

THEory into ACTion

A Bulletin of New Developments in Community Psychology Practice

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How Working to Establish a Sample Size Can

Help Foster a Community of Practice

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While campus-based programs to address gender-based violence have existed for over thirty years, as of 2015 there were no published research studies or national data outlining these programs and their affiliated professionals. When my colleague Jill Dunlap and I noticed this gap, we set out to fill it. We worked with a group of practitioners to develop a survey instrument to gather centralized information about campus programs. We then quickly recognized that the first step was as simple as it was problematic; we did not know our “n.” There was no existing centralized database or professional association for campus-based violence prevention programs, so we did not even have an approximation of the number of such programs nationally. Our experience in establishing a sample illuminate both the challenges and joys of community research.

We had recently been in the shoes of these professionals, knew many of them well and had their trust. However, because we had this access we needed to ensure that we were especially careful that we mitigated bias as much as possible. To do this, we aggregated every list of professionals we could find, divided out across over nineteen professional associations, searched

through grantee lists, and brought in a team of less connected interns to engage in some old-fashioned googling of key search terms. Leveraging the strength of our connections while also involving others who could identify potential pitfalls or biases was vital to our success.

We also grappled with technological limitations. The internet is what made this process possible and is the likely source for others looking to embark on similar processes. Unfortunately though, online information is only as good as a university's investment in maintaining it. Many campus websites were out of date or only provided contact information for individuals without clarity on their roles. Even as more and more information becomes available online, it is important for researchers trying to establish a sample to still follow up by having phone conversations with key stakeholders at the local, state, or national level.

Lastly, creating our database was challenged by limitations of funding and time. While campus sexual assault is a highly visible issue right now, there is not existing funding to study existing personnel and program structures, despite the great impact human resources and organizational structures have on addressing sexual assault on campus. Needing to establish our own sample before data collection could even begin led our study timeline to elongate by an additional four months, during which time new programs would pop up or others would lose funding. While these would be simple limitations in some research studies, other community-focused researchers might be interested in building in systems for updating their databases. Engaging student interns or volunteers could be helpful strategies.

Despite the challenges of growing a database and establishing our "n" from scratch, the results were worth it. Through creating this database, we were able to collect the first robust data on campus sexual assault prevention and advocacy programs across the United States. By working closely with our colleagues around the country, we were able to not only form a

database, but also to grow a network across the country. This process of trying to establish an “n” could similarly help other emerging fields to become more connected, thus curbing isolation among practitioners who tend to be the only person in their role in their community or on their campus. Our partnerships then allowed us to shape our survey instrument so that the results would benefit the community, and they would be interested in disseminating them.

Community-based research is often more time-consuming and circuitous than other types of research. Still, the feedback loop process we established strengthened the quality of our sampling, instrument, data collection, findings, and dissemination. By ensuring that our work was informed by the community we served, we were able to collect data about a community that had previously been dispersed in myriad larger professional communities. Before this research, there was no central hub for campus-based prevention and advocacy programs. In addition to creating scholarship that benefited the community, we were able to help form a community of practice, Campus Advocates & Prevention Professionals Association (CAPPA) and to provide critical information to the field. There are likely other fields that are growing across the country about which there is currently no accessible data for practitioners to use. This process was a poignant reminder to us of the power that research processes can have to engender positive community change.

This is one of a series of bulletins highlighting the use of community psychology in practice. Comments, suggestions, and questions are welcome. Please direct them to Tabitha Underwood at underwoodtabitha@gmail.com.