Community-Based Research Networks:
Development and Lessons Learned in an Emerging Field

Randy Stoecker, *University of Toledo* [1]
Susan H. Ambler, *Maryville College*
Nick Cutforth, *University of Denver*
Patrick Donohue, *Middlesex County College*
Dan Dougherty, *Temple University*
Sam Marullo, *Georgetown University*
Kris S. Nelson, *University of Minnesota*
Nancy B. Stutts, *University of Richmond*

While in recent years there has been an increasing amount written about how to conduct individual community-based research (CBR) projects, little is known about the infrastructure supporting such projects. This paper compares seven multi-institutional CBR networks in Appalachia, Colorado, the District of Columbia, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Philadelphia, Richmond, Virginia, and Trenton, New Jersey. After reviewing the histories of the networks, we conduct a comparative SWOT analysis, showing their common and unique Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. We conclude with the lessons suggested by the network histories and SWOT analyses.

In the last decade a variety of models and approaches have been developed for doing CBR projects (Murphy, Scammell, & Sclove, 1997; Park, Brydon-Miller, Hall, & Jackson, 1993; Petras & Porpora, 1993; Porpora, 1999; Stoecker, 1999; Strand, 2000; Stringer, 1999; Williams, 1997). In addition, models are emerging for creating and maintaining CBR centers on single campuses (Cheadle et al., 2002; Stoecker, 2002). But we know little about multi-institutional CBR networks serving metropolitan or wider regions, partly because until very recently there have been too few cases to compare.

The first known United States network of higher education institutions and community organizations supporting CBR was the Chicago Policy Research Action Group, or PRAG, founded in 1989. With four Chicago institutions—Loyola University, DePaul University, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Chicago State University—and more than 15 nonprofit and community organizations (Policy Research Action Group, 2002), PRAG set the standard for CBR networks and is the only one that has been written about. But writings about PRAG emphasize its projects (Nyden, Figert, Shibley, & Burrows, 1997), so we still know little about how to develop such a network. There are also specialty CBR networks, especially focused on public health (Minkler, 2000), such as the Center for Community Health Education, Research and Service in Boston and the Center for Healthy Communities in Dayton, Ohio (Center for Healthy Communities, 2000). The Community-University Research Alliances program of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada also sponsors specialty CBR networks in areas such as housing (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2001).

Since the middle 1990s, however, and especially in the last two years, a number of locality-based generalist CBR networks have developed. After discussing CBR networks' importance relative to single campus centers, we present brief histories and descriptions of seven CBR networks: Neighborhood Planning for Community Revitalization (NPCR) in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Just Connections in Appalachia, the Trenton Center in New Jersey, the Washington DC Community Research and Learning (CoRAL) Network, the Denver-based Colorado Community-based Research Network (CCBRN), Campus-Community Partnership of Metro Richmond in Virginia, and the University-Community Collaborative of Philadelphia (UCCP). We then compare the networks' self-identified strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to draw out lessons for network formation, maintenance, and growth.

Why a CBR Network?

Six networks analyzed here developed partly through the Corella and Bertram F. Bonner Foundation Community Research Project program (2002), funded through the Corporation for National Service. The Bonner Foundation convened a meeting in Philadelphia in January 2001 with participants from an earlier Bonner CBR project focused on creating individual campuses centers, and including many new community organizations and institutions. There we discussed why we should form local and regional CBR networks, rather than just establish individual campus centers. We revisited this question at a June 2002 meeting in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Our discussions produced the following hypothesized benefits of CBR networks.

One of the most important hypothesized values of CBR networks is their synergistic effect. Because networks employ a "weak ties" structure (Granovetter, 1973), they can tap a more diverse array of resources than can isolated efforts. Networks access different forms of funding, deploy different models of CBR, and link skills such as the multilingualism of community college students with the advanced statistical skills of students at a Ph.D. institution. Thus, networks can reduce competition and instead jointly take on complex projects for which individual CBR practitioners, or even individual centers, lack the capacity. In addition, community organizations are often small and have limited resources to navigate through the bureaucracies of each of the local higher education institutions. The networks provide that portal.

Another potential advantage of CBR networks is their ability to build the social movement effect. For some, CBR is the best means of achieving the newly popular civic engagement goal of higher education because it provides not just service, but more importantly, research that can understand and change the power structure. The social movement effect of CBR networks begins with expanding the CBR infrastructure. Increasing the number of students and faculty doing CBR can impact higher education institutions themselves. This is particularly important for those who feel isolated on their individual campus, which does not support CBR, but who can find support at other nearby institutions. Over time, a network may be able to promote the development of centers on individual campuses, as occurred for PRAG. Even more important is the ability of the networks to grow relationships with community-based organizations (CBOs) that may have an existing relationship with one institution, but need resources only available from a different institution. This can lead to a broad community-building program.

This expanded CBR infrastructure can also enhance social movement outputs. Community-based organizations that may not be able to get their own research recognized can have more impact when partnering with a higher education institution. Other organizations that justifiably refused to trust their local higher education institution may be enticed to enter into a CBR relationship through a network involving other local organizations, which are perhaps even controlled by nonprofits rather than higher education institutions. An individual student or faculty member whose CBR work is not valued on their own campus may benefit from the visibility afforded by a broader network. A network could even support junior faculty to do CBR and not suffer in the tenure process. Most importantly, however, is the potential social change impact a network structure can have through large CBR projects focusing on policy issues. Such projects are often beyond the reach of single academics, and may not be funded unless the funder can be assured the applicant has the capacity to accomplish the task.

