

Connecting with Community and Facilitating Learning through the Little Rock Congregations Study

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Abstract

Places of worship play important roles as anchor institutions that promote community engagement and motivate political activity. Universities, particularly in urban settings, can also serve as anchor institutions that connect communities. Yet, there is often a gulf between the two, to the detriment of the broader community. In this article, we present the Little Rock Congregations Study (LRCS) as an approach to community engagement with faith-based organizations in an urban setting. This research project, based at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, involves an interdisciplinary team focused on understanding and improving the community engagement of congregations in the city of Little Rock since 2012. We present qualitative and quantitative data to illustrate the benefits of our approach, including research results returned to community organizations, greater visibility of the university in the community, student involvement in research and with faith-based organizations, and substantive findings that inform the greater body of knowledge and our own community. Through more than eight years of community-based work on the LRCS we provide six key lessons learned for researchers and students building relationships with religious leaders that can help bridge the gulf between these two key community institutions.

Keywords: religion, higher education, community engagement, community-based research, collaboration

Communities are often centered around key, immobile institutions where people gather, engage, and develop relationships. Universities and medical institutions are common examples of “anchors institutions” (Adams, 2003). Places of worship, such as churches, temples, and mosques can also play this role. Although universities and places of worship are often both engaged institutions in metropolitan areas, they may not work closely together. Universities tend to come from a rational, humanist perspectives and, especially if they are publicly funded, may be cautious about crossing the church/state line. Faith-based organizations, on the other hand, may be skeptical of higher education and not feel fully appreciated or taken seriously by universities (Fraser, 2016). The gulf between the two represents a missed opportunity for connections that can benefit these institutions and the broader community. Through our research, we specifically ask: what can universities bring to partnerships with faith-based organizations in order to return mutually beneficial results and help bridge these gaps?

Here, we present one approach to university community engagement with faith-based organizations through a longitudinal community-based research project. Through more than eight years of engaging with religious leaders and congregants, involving students in work outside of the classroom, and returning meaningful results to the community, we have built relationships between our university and the faith-based community in Little Rock, AR that have yielded positive benefits.

In the following sections, we first describe the value of universities and congregations as anchor institutions and the potential for good that can come when they work together. We then describe our community-based research project at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock: the Little Rock Congregations Study (LRCS). We present both qualitative and quantitative data to demonstrate the benefits of the study to the students, the faculty, the university, and the community. We then highlight major lessons learned.

Anchor Institutions

Anchor institutions are an integral part of the community fabric and play an important role in civic life. Anchor institutions are thought of as “locally embedded institutions, typically non-governmental public sector, cultural or other civic organizations, that are of significant importance to the economy and wider community life of the cities in which they are based” (Goddard, Coombes, Kempton, & Vallance, 2014, p. 307). These institutions often have significant place-based investments in real estate, are deeply embedded in local networks, and are relatively immobile given their commitment to building civil infrastructure (Birch, Perry, & Taylor, 2013; Cantor, Englot, & Higgins, 2013). Given their permanence and commitment to the community, anchor institutions are primed to serve as a catalyst for economic growth and social success in urban areas (Harris & Holley, 2016).

Some of the most prominent anchor institutions are “Eds and Meds.” This encompassing term refers to geographically defined networks of universities, educational, and medical institutions. Places of worship, given their permanence, and as sites for building social capital, are also community anchor institutions. Both have key, complementary strengths, and their respective missions indicate their potential to collaborate. We have found this to be true both in the literature on anchor institutions in communities and through our own research.

Congregations in Communities as Social Anchors

Places of worship are “social anchors” in the community, facilitating bonding and bridging social capital, and serving as access points for connecting members across racial, economic, and gender lines (Clopton & Finch, 2011). Congregations are also places where important civic skills are learned (Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995) and where social capital is built (Putnam, 2000; Putnam & Campbell, 2012). They bring people together for fellowship and provide a space to build upon critical social connections in the community (Cnaan, Boddie, & Yancey, 2003).

