

CHALLENGES OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT RESEARCH

Terry L. Cooper

Director, Civic Engagement Initiative
University of Southern California

I have been asked to share my thoughts about what is important for research university faculty considering civic engagement research, and for those already involved in that kind of investigation. I will offer six points based on my experience with this kind of research over the last 30 years, with the understanding that academic and social contexts vary and this reflects my own in Los Angeles.

1. The university context. It is much easier to build support for nontraditional engaged research in an institutional culture that has itself become engaged with the community outside its doors. I believe that is one of the necessary precursors for an active and valued program in civic engagement research. During the last 20 years, the University of Southern California (USC) has been on the journey from a posture of antagonism toward its broader neighborhood to one of partnership and I have had the opportunity to see it transformed in the process. In the 1960-1990 years the university generated all of the usual town and gown conflicts over student housing and other institutional development that encroached on the community, the aloof and unwelcoming feeling neighborhood residents experienced when coming onto the campus, and increasing traffic congestion. During the last 18 years that has changed 180 degrees since Steven B. Sample became our new president in 1991 and announced early that USC and its neighbors needed to find new ways to live together positively. As the faculty, staff, and students responded with a host of serious new initiatives with very substantial

funding the university and community have developed collaborative and reciprocal relationships that have been beneficial to both parties.

The current university-community environment is one in which it becomes logical and appropriate for the Academic Senate to develop a white paper calling for making engaged research part of the central work of the university. It is one in which the strategic plan of the university can assert: “In developing USC as the university with the greatest societal impact and global presence, we will have to overcome longstanding divisions between fundamental versus practical applied research and scholarship...” (USC Strategic Plan, p. 6) It is an environment in which the provost of the university can establish an urban initiative with ongoing grants for action oriented research designed to address urgent urban problems.

I believe scholars at other universities that have been on a similar journey would agree that this kind of university culture and environment is crucial for being able to make civic engagement research not only viable, not just tolerated, but fully embraced as highly desirable. If that is true, those interested in civic engagement research in major research universities must attend to institutional change as well as scholarship.

2. Legitimacy is crucial. When there is an inclination, or even a commitment, to undertake civic engagement research, establishing its legitimacy is still important both inside and outside a particular university. We cannot persuade others of the soundness of our work unless we are methodologically accountable. That means not being defensive about our nontraditional methods, but having a clear understanding ourselves about how we ground that work ontologically and epistemologically. Our scholarship must be rigorous in some way. For example, we must have consistent formats and analytical

frameworks for our case studies. We must set those case analyses within a context of a broader research literature. Coplin, Merget, and Bourdeaux have argued that even when we have accepted the role of professional researcher as change agent, squarely addressing the rigor vs. relevance trade-off is crucial to how our work will be perceived. (PAR Nov/Dec 2002, vol. 62, no. 6, pp. 699-711). That needs to be a conscious and justified trade-off as we carry out and report on our civic engagement scholarship. Often that requires modesty about the limits of what may be exploratory research.

3. Credibility in the community is essential. We cannot do good civic engagement research if we do not have the trust and collaboration of the community. With colleagues I have been pursuing research on the L.A. neighborhood council system since it became a part of the public debate over how to deal with citizen alienation from government in the 1990s. We began our work on the neighborhood councils at the invitation of the city councilman of our area, which one might assume provided us with considerable credibility in the community. However, when we began talking with people struggling to organize councils in their neighborhoods all over the city we found ourselves having to explain over and over what we were doing and our motivation. Universities have a well deserved reputation in communities for exploiting people's time and energy for their own limited purposes of publication and career-building without giving anything back or including citizens sufficiently in significant research decisions. We have had to demonstrate over and over again that we can be trusted because we will respect the people with whom we are working and treat them as partners to the extent possible. We have had to demonstrate clearly and specifically how they will benefit from spending time with us.