The Networks

To the best of our knowledge, this paper includes all of the general CBR networks in the United States except PRAG.[2] The networks are all attempting to work across disciplines to serve wide-ranging community research needs. Two networks (Just Connections and the Trenton Center) are managed through independent non-profit organizations. Two networks (the Colorado Community-based Research Network and Just Connections) extend beyond a single metro area. One network was funded initially through the Department of Education Urban Community Service Program, another by the Jessie Ball Dupont Fund, and the rest more recently by the Corporation for National and Community Service through the Bonner Foundation. All the networks focus on urban areas except for Just Connections, which primarily serves rural areas of Appalachia. Some networks were based initially in service-learning programs. Others began as participatory action research networks. Some networks are branching into community technical assistance and training. The histories below draw out the networks' origins, structures, and activities.

Appalachia: Just Connections

Just Connections (2002) is an independent non-profit organization composed of community people and faculty members from Appalachian grassroots organizations and liberal arts colleges. The organization serves the Appalachian region, which

includes West Virginia, eastern Kentucky, eastern Tennessee, western Virginia, western North Carolina, and northern Georgia. Franki Patton-Rutherford is Just Connections' coordinator, and the organization is currently housed with Big Creek People in Action located in Caretta, WV. The president of the board is Marie Cirillo, a community leader from Clearfork Institute located in Eagan, TN. Other board members include faculty from several Appalachian liberal arts colleges: Carson-Newman College, Emory & Henry College, Ferrum College, Maryville College, and Tusculum College.

The first stage of the network began in 1995 with a service-learning conference at Carson-Newman College funded by the Appalachian College Association (ACA). One outcome of the conference, urged by Steve Fisher, was a task force that decided to focus on placing students in communities, primarily in the summer, and provide faculty development opportunities related to service-learning. The group expanded its focus to include community-based research to successfully apply for a collaborative faculty-student research grant program sponsored by ACA. They implemented their first four CBR projects in summer 1996 (Ambler & Shiba, 1998). From 1997 until 2000, community groups involved in the first summer's research projects provided funding.

In fall 1998, the task force formed Just Connections, a separate nonprofit organization, to carry on its activities. The task force selected the name to symbolize its basic purpose of fostering connections between campuses and communities to pursue greater social justice for distressed Appalachian communities (Just Connections, 2002). The task force sent a short proposal outlining the purpose and financial need of Just Connections to about 25 foundations, but none expressed an interest.

The next fall, Just Connections became a reality when they applied to a new ACA grant program supporting teaching and technology and won funding for a proposal called "Participatory Research Across the Curriculum." The grant supports workshops on CBR, course-based CBR projects, and developing teaching resources about CBR. In addition, the Bonner Foundation selected Just Connections as a sub-grantee in its Learn & Serve America CBR grant project. Just Connections formally incorporated in December 2000 and hired its first coordinator. Since fall 2000 the organization has supported 23 course-based CBR projects and held 7 workshops. Just Connections has also recruited a new community group from Rome, Georgia and two new colleges, Berea College and Southeast Community College, in Kentucky.

Just Connections members are committed to college and community being equally involved in the organization. Faculty from the respective colleges committed to bring a community group to the Just Connections table. So far, however, the colleges outnumber the community groups. The fundamental question that participants ask is, "What benefits are there for community people to participate?" This goal remains to be achieved.

Colorado: Colorado Community-Based Research Network

The mission of the Colorado Community Based Research Network (2002), or CCBRN, is to match the technical expertise of researchers in higher education with the local knowledge of communities to seek answers to complex issues and community concerns in Colorado. The University of Denver (DU)'s CBR Project has facilitated over a dozen research projects conducted by faculty, students, and community partners since 1997. In February 2001, the CBR Project hosted an all-day workshop that brought together over 40 representatives from local universities and CBOs in Colorado. Workshop participants decided there was a need for a CBR network in the Denver area to make it easier for university researchers and community members to identify research needs and share information regarding important regional issues. At the end of the workshop, they formed a committee to begin discussions on creating the CBR network.

The committee met in May, July, and September 2001, and noted that Colorado community organizations need credible research to evaluate and improve their programs and/or empower residents to engage in social action and systemic change. In addition, useful community studies and data sets are housed at various universities, community organizations, and public agencies, making them difficult to find and use. A network of community organizations and university researchers could facilitate access to information and people with key expertise.

After defining the need for a central location for valuable research information and a formal support organization for CBOs and university researchers, the committee formed the CCBRN. In September 2001, the CCBRN decided to embark on two major activities: 1) create a virtual and physical library to house studies, reports, and data regarding community issues; and 2) pursue funding for the library, training, and workshops for community members, and financial support for students and faculty members working on CBR projects with CBOs.