Of the estimated 400,000 congregations in the United States (Randall, 2017), almost half make significant contributions to the stock of social capital in America, either through providing volunteers, philanthropic giving, or civic participation (Saguaro Seminar, 2009). Unlike Eds and Meds, anchors that may have been physically present but historically disconnected from the local community (Adams, 2003), places of worship have traditionally been trusted institutions (Dash & Chapman, 2007). Consistent with the immobility characteristics of community anchors, religious institutions provide leadership and other resources in urban areas experiencing decline (Patterson, Silverman, Yin, & Wu, 2016), but they are also deeply embedded in the social and cultural life of a city (Maurasse, 2007).

Although congregations serve a key connecting role in communities, historically, they have also contributed to negative social patterns. Segregated churches are correlated with segregated communities across all regions in the United States (Blanchard, 2007). Homogeneous churches represent a lost opportunity to enhance racial understanding and instead undermine common connections (Blanchard, 2007; Christerson, Edwards, & Emerson, 2005). The significance of this lost opportunity for racial understanding tragically surfaced during the 2020 nationwide protests that included Little Rock. Our longitudinal research reveals a higher percentage of faith leaders now viewing race relations as a “very important issue” with 86% of responding clergy strongly agreeing or agreeing that “Little Rock has a problem with racial division.” Our initial 2020 research with clergy, however, does provide cause for hope. Of early clergy responders, 60% agree or strongly agree that race relations are likely to improve in Little Rock in the future (Glazier, 2020). Thus, while challenges of division exist, consistent with existing scholarship

(e.g., Brady et al., 1995; Cnaan et al., 2003), the permanence and legitimacy of places of worship within urban areas are their strengths as facilitators of racial understanding. Yet, we also recognize more than ever the need to engage in collaborative work that supports congregational leaders in efforts to address barriers that have historically harmed their influence.

Colleges and Universities in Communities

As place-bound institutions, universities are also critical anchors with significant ties to the local community and economy. Universities are not only catalysts that facilitate creating and sharing knowledge, but are also key to a city's economic health (Adams, 2003; Harkavy & Zuckerman, 1999). Even universities in areas experiencing urban decline and institutions with low enrollment may still invest in neighborhood stabilization and commercial development projects (Austrian & Norton, 2005), and may even boost local housing values (Cortes, 2004).

Real estate investments by universities attract other complementary investments in the surrounding metro area (Adams, 2003). Universities bring visitors from outside the region, increase local spending, and generate local revenues (Bartik & Erickcek, 2007). Moreover, Steinacker (2005) found significant positive localizing effects of student expenditures in the immediate area. As such, universities as anchor institutions contribute to economic vitality.

Additionally, universities as anchor institutions also influence the civic life of a community. Cortes (2004) points out that some in the academic community view the university's role as more than passive producers of knowledge, but as "societal instruments uniquely capable of addressing community problems" (p. 343). Thus, universities have an opportunity to engage in public work through collaboration with local citizens as co-producers of knowledge (Boyte, 2014). In doing so, the university as an anchor institution moves from being isolated islands of privilege (Alexander, Clouse, & Austrian, 2016; Harris & Holley, 2016) to inclusive spaces where students, faculty, and community members engage in bi-directional, collaborative projects that benefit the local community.

However, universities have historically had challenging relationships with their local communities. The divisions between "town/gown; ivory tower/ real world; theory/ practice; thinking/ doing" articulated by del Rio and Loggins (2019, p. 37), epitomize these challenging relationships. For instance, in articulating the "town and gown" relationship, Barr (1963) notes "the town suspects the university feels arrogantly towards it, and the gown feels the town is suspicious of it" (p. 304). Thus, there exists an opportunity for the university to work alongside institutions of the town, such as places of worship, to bridge this divide. Consistent with the literature (Martin, Smith, & Phillips, 2005; McWilliam, Desai, & Greig, 1997), we argue that a community-based research practice that builds trust and returns tangible benefits to the community can build a bridge between these local anchor institutions.

Bridging the Gap

Although places of worship and universities both serve as anchor institutions, they often serve on parallel paths. For example, as noted earlier, universities may function to revitalize their communities through purchasing power or hiring from the local community (Bartik & Erickcek, 2007), whereas places of worship may provide social capital in the form of philanthropy and volunteers (Saguaro Seminar, 2009). Occasionally, we see examples of where these paths cross, such as through job training programs at faith based organizations, but these instances are far more the exception than the rule. This gulf results in missed opportunities for collaboration and better service to the broader community.

