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The Community As a Classroom

From coping with an overflowing sewer to selling vegetables in an elementary school, college students and teachers are developing community-based projects that have a real-life impact.

By Wendi A. Maloney

WHEN TAMARA DUBOWITZ'S PARENTS immigrated to Pottsville, Pennsylvania, in 1978, their goal was to raise their children far away from the racial and social divisions of their native South Africa. In Pottsville, however, they did not find exactly what they were seeking. In the 1920s, the city had been a thriving business center serving the coal-mining industry in southeastern Pennsylvania. But by the 1970s, the downtown jewelry shops, movie theaters, and clothing stores had all closed. Dubowitz's family, supported by her father's income as a doctor, lived comfortably. But many of her friends qualified for free lunches at school and lived in subsidized housing. Watching the families of her friends struggle just to get by and listening to her parents' tales of life in apartheid South Africa helped instill in Dubowitz a deep concern for social justice.

Soon after she enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania in 1992, Dubowitz, an anthropology major, set out to find a way to combine her education with her desire to address issues of social disparity. The Turner Nutritional Awareness Program gave her the perfect opportunity. Through the program, started by Penn anthropology professor Francis Johnston,



Dubowitz and her fellow students visited Turner Middle School in West Philadelphia to collect data on the health of its students, many of whom suffer from nutrition problems affected by a lack of access to markets that sell fresh produce.

Wendi Maloney is managing editor of Academe.

The Penn undergraduates used the data to study the relationship between food, health, and nutrition in urban America. The program also required them to work with the middle school teachers and students to set up a curriculum in which the Turner students could learn the basics of health and nutrition and share their knowledge with others in the community. "The idea that the university could engage in substantive research while promoting social change in an economically disadvantaged neighborhood really excited me," says Dubowitz. "It seemed the best of both worlds."

Education with a Purpose

Efforts like the Turner Nutritional Awareness Program are part of a larger movement in U.S. higher education that started to gather steam in the 1990s. The movement began as one study after another documented social disaffection among students. The studies showed a sharp downturn in student voting and political participation and reported growing lack of interest among students in the lives of their communities.

Beginning in the early 1990s, concerned faculty and administrators started to argue for inclusion of civic activism in the core curriculum of the university. They said that encouraging student volunteerism was not enough. "Penn does not see civic involvement as a sideshow," stresses Ira Harkavy, director and vice president of the Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania, which now has more than a hundred courses in which students combine academic study and community activism.

The faculty members *Academe* interviewed for this article agree that courses involving civic engagement must have solid academic benefits for students while also supporting change in