Despite the clear vision, mission, and action plans, progress has been slow. First, the CCBRN is having difficulty finding funding. Several funders

that have been approached associate research with traditional, university-centered studies; others do not see how the CCBRN's work fits their existing community development funding initiatives. Second, creating a community library and support organization such as the CCBRN requires time and dedication. CCBRN members are committed, but they already have many responsibilities in their primary jobs and commitments to their families, limiting time to develop the CCBRN.

Nevertheless, the CCBRN has connected with some key partners, including faculty from the University of Denver (Education), the University of Colorado at Denver (Political Science), and Regis University (Sociology), along with the Piton Foundation, the Denver Enterprise Board, Denver Benchmarks, New Cole Development Corporation, Mercy Housing, and the Colorado Campus Compact. In July 2002 the CCBRN leased space from a local community development corporation to house a CBR resource library and, it is hoped, serve as a catalyst for providing community organizations and residents with technical assistance toward their research/information needs. This physical and virtual library became operational in fall 2002.

District of Columbia: Community Research and Learning Network

The Community Research and Learning or CoRAL Network (2002) of Washington DC was born in 1997 at Georgetown University with a grant from the Bonner Foundation to the University's Volunteer and Public Service Center. It has since expanded to include seven other DC-area universities (American, Catholic, George Mason University, George Washington, Marymount, Trinity, and the University of the District of Columbia); several key umbrella associations of CBOs, such as Greater DC Cares, the Consortium of Metropolitan Washington Universities, the Council of Latino Agencies, the Perry Center Community Services Inc., and the Washington Council of Agencies; and individual community-based organizations which have partnered on particular projects. The mission of the CoRAL Network is to support partnerships among DC higher education institutions and CBOs in order to "mobilize the universities' educational and scholarly resources for the purpose of supporting CBO's social change missions in pursuit of social justice."

An initial three-year pre-network grant cycle sponsored by the Bonner Foundation supported various CBR partnerships involving Georgetown faculty, students, and community organizations. Several faculty development initiatives introduced faculty to CBR, including half-day workshops, site visits to the community, a monthly brown bag lunch series, a learning circle, course development mini-grants, and a year-long bi-weekly seminar including faculty and community partners to develop joint projects.

The next three-year grant, beginning in 2000-2001, supported the development of the DC CoRAL Network by intentionally reaching out to the other universities to support their faculty and students to undertake CBR projects. A "request for proposals" was offered in fall 2000 to support collaborative projects by teams including faculty, students, and community partners. From this solicitation, seven independent projects, engaging faculty and students from five universities and eight CBOs, were supported. Grant funding also supported the development of project teams through a learning circle, which also evolved into a steering committee for the DC network. A strategic planning session at the end of this first year led to the decision to advance the CoRAL Network by creating a program coordinator position, establishing a more formal steering committee, developing a Web site to support the partnership development and information sharing functions of the network; and supporting the development of campus-based centers at the other DC campuses.

These initiatives were implemented in the fifth year, as Jason Willis, a Catholic University student, was hired as a part-time CoRAL Network coordinator, the steering committee was constituted and met regularly, the coralnetwork.org Web site was created, and four institutions received subgrants to advance their own campus CBR centers (George Washington University, Marymount University, Trinity College, the University of the District of Columbia). Key faculty members on each campus continued to offer CBR courses or sponsor projects, and key community partners continued to collaborate in directing and hosting these initiatives. The next step in the CoRAL Network's development is to continue building the network infrastructure, create additional mechanisms to support faculty and student development to undertake this work, and support larger scale collaborative projects in key neighborhoods.

Minneapolis-St. Paul: Neighborhood Planning for Community Revitalization

Neighborhood Planning for Community Revitalization (2002), or NPCR, started in October 1993 with funding from the U.S. Department of Education Urban Community Service Program under Title XI of the Higher Education Act. Funding has since expanded to include other federal and foundation sources, as well as support from the University of Minnesota. NPCR, administered through the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs at the

University of Minnesota, involves nine Twin Cities colleges and universities: Augsburg College, the College of St. Catherine, Concordia University, Hamline University, Macalester College, Metropolitan State University, Minneapolis Community and Technical College, the University of Minnesota, and the University of St. Thomas. A coordinating committee with a representative from each of the nine member schools and an equal number of community representatives oversees the program.

Originally NPCR focused on the 65 CBOs participating in the Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program, but has since expanded to serve community development corporations and CBOs serving neighborhood areas in both Minneapolis and St. Paul. Special emphasis is now given to organizations that involve and serve communities of color.

NPCR supports paid undergraduate and graduate research assistants, and course based assistance, in response to neighborhood-initiated requests. Proposals are solicited three times a year, and evaluated by a review committee. Emphasis is placed on projects that will contribute to increasing organizations' capacity to undertake revitalization. NPCR also helps to facilitate partnerships between organizations around shared issues (e.g., proposed light rail transit, use of geographic information systems).

Once projects are approved, a job posting is written, or a course sought to undertake the project. Job postings are distributed across member campuses and students apply directly to the community organization, which selects the student best qualified for the project. NPCR then makes arrangements with the student's school to add them to the payroll. For course-based projects, faculty are sought out who teach related courses and want to include a community project in their curriculum. NPCR supports 40–50 research assistants a year and facilitates 50–60 course-based projects each year.

