A marketing research project
for the Greater Lehigh Valley chapter of Buy Fresh Buy Local

Christopher S. Ruebeck
Lafayette College

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Thesis: Community-based research can enhance students’ learning in a marketing research course, satisfying goals for them to learn quantitative and qualitative methods, appreciate the scope of a large project, and contribute to a larger research program. More substantial goals can be accomplished by partnering efforts across academic institutions. By connecting to community members, students perceive greater value. Inter-institutional and intra-institutional support are important contributors to the project’s success.

Introduction

Three area schools engaged in a multi-institutional study of the Lehigh Valley’s demand for and supply of local food during the Spring 2009 semester. The project was motivated by the needs of the Greater Lehigh Valley chapter of Buy Fresh Buy Local (GLV-BFBL). Students from Muhlenberg College worked as part of an independent biology study project, a group from Lehigh University participated in a Community Consulting Practicum, and students at Lafayette College completed group projects as part of their Marketing Research class. At Lehigh the students put together a presentation and a report, at Lafayette the groups did presentations, and then faculty members brought the Muhlenberg and Lafayette results together into an additional written report of the methods, data, results, and recommendations.

This chapter describes the experience, with additional attention on the project’s inter-institutional aspect. The component that is described in the most detail below was part of a marketing research course at Lafayette College. It had the following successful factors: students’ training in data analysis and survey design, an initial presentation by the sponsor, direct

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interaction outside the classroom with producers and consumers of local food, weekly discussions among the student groups to review and critique each other’s progress, and final presentations with the sponsor in attendance. These features reinforced the project’s value, emphasized student groups’ accountability, and generated more high-quality ideas from each student group.

**Two disciplines’ literatures**

This course and the associated research efforts draw from two disciplines: marketing research and economics. It is a course usually found in a business school, but both my students’ previous coursework and my background are primarily in economics. Thus I draw on pedagogies in both disciplines’ literatures related to community-based research.

The economics and marketing research literatures use the term “service learning” (SL) more frequently than “community-based learning” and research (CBLR). This reflects, as I expect is the case in many disciplines, the significant variance in the degree to which students’ projects may be community-driven and/or focused on measuring outputs in relationship to their value in the community. Unfortunately, only a fraction of the existing programs have been documented in either the economics or marketing research mainstream literatures, perhaps due to CBLR/SL projects’ focus on outcomes, the inherently interdisciplinary nature of community-based activities, or a lack of academics’ recognition that there is worthy scholarship pursued in CBLR.

The economics pedagogy is more recent and less widespread, and it is connected to current excitement over developments in “active learning” (Salemi, 2002). Some examples of community-driven service learning in economics appear on web pages. For example, Whitehead (2009) describes a cost-benefit project that is part of a larger program at Appalachian State University (Mortensen, 2010). Some programs may be connected to or have grown out of community development efforts such as Simon Fraser University’s Center for Sustainable Community Development (2010), or they may be part of a larger policy program such as those described by Minkler and Blackwell (2010).

Lopez (2009) describes a service-learning program that brings college students into high schools to teach economics. Elliot (2009) advocates improved methods for student reflection based on service learning projects in a development economics class and observes that service learning “remains under-represented in disciplines that value objectivity” using data collected from Campus Compact (2010). The student experience in this example remains one of volunteerism, but Elliot works carefully through the utility and applicability of service learning. An ongoing partnership with local agencies has resulted in more of a partnership effort, with the agency representatives talking to the class and requesting the assessment tool. As a result, the “traditional essay/journal entry” assessment was replaced with reports directly to the agencies concerning the agencies’ assessment (of their own operations) with recommendations to for improvements, and to complete a research project.

Brooks and Schramm (2007) describe another comprehensive program at the University of Vermont. They find that a research-teaching-service model offers benefits to all participants. Students, although at first uncomfortable with the non-traditional type of course, responded very positively to the hands-on, applied, obviously relevant nature of the work. Like my own institution’s Tech Clinic (2010), their project was a larger, multi-semester project. It drew on a wider range of economics theories, under the umbrella of the “urban economics” sub-discipline.
Although the project I describe also connects research, teaching, and service, it is less integrative in nature, with more of the semester’s class time devoted to traditional lecture.