Whereas universities might be seen as ivory towers, places of worship are typically with the people of the community in a critical and personal way, thus providing an access point for broader collaboration to address local social problems. Indeed, partnerships between places of worship and universities illustrate how trust can be built between these institutions (Cantor et al., 2013) and utilized to leverage community assets (Milofsky & Green, 2016) that can build bridges between the institutions and the community they serve.

For instance, Cantor et al. (2013) illustrate how discussions between university leaders and faith-based leaders build trust. In the Near Westside neighborhood in Syracuse, N.Y., such conversations were the impetus for a broader community-based coalition to address social and economic challenges. Identifying and acting on these opportunities to connect universities and congregations can yield benefits for both, and for the broader community, including opportunities to build bridges across denominational and racial divides.

How did we seek to bridge the gap between these two anchor institutions, the university and the faith community, in Little Rock, AR? We see our approach of conducting research in partnership with faith-based organizations as one way to bridge the gap. Consistent with Stoecker (2012) and Strand et al., (2003), our approach focuses on providing useful information, emphasizes collaboration, and utilizes diverse methods. Our approach to community-based research engages community members as partners in research, not as subjects, with goals that are jointly determined and mutually beneficial (Hotze, 2011; Riffin et al., 2016). Thus, it is not just a methodological approach to doing research, but a mutually-beneficial way of engaging with our community.

As academics, we use our expertise to conduct research, to engage our students, and apply diverse methods, specifically survey and interview data, to address local social issues. Our approach is driven by the assertion that, as a university embedded within the capital city, the institution has an obligation and responsibility to engage with the community to address local issues (Dubb & Howard, 2007; Hudson, 2013). This framework, as articulated by Boyer's (1990)

“scholarship of engagement,” argues that the university attends to a city’s most pressing problems by partnering with the local community and institutions.

As community members, we aim to return meaningful results to our partners in the faith community and beyond. We address the challenge presented by the congregation-university gap by engaging multiple places of worship that represent denominations that may have not worked together in the past. For instance, our Clergy Advisory Board includes Muslim, Baptist, and Presbyterian leaders, among others, working together to identify research topics that matter to our community. Particularly in the southern United States, in a context of division and segregation, the university may prove to be a source of collaboration, of improving ties not only between the university and the congregations, but even between houses of faith.

We carried out these elements through the infrastructure of the Little Rock Congregations Study (LRCS), an interdisciplinary, longitudinal research project housed at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock.

The Little Rock Congregations Study

The LRCS is a community-based research project at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. The project involves students and faculty as multimethod researchers through surveys, interviews, focus groups, and case studies. The LRCS began in 2012, and data collection efforts with congregations took place in 2012, 2016, and 2018. The research team also worked with local nonprofits to collect data in 2019. Additional data collection with congregations is ongoing in 2020.

The research project has three broad goals: 1) to better understand the impact of faith-based community engagement, 2) to get students out of the classroom and into the community, and 3) to return meaningful findings to the community. When the LRCS began in 2012, researchers focused on the first and more academic goal. Over time, researchers learned more about the congregations we were working with and their needs, and the project became more community-oriented to align with the interests and needs of the local faith communities. Our process therefore aligns with Stoecker (2012) who suggests that as part of the community-based research process, we engage in reflective practice with our partners to make the research more useful for our partners. These goals all seek to further our broad research question of how the university can contribute to the community and help bridge gaps.

For instance, in 2012, we asked questions about presidential vote choice and political activity. We found that clergy are important political actors (Glazier, 2018) and the messages congregation leaders deliver about political engagement have an effect on their members. Congregants who attend places of worship where they hear messages about voting and

participating politically are more likely to believe that their voice matters and to be politically active (Glazier, 2015). In 2016, on the other hand, we included more questions about community engagement. We found that congregations tend to develop cultures that encourage either community engagement or political activity, rather than both, with Black Protestant churches as an exception (Glazier, 2019a). As we prepare to collect data in 2020, we are prioritizing reports for congregations on the issues their members care about and the community organizations and congregations that are active on those issues, deliverables that community members tell us that they value.

