

# WORKING FOR TWO COMMUNITIES: A COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCHER IN A RESEARCH- INTENSIVE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

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*This narrative describes the experience of a community-based researcher working as a junior faculty member in a research-intensive school of social work. The goal of the author is to offer reflections that he hopes will be useful for other community-based researchers who are considering an academic career while maintaining their passion for doing work "on the ground."*

Graduate students who are pursuing a Ph.D. and a faculty position in the field of social work are in an enviable position. Unlike our colleagues in the humanities, there is an insufficient supply of new Ph.D. graduates relative to the demand for new social work faculty members. It is truly scary to read the first-person essays written by faculty job seekers in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* who finished their Ph.D. in other disciplines but now cannot fulfill their dreams of a tenure-track job. In painful detail, they describe applying for a faculty position announcement that receives hundreds of applications, having to land one or two brisk conference interviews at their annual discipline meeting. My experience as a social work doctoral student was very different. Even a few years before I finished my Ph.D., I asked social work faculty to meet with me to discuss a potential application from me, and they cheerfully accepted.

Being in a sellers' market still includes challenges. What sort of school do you want to join? The typical typology is to distinguish between teaching-intensive schools (which I describe as schools that expect pre-tenure faculty to teach more than four courses per academic year) or research-intensive schools (which I describe as schools that expect pre-tenure faculty to submit more than three manuscripts per academic year). One of my graduate school mentors told me to look into

my soul and decide if I wanted primarily to be a teacher or a researcher and then to apply to schools based on my choice. Most importantly, he said, avoid schools that try to be both. By the way, I discovered that if you are interviewing with a school that is trying to be both, don't explain this typology to them as they will adamantly insist it is possible to be both, and they won't hire you unless you agree to be both.

This brings me to the topic of this essay. Suppose you are the sort of social work researcher who does the work described in this special issue of *Reflections*. Which type of school will best support your work? I think it is a very difficult choice. I expect that most people reading these essays love to teach and to do research. The passion that drives us to change practice on the ground inspires both community work and teaching. Which direction should we turn? I have thought about this issue a lot and have started living through one approach, but I won't claim to have definitive answers. In this essay, I will describe how I first became interested in doing research on the ground, how I pursued this work in graduate school, how I looked for an academic position that would support this work, and how I am managing doing community-based research as a faculty member in a research-intensive school of social work. At the conclusion of this essay, I

will offer some “tips” I have gleaned from my experiences.

### **Developing a Passion for Research on the Ground**

I came to community-based research accidentally. I started out working in electoral politics, helping candidates get elected to the U.S. Senate. Eventually, I found myself on Capitol Hill, advising a new Senator on a wide variety of policies. My primary qualification for this job was that I had helped the Senator get elected. I could tell you who was on what side of any debate back in our home state of Nebraska, but substantive policy distinctions were usually outside my expertise. Hoping that better public policy would result from knowing more than just what the interest groups wanted, I decided to go to graduate school to study policy analysis. After a lot of training in quantitative methods, I finished my master’s degree in public policy and got a job in a research center that studied child welfare services.

At the center, we had a database with the placement records for all children in foster care in Michigan. We used the data to create fairly sophisticated models of topics like length of stay in foster care. I suppose I understood at some level that the numbers in my computer represented the experiences of children, but I knew very little about children or foster care. I read the codebook, played with the data, and tried to intuitively build models that made sense.

Part of the center’s work involved collaboration with state child welfare officials. At some point, our relationship soured, when the child welfare officials felt as if we were just trying to make them look bad and we thought they were unwilling to critically examine their service delivery. I tried to use my old political skills to mediate between the two and after several months we developed a model of foster care length of stay that both

sides supported. I then received a letter from a child welfare official that said:

I circulated a copy of your revised paper regarding permanency planning. As noted in our phone conversation, we were very pleased with your efforts to address our concerns. The new model has a logic to it that we find persuasive. We are more inclined to believe the results because the data seems more logical. .... **We are not sure how to use it in our policy making strategies. Any suggestions would be appreciated** (emphasis added).

Despite the friendly tone of the letter, I was devastated. A year’s worth of work had produced a model that was “logical” but without practical value. At that moment, I realized I wanted to do a completely different kind of research. I wanted to do research that people would use. I decided to go back to school to get my M.S.W. and Ph.D. I planned to read everything I could about child welfare, work directly with children and families, and learn how to do research that could improve services on the ground.

