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Review Article

Community Organizing and Long-Term Legacy: The Influence of the Mid-Atlantic Private University's Community Organizing Pilot Project

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Abstract

This phenomenological case study examines the experiences of resident assistants (n=21) at Mid-Atlantic Private University and their participation in the Community Organizing Pilot Project using semi-structured interviews and the constant-comparative method. Social capital theory and community organizing theory provided the conceptual framework and lens to see how this role impacts the university, student population, and RA. The theme long-term legacy refers to ways participants utilize community organization techniques after completion of the project and graduation. Emergent subthemes were uncovered through data analysis of the participants' transcribed interviews. The subthemes include: (a) use in medicine, business, law and education; (b) being comfortable with silence; and (c) networking and mentoring. Our research indicates that applying community organizing principles to a university setting; RAs at Mid-Atlantic Private University were given the tools to create a more supportive, community-oriented residential community for first-year students, and translated these skills to professional and personal development.

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Resident assistants (RAs) are students, most often undergraduates, who are hired by colleges and universities to provide a host of services related to helping and counseling the students who live in college residence halls [1]. RAs are arguably the most important sets of student leaders on a college campus. The RA establishes the tone for the residential building, enforces university policy, and acts as a counselor, mentor, and friend. For many first-year students the RA is the first person they meet when they move in and the person who will most likely influence their decision-making during their first few weeks on campus. RAs are trained to address a myriad of issues that may arise including but not limited to homesickness, alcohol use or intoxication, roommate conflicts, relationship issues, and how to access campus resources. The RA serves as a first responder for their area/group of residents and as a programmer. Resident assistants serve many roles, one of which is as a paraprofessional or peer counselor [1]. Multiple departments within universities rely on RAs to support the overall university mission.

This phenomenological case study examines the experiences of resident assistants at Mid-Atlantic Private University participating in a new structure, specifically the Community Organizing Pilot Project. The social capital theory and community organizing theory provided the conceptual framework and lens by which to see how this new role impacts the university, the student

population, and most importantly, the RA.

Method

The purpose of this study is to use a phenomenological case study research design to understand the effect of participation in the Mid-Atlantic Private University Community Organizing Pilot Project. A growing interest in community-based participatory research (CBPR) in health and related fields has brought community organizing principles into the domain of research, challenging both positivist notions of knowledge and traditional top-down processes of academia [2]. As such, this is timely and relevant research.

Additionally, the body of research available, which specifically utilizes community-organizing techniques by students in a residential setting, is minimal to non-existent. The literature on community organizing is extensive regarding community-based initiates, but not as applied to a college setting. Therefore, this research has the potential to begin filling the gaps in existing research.

Research Questions

➤ How and in what ways has participation in the community-organizing project changed the participants' own understandings?

• How did participants experience their leadership role within the broader Mid-Atlantic University Community?

• How and in what ways did utilizing community organizing techniques address gender inequalities and asymmetries in power? How did participant's gender influence their role as a community organizer?

• What, if any, long-term effects have RAs experienced as participants in this project?

Research Participants

For categorization purposes, the career paths of the participants were divided into medicine, law, education and business. Of the seven former RAs pursuing a career in medicine, four are currently enrolled in medical school, one is enrolled in a joint M.D and Ph.D. program, and two are pursuing post-baccalaureate programs in pre-med while applying to medical

