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Rebecca A. Glazier & Warigia M. Bowman

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Teaching Through Community-Based Research: Undergraduate and Graduate Collaboration on the 2016 Little Rock Congregations Study

Rebecca A. Glazier[a] and Warigia M. Bowman[b]

[a]The University of Arkansas at Little Rock; [b]University of Arkansas Clinton School of Public Service

ABSTRACT

Students studying political science, public administration, public service, and related fields are increasingly expected to engage with local communities in their eventual careers. Providing curriculum-based opportunities for such engagement, however, can be challenging. Are the costs worth the benefits? In 2016, faculty from two universities in Arkansas collaborated on the Little Rock Congregations Study, a research project that brought undergraduate students and graduate students out of the classroom and into the community to collect both qualitative and quantitative data from clergy and congregants across the city. Here, we use qualitative data from assignments and student evaluations, community feedback, and data collection outcomes to evaluate this coordinated effort. We find that teaching through community-based research benefits students, faculty, and the community but is also very resource intensive. We conclude with a discussion of the challenges of this approach and advice for those interested in such an undertaking.

Students studying political science, public administration, public service, and related fields are increasingly expected to engage with local communities in their eventual careers. And the universities and faculty teaching students in these fields are increasingly expected to provide opportunities for engagement (see, for instance, Driscoll 2009). Participating in community engagement can help students develop key skills for future employment (Bourner and Millican 2011). These skills can enhance students' capacity to engage in crucial society-building activities later in their careers (Weiksner et al. 2012). Community-engaged learning[1] can also make the educational experience more rewarding and improve retention (Bringle, Hatcher, and Muthiah 2010; Gallini and Moely 2003; Simons and Cleary 2006; Yorio and Ye 2012).

To provide these benefits, universities often emphasize the importance of civic education and community-engaged learning (Furco 2010). Community-engaged learning can encompass a wide range of activities—learning about one's community, seeking solutions for community problems, engaging in deliberation and discussion on those problems, and building campus-community partnerships (Furco 2010; McCartney, Bennion,

and Simpson 2013). Faculty often have significant flexibility as they design courses with community engagement in mind and they have crafted innovative solutions to meet the needs of their students and their communities (e.g., DeLaet 2016, Forestiere 2015). Yet, providing such opportunities can be resource-intensive and challenging (Yanus et al. 2015). Are the benefits of teaching through community-engaged research worth the cost? Here, we take a holistic approach to evaluating a specific community-engaged research project that involved undergraduate and graduate students at two universities. We evaluate the project in terms of the benefits it provided to students, faculty, and the community.

The benefits of community-engaged research

The literature has identified a number of benefits from community engagement. Here, we organize these benefits into three categories: students, faculty, and the community.

Students

Perhaps the most prominent and most important benefits to teaching through a community-engaged research project accrue to the students. The literature indicates that students can benefit from community-engaged research in at least three different ways. First, as students engage in community-based research, they benefit from meaningful and relevant experiential learning opportunities. Getting students out of the classroom and into the community helps them learn content and process they cannot get through lecture (Beames, Higgins, and Nicol 2012; Kuh 1991). It provides experiential learning opportunities that are particularly beneficial to students through strengthening empathy and critical self knowledge, in addition to increasing content knowledge (Mitchell 2013).

Second, participating in research gives students the opportunity to improve research skills in a hands-on, memorable, and engaging way (Gregerman et al. 1998; Ishiyama 2002; Russell, Hancock, and McCullough 2007). Conducting research, particularly in fieldwork settings, can help students develop useful skills (Everett et al. 2011; Hovorka and Wolf 2009; Levine et al. 1980) and it can help students use skills and knowledge in a real-life situation (Breese 2011). Having students participate in a research project that they see through from start to finish can help students to actualize the connections between theory and practice (Breese 2011; Bringle, Hatcher, and Muthiah 2010; Furco 2010; Gallini and Moely 2003; Gullion and Ellis 2014; Simons and Cleary 2006; Weiksner et al. 2012; Yorio and Ye 2012). In a macro sense, high-impact learning opportunities, like engaging in research projects, benefit students by increasing their chances of being retained and of graduating (Ishiyama 2002). Undergraduate research opportunities foster both learning and retention (Alexander 2000).

Finally, community-engaged research gives students the opportunity to get out of the classroom and engage with their city and their neighbors. This can provide students with authentic and meaningful interactions with people and situations that they might not otherwise encounter (Anderson 2002; Chapman and Chapdelaine 1999; Strand 2000). Community-engaged learning provides students the opportunity for critical self

reflection (Breese 2011). Researchers observe that Millennial students in particular value meaningful work and activities that benefit society and they seek educational experiences that embody those goals (Furco 2010).

Faculty

For busy faculty, the best practices outlined in the literature are not always simple to implement and faculty may find themselves stretched too thin as they try to follow best practices (Glazier 2011). Indeed, overburdened faculty may be reluctant to undertake community-engaged research projects or incorporate community engagement in their courses because doing so requires a lot of time and resources and is rarely seen as favorably as other academic activities—like publishing—that may be sacrificed as opportunity costs (Furco 2010; Kennedy et al. 2009; Leonard 1999).