NPCR has an interactive Web site (http://www.npcr.org) to communicate research opportunities, resources, results, and community interests. In addition to program information, the site features an online library of over 150 NPCR-supported neighborhood research reports, a portal for information on the nearly-100 Twin Cities neighborhood organizations, an active database on course-based research opportunities and community research proposals, and current research assistant positions. The NPCR Web site registers over 50,000 hits a month.

Philadelphia: University Community Collaborative of Philadelphia

The University Community Collaborative of Philadelphia (2002), or UCCP, was started in 1997 to work with CBOs to provide research on issues defined by the community. In the last five years, the UCCP has gone through three identifiable evolutions.

Initially, UCCP was a collaborative effort between CBO and faculty researchers to provide university research assistance for community-identified projects. There was no pre-determined substantive focus and most projects were short-term. Faculty researchers came from the University of Pennsylvania, Swarthmore College, West Chester University, Millersville University and Temple University, but little attention was given to developing a larger CBR network. For the first two years, the UCCP was staffed by Barbara Ferman, director, and a graduate assistant. An advisory board and steering committee were established, made up of an equal mix of community members, university faculty (from the University of Pennsylvania, Swarthmore College, and Temple University), and representatives from public policy organizations. This structure did not facilitate network development, as the individuals from these two bodies were not UCCP project partners.

By 2000, numerous changes occurred to strengthen the UCCP network building focus. First, the lessons from the initial period about the need for a focused and deliberate approach to CBR partnerships encouraged UCCP to think in terms of building support across communities based on common issues and needs. Community partners became a part of the steering committee to link the various projects, organizations, neighborhoods, and UCCP's overall direction. Second, UCCP hired two new staff to focus on substantive areas developed through UCCP-brokered CBR partnerships. Third was the addition of a Youth Civic Engagement initiative, funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts and included in the renewal proposal to The William Penn Foundation, UCCP's original funder. The increased capacity and emerging foci led UCCP to develop a pool of faculty researchers who could be involved in multiple CBR projects, more projects being conducted "in house" by UCCP staff, and closer coordination of projects. Lastly, a series of strategic relationships developed between UCCP and other networks around Philadelphia, introducing CBOs, faculty, and students to a broader range of research and CBOs.

The final stage of UCCP network development has been occurring since late 2000. The Learn and Serve grant from the Bonner Foundation brought new resources to build a network and promote CBR, using mechanisms such as: seminars where participants network and discuss ongoing CBR

projects; workshops to attract new faculty researchers and raise awareness on campuses about CBR; and an RFP process to solicit projects from the community and faculty researchers for UCCP through mini-grants. The grant also allowed UCCP to hire a staff person to build a city-wide and regional CBR network, which now includes the Philadelphia Higher Education Network for Neighborhood Development (PHENND) and faculty and staff from Saint Joseph's University, Bryn Mawr College, Eastern University, Cumberland County College, LaSalle University, the University of Pennsylvania, and Temple University.

Richmond: Campus Community Partnership of Metro Richmond

The Campus Community Partnership of Metro Richmond (2002), or CCPMR, began in the University of Richmond's Jepson School of Leadership Studies in 1993. The Partnership's mission is to employ campus resources to address community challenges in metro Richmond and to offer students relevant learning experiences.

The organization's work had been largely coordinating service-learning among University of Richmond faculty and students, and facilitating discussion among area colleges. In January 1999, the Partnership shifted to participatory action research when it received a seed grant from the Jessie Ball Dupont Fund to create a consortium on participatory action research among Virginia Union University, the University of Richmond, Virginia Commonwealth University, and J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College. The consortium fosters campus-community partnerships based on a collaborative, asset-based "problem-solving model." Local people and faculty/student teams are equals in the research process. With the Dupont grant came funding for a new director, who brought a more community-oriented understanding of what higher education could contribute to communities. The director and faculty founder unsuccessfully tried to get a large federal or national foundation grant to institutionalize the program and conduct further research.

One major partnership project was "Connect Richmond" (http://www.connectrichmond.org), a community research and information clearinghouse that includes a news section focused on legislative and other issues affecting nonprofits. In February 2000, 55 representatives of local nonprofits, colleges, and universities met to discuss ways that the colleges and universities could contribute to community-based efforts in the area. They identified evaluation research and information technology as areas where the academic community could help. In response, the director proposed a listserv for area nonprofits and a Web site to centralize information Richmond nonprofits needed, but funding was difficult to acquire. When the consortium was nearly out of funding, Virginia Commonwealth University contributed $5,500, the University of Richmond contributed $55,000, and the community foundation donated $25,000 for Web site development. In summer 2001, students and staff developed the site contents, and the site launched in November 2001. The next month, the Bonner Foundation granted the University of Richmond $35,000 to renew the Partnership's community-driven research program. Local funders have since maintained the organization.

To date, the consortium is largely "representative," meaning that the director, and faculty who have the greatest commitment to the work, act and communicate on behalf of the partnership. There are no written agreements among them and school representatives change as interests change. Participation is at its highest when there is research grant funding available. There are many people on all campuses that do not know of the consortium. Conversely, CCPMR's signature project, Connect Richmond, has quickly become the central communication point among nonprofits and business, government agencies, and higher education seeking to communicate with nonprofits. Because it is often a site for resource distribution (e.g., recycled computers, office furniture, volunteers) that usually go to the first to respond, nonprofits use the resource network daily. This role enables CCPMR to know about and convene a number of disparate local technology and research efforts, and is beginning to become a platform for collaborative, community-driven social change efforts.