The marketing literature in SL/CBLR is more developed, in part because student projects are well-established in principles of marketing and marketing research courses. Over twenty years ago, Ramocki (1987) stated that “The client-sponsored research project is no longer a novel approach to the marketing research course or to the marketing curriculum in general.” After reviewing the favorable descriptions in the literature from the early 1980s, he then describes his contribution: the first empirical study of such a project’s success. In pedagogy in Ramocki’s evaluation technique, we can see another reason for slow acceptance of scholarship: the evaluations are based largely on students’ self-assessment rather than the more “scientific” method of separating students into treatment and control groups. Although less direct, student self-assessment is used widely (Sanford Bernhardt et al, 2010). Ramocki found significant increase in students’ self-reported research proficiency, and validated this finding by comparing student and client opinions about the results’ utility and achievement of the project’s purpose. I will return to connections between Ramocki’s findings and my experience in this chapter’s concluding section.

Returning to the economics literature, Ziegert and Goldrick (2008) comment that “economic educators have been slower to adopt service-learning in their classrooms,” and note that “no empirical studies have been performed” to assess service learning’s impact. To provide a scholarly structure for these efforts, both the economics and market science literatures, (Petkus, 2000; McGoldrick 1998) discuss Kolb’s model of experiential learning, based on historical use in understanding the benefits of ‘service learning’. Kolb’s cycle can be initiated at any stage, moving through abstract conceptualization, active experimentation, concrete experience, reflective observation, and back to abstract conceptualization. Entering the cycle at the abstract level is standard in economics: the lecture. New applications are often illustrated as part of lecture, homework, and exams. We may attempt to provide concrete experience and reflective observation by assigning ‘current events’ reports. The advantages of SL/CBLR include the ability to cycle through the levels more than once, allowing more concrete experiences, and increasing the frequency and relevance of reflective observation.

Although the program that McGoldrick describes is closer to “community service” than CBLR, an edited volume by McGodrick and Ziegert (2002) contains many more examples of the range in which economics service-learning projects can be found. Some chapters also make a connection between these classroom efforts and faculty research.

Ziegert and Goldrick (2008) characterize the current state of pedagogy in economics well when they say that “Thinking like an economist has become the buzz phrase for describing lifelong learning in undergraduate economics education.” A literature is developing in economics around the ‘use it or lose it’ pedagogy advocated by Hansen et al. (2002) and Salemi et al. (2001). These programs usually advocate simpler approaches than CBLR through classroom activities, smaller-scale projects, and activities such as journaling. In advanced courses like marketing research—with its statistics, econometrics, and intermediate microeconomics prerequisites—the large-scale nature of the project described here is a natural extension to those experiences students should gain earlier in their academic careers.

Ziegert and McGodrick also have the insight that the economics discipline could use better ‘public relations’, in two directions. We could enlarge our traditional focus on the assumption of ‘self-interest’ to include the benefits and understanding provided by models of self-interest. We can also provide students with more community context in which to understand the theories
explained by economic theory. “Through service-learning, students have opportunities to make a difference in their communities while at the same time developing the habits and skills of an engaged citizen.” My students expressed the value they found in this dimension of the project.

In CBLR, we seek to have tighter connections between students, community, and research goals—perhaps even across institutions. After describing the project, I will return to this inter-institutional nature and its connection to the OPERA mnemonic for Objectives, Partnerships, Engagement, Reflection and Assessment. The focus, throughout this chapter, is somewhat more heavily on the ‘Partnership’ component of OPERA.

The project

Marketing research—as a course, discipline, or practice—is about survey design, data collection, qualitative analysis and statistics. To enliven such a course, we can include various forms of “real data” as interesting examples in lecture and ask students to complete data collection projects and end-of-semester presentations. Using community-driven ideas for student projects will have more impact on the local community’s needs than will student-driven project ideas, and it will also enhance students’ commitment to the effort.

A new approach for student projects

Because the motivation for this project was from the community, it presented a transition for me, one that I was unsure would be successful. During previous semesters, the projects were chosen by each student group—a lower-level form of service learning. The community service component had been important to me before: I urged students to consult campus experts (in athletics, the library, or the Dean of Students for various projects that related to each of those areas’ expertise, for example) before starting their survey designs, and then to invite those experts to the students’ final presentations.