Indeed, the literature stresses that faculty involved in community-engaged research and student-centered learning need to be rewarded for their efforts in reviews for promotion and tenure (Breese 2011). Recognizing this tradeoff, some scholars have advocated for changing the reward and incentive structure to encourage faculty to teach through community engagement (McCartney 2013; O'Meara 2003). When it comes to the best interests of faculty, community-based education that meets multiple goals across teaching, research, and service appears to be the best approach (Berger 2015; Bloomgarden and O'Meara 2007; Sloam 2010). Being able to advance a research agenda while also contributing to teaching and service could be a great benefit to faculty members and could encourage teaching through community-based research.

One of the most direct benefits to faculty is the research output itself. Publishing peer-reviewed work is an important component of tenure and promotion for many faculty members and may be the key to a better position, mobility, or negotiation (Rothgeb and Burger 2009; Marshall and Rothgeb 2011). Advancing one's research agenda is a direct benefit of community-based research. Sustained and repeated interactions with the community provide benefits to faculty researchers, as access to community-based organizations is often one of the most difficult aspects of conducting community-based research (Breese 2011; Furco 2010; Payne and Williams 2005).

Additionally, community-based research can be incredibly rewarding. The academy can sometimes seem distant from the community and connecting through research can be a positive experience for faculty members (Bloomgarden and O'Meara 2007; Johnson 2006). Similarly, giving back to the community in the form of relevant and helpful research findings can make the research more meaningful to the faculty member (McDavitt et al. 2016; Quinn and Kiernan 2017).

Community

Creating a collaboration between academic researchers and community members represents a core characteristic of community-engaged pedagogy (Breese 2011), one that can be genuinely mutually beneficial. However, with student needs coming first and faculty needs close behind, community-based research sometimes, ironically, leaves the community component with less attention than it probably deserves (McDavitt et al. 2016).

Benefits are most likely to come to the community in the form of useful findings or improved circumstances (Raymond 2017) when they are part of the decision-making process. Several scholars have observed that communities have a right to be participants in, not just subjects of, community-engaged research (Kennedy et al. 2009). Lisman (1998) argues that partnerships with the community must be created based on mutual goals and values and with a sustained, long-term commitment. Both the students and the community should be empowered by the experience (McCartney 2013). Campus–community partnerships should emphasize reciprocity as well as mutual benefit (Furco 2010) and, in designing the research plan, attention should be paid to how community voices are incorporated and honored. Neglecting to pay close attention to community needs can harm a project and also damage long-term relationships between the researchers and the community (Furco 2010), while giving proper attention to community needs can strengthen such relationships.

Repeated interactions between students, faculty, and community members can help reduce the "town and gown" barrier while strengthening the relationships between students and local community members (Butin 2010). Conducting community-based research in a way that encourages community participation (O'Connor 2006) can be challenging. Ultimately, successful projects require sustained, mutually-beneficial interactions between researchers and the community (Bringle and Hatcher 1996). Under these circumstances, the community can benefit from learning about relevant research outcomes, from connecting with students, and from building relationships across institutions.

The research project: The Little Rock Congregations Study

Understanding that it is theoretically possible to teach with a community-based research project in such a way as to benefit students, faculty, and the community, we set out to design a curriculum centered on student participation in the 2016 Little Rock Congregations Study, a research project led by Dr. Rebecca Glazier at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and Dr. Warigia Bowman at the University of Arkansas Clinton School of Public Service.

This study builds on the Little Rock Congregations Study (Glazier 2015), which was conducted under the direction of one of the study's primary investigators. The Little Rock Congregations Study began in 2012 with the research goal of better understanding how places of worship might influence the civic and political behaviors of their congregants. Now a longitudinal project, the study utilizes a multimethod approach, bringing individual-level data from surveys and interviews with congregants together with congregation-level data from surveys and interviews with clergy. [2] Research indicates that using a mixture of methods in combination with creating trust between researchers and the studied communities may facilitate effective data collection, particularly in resource-constrained environments (Athayde, Stepp, and Ballester 2016; Gullion and Ellis 2014; Schensul 2010; Stringer 2014; Williams and Schoonvelde 2018). Some results from the study are available in publications by the principle investigator (Glazier 2015, 2017).

In 2016, one undergraduate research practicum course at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock with a total of 20 students and two sections of the graduate research

methods course at the University of Arkansas Clinton School of Public Service with a total of 38 students participated in the study as part of their course work. The undergraduate class focused substantively on religion and politics in the United States, whereas the graduate course emphasized research skills.

As the literature indicates some potential benefits to graduate and undergraduate students working together (Shostak et al. 2010), there were a number of points of overlap between the two courses. Both courses required students to critically reflect on their experiences attending congregations and observing the community-engaged behaviors of churches. Both courses also included hands-on data collection in the field in the form of surveying congregants. While the graduate-level field research methods course also included requirements in interviewing clergy and conducting congregant focus groups, the undergraduate course required students to engage in hypothesis generation and testing. Both courses were designed to facilitate student engagement with the religious community while also considering important questions of civic life in Little Rock and emphasizing a participatory, action research approach that views community members as partners, not subjects (Stringer 2014). The undergraduate course was created specifically for participation in this study, while the graduate course is a field research methods course that selects a different project each year. This is the first time that the graduate class participated in a cross-campus collaboration with undergraduate students.