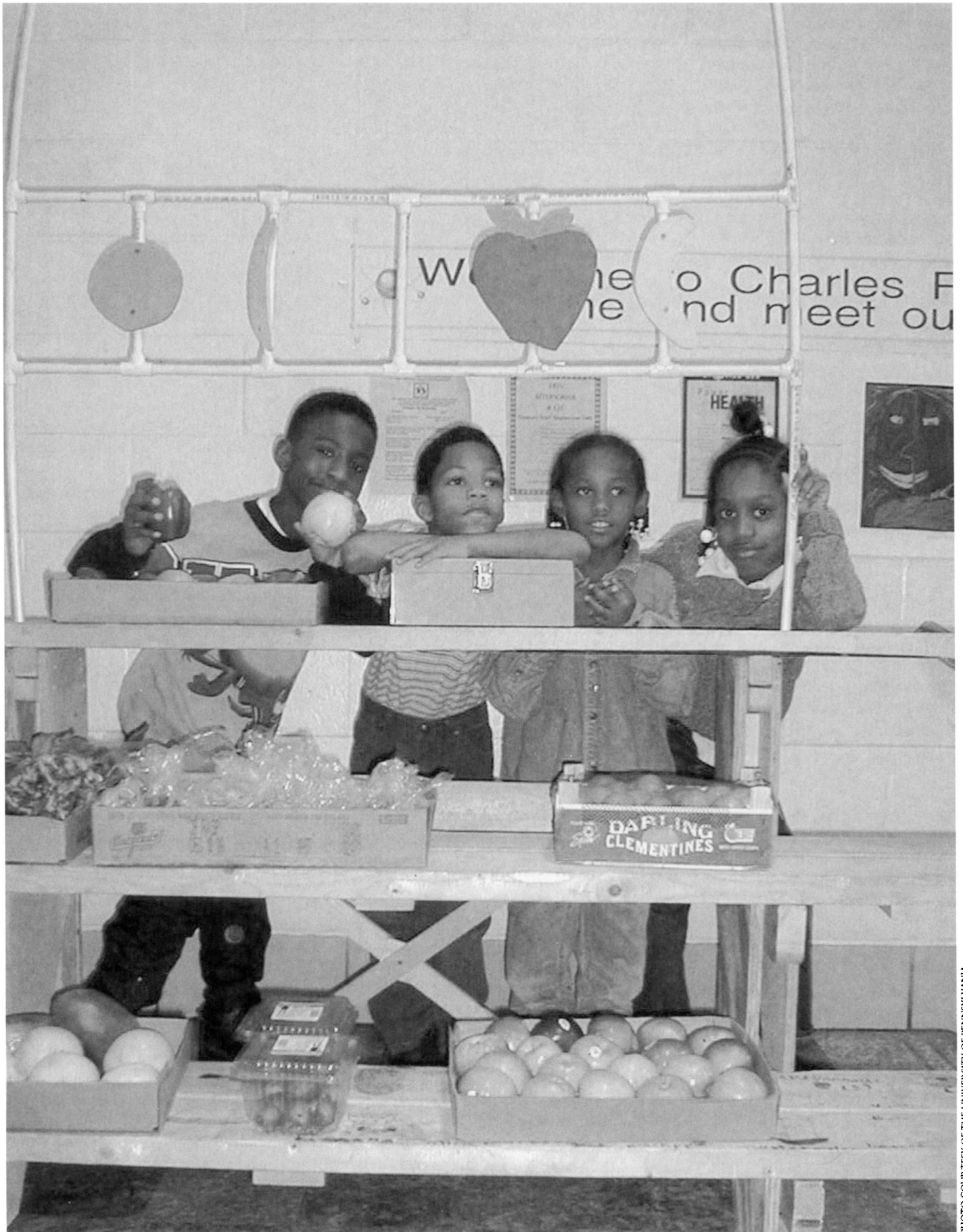


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Students sell fruits and vegetables to their classmates as part of a program to improve students' snacking habits.



West Philadelphia students work in a school-based garden.

the community. Not surprisingly, faculty in community-based research have had their share of run-ins with local groups that have opposed their projects. In addition, they must deal with issues of race and class as a result of sending middle-class students into low-income, minority communities. And tenure is a constant concern for these faculty members, because tenure and promotion committees often fail to recognize community-based inquiry as “real” research.

Roots

Ira Harkavy, who is a historian, sees a precedent for the current push for civic education in the early days of research universities, when service was viewed as an important part of the institutional mission, especially at urban and land-grant universities. Institutions moved away from service in later years, Harkavy explains, especially during the Cold War, when they focused resources on distant, not local, problems. Now that the Cold War is over, he says, universities can no longer afford to ignore long-neglected issues affecting localities. “Over forty-five years of looking outward had its costs as unresolved domestic problems developed into unresolved, highly visible crises,” Harkavy notes.

Moreover, the government and private foundations now want research institutions to use their resources to help solve social problems, and they are providing funds for that purpose. “Universities are starting to see that altruism pays,” he remarks, although he cautions that the amount of support given is often inadequate to address the problems at hand. For institutions like Penn that are situated in distressed urban areas, altruism pays in more than one way: it improves the environment surrounding the colleges and universities, presumably making

them more attractive to prospective students.

According to Harkavy and others, the main difference between past and present interactions between universities and communities is that the needs of communities are now central. Even as late as the 1980s, research was done *on* communities, not with or for them.

Kenneth Reardon, a professor of urban and regional planning at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, directs the East St. Louis Action Research Project, a major community development effort in East St. Louis, Illinois. For years, Reardon explains, the project operated on the “professional expert” model: the university carried out research on the community and made recommendations. “Residents felt they were being studied to death,” he says, and they protested. Reardon was hired in

1990 to bring community members into the process of identifying problems and effecting change.

In the opinion of Richard Suttle, director of a local neighborhood development group, Reardon has more than succeeded. “The community had no input before Ken arrived,” Suttle says. “But he set up classes and enlightened community members as to how they could get involved and make a difference.”

Education Versus Community Needs

Faculty members in civic education may agree on the importance of community involvement. But they do not necessarily use the same techniques to bring members of the community to the table. Nor do they balance the needs of the community and the needs of their students in the same way.