Now I was considering a project selected to be in line with a community group’s interest and its synergy with both my own research and the course’s goals. The previous student projects had a natural variety; there were likely to be projects in which each individual had interest. Moving to a structure that further integrated community needs could have just added additional complications to the structure I had already developed for student projects in this class. I worried that students would chafe at the requirements driven by the community’s wishes rather than their own, but instead found that the connection to a community’s needs can inspire students’ commitment and imagination. They saw the project’s relevance to their classroom knowledge (and vice-versa), and they were motivated by the community sponsor’s participation in defining the goals. I also worried that there would not be enough work for me to assign to five different groups of students. Not only was there plenty for each group to do, but the groups also provided each other with useful input during the process, collaborating together on each dimension of the project, resulting in a richer understanding for the community’s larger social goal.

The project specification

As I will describe further below, the project was organized through the Lehigh Valley Research Consortium (LVRC) to satisfy the goals of the Greater Lehigh Valley chapter of Buy Fresh Buy
Local (GLV-BFBL), student learning goals, and research interests. Our goals for the project, as committed to GLV-BFBL through the LVRC were to:

1. identify regional food production capacity including such measures as the number of farms, farm acreage, types of food production, and monetary value of food sold locally;
2. characterize consumption of locally-grown food, including households, food distributors, and restaurants;
3. understand the decision making process of those stakeholders in the demand for and supply of locally-grown food: how they make their decisions, on what time scales, and what market or policy variables may affect those decisions;
4. identify challenges to greater use of local food supply and consumption; and
5. identify best practices, market conditions, and policies that could increase the wealth of stakeholders in this region by addressing the obstacles for bringing together food suppliers and consumers.

The students were organized into five groups at Lafayette College and one group at Muhlenberg College. A separate group of students at Lehigh University investigated restaurants’ local food use. Goals 1-5 stated above were part of a larger contract that also specified a written report produced by faculty members after presentations by the student groups. In my class, the five groups of three students each were initially tasked as follows.

Group A: Consumers’ current food purchase behavior, decision process.
Group B: Consumers’ decision-making process, reasons to change what they do
Group C: Six farmers (starting with a list of 10).
   What is currently sold locally? How can decisions change? Define “local”.
Group D: Four to ten Easton restaurants.
   What is currently bought locally, why would it change?
   Challenge: their willingness to share information.
Group E: Local distribution networks, “middlemen”, perhaps groceries
   What is currently bought locally? How can decisions change? Define “local”.

Students also had a chronology of the semester delineating the development, testing, administration, and analysis of their surveys. The students understood that they would be critiquing each other in an electronic discussion board and providing informal feedback on progress in classroom sessions as the project progressed. To understand GLV-BVBL’s goals better, we invited the community organizer in for an initial presentation on BFBL for us and asked her to attend the final student presentations. The final presentations were graded based on the rubric below.

(5%-10%) Introduction
   Outline briefly targeted to your part of the project
   One- or two-sentence synopsis
(10%-5%) Goals (from the list of 5) addressed by your component of the project
   Characterize as exploratory, descriptive, etc
(35%-25%) Questions from the survey (the important ones, not all of them)
This project’s fit with OPERA components

The project’s fit with the OPERA structure had the following features.

Learning Objectives included students’ application of the classroom knowledge to understanding the features of the local food supply chain, but they did not specify goals for the community. Students still understood what the community organizer and I wanted to accomplish through the goals listed above and through her presentation before the project started. The presentation not only allowed for a dialogue between the students and the community organizer, but it also allowed the students to observe our interaction—questions and clarifications from me as well as the community organizer. Our classroom discussions after the presentation, as well as our modifications to the plan as the semester progressed, incorporated that knowledge. Naturally, she and I also had discussions before and after her presentation to help me guide the students’ development.

That cooperation between community, students, and professor was one of the components of the community Partnership, but we also had an academic community in which we operated. There were two components: synergies with my NSF-funded scholarly research and its connection to colleagues at my own institution, and—perhaps more importantly from the perspective of the community—coordination of the work across our local institutions before, during, and at the end of the project. We worked out those responsibilities with the biology group at Muhlenberg College and the economics group at Lehigh University. I will discuss the partnership components of the project in more detail below.