This gradual change in the priorities of the researchers, away from our own intellectual understanding and towards helping the community in the most beneficial way, is reflected in additional substantive choices we made over the years. As our research focus became more refined, our 2018 clergy survey asked about collaborations with nonprofits. In 2019, we added a nonprofit survey to gain a fuller picture of collaboration in the Little Rock community and to understand what barriers might be standing in the way of further collaboration. The shift in focus was prompted, in part, by informal ongoing dialogue with members of the faith community. This dialogue was facilitated by the creation of a Clergy Advisory Board in 2018 and the LRCS Religious Leaders Summit, which we hosted in 2019, with the explicit goal of listening to faith and community leaders and getting feedback on the issues they wanted us to focus on in our research.

We see our approach of conducting community research with faith-based organizations as one way to bridge the gap between universities and congregations. Thus, it is not just a methodological approach to doing research, but a mutually-beneficial way of engaging with our community. We find that it yields benefits in five distinct, yet interrelated, ways for students, faculty, the university, the community, and reciprocity in collaboration. In the following sections, we use qualitative and quantitative data to demonstrate how the LRCS has provided benefits in each of these areas.

Benefits to Students

Experiential learning research indicates that students often learn best by doing (Beames, Higgins, & Nicol, 2012; Kuh, 1991). When they participate in the LRCS, student researchers get out of the classroom and into the community to see how people of faith act and serve. While sitting in Sunday services, students hear announcements about back-to-school backpack drives and meals for the homeless. They find out about the real and substantive ways that people in faith communities serve. The students also interview clergy members who organize prison reading ministries, or youth summer education programs. They see the real work that is done by faith leaders behind the scenes. The students attend service days and help with neighborhood clean ups. These experiences enhance students' classroom work, enable them to make meaningful

connections with the people in their city, who they might not come into contact with otherwise, and lead students become more civically engaged and socially competent (Anderson, 2002; Strand, 2000).

Additionally, students who participate in the research also learn marketable research skills (Gregerman, Lerner, von Hippel, Jonides, & Nagda, 1998; Russell, Hancock, & McCullough, 2007). Our graduate students work across semesters and see projects through multiple research stages, an experience which benefits students intellectually and in terms of their careers (Thiry, Weston, Laursen, & Hunter, 2012). Student researchers have the opportunity to develop and test their own hypotheses in the data, thus making connections between theory and practice (Breese, 2011; Furco, 2010; Gullion & Ellis, 2014).

These educational opportunities have been exceptional as students have gained experience through research design, data management, participant observation, interviewing, focus groups, survey administration and analysis, and hypothesis testing. These skills can be transferred to a world where data literacy is increasingly emphasized. Course evaluations reflect the value students see in these skills; both undergraduate and graduate students mention the importance of learning analysis techniques and gaining data collection experience. For instance, one student shared in their final course evaluation that the best part of the course was “real experience researching, conducting surveys, and working with data.” Another student remarked in their final course evaluation they had strengthened their research skills, noting, “I learned how to conduct surveys, do interviews, input data, leading focus groups, and much more” (Glazier & Bowman, 2019, pp. 13-14).

Since 2012, over 170 students have participated in research with the LRCS. Of these students, five have presented original research at academic conferences, two have co-authored academic papers currently under review at peer-reviewed journals, and four have been awarded research grants to further their individual research related to the project. Students have reported improved analytic skills, data analysis skills, and skills that transfer well to careers beyond academia. Additionally, the students are able to connect with their local community in a way they otherwise would not have without this experiential learning opportunity (Glazier and Bowman 2019). In all, many benefits flow to students as a result of engaging with places of worship through community-based research.