The research project proceeded in four stages. In the first stage of data collection, one of the primary investigators compiled a comprehensive list of Little Rock religious congregations by cross-referencing the religious organizations in a Little Rock registry at City Connections with local Yellow Pages listings. After identifying the religious leaders at each of these houses of worship, one of the primary investigators mailed clergy surveys to the 392 houses of worship within the Little Rock city limits, to be complete by the clergy member who delivers the majority of the messages at worship services. The survey included multiple-choice questions about congregation demographics, clergy religious beliefs, and interest in participating in the subsequent phases of data collection for the study.

Of the 392 houses of worship that received surveys, 84 completed and returned the surveys (a 21% response rate). In the second stage of the research, the primary investigators chose 17 houses of worship, from the 84 that responded to the survey, to target for the congregation survey and congregation focus group phases. Overall, congregations were selected by purposive sampling for diversity of congregation size, location, demographics, and religious tradition.

In each of these 17 places of worship, students attended services, made announcements, and coordinated with the congregation leader to help publicize congregant surveys and to recruit congregants for participation in focus groups. Student teams attended religious services at each location between Friday, October 21, and Sunday, November 6, 2016. Students greeted each congregant at the door and handed them a survey if they were over the age of 18. The anonymous survey consisted of 70 questions about congregants' religious participation, community concerns, and social activities, and included space for open-ended responses. Survey team leaders kept a tally of surveys distributed and of people who refused surveys to calculate accurate response rates. After the service, students either collected completed surveys in sealed boxes or

respondents had the option of mailing them to the research teams at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock via self-addressed, postage-paid envelopes. We received 1,475 completed surveys by November 20, 2016.

In the third stage of the research, all 84 congregation leaders who responded to the mailed clergy survey were contacted via phone or email by a student researcher to request an interview. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour. The project's primary investigators developed a semi-structured interview protocol, including a uniform set of open-ended questions that allowed for detailed responses. Specific questions were designed to gather qualitative information about the congregation, the clergy member's religious beliefs, and the involvement of the congregation in the community. A total of 69 clergy interviews were completed and transcribed (an 82% response rate).

In the fourth and final stage of the research, focus groups were conducted at 15 of the 17 places of worship that participated in the congregant surveys. The focus group leaders used a protocol that was similar to the one used in the congregation leader interviews. A total of 78 congregants participated in the focus groups.

Student teams analyzed interviews and focus group materials using standard qualitative data-analysis procedures. First, student researchers transcribed all audio recorded interviews and focus groups. Then the analysis team collaborated to develop codes to use in cross comparisons of the qualitative data. These codes were created to group together similar ideas expressed by congregants and clergy across religious traditions. The 1,475 returned surveys were divided among student researchers for data entry into a master spreadsheet and students used basic inferential statistical measures to assess the strength of relationships among variables. Results were compared across qualitative and quantitative data and findings of interest were shared with the community through the project website (https://research.ualr.edu/lrcs/) and through a community event. Findings have also been published in peer-reviewed journals (Glazier 2015, 2017, 2018).

Results

Teaching our courses through this community-based research project was a major pedagogical and logistical undertaking. We expected to see important benefits flow to at least three categories of stakeholders: students, faculty, and the community. How successful was the project? Did we see the expected benefits and did they outweigh the costs of the project?

In the following sections, we use metrics from the data collected, from interactions with community members, and from student feedback through course assignments, reflections, and evaluations to assess the extent to which this project provided the anticipated benefits. Evaluation data are drawn from all three classes taught in the fall of 2016 (one at the undergraduate institution and two sections of field research methods at the graduate institution). In the results that follow, open-ended comments from student evaluations are cited as either Bowman evaluations 2016 or Glazier evaluations 2016. Qualitative data from student assignments and fieldwork exercises are also cited. For many of these assignments, students worked together in teams. Student reports regarding visits to congregations are cited as Congregation Visit and the number of the

team. Student reflections on the focus groups are cited as Focus Group Commentary and the number of the team. Final papers produced by the students are also cited.

Benefits to the students

As indicated above, the literature hypothesizes that students can benefit from community-engaged research in at least three different ways: through high-impact learning opportunities outside of the classroom, through improved research skills, and through interacting with community members. Below, we examine qualitative data from student assignments and evaluations to assess the extent to which our project provided these benefits to students.

We found that students learned through this research in experiential ways that wouldn't have been possible otherwise. Students learned by getting outside of the classroom and seeing the civic engagement of churches in action. This experience contributed to their content knowledge of religion and community engagement in an urban environment. While sitting in Sunday services, students heard about back-to-school backpack drives and soup kitchens; they interviewed pastors who organized voter registration tables at Sunday services and hosted the homeless in the church basement; they heard announcements about food drives for elementary schools and visiting sessions for ill and elderly parishioners. Some churches hosted prison reading ministries or youth summer education programs, often requiring significant time—as well as financial—commitments from parishioners who themselves are not wealthy.