schools. Additionally, five participants are working in business, including sales, information technology, consulting, engineering, and finance. Two former RAs are enrolled in law school. Finally, seven participants are involved in the education field; three are currently classroom teachers; one is pursuing an advanced degree; one is working at a youth empowerment program; one is working as an education coordinator for a museum; and one is the coordinator of teen education services in a library.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited for this study during January of 2014. To gain access to the participants, the Associate Dean in the Office of the Dean of Students at Mid-Atlantic Private University provided a comprehensive list of RAs who participated in the Community Organizing Pilot Project. This number was approximately 50. Those participants were then contacted via email with a participant recruitment letter to explain the purpose of the research and explain the requirements for participation. Participants indicated their willingness by returning the Recruitment and Contact Information Form. The form required participants to acknowledge their desire to participate, their residential college, and number of years they served as an RA. The form also requested their preferred form of contact: e-mail, home phone, cell phone or Skype. Resident assistants who were interested in participating were given an informed consent form. Participants were reminded that the research study would be conducted in the spring of 2014 and that they would be asked to participate in one 45 to 60-minute interview that would be audio-recorded with their permission. Participants were reminded that there were no costs associated with participation and no monetary compensation for their participation. Participants were also told that the research is confidential and communicated the measures in place to protect the data and the participants' confidentiality.

Participant Profiles and Description

Interviews were conducted with a total of 21 resident assistants who participated in the community organizing pilot project. Of those 21 participants, 13 identified as female and eight identified as male. Fourteen of the participants had resided in Berry College whereas seven had resided in the Lincoln community (Table 1).

Participant #	Name	College	Gender	Ethnic/Racial Background	Sexuality	Career
1	Monica	Berry	Female	Asian American	Heterosexual	Business
2	Marion	Berry	Female	White	Heterosexual	Medicine
3	Andy	Berry	Male	African American	Heterosexual	Business
4	Annie	Lincoln	Female	White	Unknown	Business
5	Rachel	Berry	Female	White & African American	Heterosexual	Law
6	Marie	Berry	Female	Asian American	Heterosexual	Medicine
7	Joe	Lincoln	Male	Latino	LGBT – Gay	Education
8	Suzanne	Lincoln	Female	African American	Heterosexual	Education
9	Ginger	Berry	Female	White	Heterosexual	Law
10	Aiden	Berry	Male	Latino	Heterosexual	Education
11	Elizabeth	Berry	Female	White – Jewish	Heterosexual	Education
12	Catherine	Berry	Female	White	Heterosexual	Medicine
13	Barbara	Berry	Female	Intl. African	Heterosexual	Medicine
14	Shirley	Berry	Female	African American	Heterosexual	Medicine
15	Scott	Berry	Male	White	Heterosexual	Education
16	Christopher	Berry	Male	Latino	Heterosexual	Medicine
17	Addison	Berry	Female	White	Heterosexual	Education
18	Kayla	Lincoln	Female	Asian American	Unknown	Education
19	Ralph	Lincoln	Male	Intl. Asian	Unknown	Business
20	Melissa	Lincoln	Female	White	Heterosexual	Business
21	Jim	Lincoln	Male	Latino	LGBT - Gay	Business

Table 1: Participant Backgrounds

Data Collection

The main method of data collection was semi-structured interviews of RAs who participated in the Community Organizing Pilot Project. 21 individual, one-time interviews were conducted in the spring of 2014 (19 via telephone and 2 via Skype). Each interview ranged from 60 to 90 minutes and was guided by a semi-structured interview protocol. Respondents were asked about their experiences as an RA and their thoughts about participating in the community organizing pilot project. An interview guide method was used to ensure that all the interviews included the same general material. The interview guide created the framework for the interview and ensured that all interviewees are asked the same basic questions. Additionally, the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed the interviewer to blend the informal conversational interview with the general interview guide approach.

Kahn and Cannell describe interviewing as "a conversation with a purpose" as cited in [3]. In the hopes of expanding the breadth and depth of information gathered, the researcher guided the interview while simultaneously allowing the participants to articulate and guide their telling of their experience. With the participants' consent, the interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred via the constant comparative method [4], which highlights a "research design for multi-data sources, which is like analytic induction in that the formal analysis begins early in the study and is nearly completed by the end of data collection" [5]. The steps of the constant comparative method, according to [4] are: (1) begin collecting data; (2) find key issues, events, or activities in the data that become main categories for focus; (3) collect data that provide many incidents of the categories of focus; (4) write about the categories explored, keeping in mind past incidents while searching for new ones; (5) work with the data

and emerging model to discover relationships; and (6) sample, code, and write with the core categories in mind. The steps of the constant comparative method occur simultaneously during data collection until categories are saturated and writing begins.