The students that had the most active Engagement with the community were those that interviewed farmers, distributors (groceries), and restaurateurs. The students that surveyed consumers focused on our own college community, treating this survey as a pilot for a more comprehensive effort. Our classroom discussions as well as the final presentations helped each group of students understand what the other students learned from their contacts.

The interactions and presentations in class were also part of the students’ critical Reflection, a component that is important for making the information available to other students, in addition to providing a method for internalizing the student’s own experience. By critiquing the written work of others as the semester went on, students helped improve other groups’ efforts, and each student thought more critically about what they and others were doing.

Characterizing a project as CBLR requires placing limits on its goals that may not usually be placed on SL projects: that the projects be community-driven and that they satisfy research goals. This project clearly satisfied those goals. Yet the CBLR paradigm also enriches the project beyond students’ community interaction, as illustrated by the OPERA mnemonic. Structuring an umbrella CBLR program so that the courses and projects that it supports follow the OPERA framework might not change some of the “service learning” programs that exist today, but there are many that could benefit from such refinements. Changing my own course project from student-driven to community-based projects reflects especially on the second element of OPERA, Partnership.
Partnership: joint effort and community support

There are several explicit and implicit partnerships involved in this project. These relationships were crucial to the project and we should reflect on the community, intra-institution, and inter-institutional support necessary to keep CBLR alive and vibrantly engaged.

Diagnosing a community issue and the strategic design process

Stoecker and Beckman (2009) describe “three crucial places where research is needed” in Stoecker’s (2005) four-phase cycle of the strategic “community design” process: diagnosis, prescription, and evaluation. (The fourth phase is implementation). Our work with Buy Fresh Buy Local addressed two phases, diagnosing a community issue and prescribing action. The community organization (BFBL) that recognized this need was able to bring its question to academics through a local forum. Those academics, the chair of the Economics Department at Lehigh University and the director of the Lehigh Valley Research Consortium, were on the lookout for projects in which their constituencies could help the community. A program supporting local food growers needed to diagnose the current situation, and this fit in general with both my existing academic goals and research program.

As part of the academic goals, it was important for students to be involved with describing prescriptions and the criteria for choosing a strategy. As they heard through lecture and reading, marketing research should be designed, collected, and analyzed with an eye towards the effect it will have on decision making. It’s an important part of the process that can be forgotten in the hullabaloo of survey design, data collection and statistical tests: if the decision makers aren’t going to pay attention to the questions—either because they don’t trust the data collection methods or because the questions aren’t relevant—the time spent on marketing research is wasted effort. In our classroom sessions and discussion board exchanges, we focused our hypotheses, survey design, and data collection methods by asking each other, “How can the answers change decision makers actions?”

The project does have an ongoing nature beyond a single semester. The first is the written report produced to integrate the students’ work. The second is the interest from others in the Lehigh Valley that may be generated by this project, and support that would then come from the LVRC. I will return to a discussion of the LVRC and other support questions after describing the industrial partnership implicitly studied through this project.

Communities: the supply chain, scholarly research

There was inherently broad community participation in the project because it was about an industrial supply chain that brings local food to diners’ plates at home or in a restaurant. Supply chains are diverse, connected communities, and our study considered the various impacts that farmers, distributors, groceries, restaurateurs, and consumers have on each other due to the linkages between them in the supply chain. “Community” is too often used to mean only consumers, excluding the people behind the goods and services. Not only did we include producers as part of the community, but we also differentiated among the producers at each stage of the supply chain, and we thought about them in terms of their local, national, and global reach. Students responded positively to this chance to understand the local community better through
they eyes of people engaged in business as well as those participating as consumers. We can think of the people that are the links in this chain as connected to each other through an economic partnership. We found not only that many of them viewed themselves that way but they also value their connections to other like-minded entrepreneurs.

Another community was implicitly involved in this study, the research community. The partnerships brought together faculty and students, faculty across disciplines, and faculty across institutions—all pursuing shared goals. Although not every student was involved in this component of the project, students also contributed to the research level outside the classroom. My participation during and after the semester also brought me into closer contact with scholars at other local institutions and additional Community-Based Research and Learning scholars at my own college. My involvement in this book project is perhaps the primary example of CBLR’s natural expansion of my sense of community.