### **Learning How to Be a Graduate Student Doing Research On The Ground**

I went to graduate school at a research-intensive school that places a premium on federally funded research. Many Ph.D. students there work in federally funded research centers and write their dissertation using data generated by the centers. It is a very good model for training faculty for research-intensive schools of social work. I chose a different path. Another graduate student and I essentially hung out our shingle as community-based program evaluators. We were fortunate to receive several contracts to do participatory program evaluation in a

small urban community that was a two-and-a-half hour drive from campus. After so many trips there, we could now probably drive that route with our eyes closed.

It was a wonderful experience. For seven years, we came to know everyone in that community who worked in or with their child welfare system. They gave us whatever data we wanted. We analyzed the data on campus, presented our findings throughout the community, and re-worked it again and again. On those long car rides, we vigorously debated what it all meant. The community sincerely wanted to know how to improve their work, and we did our best to help them. We even found just enough sympathetic faculty members in our home university to put together dissertation committees and write dissertations based on our research.

After fulfilling my dream to do research that was more relevant than elegant, I also experienced the dark side of policy relevant research. We were evaluating a program that sought to reduce the over-representation of children of color in foster care by using Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) to divert children from foster care into informal kinship care. The focus of FGDM is convening a meeting of the child's extended family in order to make a plan for the child's care and protection in cases of child abuse and neglect. One day, I did a simple calculation that showed how the program reduced admissions of children of color into foster care by 23 percent. I wrote up a brief memo explaining how I did the calculations but also carefully establishing some context and caution for the findings. I reminded my community partners that diverting children was not enough; we also wanted children to be better off. The goal is family empowerment, not saving money. But before I knew it that 23 percent figure was bouncing all over the state and I heard was even discussed in Washington, D.C. (probably shared with naïve Capitol Hill staffers who had no idea what it meant).

The Governor's budget included a proposal to spend 6 million TANF dollars piloting FGDM in Michigan. Why? Because it can empower families? No. The rationale listed in the Governor's budget included only the information that a pilot program had reduced foster care by 23 percent. I learned from that experience that community-based research can have great impact, but not always in the ways we intend. To make sure research helps improve practice, we have to spend a lot of time with our community partners to help them articulate what they hope to accomplish, how their program can accomplish those things, and how we will demonstrate their success. We also have to consider how research results might be used within larger political and social contexts.

As much as I enjoyed doing community-based research as part of my graduate studies, it wasn't all easy. Many of my professors noted that I had little patience for knowledge for knowledge's sake, which was true. Always thinking about how a new theory or method might improve my community work helped me understand many of the things I learned, but I also missed many valuable lessons in graduate school because I did not see an immediate value to them. Part of the problem was working so much while going to school; I had little time to think big thoughts.

The most stressful thing was the money. We received very little financial support from the university. Every semester we had to pay for our tuition and salaries through our community-based research or by teaching an M.S.W. course. We also hired a part-time research assistant who understandably wanted to know if her job was going to end any time soon. We wrote a lot of proposals that were rejected, but just enough were awarded to keep us afloat. Over a seven year period, we raised over half a million dollars, but it was never easy or certain. We spent a lot of time pouring over spreadsheets—not the ones with program data but the ones we used

to track our expenses and grants. In the end, we managed to pay our bills, get our degrees, and, I think, help improve services for children and their families.

As great as this experience was, I could not see how to replicate it in the next stage of my career. We benefited from a unique convergence of a great research team that worked well together, a community that wanted our help, and the resources to do the work. As our grants ran out, it was time to find something else. My research partner chose a full-time research position at a community-based agency. She spends her days helping the staff improve their practice, but she can teach only an occasional course as an adjunct. After reading this essay, she reminded me that agency-based work is no bed of roses. She has to deal with the bureaucracy, the funding needs, and all the other things that go into working for an agency. I suppose I avoided the agency route because I was tired of always worrying about money (of course, academics do a lot of grant writing as well). I decided to try an academic career, and that presented a new set of challenges.