Trenton: Trenton Center for Campus-Community Partnerships

The Trenton Center, or TC is a "community-driven" nonprofit organization/consortium that aims to improve the quality of life in the city by mobilizing local assets, through forging sustained and mutually beneficial working partnerships between college professors, their students, nonprofit leaders and residents. Its brief history has three stages.

A small group formed in 1999 to build a citywide CBR network that would mobilize academic teams to address local community groups' problem solving needs. These teams came from Princeton University's campus-based CBR Center, The College of New Jersey, Rider University, and Mercer County College. A working committee formed to obtain local stakeholders' input via focus groups. The result was a plan to create one location where community groups could access CBR

and tools such as capacity-building training, study circles, direct service teams, "data warehouses," and legislative and funding updates.

As the vision developed, so did an organization and consortium to advance it. In 2000, a member of the original working committee, Pat Donohue, became interim director and implemented the committee's "product-driven" strategy: organizing a small number of projects that could encourage others to participate. Over time, some folks moved from being focus group participants, to partners in a CBR project, to advisory board members, and eventually to Board of Trustees members. This first Board, which consisted of 11 non-profit leaders and a representative from each of the academic institutions, helped carry out TC's day-to-day work as well as its events. This included organizing a two-day gathering on CBR and campus-community partnerships, involving more than 90 participants, and bringing attention to the consortium's accomplishments: completing more than 24 projects and institutionalizing CBR at three of the four higher education institutions.

As TC entered its third year, it moved into a capacity-building phase, developing a wider mix of community and academic partners, and extending beyond class-based CBR projects. This included mobilizing the talent of nonprofit staff to help other groups with tasks such as GIS mapping to show concentrations of poverty and the location of food pantries and soup kitchens. TC also organized its first set of training workshops on variety of topics, such as "Strategic Planning and Participatory Neighborhood Planning." In addition, with the support from the Bonner Leaders AmeriCorps program, TC created CBR Corps—teams of students that work on projects over an entire academic year.

Spring 2002 ushered in a new stage for the consortium when it did not receive a substantial grant to fund a full-time director and staff. In response, the key stakeholders met to identify what assets they could redirect to TC. The TC Board designated one of its strongest nonprofit partners, Isles Inc., as the lead agent of the consortium for the next two years, providing TC with nearly $30,000 of in-kind administrative support and significantly enhancing its management and resource development capabilities.

Comparative SWOT Analysis

SWOT, or "strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats," analysis is commonly used for program review and planning purposes. In a typical SWOT analysis, a staff or board (or both) meets for 1.5–2 hours to complete the initial analysis, beginning with listing the perceived strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Strengths are things internal to the organization or program that are seen as positive accomplishments. Weaknesses are things internal to the organization or program that are seen as problematic. Opportunities and threats refer to conditions external to the organization or program, and which could facilitate or impinge on future efforts. Next, the group looks for themes—commonly mentioned issues across the categories—to guide their strategic planning (Balamuralikrishna & Dugger, 1995; Department Of Urban and Regional Planning, n.d.; Jones, 1990).

A SWOT procedure was elected because it allowed each network to develop independent self-assessments rather than be compared to arbitrary one-size-fits-all standards. The state of our knowledge is too thin, for example, to say how many CBR projects a network should accomplish to be considered successful, and whether there could be a common standard across the different network configurations. The SWOT analysis also allowed themes to be generated from each network, and see the extent to which the themes were consistent with expectations. The SWOT analysis procedure is consistent with CBR principles, giving research "subjects" an integral role in defining problems and analyzing data, providing information the networks can use to plan their futures. It is important to note that the comparative SWOT analysis is a hermeneutical device. Its use is in identifying themes occurring across the networks. The absence of a theme in a single network does not mean that the theme may not be relevant for that network, only that it did not come up in the SWOT analysis. But an issue appearing in only one network is much less likely to be common across the networks. Thus, the more instances of any theme across the networks, the more important it is for the analysis.

In this adaptation of the SWOT analysis, a description of how to conduct a general SWOT analysis was distributed that asked each network coordinator to gather together as many people as possible who knew the network's history, and who represented different perspectives (higher education faculty and staff, community organization representatives, and others). In some cases the entire group met in one room at once. In other cases a small group met face to face, and others contributed via e-mail. Each network conducted its own SWOT analysis. The raw SWOT analyses were then collectively reviewed to determine common themes across the networks. Any item appearing in three or more networks was considered to be an important theme. All themes reported by more than one network appear in Tables I–IV.

Strengths of the Networks

As shown clearly in Table I, the networks' greatest strengths are in their relationships, in particular the quality of their relationships with community organizations. In many cases the relationships between academics and community organizations in a network are long-standing. Community organizations show up in strong numbers for network-sponsored events in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Trenton, and Colorado, and regularly attend meetings at all the networks. Three networks also indicate success in emphasizing community control over their network. And preliminary reports from community organizations in the six networks involved with the Bonner Foundation show that they are eager to continue those relationships.