Philip Nyden, a sociology professor at Loyola University Chicago, directs the university’s Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL). Since its founding in 1996, CURL has engaged in many community-based research projects, including efforts to evaluate the impact of welfare reform on women, children, and immigrants; to create new options for child care in a Chicago neighborhood; and to evaluate a program for placing children in foster care.

Nyden explains that CURL carries out research in teams in which community leaders work with undergraduate and graduate students and faculty members from any number of disciplines to gather data on a problem and plan political solutions to overcome it. Students have multiple mentors, Nyden says, not a single professor. In one seminar, a Chicago alderperson was a mentor. Nyden believes that seeing community members in such roles teaches students to think differently; they learn that knowledge exists outside the university as well as inside.

According to Elizabeth Hollander, executive director of Campus Compact, a coalition of college and university presidents committed to campus-based public and community service, CURL stands out in the level of community involvement it brings to its efforts. Community members propose projects to CURL—in recent years they have suggested many more than CURL can handle—and they participate in every phase of the research and implementation. “I see CURL as a model in the field of community-based research,” Hollander remarks. “It was the first program to figure out how truly to generate research from the community.”

Balancing the needs of students and those of the community in such a situation is a delicate process, Nyden says. “We try to be sensitive to both goals as we move along,” he explains. “We have built up trust with communities; they will give us access because they realize we can help them accomplish a goal. They also realize, however, that we have responsibilities to our students.”

Nyden’s aim for his community partners is to show them that documenting their problems and devising political solutions can help them win back control of their communities. CURL, Nyden says, “builds up challengers to the status quo.” For his students, Nyden’s hope is to demystify how a city is run. “They find out,” Nyden explains, “that decisions are made through a process of negotiation and often battle, and that power must be taken into account.” Like CURL’s community partners, the students discover that they can play a part in promoting social change. “It’s rare for an undergraduate to be able to engage in work that has an impact,” Nyden notes.

For Anne Whiston Spirn, a professor of landscape architecture and urban planning at the University of Pennsylvania, the needs of her students and those of the community never compete: her students always come first. “My students test theory against reality in the community and in the process provide service,” she explains.

Yet the needs of the Mill Creek neighborhood of West Philadelphia, where Spirn’s students do their research, do not fall by the wayside. For the past five years, her students have worked with teachers and students at Sulzberger Middle School to study and address problems associated with a streambed buried in a sewer near the school. Flooding and cave-ins have afflicted the surrounding area for many decades.

Before each semester, Spirn meets with middle school teachers to learn their pedagogical objectives, which she tries to mesh with her own. In addition, she meets with the neighborhood coalition and says, “Here’s what I must achieve in terms of teaching my students; what kinds of issues can we work on together?”

Recently, the local water department agreed to implement a project designed by Penn and Sulzberger students over the past

three years. The students proposed turning an urban block near the school into a wetland that will collect and hold storm water so that it can seep gradually into the sewer to reduce flooding. The wetland will accomplish a practical purpose while also serving as a study tool for the middle school students.

Politics


It comes as no surprise that projects that, as Nyden says, challenge the status quo would run into political roadblocks. Outside organizations, Reardon reports, have tried to scuttle his efforts in East St. Louis more than once. When he was under consideration for tenure, a group of businessmen who sought federal funds to develop the city attacked Reardon after he issued a report that recommended awarding federal dollars only to groups with development expertise and experience in the community. The businessmen, who lacked the requisite qualifications, called Reardon a racist and accused the university of undermining African American business. In the end, Reardon, who had strong support in the community, was vindicated and obtained tenure; but the experience was harrowing, he says.

Nyden stresses that politics can often work in favor of community-based projects. In 1997 CURL research teams working with two Chicago community groups showed that a threatened federal cutoff in the supplemental Social Security income of legal immigrants would impoverish a group of elderly Cambodian women living in Chicago. Moreover, it would remove millions of dollars from the local economy. After a state legislator found out about the problem from a newspaper article, the Illinois legislature passed a bill allocating \$10 million toward easing the effect of the cutoff on local immigrants and businesses.

Race and Class

Another challenge facing professors in community-based research is how to deal with the tensions that inevitably arise when middle-class, mostly white, university students show up in low-income minority communities to work on projects.