The extensive focus group conversations provided valuable qualitative data from the personal experience of congregants and supplied the students with the opportunity to see civic discussions in action as congregants talked about the ways that their faith communities are engaged in the broader Little Rock community and beyond. For example, one student team reported that it was "both heartwarming and insightful to see [focus group participants] express [their values] and learn how [the house of worship] supports those values" (Focus Group commentary, Team 7).[3]

Through these interactions with congregants, students also came away with significant soft skills, including flexibility, creating rapport, taking the community's concerns seriously, and thinking more about how they might "contribute to the greater understanding of how people act and view the world" (Bowman evaluations 2016). The qualitative fieldwork also taught students a skill highly valued in the corporate workplace: flexibility. The emergent nature of fieldwork forces students to make mid-course corrections and deal with unanticipated events in the research process, building traits such as maturity, independence, and a critical awareness of the social contexts that they live in (Keen 1996, 173).

Community-based research also has great potential to provide students with improved research skills. Through this project, students were able to gain experience in research design, data management, participant observation, interviewing, focus groups, survey administration and analysis, and hypothesis testing. These are important skills for students to have in an increasingly data-driven world. Given the extensive training and hands-on research application of the courses, it is no surprise that numerous students mentioned their increased comfort level with research methods and their newly

found confidence in applying the skills learned in the Little Rock Congregations Study in course evaluations. Both undergraduate and graduate students mentioned the value of specific data collection and analysis techniques they learned in class. For instance, one student remarked in the course evaluations:

"I thought the Little Rock Congregations Study was a fantastic tool. Once I realized how much work would be done with it, I got myself interested, and I really enjoyed learning about research methods through the lens of the study (and vice versa)" (Bowman evaluations, 2016).

Undergraduate students were especially likely to mention that they learned skills in research, data analysis, data management software, and surveys. Out of 17 undergraduate student evaluations, nine mentioned data and research skills (53%) (Glazier evaluations). Quotes from student evaluations indicate that the goal of skill development was largely met for both graduate and undergraduate students. Twenty-nine graduate and undergraduate comments out of 107 total comments (27%) mentioned strengthened research skills in the end-of-the-semester evaluations. One undergraduate noted:

I came to UA Little Rock because of this course. It was everything I hoped it would be and more. Real experience researching, conducting surveys, and working with data (Glazier evaluations).

Graduate students in the research methods class echoed these sentiments. Nearly a quarter of all graduate student course evaluations (24%) mentioned that they had strengthened their research skills. For instance, one student remarked: "I learned how to conduct surveys, do interviews, input data, leading focus groups, and much more" (Bowman evaluations). Because methodological training went beyond data collection and into analysis, student comments like the following were common: "I learned how to collect data, both qualitative and quantitative and how to interpret it" (Bowman evaluations). Students used phrases such as "hands-on research," "hands-on experience," and "real world research experience," to describe their learning experience with the Little Rock Congregations Study.

In addition to mentioning that their skills were strengthened, numerous students also referred to the fact that they can apply what they learned in the workplace. They noted that "skills learned in this class are applicable to work places," that "students walk away with usable, marketable, resume-worthy skills" and that the skills they learned would be valuable in a public-service career:

"It is the role of … public servants to find out what people think and contribute to the greater understanding of how people act and view the world. I … could see myself fulfilling this role in the future." (Bowman evaluations).

Undergraduate students also reported improved analytic skills and an intention to use the research they did in the class to further their academic careers. Five of the undergraduate students who participated in the 2016 study presented their research at the Arkansas Political Science Association annual conference in March 2017. The original research they produced will become graduate school writing samples and the skills they developed in community data collection will be discussed in answers to job interview questions someday. The opportunity to conduct political science research as

undergraduate students is rare; the experience provided by the Little Rock Congregations Study clearly benefitted the academic careers of the participating students.

However, not all students enjoyed the experience. Some students found the experience of "collecting data and working with [members] in the community … frustrating because it is so dynamic" (Bowman evaluations), which is a reflection, in part, upon the experience of data collection.

We were also pleasantly surprised by how positively students responded to their interactions with the religious communities. Students visited diverse congregations, including Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Catholic, Evangelical, Protestant, and Mormon congregations. Students visited congregations that were predominantly African American, as well as congregations that were predominantly white, and some congregations with very diverse memberships. Student comments on the congregations they visited were almost all positive. Some students described a Baptist church community as "lively, welcoming and joyful" (Congregation Visit, Team 5). One student team—which had no Muslim members—described a Muslim congregation in these words: "We were greeted very warmly, and everyone we met was welcoming and friendly" (Congregation Visit, Team 8). A predominantly white student team described their predominantly African American congregation this way: "The overall atmosphere was warm, community-oriented, and jovial" (Congregation Visit, Team 3). Finally, a student team referred to a Mormon congregation as "inviting, warm, and inclusive" (Congregation Visit, Team 1).