Benefits to Faculty

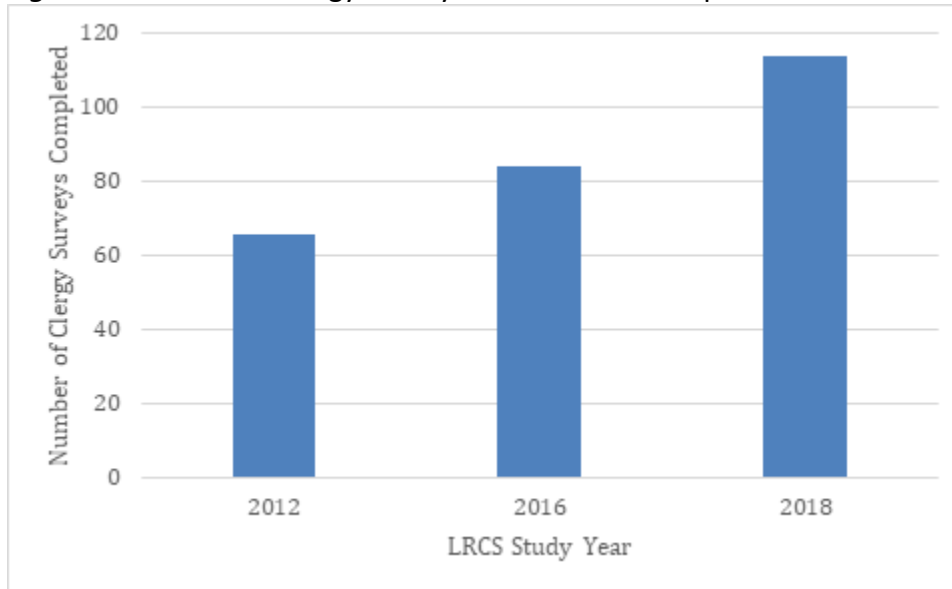
Faculty benefit from our approach to community-based research because of the wealth of data and the potential publications that come from it. The LRCS approach is one of community-based, longitudinal, interdisciplinary research. Multiple faculty members at the university work

together to develop research questions, work with community members to address topics that matter to them, and collect data.

Successful community research partnerships are both sustainable and long-term (Furco, 2010; Hyland & Maurette, 2010). As we have continued to work with the community and return useful results over the years, participation in the study has steadily increased. As Figure 1 shows, both the total number of participants and the response rate has increased over time, indicating increasing trust from our community partners.

As more congregations and clergy leaders have participated, we have been able to produce more academic research papers, which are of course essential to tenure and promotion. Researchers have used data from the Little Rock Congregations Study to publish six academic research papers, with four others currently under review. Thus, the benefits to faculty in terms of academic data and publications are substantial.