Kenneth Reardon recounts an incident in which he brought undergraduates to East St. Louis to help a group of elderly African American women paint a church. It was the first time the students had visited the city, and they were a little nervous, Reardon says. But interacting with local residents seemed to alleviate their anxiety, and the day went smoothly. In the wrap-up session that followed, the students talked about how working with residents changed the negative preconceptions they had of people in East St. Louis. One student from Chicago’s suburbs reported, however, that he had never been scared, because he had brought a knife. The group spent several hours talking about why the student felt the need to arm



“We have built up trust with communities; they will give us access because they realize we can help them accomplish a goal.”

himself. “His behavior was extreme,” says Reardon, “but it shows what can happen when you bring students from the suburbs into a city demonized by the media.”

“Issues of race and class have to be continually negotiated and renegotiated in community-based projects,” explains Ira Harkavy. But Harkavy and others agree that working on concrete problems often leads to greater understanding among students and members of the community.

Making sure that the student teams that visit communities are racially and ethnically integrated also helps. Penn sponsors a summer internship program that provides group housing for twenty students while they work together on a community-based project in the public schools, whose students are mainly African American and Asian American. Usually, about a third of Penn’s student team is white, and another third is African American; the remaining third is made up of Latino and Asian American students. The experience, reports Harkavy, has a profound impact on the Penn students. “I can see a noticeable change in their perspectives on people and communities,” he says.

Every summer, the East St. Louis Action Research Project sponsors a program to introduce East St. Louis high school students to educational and career opportunities in urban planning, landscape architecture, and architecture. Reardon sees the program as a way to encourage the students to enter these fields: “The lack of people of color in the field handicaps our profession, which works directly with people in communities.” Reardon has had some success in this area: one of the staff members on the East St. Louis Action Research Project was inspired to study urban planning in college after attending the summer program.

Tenure

A major concern of faculty in community-based research is the lack of support for their work among tenure and promotion committees. By Kenneth Reardon’s account, his institution, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, has one of the most progressive policies in the country in terms of recognizing community-based research for purposes of tenure and promotion. Yet he was advised, when he was preparing for tenure, to publish eight to ten articles in journals recognized by the profession. That is the same requirement faculty members who do not engage in service must meet. “I had to scramble to get the publications,” Reardon remembers. “That kind of pressure keeps many committed scholars from doing this kind of work.”

“I’d be careful about recommending to probationary faculty that they launch a project like the one I’m involved in at Penn,” Anne Spirn cautions. She began to study how landscape architecture can contribute to inner-city neighborhoods

just after she received her master’s degree. In retrospect, she thinks she may have been naïve. Even though she published a well-received book and tied her community work directly to her research and teaching agenda, senior faculty members at Harvard University, where she first taught, criticized her for putting her tenure and her students at risk. She achieved tenure only when she arrived at Penn, where support for community-based research is strong.

Philip Nyden, a former chair of the sociology and anthropology department at Loyola, says that his department decided that if a faculty member turns one report based on community research into an article published in a peer-reviewed journal, other such reports can be considered in the tenure evaluation. Accepting a mix of different kinds of research makes sense, according to Nyden, especially in the current climate in which the public demands to see the impact of higher education.

“I’m not sure some of the more traditional folks in academia understand this yet,” Nyden muses. “They are not as political as they should be.”

Lasting Impact

As for Tamara Dubowitz, her foray into community-based research at Penn shaped her career path. In 1995 Dubowitz and fellow student Danny Gerber applied for a grant to start a fruit and vegetable store at Turner Middle School. They wanted to make it easy for the Turner students to change their snacking habits. The store, “Fruits Are Us and Vegetables, Too,” soon became the most popular component of the project. The Turner students enjoyed running the store, and the teachers appreciated its value as a learning tool. “We wanted to really involve the students in changing

their own lives,” says Dubowitz.

The Turner project, now called the Urban Nutrition Initiative, has since expanded to two other West Philadelphia schools, with Dubowitz and Gerber as program managers. The larger project features school-based gardens, a greenhouse, and an interdisciplinary curriculum that incorporates health and nutrition education into science, social studies, language, and math courses in K–12 classrooms.

Dubowitz is evaluating the project’s effectiveness for her master’s thesis in anthropology. The early forecast is that it has been highly successful. “Today, many of the students involved in the project choose carrot sticks, kiwi, or grapes as afternoon snacks,” reports Dubowitz. “We hope that this easy access to fresh produce will have a larger effect on nutrition-related disease in the community.” Dubowitz, who will start work on a doctorate in public health at Harvard University in the fall, says she plans a career in public service. “Obviously, for me,” she concludes, “coming to Penn was a wonderful opportunity to merge my interests in health and human justice with academic study.” ✍

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