We have needed to show that we are doing our best to be honest brokers of information that will be shared widely through policy briefs, newspaper articles, op-ed pieces, presentations to community groups, and posting our reports on our website. We have had to establish that we are in this research for the long haul and not just dipping in to harvest an article or two for scholarly journals and conferences and then vanish. By taking this responsibility seriously over a number of years we have built up a reservoir of trust around the city that is one of our most valuable assets.

4. Funding is problematic. One of the problems in funding this kind of research is that it often falls between action and traditional social science research. Civic engagement research usually can be characterized as “engaged research” or “action research,” meaning that it reflects either a normative commitment, or the intention of informing action in ways that may create change. Foundations that are interested in impacting the world worry that our work will just result in academic journal articles that no social change agents are likely to read and some lines on a professor’s curriculum vitae. Research oriented funders like the National Science Foundation (NSF) and some private foundations are reluctant to get associated with taking positions on controversial issues. They fear that the work will just do something practical, but not produce any theory-based systematic findings that are genuine contributions to the research literature.

Our way of handling that problem has been to always try to be clear that there will be practical results **and** research articles for anything we do. We are theory-based and action-oriented in all of our work. As university researchers we have no business doing things that are just action. As scholars who care about change for the better in the world, we want the knowledge we generate to make a difference, but we do want to contribute to

the body of scholarship around which our practice is oriented. Selling this calls for building relationships with funders based on trust. That trust is based on performance as we demonstrate our ability and commitment to disseminating our work to citizens, government officials, and nonprofits through publication in op-ed articles for the newspaper, interviews with the media, as well as placing our research findings in the best scholarly journals.

5. Civic engagement research is more difficult than traditional social science research. Some who have never done this kind of research mistakenly assume that it amounts to cutting the corners by doing something not as demanding. In fact, it is more complex, more time consuming, less predictable, and riskier. It is complex since it often involves multimethod approaches to data collection and the management of a network of relationships outside the university. Since, as I have argued above, civic engagement research requires one to spend time establishing credibility with citizens and others outside academe and including them as partners, much more time is required for meetings and individual conversations. It is riskier since the civic engagement researcher has limited control over events that may jeopardize completion of the work. One never knows when some community person will complicate your life by publicly criticizing your work or questioning your motives. One never knows when a government official may block the work for political reasons.

Anyone who undertakes civic engagement research must be willing to invest significant time beyond the campus, exercise enormous patience in dealing with people who neither understand scholarly investigation, nor trust the purposes for which it is

being done. One must be prepared midstream to revise a research design or adopt new data collection techniques.

6. Collaboration is necessary. Successful and sustained civic engagement research requires collaboration with citizens, officials, and other scholars from appropriate disciplines. Being a solo scholar carrying out a research project entirely in an academic environment simply doesn't work for most of the problems that need addressing in civic engagement. One of our projects funded by NSF involved collaboration among public management and public policy, anthropology, and political science faculty members. Beyond the university, all of our projects have necessitated collaborating with various combinations of citizens, elected officials, public administrators, and professional facilitators.

Collaboration is time intensive; it takes time to talk through the goals, methods, budgets, and participants in a research effort. One must be willing to spend long hours building understanding and trust. In the NSF project I mentioned above, almost a year was devoted to finding a common vocabulary that would make sense disciplinarily, but also to those outside academe.

Also, conflict must be managed. Conflict must be anticipated and resolved in collaborative research and that requires both patience and skill. Flexibility is called for when scholars and lay people collaborate to do research. The fruits of successful collaboration are rich and worth working for, but challenging to achieve.

Conclusion. Cultivating an institutional environment that is supportive of action or civic engagement research is important. As a precondition for effective civic engagement research broad institutional involvement in the community helps in establishing the

legitimacy of this kind of research within the university. Inclusive and open involvement with those within and beyond the university requires us to be clear and methodologically accountable. Creating credibility among lay people requires long term commitment and reciprocity. Funding this kind of research calls for building long term relationships with potential funders since they often need help understanding its potential contributions. Carrying out civic engagement research requires a willingness to deal with the complexity of collaboration. It is difficult work with enormous personal, institutional, and community payoffs when done well.