These positive experiences across faith boundaries were meaningful to students and put them in contact with parts of their own community that they otherwise may not have experienced. In their focus group write up, one team noted that "the opportunity to learn more about the lives of Reform Jews within Little Rock was a fantastic experience in and of itself, especially when that particular type of congregation is not common throughout the state of Arkansas" (Focus Group, Team 8).

In addition to enjoying the experience of working in the community, students also reflected on how research can help them to understand better the needs of those whom they wish to serve. As one student put it, "Community services can only be adequately resolved first by knowing the cause of the problems through research" (Bowman evaluations 2016). Five of the 90 comments in the student evaluations from the graduate course specifically mentioned community engagement.

Many students enjoyed the opportunity to be in the community and to learn outside of the classroom. One student remarked: "I have a better grasp on how to move throughout the community (asking for interviews, interacting with strangers, etc.) and how to represent research that is not my own" (Bowman evaluations). Another stated that "the course also pushed me to meet the community members of the new city I live in and that was incredibly beneficial" (Bowman evaluations).

Benefits to the faculty

One of the central goals of the Little Rock Congregations Study was to expand the data collection beyond what was possible in the 2012 study. It was this goal that led Glazier
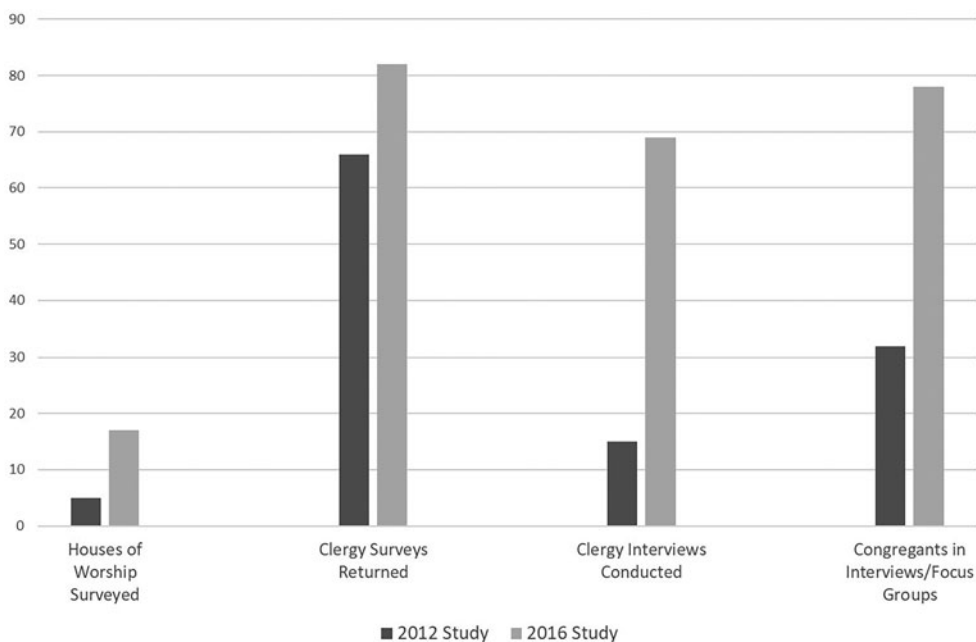
Figure 1. Little Rock Congregations Study data collection numbers, 2012 v. 2016.

to apply for and receive funding through the Alma Ostrom and Leah Hopkins Awan Civic Education research grant[4], and to seek out a collaborative partnership with the Clinton School of Public Service. Expanded funding, and especially with expanded capacity through additional student researchers, made collecting more data a real possibility.

The student researchers contributed significantly to the success of the project. One of the most difficult aspects of fieldwork is gaining access to the client (Keen 1996 at 168; Payne and Williams 2005). Having student researchers visit participating houses of worship likely improved the success of the study. Student contact with the congregations helped develop rapport and a personal connection, resulting in higher trust levels. This personal contact made entry for more difficult fieldwork projects, such as clergy interviews and focus groups with congregants, easier.

Thus, one of the greatest benefits of this community-engaged data collection and teaching effort came to the faculty researchers. The collaboration between the two institutions and the inclusion of students as research participants resulted in a greater breadth and depth of data than had previously been possible. The increase in data is displayed graphically in Figures 1–3.