### **Learning How to Obtain an Academic Position Doing Research On The Ground**

I went on the faculty job market and considered a wide range of schools. I applied to the teaching-intensive schools, the research-intensive schools, and those that wanted to be both. I even applied to a well-known school of public administration. That school invited me to a campus interview. After a full day of interviews and my job talk, during which I was peppered with questions designed to throw me off my feet, the search committee chair informed me that I was not a good fit for the school. After my trip to campus, the faculty realized that I wanted to do community work and at their school, untenured faculty are not supposed to do

community work. I agreed that was a terrible fit for me, but I learned from that mistake. During the rest of my job search, I asked every school about community service and also asked to meet with community members as part of every campus interview (if the school can't find a community member willing to recruit new faculty, that is a bad sign).

I spent a considerable amount of time researching the schools that I applied to so I could write persuasive cover letters and so I could make sure they were a potential fit for me. I did a lot of informal interviewing at conferences before I signed up for those exhausting campus visits. For example, in a conference interview I met with a small group of faculty with excellent ties to their community and who were excited about my work, but upon hearing about their experiences with high teaching loads and service demands, I realized I would probably not have time to write for publication. Some schools were annoyed by my questions about teaching "loads" and some were reluctant to name out loud how many publications they expected new faculty to have in order to gain tenure, but I found that these crude numbers helped me gauge how much support I would receive as a new faculty member. The elusive fit between the school and the new faculty member is very important for both parties, and straightforward questions with open communication are the only ways to determine if the fit is right.

In the end, I chose to accept a position with a research-intensive school that has excellent ties to the community. As part of my campus interview, I met with a public, child-welfare, deputy director, and we mapped out a specific research agenda based on a match between my expertise and their community needs. Using that blueprint, I wrote to the Dean and told him exactly what research I would do if they hired me. They did hire me, and I can honestly say that three years later, I am following through with that work.

Although this community work is valued at my school, a strong publication record is the key to tenure and promotion. Through writing this *Reflections* essay, I can now see that I have two community partners: the community I try to help through my child welfare research; and the academic community that hired me with tenure expectations of grants and publishing. The challenge is to meet the demands of both communities, which I will address next.

### **Learning How to Live and Work in The Academy While Doing Research On The Ground**

In my current job, I have two community partners: the community that hired me; and the community I help with my research. The local public child welfare agency will take as much of my time as they can get. I am on three standing committees, and whenever they start a taskforce, I know I will receive an invitation to join. My other community, the one that pays my salary, wants me in my office writing articles for publication. Of course, there are only so many hours in a day. As my planner fills up with child welfare meetings, I find fewer blocks of time to write. One well-meaning colleague suggested that I just stop going downtown to the public child welfare agency for a while. Although the public child welfare folks would be jealous if I did that, I admit they would understand. The real barrier to isolating myself like that is I would feel lost. The reason I do this work is to change practice on the ground. Take away those long frustrating meetings in which we try to improve a big social service bureaucracy, and I would forget why I do what I do.

My initial concern was how I was going to balance learning my way around my new child welfare community with writing articles and grants. Fortunately, my school community has been generous in giving me time to do both. My real challenge is to write articles that are accepted and grants that are funded.

In three years, I have submitted a dozen manuscripts, but only four have been accepted. I have written six grants, but only two small university-sponsored grants have been funded. I have also presented over a dozen conference papers and posters, but those are not so important to my promotion. At the rate I am going, I may not be able to keep my job unless I learn how to negotiate yet another "community," the world of peer-reviewed journals.

At first, my window into the peer-review world was a stream of rejection letters. My impression was that article reviewers don't like things they don't recognize, and many of them think community-based work is messy and foreign. Reading rejections of your work is painful, but it gets easier over time. I later decided to become a reviewer myself, which certainly has helped me learn the process. One journal I review for sends the reviewers a copy of all the reviews for the article they read. It is amazing to see how uneven and incongruous a set of reviews can be. Of course, that is what we all think when they are rejecting one of our own articles, but when it is someone else's article you can really see how random the process is. On the other hand, journal editors are sympathetic to our 'publish or perish' existence and are often willing to offer some advice on where to send manuscripts and how to pitch them.