Although case study data collection follows a formal plan, researchers must review the evidence and continually ask why the facts or events appear as they do [6]. After the interviews were completed, transcribed, and coded, a review of the data occurred including the writing of analytic memos. By creating memos of the emerging themes, the researcher was able to see the multiple themes as they became salient. This is indicative of the strength, richness and depth of the qualitative research gathered. Reliability and trustworthiness of data collection was enhanced through member checking. Participants provided member-checks in which emergent themes were verified with the participants after the interviews were conducted. If the participants confirmed these themes, additional trustworthiness is provided around the findings.

After recording and transcribing all the interviews and systematically recording interview notes, the researcher categorized the data first by coding all the interview transcripts using broad "etic" codes based on emerging themes, relationships, experiences, or observations. Data was then coded in another round using more specific "emic" codes. All materials were kept confidential. This research is stored in a secure location and remains confidential. The research records only include non-identifying information, such as years of experience as a resident assistant. Participants' names and the name of the residential college were removed from interview transcripts and notes. All audio recordings, transcripts, and notes will be destroyed at the conclusion of the successful defense.

Results

Resident assistants have the potential to significantly shape the collegiate experience of their residents. Utilizing community-organizing practices in a residential community is an innovative approach to shape those experiences for the better. By applying those principles to a university setting, RAs at Mid-Atlantic Private University were given the tools to help create a more supportive, community-oriented residential community for first-year students.

During this research, multiple themes emerged. These themes represented the most recurring and prominent themes and subthemes that emerged during data analysis. These major themes were: (a) relationship building by utilizing community-organizing techniques; (b) influence on power and gender; and (c) long-term legacy.

Long-term legacy refers to the ways in which participants utilize community organization techniques after completion of the pilot project and graduation. This includes emergent subthemes that were uncovered through the data analysis of the participants'

transcribed interviews. The subthemes include: (a) use in medicine, business, law and education; (b) being comfortable with silence; and (c) networking and mentoring. These emerging themes were unexpected by the researcher and have not been mentioned in previous research about the utilization of community organizing in higher education. This makes the themes even more valuable for understanding the long-term influence of utilizing community organizing techniques in a higher education setting. This paper will focus primarily on this theme of long-term legacy and the utilization of community organizing techniques outside of and beyond Mid-Atlantic Private University and the Community Organizing Pilot Project. These key themes are detailed in (Table 2), Summary of Themes.

Theme	Corresponding Sub-themes
I. Relationship building by utilizing community organizing techniques	1. Importance of strong initial meeting
	2. Seeing beyond stereotypes
	3. Creating lasting connections
	4. Enhanced communication
	5. Effect on discipline and accountability
II. Power	1. Giving students a voice
	2. Individual meeting opportunity to link people
	3. Gender dynamics
III. Utilization of community organizing techniques outside of Pilot Project	1. Use in medicine, business, law, and education
	2. Being comfortable with silence
	3. Networking and mentoring
	4. Use beyond pilot project

Table 2: Summary of Themes

Using Community Organizing Beyond Pilot Project

RAs who approach their current profession from a community organizer lens are finding that the techniques learned are applicable to their current profession and personal life. The long-term legacy and use of the community organizing techniques after graduating or outside of the pilot project has been profound for many of the resident assistant participants, as all 21 RAs who participated in the community organizing pilot project employed the use of community organizing techniques and skills either consciously or subconsciously in their career or graduate training programs. Similarly, Zakoc and colleagues' multi-site case study showed that higher-developed partnerships were built by college

staff who worked like community organizers; that is, by focusing substantial efforts on establishing strong relationships with stakeholders and on building structures and processes that allowed for active stakeholder involvement [1]. This demonstrates the value and versatility of community organizing practices and the many contexts to which they can be applied.