Figure 1 depicts some of the key increases in raw numbers. In 2012, congregation leader surveys were distributed via mail to a total viable sample of 409 places of worship in the city limits of Little Rock. A total of 66 surveys were returned completed, for a response rate of 16.14%. Glazier interviewed congregation leaders from 15 of those organizations, and surveys and interviews of congregants were conducted in 5 of those congregations. In the 2012 study, each congregation was surveyed the Sunday before and the Sunday after the 2012 Presidential Election. There were a total of 968 pre-surveys distributed and 274 returned, for a response rate of 28.3%. There were a
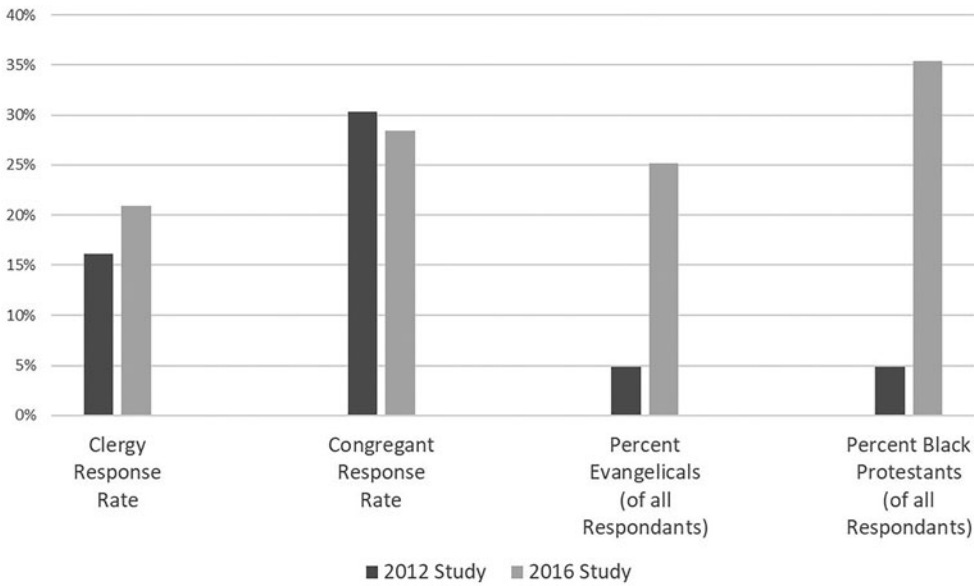
Figure 2. Little Rock Congregations Study data collection percentages, 2012 v. 2016.

total of 703 post-surveys distributed and 233 returned, for a response rate of 33.1%. The overall response rate was 30.3%. There were also 32 interviews conducted with congregation members. The congregant interviews and the survey distribution were conducted by 16 undergraduate students enrolled in an upper-division research practicum class on religion and electoral politics.

In 2016, additional resources enabled extensive follow-up with congregation leaders via phone calls and emails. As a result, 84 clergy surveys were returned for a 5% increase in the response rate (from 16% in 2012 to 21% in 2016). The collaboration between the two institutions also expanded the interview data collected. Student teams interviewed nearly all of the surveyed clergy (69 of the 84), making more extensive qualitative data analysis, as well as textual analysis, possible.

Indeed, with approximately 58 students enrolled across three courses at two universities, we were able to expand the survey collection to 17 places of worship, including multiple churches from the Evangelical and Black Protestant traditions, which are the most common in Little Rock, but were only represented by very small congregations in the 2012 study. Student researchers reached out to Evangelical and Black Protestant congregations through multiple contact attempts using mail, phone calls, e-mail messages, and personal interactions. We believe that these efforts played an important role in expanding participation by Black Protestant and Evangelical congregations, as seen in Figure 2. The survey data collected from congregants in 2016 was not only larger in absolute numbers but was also more diverse and representative of Little Rock's religious community.

The total numbers of congregant surveys almost tripled from 2012 to 2016, growing from 507 to 1475, as depicted in Figure 3. The overall response rate declined about five
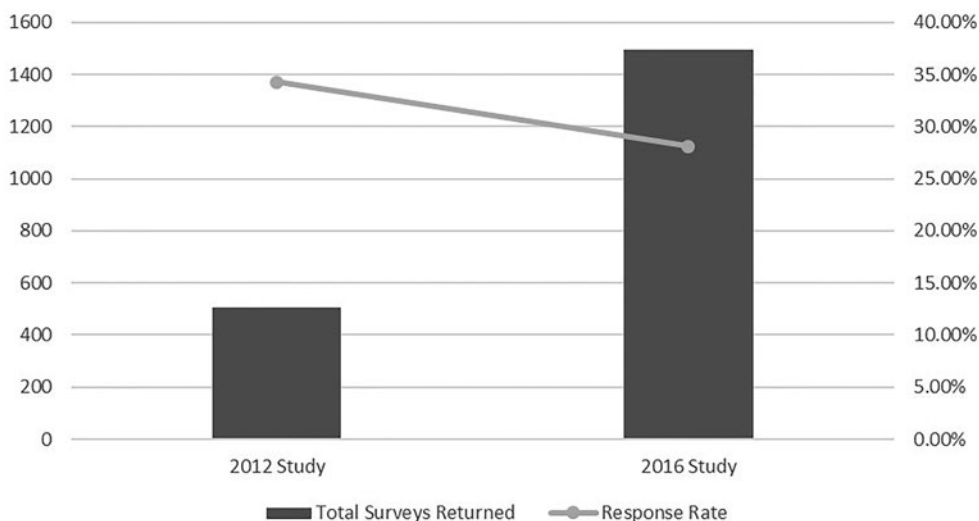
Figure 3. Little Rock Congregations Study total congregant surveys returned and response rates, 2012 v. 2016.

percentage points from 2012 to 2016. The percentage response rate is on the right *y*-axis in Figure 3 and the total number of returned surveys is along the left *y*-axis.

Instead of conducting short interviews with congregation members at the time of survey distribution, in 2016, students arranged focus groups at each place of worship surveyed. These focus groups usually had between 5 and 8 congregants in attendance and lasted for 30 minutes to over an hour and were conducted at 15 congregations—reaching about 78 congregants—a significant expansion from the 32 short interviews conducted in 2012.