It is also important to note that four networks cite the quality of their internal core group relationships as a strength. Many of the networks have only one or two academics involved from each institution. The sense of belonging gained from a CBR network helps counter the isolation academics may feel at their home institutions. And CBR is difficult work, fraught with mis-steps and stresses, particularly for non-tenured faculty members. Students may not complete their work on time or with sufficient quality, a CBO may not have the capacity to support the project, college or university issues may disrupt the tight CBR project schedule. Having a support group of people who have gone through many of the same tensions is invaluable.

Yet another relationship strength of the networks is their stability. In a higher education context so often fraught with petty bickering and difficult personalities, and local community organization environments fraught with turf and resource competition, the constructive and stable nature of participation in these networks is remarkable. Planning meetings are consistently attended, and there is strong commitment to follow-through on CBR projects from the network core group members. It is notable that three of the networks listed a sense of unified vision as a strength, which also contributes to stability.

Of course, a main reason that the networks exist

Table 1
Strengths

Theme	Number of Networks Reporting (out of 7)
strong community-based relationships	7
significant project / training accomplishments	7
high quality, committed, stable participants	6
source of mutual support	4
positive student outcomes	4
access to a variety of skills / resources	4
unified vision / mission	3
using CBR to promote community control	3

is to do CBR projects. That, too, is listed among all the networks' strengths. First is the completion of individual projects, typically between one academic or group of students and one community organization. Projects involving multiple institutions and multiple community organizations are rare, though some networks are attempting to move in that direction. This is important, because one goal of CBR networks is to take on projects large and extensive enough to have major policy impact. Another expected benefit of CBR networks discussed earlier is the access to diverse and increased resources. Table I shows that four networks note that benefit, but the fact that more networks did not list it also shows that they may have a distance to go in realizing their potential. On the other hand, the second line of accomplishment is in the training activities in which many of the networks engage. Those trainings are the most visible examples of activities that engage multiple network partners. Finally, while listed as a separate strength, the positive student outcomes listed by three networks could also be considered an accomplishment from a service-learning perspective.

Weaknesses of the Networks

The two most pronounced weaknesses of the networks, shown in Table II, are lack of visibility and capacity. Network directors and coordinators note strong and stable participation from individual faculty, but not from administrative levels of their institutions. In viewing the networks' histories, it is important to note that each formed as a consequence of external funding. They were not planned or supported from within the participating institutions themselves. These efforts are what Kathy Staudt (1985; also see Staudt & Brenner, 2002) calls "enclave offices," which are located at the margins of the institution where failure will not impact the institution itself. Service-learning has moved into the mainstream of many institutions, but CBR, and especially multi-institutional CBR networks, remain marginal.

The other important weakness present across the networks is lack of capacity. Most networks, particularly as they become well-known in the community, receive more requests for assistance than they can meet. This weakness is directly related to the lack of institutional support, as the meager funding to support faculty involvement in CBR projects, and the lack of institutional protection for them, also weakens recruitment of faculty (and consequently their students) to meet the many and diverse community requests for CBR. Faculty recruitment is cited as a weakness in at least three networks.

A less generally reported weakness, but still of

Table 2
Weaknesses

Theme	Number of Networks Reporting (out of 7)
lack of visibility / support across campuses	6
lack of capacity compared to demands	6
lack of community involvement in network	3
lack of strong recruitment to network	3
use of technology and tech support in network	3

note, is the difficulty some networks face trying to integrate technology into their work. In some cases networks have found themselves relying too much on e-mail, and losing personal relationship qualities they valued so highly. In other cases networks have not developed their use of technology enough, lacking a Web site in one case and often lacking technical support. Finding an appropriate role for Internet technology has been challenging for most networks.

A final weakness for three networks concerns getting community organizations involved in running the networks. Of networks noting this weakness, one has written by-laws that half of their governing body be from community organizations. This network currently has three community organization participants who are strong leaders. Other networks are more comfortable having academics coordinate the network, but emphasize that CBR projects be led by community members. Whether and how community members participate in the networks remains a conundrum. Most community organization representatives care about getting their work done, and are often overstretched. Being on yet another committee not directly relevant to day-to-day issues is a secondary priority. On the other hand, it is easy for such an effort to lose sight of its purpose without constant reminding from community representatives.

Opportunities for the Networks

There are really only two categories of opportunities mentioned by the networks, presented in Table III. The first category concerns network expansion. The networks listed many such opportunities. In some cases networks have identified groups, such as new immigrant communities or smaller community organizations that have not received CBR services. In other cases they have identified large regional or national projects for which the network could manage a local branch. Similar programs involving service-learning consortia or technical assistance networks were also mentioned as potential opportunities for network expansion. Of course, all these opportunities for network expansion are tempered by capacity weaknesses cited above, but in some cases these new opportunities also bring the potential for new funding.