Use of Community Organizing in the Education Field

Participants resoundingly spoke of the incorporation of individual meetings, skills, strategies, and goals into their professional careers. Just as the role of the resident assistant is multi-layered, within their current careers the RA participants worked to foster a sense of belonging among their coworkers, students, and community. This sense of belonging construct was originally designed to measure a felt sense of social cohesion within a university, city, or country [7] and applies as a potential concept for understanding how former RA participants may develop a sense of membership in their educational community [8]. By applying this concept to the experience of resident assistants, one can see how the RAs experienced a sense of social cohesion within their residential community at Mid-Atlantic Private University and subsequently used that framework to foster a sense of belonging in their career. Social cohesion and sense of belonging entail multiple possibilities for forming affiliations with a larger community [9] and this was seen extensively in the field of education as described by participants. Perceptions of racial climate and connections with external communities (including family, social, geographic, and religious communities outside the college) have been found to be significant predictors of sense of belonging and other measures of a successful adjustment to college, such as academic motivation and psychological health [9,10]. Consciously or subconsciously, the RA participants strive to create a sense of belonging to foster successful adjustment for their students in the education field and create a space for growth and self-awareness.

Use of Community Organizing in Medicine and Enhancing Patient Care

One of the most profound ways in which the RA participants used the community organizing skills after graduation was in the medical profession. Of the 21 participants, seven are pursuing a career in medicine. With five currently in medical school and two in post-baccalaureate programs with the intention of pursuing medicine, it was fascinating to learn the multiple ways in which the community organizing skills are transferable in the medical profession.

Use of Community Organizing in the Business Sector

Five former RA participants are currently employed in the business sector. Congruent with the findings of [11], participants with community organizing skills view themselves as effective project directors and attribute, in varying degrees, their success to the community organizing skills learned through participation in the Mid-Atlantic Private University Community Organizing Pilot Project. This concept of feeling connected was also explained by one participant and the affinity groups he formed within his company. Jim works in the business sector of a governmental agency. In his current position, he interacts with a significant number of employees, who are close to his age, recent college graduates who are entering the workforce. Within this cohort, Jim identified a significant number who identify as members of the LGBT community. As a self-identified member of the LGBT community and new member of the workforce, Jim created a peer affinity group at his place of work. He sends emails to the new analysts and invites them to learn more about what is called a "business resource group" an affinity group based around race, gender or sexual identity for people of the same age to get together, network, and find support with. Although the affinity groups are not usually overly structured, Jim did find that he utilizes the community organizing skills while networking and acclimating to the culture. Because Jim was reaching out specifically to people who identified as LGBT, he found that he ended up having sit-down one-to-one meetings with individuals. He attributed this to the fact that he was being brought together with a new person by one specific issue and ended up speaking about concerns regarding navigating an LGBT identity while in federal government related work. This affinity group and the individual meetings foster a sense of belonging for the new members of the community and all members of the affinity group.

Use of Community Organizing in Law

Other participants indicated that the use of the community organizing techniques was hard to specifically pinpoint but rather that these habits permeate day-to-day relationships; not only in the workplace but also in the way they interacted socially with new people. For participants in the field of law, the use of community organizing practices infuses their daily interactions and relationships. Rachel, a law student and employee at a law firm, felt that her experience with the program and utilizing community-organizing skills helped to make her "a really good listener". She also found that the confidence gained through being a community organizer, facilitating multiple one-to-one meetings, and building community helped her feel comfortable to ask for alone time with bosses or colleagues to clarify responsibilities, express confusion or concerns, and seek clarity. Many new professionals may find themselves intimidated, but Rachel had found she "is not scared as much to go talk to an authority figure". Although the roles were reversed from when she served as an RA, by having the experience of the meetings, Rachel valued seeking out individual meetings. Rachel's experience exemplifies the long-term legacy of the Mid-Atlantic Private University Community Organizing Pilot Project and the application of community organizing tenets to multiple contexts.