As Figures 1–3 illustrate, the data expansion from 2012 to 2016, facilitated by increased student participation through cross-institutional collaboration, makes it possible for the researchers to do more and more sophisticated analyses than would otherwise have been possible. The additional student researchers helped broaden the scope and type of data collected (Keen 1996), while also improving the sustainability of the research as a longitudinal study. The personal contact, together with efforts to share the results with the community, sent a message about how invested the researchers are in genuinely helping the community. A key element of successful community research partnerships is that they are sustainable and longer term (Breese 2011; Furco 2010; Hyland and Maurette 2010). With greater visibility and legitimacy for the research project, a related data collection effort in 2018 was able to secure survey responses from 111 congregations (a response rate of nearly 30%).

Overall, we were pleased with the ability of this project to meet multiple goals. Not only did data collection and community relations improve, but we saw very positive student evaluations from the courses involved. Indeed, positive evaluations far outweighed negative evaluations in both the undergraduate class and the graduate class, as displayed in Table 1. In addition, the graduate professor saw a higher number of students completing the evaluations in the 2016 research methods class ($n = 21$) compared with the 2015 research methods class ($n = 12$).

Table 1. Positive and negative course evaluation comments across courses.

Name of professor	Number of positive evaluation comments	Number of negative evaluation comments
Glazier (Undergraduate)	15	2
Bowman (Graduate)	52	29

We compared the student evaluation data from 2016 to data from previous iterations of both courses but did not find statistically significant differences. Because the 2012 version of the undergraduate course participated in a the first iteration of the Little Rock Congregations Study and the graduate field research methods course usually works with nonprofits in the local community, we think the lack of statistically-significant differences across courses is understandable. While we do not have an experimental design through which to causally demonstrate that participating in community-based research benefits students, we do have the students' own words. As described in the previous section, and presented in Table 1, students responded to the project very positively.

As researchers, we also found this community-based research project to be incredibly rewarding. Learning about the different religious traditions in our community and the ways that they are serving and helping in our city was truly inspiring. One of the best moments of the project came when we hosted a community event to share our results with clergy, congregants, and community members. We shared results that we sincerely hope will be helpful to these community members and were pleased with the positive response we received. One congregation leader e-mailed to say "Thank you for sharing your excellent, important work" and another wrote a Facebook message to say "Thank you … it's refreshing to hear of your program." These comments and others made us feel like our work was appreciated and that our impact on the community was a positive one.

Benefits to the community

With the religious community in Little Rock a key partner in this research, we expected two main benefits to flow to the community: first, a stronger relationship between the university and the congregations that participated in the research and, second, useful results that matter to the community.

One benefit of this community-engaged research project is that the two institutions of higher learning raised their profile in the local community and established stronger relationships with clergy partners. In terms of solidifying relationships with clergy, a combination of introductory phone calls, student visits to congregations, interviews, surveys, and focus groups facilitated cordial relationships, and indeed, friendships, between clergy, students, and faculty. For example, a Quaker clergyperson and a Southern Baptist pastor were welcomed as guests to the final class of the field research methods course to reflect on the 2016 election. In an email after a meeting, one congregation leader wrote "[Clergy name redacted] and I so enjoyed being with you and the great ministry you are doing. We are so glad that our partnership with UA Little Rock is also growing thanks to you."

With regard to raising the profile of the university, the Office of Communication at the local undergraduate institution put out a press release on the study, the local public

radio station did an extended story on the project, and the local Catholic news service, Arkansas Catholic, also ran a story about the Catholic participation in the study. This attention, together with the community event, will hopefully have a lasting and positive impact on relationships among the two institutions of higher learning and the broader Little Rock community.

With the data collected through this study, students were able to test original hypotheses as they tried to understand the role of religious organizations in community engagement. For instance, one student hypothesized that Black Protestant churches would be more likely to be involved in their local communities, given the prominence of the church in many African-American communities (Harris 1994; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Williams 2002). The Little Rock data actually show similar levels of community engagement across religious tradition. This and other findings were explored through student-directed hypothesis testing to better understand community engagement. By asking questions about engagement and looking for answers in the data, students demonstrated a deep understanding of how religious organizations engage in their communities.

For example, in their final paper, students observed that "The results of the survey data demonstrate that worship service messages about social issues or political involvement correlate with increased levels of congregant community involvement" (Final Paper for presentation at community forum 2016). Further, students found that most of the religious traditions rated education, crime, and healthcare as their top three concerns in the community. Finally, data collected from surveys, interviews, and focus groups indicated that, overall, houses of worship in Little Rock provide their congregants more guidance about social involvement than political involvement.

These results and others were shared through an executive summary, posted on our project website (https://research.ualr.edu/lrcs/results/), and presented at a public event. Public meetings represent important forums to provide community education on topics related to the study. They also help disseminate results of the project in the community and give the community an opportunity to give feedback to the research team (Kennedy et al. 2009). This project incorporated clergy as expert panelists in a community event to present the results of the project in April 2017. By incorporating community members who had participated in the study as panelists in the community event, this project helped build the bridging capacities of those communities (Schensul 2010).