Figure 1. Number of Clergy Surveys Returned and Response Rate over Time



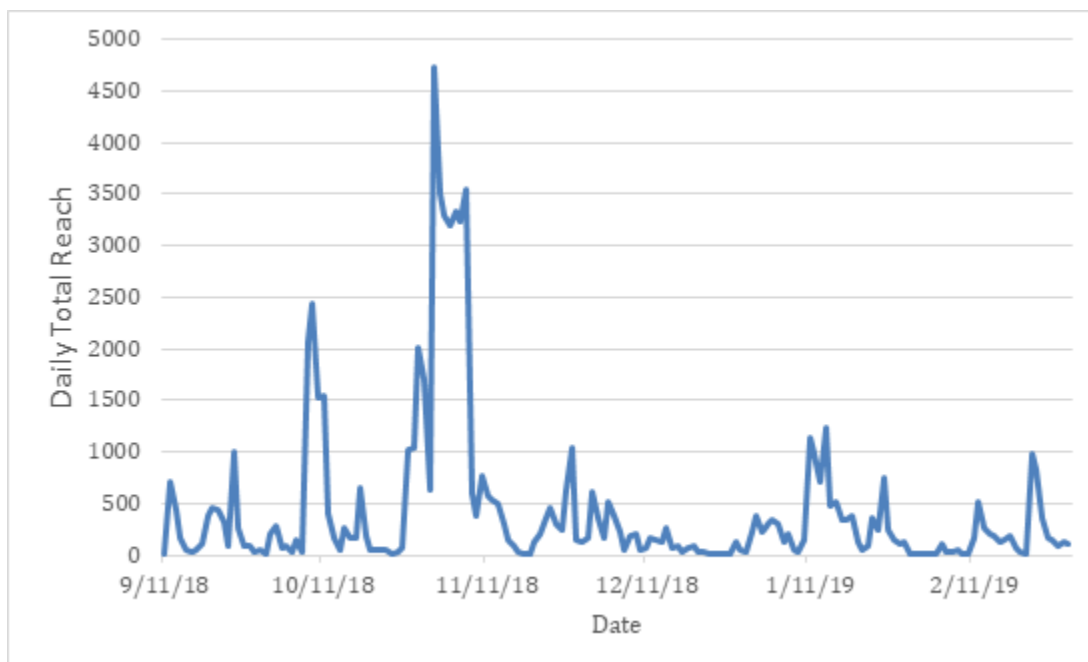
Benefits to the University

The university benefits from the approach exemplified by the LRCS mainly through the increased positive public presence of the university in the community. The research has garnered a fair amount of press coverage over the years. With each iteration, the Office of Communication puts out a press release on the study, which local newspapers often pick up, including religious news services. For instance, both the local Catholic news service, Arkansas Catholic, and the Arkansas Baptist News have run stories about the LRCS. For a full list of news stories on the LRCS, see the media coverage section of our website (Media Coverage, n.d.).

In 2018, we started the LRCS Facebook page, where we regularly share study results, promote community events, and highlight the good work that people of faith are doing in our community. As of August, 2020, the Facebook page has 376 followers, providing LRCS with a consistent form of contact with community members. Figure 2 shows just how many people we have been able to reach through the posts we make on our Facebook page.

Figure 2 shows a metric provided by Facebook called a “Daily Total Reach.” This metric is defined by Facebook as, “The number of people who had any content from your Page or about your Page enter their screen. This includes posts, check-ins, ads, social information from people who interact with your Page and more. (Unique Users).”

Figure 2. Daily Total Reach of the LRCS Facebook Page, September 10, 2018-March 1, 2019



Because our followers share our posts to their friends and because we sometimes pay to promote our posts to members of the Little Rock community, not everyone who sees our posts necessarily follows the LRCS Facebook page. In the fall of 2018, when the Facebook page first started, we shared some heartwarming stories about student researchers and community members that were liked and shared a number of times, representing the larger spikes in Figure 2.

The Facebook page helps us share results with community members, raise the profile of the research and the university, and maintain good relationships necessary for community-based research. The data in Table 1 show the responses to the different kinds of Facebook posts, with

Results posts the most common, followed by Spotlights posts, which highlight the work of specific congregations as they provide service to the community.

Spotlight posts garnered the highest mean lifetime post reach, meaning they reached the most people, likely as the congregations we tagged shared them on their own pages. Although for any of the post subjects, the range of the number of people reached is quite large. Some of our Spotlights posts reached thousands of people, whereas others reached only tens, and the standard deviation is over 1,000. In all, our outreach efforts through Facebook benefit the university by bringing thousands more people into contact with the research and the university. This definitely raises the positive profile of the University in the community. For further discussion of how social media can help facilitate community-based research, please see additional research by the authors (Glazier and Topping, 2020).

Table 1. Types of Posts and their Reach through the LRCS Facebook Page, September 10, 2018-March 1, 2019

Post Subject	Total Number of Posts Made	Mean Lifetime Total Post Reach	Standard Deviation	Range
Results	31	510.96	651.84	64-3063
Spotlights	27	738.48	1026.56	52-3860
Events	15	432.33	668.23	34-2161
Promotions/Well-wishes	18	473.44	856.83	33-3684
News Coverage	6	334.83	350.20	30-816
Total	97	544.27	797.69	30-3860

Additionally, the LRCS community-engaged approach of faith and scholarship benefits the university by engaging students. High-impact learning opportunities, like engaging in research projects, have a significant and positive impact on student learning, retention, and graduation rates (Alexander, 2000; Ishiyama, 2002; Thiry et al., 2012). The opportunity to engage in undergraduate research can be particularly impactful for first generation college students (Ishiyama, 2002), which make up 80% of the student population at UA Little Rock, and students

of color (Pender, Marcotte, Sto Domingo, & Maton, 2010), 45% percent of our student population (Quick Facts, 2019).

Benefits to the Community

The LRCS also provides benefits for the community. When community members collaborate with researchers, the needs of the community are taken into account (Hotze, 2011). As a result, community members feel heard and the research results can inform community problems that they care about. Returning deliverables to community partners helps to create a positive feedback loop and builds trust (Goldberg-Freeman et al., 2010).