Being Comfortable with Silence

Barbara, currently a medical student, reflected on her current use of silence in comparison to the way she experienced it while conducting her individual meetings at Mid-Atlantic Private University. In her opinion, silence is a key skill that needs to be implemented effectively in the medical profession regarding patient interactions. According to Barbara, silence is utilized when speaking with patients, especially when delivering news that is "not quite uplifting". Barbara indicated that it is important to sit back, give patients space, and time to think, being able to deal with silence. Elizabeth, a museum educator, also reflected on the effective use of silence. Elizabeth found utilizing silence during her individual meetings was an effective tool as an RA. Since leaving Mid-Atlantic Private University, she has learned to be comfortable with silence. In addition, Elizabeth shared that in her opinion the biggest legacy is the fact that she has grown into a person who is comfortable speaking one-on-one as she now knows how to ask the right questions in order to keep someone talking and engaged. These skills have helped her directly interview candidates in her office. Barbara and Elizabeth's experiences with silence and individual meetings demonstrate the ways in which community organizing practices can extend beyond the immediate contexts in which they are employed.

Use of Community Organizing Skills outside of Pilot Project

For some RAs, utilizing community organizing skills occurred not only after graduation in the workforce and graduate school, but also during their time at Mid-Atlantic Private University. Examples included using community organizing in extracurricular organizations and using community-organizing skills during service-learning trips. There are varieties of additional ways that RAs utilized their community organizing skills outside of the pilot project.

Networking Skills

In multiple ways, these RAs communicated that by participating in the Mid-Atlantic Private University Community Organizing Pilot Project, they feel empowered with the skill set to have meaningful conversations either with students in schools, patients in a doctor's office, stakeholders in business, or clients in the law profession. The community organizing skills, specifically one-to-one meetings, and the concept of building a community of shared interest, permeated these young professionals' career development and interconnection of their own network. Joe observed, "I also view it as a really strong networking skill because if in a matter of 30 minutes you're able to kind of dig deep, there's almost like a connection that maybe would not exist if you didn't have that skill set". [12] Argued that departments within colleges and universities should understand and leverage relationships, and the RA participants are doing just that in the medical, education, business, and law fields.

Mentoring

For Monica, Melissa, and Jim, participating in the Mid-Atlantic Private University Community Organizing Pilot Project fostered a sense of awareness and sensitivity to issues of mentorship. Monica, a first-generation college student and a first-generation American, mentioned that she wished she had personally had the kind of mentor relationship that she tried to develop with her residents. At the same time, for Monica "it was kind of amazing to see the transformation that my residents induced in me. Mentorship goes both ways I think. Sometimes we can learn more than we can teach". The power and importance of mentorship was also reflected upon by Melissa, who mentored new employees in her company, and Jim, who participated in a work mentoring program.

The long-term results from participating in the Mid-Atlantic Private University Community Organizing Pilot Project were realized and interpreted differently by each RA, since each person had their own unique lens and experience. It was clearly communicated through the 21 participant responses that although they may not have labeled their actions in community organizing jargon, the skills learned and experience gained was invaluable and pervades their daily interactions, personal and professional relationships, and professional career in multiple ways.

Discussion

The study's third research question and this paper explore what, if any, long-term effects RAs experienced as participants in the Mid-Atlantic Private University Community Organizing Pilot Project. As previous research established [13], RAs and staff members with consensus-based organizing skills were better able to carry out the important tasks of partnership building. Similarly, to other researchers studying community organizing who have found that staff with community organizing skills are better able to build community capacity [14], the participants in this pilot project and dissertation were able to build strong working relationships and communities with their professional sphere of influence.