Another important opportunity listed in Table III is the potential for policy impact. The networks emphasizing this generally find themselves well-placed for realizing the opportunity. One network is in Washington DC, where policy impact is a profession, and where CoRAL is already working with one organization on a major study that is producing policy briefs. The CCBRN in Denver cites research showing institutions of higher education as one of the most trusted institutions in Colorado, and the political system as the least trusted (Wells Fargo Public Opinion Research Program, 2001), leading them to develop strategies of building on that trust around policy questions. The UCCP in Philadelphia is leading an effort to build a regional CBR network focusing on community economic development, youth programming, and information infrastructure that aims to have regional policy impact. The Trenton Center, by bringing together city nonprofits, is also positioning itself to have future policy impact. And Connect Richmond is promoting a discussion around city development issues.

Finally, because realizing opportunities for network expansion and policy impact require greater capacity, it is important to note that three networks see opportunities for expanding their capacity. These networks have identified faculty or other institutions from which they can draw further CBR resources. They also see potential in developing their communications technology, which could be used in recruitment. Three networks have identified new funding sources. In two cases this involves funders with whom network representatives already have a relationship and see a realistic opportunity for influencing the funder's priorities. Two networks are also moving toward offering fee-for-service programs. Funding is perhaps one of the largest issues for the networks, and shows up prominently in the "threats" section.

Threats to the Networks

The environment in which the networks operate is not terribly friendly. As Table IV shows, funding is the

Table 3
Opportunities

Theme	Number of Networks Reporting (out of 7)
connect with other known projects / partners	7
impact policy	4
develop use of technology / online tools	3
broaden recruitment	3
impact funders to support CBR	3
fee for service possibilities	2
use funds to recruit	2

most problematic aspect of that environment and may worsen as the present economic downturn reduces fiscal resources of foundations and agencies. It is not only that the networks have a difficult time obtaining sufficient funding. Additionally, the available funding often does not fit the networks' activities. The networks have had to severely bend their priorities to fit funders' grant criteria. Furthermore, most funders do not provide operating support unless it fits the funder's program du jour and do not value CBR's potential for sustainable change through data-driven decision making, organizational capacity building, or policy approaches to problem solving over the immediacy offered through funding direct services.

Three networks also note the threat of competing programs. The competitors may be community organization consortia or service-learning networks, or individual institutions doing community outreach. Three networks also note that CBR projects could threaten existing power holders. CBR differs from nonprofit consortia or service-learning networks because it is specifically designed to understand and change the power structure. This places CBR networks in an initially more vulnerable position. Social movements are at their most vulnerable when they are young and lack the strength of numbers needed to counter the greater wealth and power of entrenched structures. A further threat noted by three networks is that community organizations also operate under politically turbulent conditions with turf battles, funding competition, and other power issues. To become politically powerful, the networks also will have to help their community organization partners overcome these conditions.

Lessons

Initially, it was expected that this research would show structural variations across the networks. It was suspected that networks based in nonprofit organizations might differ from those housed in institutions of higher education, that older networks might differ from younger networks, or that networks involving larger universities would differ from those involving smaller colleges. But the diversity of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, or threats does not seem explainable by any characteristics common across the networks. Indeed, for

Table 4
Threats

Theme	Number of Networks Reporting (out of 7)
lack / direction of funding	5
turf / internal politics of local organizations	4
might threaten existing power holders	3
competition from other similar efforts	3

SWOT themes listed by three networks, a case could be made for them fitting most of the other networks as well. Some of the variation among the networks may simply be a weakness of the SWOT method and its potential lack of measurement accuracy.

We are left, then, to focus on the networks' commonalities, leading to some suggested lessons for building and maintaining CBR networks:

1. "Community involvement" does not have a single meaning across the networks. It is challenging to involve community organizations in running the networks. Some networks, such as the Trenton Center, have achieved community involvement in managing their network through steps of increasing participation. Others, such as NPCR, involve community organizations for specific activities such as reviewing project proposals. Often, however, community organizations see their most important involvement as making sure specific projects serve their needs. When the project works, they see no need to help manage the network, making a lack of community organization involvement a symptom of success in some cases.

2. Strong personal networks make CBR networks work. CBR networks often build on the strength of personal relationships. CoRAL grew out of a joint academic-community study group. Just Connections developed via a core group who built relationships through retreat experiences that sustained the network even through periods lacking funding. Importantly, however, these strong core groups have also found ways to expand their circle, adding new participants gradually in the case of the Trenton Center, or through personal relationships.

3. CBR networks operate in funding gaps between foundations and higher education institutions. Every network developed because of the availability of specific funding programs. But funding to develop CBR networks is rare, as the CCBRN and Trenton Center noted. Networks housed in institutions of higher education are able to gain some institution-based support for network operations, but still subsist on grants that leverage such support. The networks currently operate between the funding categories. Foundations fund specific projects, but not usually operating support. Colleges and universities do not know how to fund operations controlled by consortiums. And, because most institutions of higher education have not yet determined how to count faculty involvement in CBR, faculty manage both network operations and projects in addition to, rather than in place of, their other institutional responsibilities. This leads to the noted lack of capacity to meet all the CBR projects brought to the networks, and the lack of visibility across the areas they serve.