### **Striving to Succeed in the Academy as a Community-based Researcher**

I just had a major performance review with the not surprising outcome that I need to "publish, publish, and publish," as one colleague succinctly put it. If I want journal editors to publish my work, I have to understand their constraints and rewards while I remain true to my calling as a community-based researcher. My child-welfare partners always want data they can use, but I have to challenge them to think of how to obtain data that will persuade the newspaper reporter or

the taxpayer that a program works. On the other hand, research journals want to publish research that is rigorous, but, for me, it must also be relevant to social work practice. What I find helps me in my own research is a constant feedback loop of sharing my results with practitioners and getting their input and then sharing it with fellow researchers and getting their input. This is why I think all community-based researchers can benefit from publishing our work. My community work is stronger when I subject it to peer review. All of our work improves when we share our experiences through publication. A strong publication record earns the respect of our peers and, hopefully, helps us secure grants and tenure.

But how do I “publish, publish, publish” – with a ticking tenure clock – when my work is often not understood by the editors of academic journals and those who review for them? Here are a few things I have tried.

First, write about methods. While sample sizes and research designs in community work are often not readily accepted by research journals, community-based researchers can sometimes write a publishable manuscript about the methods developed for a particular study. For example, much of my work concerns Family Group Decision Making (FGDM). In several articles, I describe how I help community members articulate why they want to try FGDM and how they will evaluate their efforts. Because FGDM is focused on forming partnerships with all the people who are concerned about a child’s welfare, I demonstrate how FGDM evaluation and research should similarly engage all stakeholders in designing the evaluation, interpreting the results, and making changes to the program based on the research findings.

Second, know the literature. Generalizability is usually a concern with community-based work, but an extensive knowledge of the literature in a specific substantive area helps community-based

researchers draw out interesting points related to differences between the conventional wisdom and findings drawn from community-based research. For example, a lot of the research on kinship care compares relatives and foster parents as caregivers and then tends to highlight the deficiencies of relative caregivers. However, focusing on this comparison misses information gained by studying FGDM as an alternative way of working with relatives. Kinship care providers’ concerns, needs, and strengths are better understood when social workers use FGDM to work with relatives rather than assume that relative caregivers should behave like foster parents.

Third, do large data set analysis with local implications. Given my love of community work, I have been reluctant to follow the path of downloading a secondary data set, regressing A on B, and cranking out a quick article. I have discovered an alternative that I like. I download secondary data that is drawn from my community, analyze it, and then ask my community partners to help me interpret the results. I can then write articles based on a large sample, but the implications of the work have more meaning to me. One database that is helpful to me links information from the birth certificates of all children born in the county to the children’s contact with social services. My colleagues and I have used this database and life table analysis to show that 49 percent of all African-American children in our community will be investigated for child maltreatment some time between their birth and their tenth birthday. I have presented these data in community forums throughout the county and in an op-ed I wrote for the main newspaper in order to increase awareness about the over-representation of African American children in the child welfare system. Now I can write an article about the value of using life table analysis in community advocacy work that describes both the

statistical methods and community-organizing methods.

Finally, collaborate with community and faculty colleagues. If community-based researchers have picked their institutional home carefully, faculty colleagues should be supportive of community-based work. Writing with supportive colleagues should help community-based researchers get more published. For example, I am writing a literature review on the relationship between neighborhood characteristics and child maltreatment with two of my senior colleagues who are experts on this topic. Similarly, community-based researchers can write with their community partners. When I am honest about my publish-or-perish existence, I find that my community colleagues are more than willing to review a manuscript for me or even participate in writing it. I recently wrote an article about how principles of social work with groups can apply to FGDM practice. I asked several practitioners to review the manuscript for me and help me clarify when group work applies and when it does not. As a result, my practitioner colleagues had to think critically about why they do, what they do and the practical relevance of my academic work improved.

### **Coda**

As I reflect back on my journey, there are at least three major challenges to doing research on the ground: finding an institutional home that supports this work; balancing the demands of my institutional home with the needs of my community research partners; and publishing community-based research. A response to these challenges begins with recognizing that finding a career that supports community-based research is not unlike doing community-based research itself. Just as I would never jump into a community and start researching without talking with community members about their needs, I should not

accept a job with an agency or university without first understanding what they want from me. When I am doing research on the ground, I have to understand the different needs of different stakeholders and figure out how to produce research that will be useful to the whole community. In the same way, I have to learn how to reconcile the needs of my employer with those of the community members we are helping. Successful community-based research requires favorable reception of my work by the community, which means I have to understand their needs. In order to get my work published, I have to appreciate the needs of journal editors. My ultimate goal is to understand and to meet the needs of these various constituencies while remaining true to my calling.

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