Support for community-based research in the region

For this project, as it has for many others over the past few years, the Lehigh Valley Research Consortium (LVRC) brought the schools together to address a community need. LVRC’s mission includes identifying and facilitating community-based research and learning, connecting scholars from institutions in Pennsylvania’s Lehigh Valley in collaboration with government, non-profits, and businesses. The director of the LVRC actively seeks out projects from various community sources, acting as an aggregator and facilitator for inter-institutional, community-base research. Each of the projects organized by the LVRC must have faculty from at least two of the member institutions. The LVRC also enables improved access for the community because its overhead can be substantially lower than that specified by the individual schools’ grant offices.

The difficulty that LVRC now faces is maintaining the connections to the groups, in particular the difficulty of maintaining sufficient funding. This is in part due to the current recession, but it could be true at any time. A school’s administration may find it hard-pressed to justify financial support for an inter-institution group, and yet the group of institutions benefits from such an aggregator—a classic tragedy of the commons (Hardin, 1968; Ostrom, 1990). It may be that CBLR is precisely the area where our separate institutions can recognize the shared goals and the need to engage the community as a group in order to make individuals’ work more relevant and long-lasting.

This raises another question: Should we ask the community partners to contribute financially to the project? Financial contribution is important for two reasons. The lesser reason is to have more committed community partners. The greater reason is to fund the efforts of groups like LVRC to create more contacts between the academy and the community and focusing the developed projects on the community’s needs. In relationship to that latter goal, there is also a need to compensate the faculty involved, in recognition that school often have difficulty allocating faculty time for community involvement.

The partnership across schools

The cooperation of faculty at our three schools was loose, recognizing the constraints and differing goals in each group’s academic environment. My challenge at Lafayette College, with the largest number of students involved (fifteen, as compared to three at each of the other two
schools), was to find sufficient dimensions of the project to give meaningful work to five groups of students. The three students at Lehigh University had the most time to give because this project was the single focus of their capstone course, while the Muhlenberg College group was not part of a class project, simply faculty-directed research.

We allocated work to the different groups in two dimensions. The first was naturally geographic because Lafayette and Muhlenberg are at opposite ends of the valley and Lehigh is in the middle. The other dimension was the nature of the tasks given to each group. At Muhlenberg the students’ focus was on biology, naturally applied to farm production at the beginning of the supply chain, while the students’ majors at Lehigh—marketing economics—led to their focus on restaurants, at the other end of the supply chain. My own research program in a related project studying the total supply chain fit nicely with the need for five different student groups spanning the entire supply chain from farming to consumption. These allocations helped us avoid duplicated effort and kept the student groups from overwhelming any farmers or restaurateurs.

Our goal was to have the student groups attend each other’s presentations, but they did not due to busy schedules and their lack of desire to leave their respective campuses for long—it is somewhat easier to engage students in the community than to engage them in nearby campuses’ activities! There was no presentation at Muhlenberg, but the community organizer and I attended both presentations on the Lehigh and Lafayette campuses. The Lehigh student group compiled a separate report, reflecting their focus on this project as the total output for one of their courses.

Support for community-based research at the institution

An instructor can look for models in his or her own discipline, in related disciplines, and across the instructor’s institution. I have already discussed disciplinary resources related to this project. Other active programs at a faculty member’s institution increases the “critical mass” necessary for administrative support. Some of the CBLR experience at our institution is reflected in statistics pedagogy and the mathematics of social justice (Bremser et al., 2010; Root and Thorne 2001; Root et al. 2005). A long-standing program at Lafayette College is the Tech Clinic (2010), an interdisciplinary two-semester course that integrates community, industrial, and college needs with interdisciplinary teams of students and instructors. It inhabits a middle ground between the academic projects run by faculty as part of a course and the pure community service efforts organized by the Dean of Students. Further towards that non-academic end of the spectrum at Lafayette College and other institutions are groups like Engineers Without Borders, where students get no academic credit but use skills associated with their academic discipline and anticipated profession.