4. Making the most of a network's potential requires increased strength, visibility, and capacity. All the networks face the dilemma that, without adequate resources, they cannot realize their potential of creating a highly visible one-stop-shop for community organizations needing research assistance. The UCCP is addressing this dilemma by maximizing the network's visibility in one or two specialties, making a few resources go further. And before the networks can take on significant policy issues in a way that will allow them to have significant impact, the networks need enough capacity to conduct credible policy research, enough visibility to be taken seriously, and enough strength to weather the political storms such engagement will bring. Until then, networks such as CoRAL or the CCBRN provide policy support work for other organizations that do the public part of the policy battle.

Conclusion

CBR networks are building a ground-level infrastructure of solid relationships, mutual support, and service to communities. They are getting an increasing number of faculty, who receive no support for CBR at their home institution, involved in CBR projects. They have not yet reached their potential for growth, which is promoting the practice of CBR and producing major policy change. But the infrastructure is slowly and steadily developing.

It is hopeful and encouraging that one of the networks' greatest strengths is their internal relationships and their relationships with community organizations. To hold together a network during the heat of political battle, a network will require more than "weak ties." It will require the mutual support found in deep relationships (McAdam, 1986). That precondition is already being met in the networks featured in this paper. Building on the relationships already established will provide the social movement infrastructure needed to change both the environment in which grass roots community organizations work and the institutions of higher education in which faculty and students operate. Realizing the dream of democracy, both across our communities and within our colleges and universities, cannot be achieved by isolated individual CBR projects. This dream will require networks of solidarity and projects large enough to the task of accomplishing essential social change.

Notes

[1] MJCSL editorial policies limit the number of authors that can be listed. Because CBR does not privilege particular forms of knowledge, we include as authors all who made significant written or oral contributions to this article. Those listed at the beginning of the article fit the MJCSL definition of making the most written contributions. Our other co-authors include: Hillary Aisenstein, University of Pennsylvania; Terri Bailey, Piton Foundation; Anita Bonds, Perry School Community Services, Inc.; Jacqueline Burke, Georgetown University; Donavan Cain, Berea College; Agnes Caldwell, Adrian College; Tony Campbell, Rider University; Sally Causey, Rural Resources; Deanna Cooke, Georgetown University; Theresa Cusimano, Colorado Campus Compact; Mika Farar, Denver Enterprise; Barbara Ferman, Temple University; Robert Hackett, Bonner Foundation; Katharine Kravetz, American University; Patricia Marcacci, Trinity College; Paul McElligott, Perry School Community Services, Inc.; Roxana Moayedi, Trinity College; Franki Patton Rutherford, Big Creek People in Action, Just Connections; Alexandra Rollins, Georgetown University; Trisha Thorme, Princeton University; Marycel Tuazon, University of Denver; Jason Willis, Catholic University of America. Thanks to anonymous MJCSL referees for their comments on an earlier draft, and to many other individuals not listed here involved in each of these networks.

[2] PRAG was not able to participate in this study due to their time and schedule limitations. Not including PRAG allows for comparison of networks with more similar and more recent histories.

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Authors

RANDY STOECKER is professor of Sociology at the University of Toledo. He has been the evaluation coordinator for the Bonner Foundation's Community Research Project, which supports most of the networks in this article. He has experience with a wide range of community-based research projects over the past 15 years, and moderates the COMM-ORG online conference on community organizing and development at http://comm-org.utoledo.edu.

SUSAN H. AMBLER is an associate professor of Sociology at Maryville College. She is a founding board member and treasurer of Just Connections, an organization networking communities and colleges in Appalachia through community-based research and service. She is the coordinator of a grant, "Participatory Research Across the Curriculum," which supports the development of course-based projects, a Web page, and a toolbox, funded by Appalachian College Association. She has developed several course-based community-based research projects with local grass roots organizations and summer projects with students in mountain communities.

NICK CUTFORTH teaches courses in community-based research, teacher research, research methods, and urban education in the College of Education at the University of Denver (DU). He directs DU's Community-Based Research Project and coordinates the Colorado Community-Based Research Network.

PATRICK DONOHUE is an assistant professor of Political Science at Middlesex County College (MCC) in Edison, New Jersey, where he also directs the MCC Community Scholars Corps and MCC Community-Based Research Center. He is the co-author of the forthcoming book, *Community Based Research: Principles and Practices for Higher Education* and the former acting director of the Trenton Center for Campus-Community Partnerships.

DANIEL DOUGHERTY is a doctoral student in Political Science at Temple University where his

focus is in Urban Politics and Public Policy. He also works with the University Community Collaborative of Philadelphia (UCCP) at Temple University as the associate director of the Community-Based Research Network.

SAM MARULLO is associate professor and chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Georgetown University. He is also director of the Community Research and Learning (CoRAL) Network of Washington, D.C. He regularly teaches a yearlong, community-based research seminar for undergraduates, Project D. C., which is the capstone course for students with a concentration in Social Justice Analysis.

KRIS S. NELSON is program director for Neighborhood Planning for Community Revitalization (NPCR) at the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA), University of Minnesota. NPCR, a nationally recognized program, links neighborhood-initiated research projects to faculty, student research assistants, and courses at nine Twin Cities colleges and universities.

NANCY B. STUTTS teaches in the Jepson School of Leadership Studies at the University of Richmond and is the director of the Campus Community Partnership, a consortium of four schools that works to put academic resources to work on community problems. Her research interests include issues affecting children and families and the roles of business, philanthropy, and leadership in social change.