The decision by the principal investigators to disseminate the results widely and in a forum that privileged community members who had participated in the research is in line with best practices of community-engaged research and garnered "positive visibility" within both the university community as well as the broader community (Hyland and Maurette 2010; Schensul 2010). By bringing clergy of diverse religious backgrounds together to converse in an environment that highlighted the accomplishments of their congregations, this project arguably helped those congregations to strengthen relationships across racial and economic divides and conceptualize areas where they may have common goals (Schensul 2010).

We found that it is particularly important to articulate the benefits clergy and congregants might receive from participation in the study. Community mistrust is a real challenge for researchers and is based in the perception that faculty only want to collect

data from the community for their own benefit (Kennedy et al. 2009). Indeed, this challenge did surface in the Little Rock Congregations Study. One prominent minister of a well-known African-American congregation explained that his organization had not initially taken our calls because he was skeptical of those wishing to "study the Black Church." This minister specifically asked about the benefits to the Black Church if they chose to participate and did not agree to participate until we were able to articulate nonresearch related goals.

Conclusion

Although teaching through community-engaged research can be resource intensive, our experience indicates that the benefits to students, faculty, and the community are significant. The Little Rock Congregations Study provided an excellent opportunity for students to engage in the community and conduct hands-on research. By extension, students visited several neighborhoods they were unfamiliar with, often in areas of ethnic diversity to which they would not normally have traveled. This research project also helped students to see the "good work" that houses of worship of various denominations and religious traditions are doing to solve social problems in their communities.

Thus, the study facilitated interaction between students and the community, thereby reducing "the town and gown" divide, while exposing students to the potential of houses of worship as an important component of the community. The research project also helped community members to reflect on the work that they and their congregations are doing to help their communities.

Perhaps the largest and most tangible benefit of this project was the data collected. The primary investigators on the study now have data from which to publish multiple research articles. This outcome fits exactly with the recommendations of the literature to shift the incentives for teaching and research (McCartney 2013; O'Meara 2003). In this case, faculty were incentivized to engage the students in community-oriented projects in part in order to further their own research agendas. Despite this emphasis, from the start, we conceptualized the project not just as a research project but as an example of "the scholarship of engagement," focused in part on meeting the needs of the larger community (O'Connor 2006).

Although the project described here is only one data point, our results are in line with the expectations in the literature and lead us to see a lot of potential in community-engaged research. These types of projects can strengthen students' technical skills, immerse students in their community, and enhance relationships across institutions in the community, all while resulting in a rich store of publishable data. Although we found that the work-load of this study may have reached the outer limit of what 60 students and two faculty members can do in terms of data collection, we do consider it well worth the effort.

Sustainable and institutionalized research benefits students, faculty, and the community. When research is sustainable and institutionalized, faculty can get longitudinal results and fine tune their research approach, as occurred in this project. In addition, repeated and long-term contact with researchers allows communities to build trust with researchers,

provide feedback, and articulate benefits that they may wish to receive (Hyland and Maurette 2010).

The sustainability of community-engaged research is not a given, however. It requires a financial commitment from universities and the establishment of funding dedicated to supporting institutional engagement with the community (Breese 2011). It requires that faculty who participate in community-engaged research are rewarded in terms of credit for service, as well as publications that emerge from such projects, in line with the model proposed by "Boyer's Scholarship of Application" (Boyer 1990). Finally, the sustainability of community-engaged research requires changes to curriculum to emphasize courses that contain a community-engaged component.

In the long run, we suggest that programs of political science, public policy, public administration, and public service look closely at whether teaching through community-engaged research projects might meet their teaching, research, and service goals. Our recommendation for interested programs is that they explicitly articulate the goal of conducting community-engaged research using bottom up, collaborative approaches that are based on partnering with the local community and that are responsive to community needs.

Notes

1. As pointed out by Jeffrey Breese (2011) Community-engaged research has many names and many permutations including action research, participatory research, community-based research, empowerment research and or service learning.
2. This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, IRB approval numbers 17-050 and 16-158.
3. Participant and congregation names are redacted to maintain confidentiality.
4. This grant is administered by the American Political Science Association's Centennial Center for Political Science and Public Affairs.

Notes on contributors

Rebecca A. Glazier is Associate Professor of Political Science in the School of Public Affairs at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. Her research agenda addresses issues of religion, political communication, and United States foreign policy. She is particularly interested in how religion motivates political action and has published research on the role of providential religious beliefs in the process. She also studies the scholarship of teaching and learning and has published articles on the efficacy of various teaching strategies, including simulations, satire, and smartphone apps.

Warigia M. Bowman is Assistant Professor of Public Policy at the University of Arkansas Clinton School of Public Service. She will begin a position as Assistant Professor of Law at the University of Tulsa College of Law on June 1, 2018. Her research agenda addresses information technology, infrastructure in rural areas, water law, natural resource issues, and energy. She is particularly interested in the rule of law and democratization in Africa. She also studies censorship and contentious speech.

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