Research shows that staff members with community organizing experience are viewed as effective project directors [11]. Resident assistants participating in this project had a strong ability to build capital and be effective project directors, specifically in the business sector. This dissertation confirms that RA participants were able to build strong relationships in their place of employment, negotiate with patients, colleagues, and clients, and navigate political climates. These current findings are congruent with recommendations of experienced college personnel to hire a community organizer to facilitate partnerships because they possess requisite skills for working with stakeholders and negotiating politics such as town-gown relations [15].

Throughout this research, the theme of long-term legacy appeared consistently. This refers to the utilization of community organization techniques after completion of the pilot project and graduation and includes the subthemes: (a) use in medicine, business, law and education; (b) being comfortable with silence; and (c) networking and mentoring. These themes emerged unexpectedly as they have not been mentioned in previous research regarding the use of community organizing techniques in higher education, making them particularly valuable for understanding the long-term influence of these practices in this context.

By applying the sense of belonging construct [7, 9] to the experience of resident assistants, one can see how the RA participants experienced a sense of social cohesion of their residential community at Mid-Atlantic Private University and subsequently used that framework to foster a sense of belonging in their career. Social cohesion and sense of belonging involve multiple ways to create affiliations with a larger community [9]; the presence of this was seen in the testimonies of all participants, but extensively in the field of education.

RAs communicated that participation in the Mid-Atlantic Private University Community Organizing Pilot Project empowered them with the skills needed to participate in meaningful interactions both personally and professionally, and both during their time at the university and after graduation. The skills learned there, specifically individual meetings and the building of a community of shared interest, permeated the professional development of their careers and their own networking goals. Based on the experiences and career success of the 21 RAs who participated in the community organizing pilot project and the multiple and effective ways that the use of community organizing skills has permeated their professional careers, hiring and admission committees should strongly consider hiring and admitting candidates with community organizing experience. One way to apply these findings specifically in higher education would be through university departments such as Career Services. Career services departments would benefit from creating workshops or trainings with the aim to introduce students to community organizing practices and illustrate how community organizing knowledge and skills can potentially benefit their career.

Student life programs would benefit from training their resident assistants and student leaders in the tenets of community organizing. Although some residence life programs may already conduct individual resident meetings, based on the research of this dissertation it could strengthen the resident and RA relationship if a community organizing framework is employed. This research found that by applying the community-organizing framework to individual meetings, RAs developed a strong awareness of self and others. These meetings provided a medium for RAs to get to know

someone and their motivations in a very personal and intentional way. The individual meetings also opened the door for an intimate conversation and fostered a safe relationship that allowed students to share personal thoughts and concerns.

Within the residential community, the use of the community organizing tenets fostered a collective sense of accountability for both the living space and personal actions. A collective sense of accountability also increases a student's sense of belonging, which has implications for judicial affairs practitioners, health and wellness practitioners, and facilities or housing staff regarding damages. If residence life programs utilize the tenets of community organizing in framing the expectations of the community, a reduction in vandalism and high-risk behavior may occur. If residents have a personal accountability for their actions, it may assist RAs in meeting the requirements of their position more effectively.

The use of the individual meetings provided all residents with equal access to the RA, the person in a position of power and authority in the community. This served to give all students an equal voice and platform to share without judgment. The individual meetings utilized community-organizing techniques to connect across differences, which fosters a sense of belonging. By utilizing these techniques, RAs were able to build their social capital and in turn the social capital of their residents. [16] Concluded that building social capital may give people and communities the connectedness they need to succeed, which has implications for admissions departments in reference to retention and completion rates. Additionally, students who feel a sense of belonging within their university community are more likely to excel academically because of the social capital gained and connections made within their community of learning. Finally, student life departments can benefit by understanding the implication of this research and the sense of belonging fostered. Students who are connected to the university are going to engage more with clubs and organizations. By understanding the tenets of community organizing and applying the skills when possible, student leaders will likely be more effective.

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