We also have a new college-wide committee on community-based learning and research. One of the committee’s first acts was to hold a CBLR “Expo” showcasing faculty activities in this area—all of which existed before the committee was created. This bottom-up nature of CBLR (and on into the Service Learning end of the spectrum) is not unique to Lafayette College; it reflects the value that faculty members place on both students’ learning and their own research efforts. The growth of CBLR efforts also reflects a nation-wide trend in pedagogy and pedagogy’s links to faculty scholarship.

All of these efforts combine to create a culture of community-involvement on campus. They may also lead to connections that CBLR-oriented faculty can exploit. Although individual
faculty and administrators’ efforts are crucial to the success of the projects they spearhead, the faculty member involved in CBLR may rely on larger inter-institutional or intra-institution aggregator groups to help make the connections to community members. Conversely, the individual faculty member—who has a pedagogic agenda in a particular course or a scholarly agenda in a research program—can be a significant resource of specialized knowledge to larger programs focused more purely on community needs. When a service program exploits and enables the use of that specialized knowledge through CBLR work with students, this can in turn lead to greater understanding of the community by a large number of future business and government leaders—that is, our students.

**Reaching goals**

*Agreement among constituencies*

The original goal of GLV-BFBL was for this project to create an estimate of the impact of buying local food on the Lehigh Valley economy. Although similar statements are available for other communities (Swanson, 2006; Herrera et al., 2004), such a study did not fit the academic goals of the course. Because the focus of the course was on gathering attitudes, behaviors, and opinions using various survey methods, we could develop the groundwork in expertise for understanding the economic effect of buying local. Thus our agreement was something of a compromise in goals, serving three constituencies: the students’ learning, the community’s needs, and existing research goals. The administrative process of the LVRC and the written contract contributed to ironing out these goals before the project started. This need for discussion of goals before the project begins is part of the OPERA mnemonic’s Partnership component. Putting together a written contract helped us understand each other’s constraints and goals, as well as increase the community partner’s appreciation of the varied dimensions that the students could provide.

What made the project successful was the fact that we did provide new information to support BFBL in its efforts to increase use of the local food supply chain, in dimensions complementary to the original intent. We also laid the groundwork for future efforts to follow those goals. By better understanding the workings of the supply chain, we can in the future investigate the flow of the consumer’s dollar back into the community via a local food purchase rather than food that originates outside the Lehigh Valley. This knowledge provided new ideas for BFBL to improve the viability of farmers’ local food distribution: the improvement of relationships between farmers and groceries, assistance with farmers’ marketing efforts, and information about correlation between consumers’ demographic characteristics and their focus on taste, price, and convenience.

*Student learning, “buy-in”*

Marketing Research is a course in which it is natural to integrate students’ academic learning objectives with community members’ objectives. Members of the community, in this case the local BFBL chapter, often want a better understanding of their environment (natural, social, built, etc.), and this is precisely what marketing research is meant to do, using appropriate qualitative and quantitative techniques.
The kick-off presentation by BFBL had several effects on the students. Not only did it give them context for the project, it also allowed them to ask questions to better understand the community organizer’s goals. Comments on the course evaluation forms and my observations of the students’ work provide evidence that—in addition to wanting to please me (if for no other reason than to earn a good grade)—the students wanted to help the community organizer achieve her goals. That presentation made it a personal connection in which students were invested, and they knew from the start that the community organizer would return to observe their final presentations. It was also the first time she had done such a presentation—another benefit created by our CBLR activity: helping the agent of change develop a message that could be used elsewhere.

In the context of Kolb’s learning cycle, Ziegert and McGoldrick (2008) make clear the distinction between deductive and inductive reasoning. They assert that economics instruction is usually deductive, from the general to the specific; while service learning allows students to think inductively, taking examples from their particular experiences and generalize from them. We can take this idea further, recognizing that the Kolb cycle is about moving back and forth between inductive and deductive reasoning, without giving primacy to either mode. We improve learning when we move through a cycle that alternates between inductive and deductive argument, whether that cycle is followed exclusively in class or in tandem with experiences outside the classroom. Add this to the CBLR paradigm’s ability to create greater utility for both the community and the researcher in addition to the students’ education.