Getting the results of our research out into the community is one key way for the university and the researchers to show our partners and the broader community that the research is relevant and meaningful. Over the years we have done this through mailing executive reports, hosting community events, creating a project [website](#), and sharing findings through our project [Facebook page](#). The website houses all of the findings from the study, including executive summaries, infographics, and academic papers, as well as blog posts discussing findings and community spotlights.

One resource on the website that is directly aimed at helping the community is an interactive map of food pantries (available in the References). This map has the location, hours of operation, and requirements for every food pantry in Little Rock. In Pulaski County, where Little Rock is located, the food insecurity rate is 19.9% (Feeding America, 2019). The United States Department of Agriculture has identified Little Rock, and in particular areas south of Route 630 and east of Route 430 as a food desert (2017). Thus, by developing this interactive map, we move beyond an intellectual exercise in Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping, to developing a platform where the university, students, faculty, and the larger community can access information that attends to the real-life challenges faced by the broader Little Rock community. Congregation leaders can now share information with their congregants and other community members in need on where they can access meals and learn about healthy eating habits.

For the 2020 LRCS, we plan to expand our efforts at sharing our findings by preparing a report for each participating congregation. These reports will let the congregational leaders know which community issues their congregants are most concerned about, would like to see their place of worship address, and the extent they are willing to volunteer. The reports will also include contact information for congregations and nonprofit organizations that are working on those issues, so they can connect with community partners. An example report is included in the Appendix.

This engaged process leads to another community benefit: facilitating connections. The reason we revised our research design to provide reports specific to each participating congregation was because of feedback from religious leaders. In 2019 we hosted a Religious Leaders Summit to bring city leaders together to talk about the major problems facing our city. We held this meeting at UA Little Rock Downtown, an urban space in the heart of Little Rock. At that meeting, one of the problems clergy identified was the difficulty of collaborating and making connections with one another. The contact information in our reports addresses this issue, along with our plan to hold future summits.

Reciprocal Benefits of Collaborative Community-based Research

The LRCS is one example of an academic research project, housed at a community anchor institution, that has used its resources to connect with and serve the community in a mutually beneficial way. We view this relationship between congregations and the university as ongoing, but looking at just the past two years can provide a snapshot of the process by which ties are strengthened, research is furthered, and the community benefits. In 2019 we brought together religious leaders from diverse faith traditions across the city to advise us on survey design and community outreach as members of our Clergy Advisory Board (Clergy Advisory Board, n.d.). Our advisory board represents the religious, gender, and ethnic diversity of our city, and helps grow and sustain the relationship between the university and the faith community. The board members provided feedback, planning, and goodwill in the community as we planned and hosted a Little Rock Religious Leaders Summit in 2019 to share our findings with leaders and get their feedback on future research. Working together provides an opportunity to be self-reflexive and engage in a dialogue with congregational leaders who have the local knowledge necessary to guide our research.

At the summit, we distributed reports to share two findings that we thought would be particularly meaningful for the religious leaders in attendance. Congregations that: (a) partner with nonprofits or other congregations are able to reach more community members in need; and (b) are engaged in the community have members that are more likely to volunteer at their own congregation. Service is not a zero-sum game. Serving in the community fosters a culture of service that also leads to more service to the congregation (Glazier, 2019b).

Leaders at the summit were able to immediately see the value in the work we were doing, connect with other faith leaders at the event, and let us know what was important to them for future research. These efforts, the findings, and the increased engagement from the community are indicative of the value added of our ongoing bridge-building work.

Lessons Learned on Bridging the Gap

The LRCS approach continues to be refined. In our collaborative journey with colleagues, students, and our community, we have identified five lessons learned that we hope will aid others in building bridges in urban areas. These practices can be replicated by other universities engaging in community-based research with faith-based partners.