Further reflections and conclusions

What factors contributed to the successful community interaction in this course? In addition to several discussed above, there were two structural advantages to CBLR in this course: (i) it was an upper-level course, with a strong econometrics pre-requisite, and (ii) the students were economics majors, more likely to be innately comfortable with business interactions or at least motivated to overcome any initial trepidation. Ramocki’s (1987) observation that “clients must be properly screened to ensure that they are enthusiastic and possess realistic expectations” is also relevant. Our client’s enthusiasm affected the students’ commitment to the project. Petkus found that it is important to have clients that are likely to cooperate. My students’ experience in this area was most acute with distributors and grocery stores—it was a challenge to find the members of the organization that had the time and knowledge to help us.

Students learned from this course in ways that are hard to measure. They knew that it was a required project, but this was not different from past project assignments. What was different this time was (i) they worked together on a larger project, (ii) it was chosen not by them but me, and (iii) it was motivated by a need from the community. They recognized the community’s need because they heard directly from the community partner and our college is currently focused on improving “green” aspects of campus.

The course objectives did not include aspects of the community service. The process of drawing up a contract through the LVRC provided important guidance for this aspect through its clearly stated objectives. The students and I also worked together to understand how they could apply the knowledge they had from the course to the contract’s objectives. So there was a balance, as in all pedagogy, between the specificity of the instructor’s directions and the creative
latitude given to students. My students probably grew more—and likely enjoyed the project more—precisely because the objectives were somewhat open-ended.

The community sponsor received more information through this collaboration across campuses, but future projects could do more to integrate the students’ cross-campus experiences. The inter-institutional nature of this project also highlights the challenges to providing sustainable support for these programs. Although significant initiative is required on the part of the instructor, community partnerships are more likely to be productive if organized by the institution, or even across institutions in the local area. Nascent forms of such support exist at Lafayette College and across the Lehigh Valley schools, but we have only recently recognized that a critical mass of interested (and already engaged) faculty has developed on campus. A committee has now been formed to marshal resources to sustain these efforts as long-term components of the student experience. Within my own department, the addition of a “capstone” requirement in the major may lead to longer-term sustainability of CBLR, but we do not have such a motivation in place at this time.

My experience was also not one in which I was looking to move more towards a CBLR model. I did not say to myself, “This course needs to address the community’s needs more directly. Maybe I can find a project that is community-motivated.” Instead, the community presented itself to me as an opportunity, although I could not be sure it would be successful either pedagogically or popularly with the students. This provides the first reason for us to support inter-institutional and intra-institution programs for CBLR. Without the inter-institutional support from the LVRC I would not have been aware of this community need. The College was also not prepared to support my contractual relationship with a community partner, a practical way in which the LVRC supported our community-scholar integration.

There are three additional reasons that community partnerships have a better chance of survival through inter-institutional support like the LVRC. One is its lower overhead; traditional institutional overhead is determined by higher rates paid by national grant-giving agencies. Community partners typically cannot justify the high overhead that the federal government’s agencies are accustomed to paying. Another reason that the inter-institutional LVRC can be a better supporter of CBLR because it little reason to focus on a single institution’s goals. Finally, the inter-institutional LVRC has a greater diversity of expertise, while the range of expertise at any single school is naturally limited by the size of the faculty.

The main impediment to an inter-institutional body like the LVRC is the competition that naturally arises between a region’s academic institutions. Thus both when raising operating capital and when pursuing a given project, there may be some tension between the member organization and the aggregator LVRC. Although every institution would gain from better coordination of inter-institutional efforts, each individual institution can most clearly see the cost of ceding some “territory” to the umbrella group.

McGoldrick and Peterson (2009) place their economics course examples in the field of public scholarship, putting experiential learning in the larger context of pluralism in economics education. They argue that a variety of learning styles can be addressed by service-learning. Peterson and Goldrick (2009), as well as other scholars, pull together several strands of the education and economics education literature to describe how “Economic educators have struggled to find evidence that the learning we assume is occurring in our courses has any lasting effect.” They also believe that “economists are already, perhaps unknowingly, developing experiences consistent with facets of this approach.” My experience was a slow realization that what I was trying to do with my class was part of this larger effort. When the opportunity
became available to do so, I wanted to connect my efforts to this larger experience, even though I was concerned that students wouldn’t have the same motivation due to the stronger community orientation and resulting prescriptive nature of their projects’ goals. We all benefited from these connections, improving the pedagogy and scholarship, because we were motivated by community goals.

**References**


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