First, invite community leaders to inform the research process. While we still add theory and research in appropriate publications, the LRCS approach reflects the values of community-based research by working with community partners. From our work with over 50 leaders in focus groups seeking to understand the most pressing issues facing our city to engaging our Clergy Advisory Board in shaping survey and interview questions, by taking the input of community partners seriously, we close the gap between the anchor institutions of university and congregations. In addition, this process ensures that even before data is collected, bridges are built. We have stronger relationships with leaders than ever before. They know we seek to listen to and provide data that will aid their efforts to improve our community

Second, find ways to improve civic discourse at public events. We have learned the hard way that we work in a polarized space. For instance, in our first foray into hosting a downtown event designed to share data with community leaders, we invited local political leaders to lend their voices to the importance of such venues. This platform, however, was taken as a rallying point for political leaders that marginalized other voices present. In listening to reactions from participants, some were taken back by the speeches given by one political leader. Others expected it. Bridging long-standing gaps between universities and institutions of faith does not happen automatically and missteps are to be expected. In this instance, we learned that while we cannot dictate the comments of politicians, we can either offer talking points, or frame the event so those attending know to expect diverse voices.

Third, create spaces for dialogue on the complexity of causes and solutions for addressing endemic social problems. Religious organizations seek to address endemic problems, but may not be aware of the role of discriminatory social networks or government policies that fail to address these issues holistically. For example, congregations frequently provide food pantries. Through our research, we are learning that limited collaboration happens in this space in terms of working with neighborhood-wide or political initiatives to address food insecurity. Our website map of Little Rock food pantries illustrates instances where collaboration is happening and provides a tacit invitation for further collaboration. We are now also aware of the need to create spaces for dialogue on addressing complex social issues.

Fourth, identify and promote collaborative counter-narratives. Counter-narratives refer to “narratives that counter missing, inaccurate, incomplete, and/or damaged social constructions”

(Papa, Singhal, & Papa, 2006). Our work in this space moves against the primary narratives in congregations and non-profits which focus on the successes and programs of individual organizations. In contrast, we provide community spotlights focused on collaboration.. As such, they provide “counter-narratives” to the cultural norm of working independently and/or in competition. Indeed, our work has been enhanced by a denominationally and racially diverse network of pastors addressing divisions (Driskill & Camp, 2006) This pastor network launching an organization featured in a LRCS community spotlight, The Children of Arkansas Loved for a Lifetime (C.A.L.L.). This collaborative effort, in response to a shortage of families for foster care, engages congregations by providing training and open homes. Other LRCS spotlights include the Madina Institute and Islamic Center. Both represent minority religious traditions in a Christian-dominated Bible belt state and the stories highlight their community-engaged work. Such spotlights, shared through our Facebook page and website, provide a way to fill in incomplete narratives about marginalized groups.

Fifth, identify and/or create diverse networks to address racial, socio-economic, and religious division. Division based on race/ethnicity as well as economics and religion is a story our city shares with others. The incongruity of these divisions with theological tenets of faith surfaces and resurfaces in our community. In fact, in a study in our city, over 50 leaders from diverse denominations and ethnicities gave a public confession on how their divisions had harmed the community (Driskill & Camp, 2006). In addition, the language of “the most segregated hour” has consistently emerged in our interviews with pastors along with their appeals to address division (Driskill, Arjannikova, & Meyer, 2014; Driskill & Jenkins, 2019). Thus, our work has involved connecting with already existing diverse pastor networks as well as creating bridges built through collaborative service.

Conclusion

Places of worship and universities exist as anchor institutions that make positive contributions to our communities. However, bridges between these institutions are often lacking and the good work that they do is thus limited in its reach and efficacy. Our research question sought to answer how universities could partner with faith communities and bridge the gulf between them in a mutually beneficial way. Community-based research is one answer to that question. The LRCS provides one example of how researchers might develop such a bridge. As we have worked to build relationships in our own community, our data evidences positive results for the community, as well as benefits to the university, the faculty, and the students.

Furthermore, we have evidence of positive impacts from practices that promise to further strengthen this bridge. As we reflect on the lessons we have learned through more than eight years of researching with community partners in Little Rock, AR, we recommend five practices as an encouragement to others of ways to replicate our work in our urban center: (a) invite

community leaders to inform the research process; (b) anticipate and find ways to improve civic discourse at public events; (c) create spaces for dialogue on the complexity of causes and solutions for addressing endemic social problems; (d) identify and promote collaborative counter-narratives; and (e) identify and/or create diverse networks to address engaged in creating collaboration.

As universities and places of worship are able to come together for their mutual benefit and the benefit of the community, we see the potential for great hope for collaboration and community improvement.

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