

Engaging the Community in Grants Development through Participatory Action Research

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GPC Competencies

Competency #2: Knowledge of organizational development as it pertains to grant seeking

Competency #3: Knowledge of strategies for effective program and project design and development

Abstract

This strategy paper promotes the use of participatory action research (PAR) as a best practice for engaging collaborative partners in the development, implementation, and evaluation of grant projects. PAR engaged beneficiaries through the grant project in meaningful ways, allowing these essential community members to directly influence the design of interventions and supports. The model ensures grant professionals fully engage with the community in the development of proposals and implementation of programs, thus promoting engagement and equity while improving outcomes.

Introduction

Grant projects provided educational organizations a means to address systemic inequities which persist throughout the institution. Collaborative conversations held with service providers, partners, beneficiaries and other community members are used to define problems, review best practices, and design solutions. Drawing on the methods of participatory action research, grant professionals can improve the design, implementation, and evaluation of solutions in a way that further promotes equity and engages project participants and partners. This strategy paper outlines methods for engaging project participants throughout a grant's life cycle to improve engagement and equity.

Defining Action Research

Research in the social sciences often adopts the viewpoint of an observer, wherein the researcher views social phenomena, analyzes those experiences through one lens or another, and reports generalized findings. In some instances, the researcher may embed themselves within the community (such as in ethnography), but their role still relies more on engaged observation. The goal is not to engage in the phenomenon of the study, but to understand the social system and generate generalizable analyses. Action research takes a different approach. Radical change, rather than observation, is the goal (MacDonald, 2012).

To promote radical change, action researchers go through several phases of data collection and analysis. The first phase involves an informal process of observation, conversation, and review of scholarship. This phase of research emphasizes defining the problem. The second phase focuses more on community engagement. Here, preliminary data is collected from surveys, interviews, and/or focus groups involving research participants, beneficiaries, and collaborators. The researcher focuses on understanding the challenge in a localized context, along with the wants and needs of research participants. The data is used to inform the design of an intervention, commonly referred to as an action step.

The action step is implemented at the onset of the third phase of research. During the action step, researchers observe participants and interact with them. Usually, additional data is collected through similar methods as used in the second phase. This data is then analyzed as a means for evaluating the action step. Finally, researchers will write a report and disseminate it to collaborators, beneficiaries, and other practitioners. The process may be repeated to make changes and be assessed in additional contexts (Stringer, 2014).

Grants follow a similar model. Problems are defined and addressed in proposals. Once funded, an intervention is implemented. Reports, whether quarterly, annually, or just during closeout, evaluate the project and are disseminated to key community members for feedback – both formatively and summatively through listening sessions, which are described later in this paper. The process allows for both change-making and learning from practice. These are hallmarks of action research. Another clear connection between grants development and action research comes from the purpose of instigating change. Programmatic grants in particular offer funding to explore, pilot, and launch institutional, systemic changes. This too is integral to the work of action researchers taking on the role of scholar-practitioners (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

Engaging the Community

One of the key features of an action research study is the engagement of community members (Stringer, 2014; Herr & Anderson, 2015). Again, this is a key feature of grants development. “Community member” is a broad term, however, and whether writing grants or conducting research, it is important to identify all potential collaborators for a project and engage them appropriately throughout. Funders, principal investigators, institutional or organizational leaders, community partners, and beneficiaries of an intervention are all essential collaborators. The level of engagement will vary. Funders, for example, set expectations for proposals and reports, but play a limited role in project design and implementation. On the other hand, participants in a study or grant project are likely involved heavily throughout the process.

For grants development, the model of participatory action research (PAR) is likely the best model for engagement (Greenwood, Whyte, & Harkavy, 1993). While all forms of action research inherently engage participants, PAR deeply integrates the beneficiaries of a project into the conceptualization, design, intervention, design, and evaluation of a project. This is the model the grant professionals can take for fully engaging these community members in the development of proposals and implementation of programs. Prioritized groups can and should be engaged throughout an action research study just as they should be engaged throughout a grant project.

A key benefit of using PAR is the democratic nature of data collection and analysis. Here, the participants of the study/grant project are not just casually included in interventions. Instead, their voice is leveraged throughout the phases of research. Grant professionals can actively engage participants in a similar manner, thus generating solutions to community-based challenges which are informed by, completed with, and evaluated with partners, collaborators, and beneficiaries.

Participatory Grants Development

Action research and grants development/implementation, though having similar purposes, do have several differences in process. A proposed framework for participatory grants development draws on the methods of action research, but also considers the different needs in grants development. The phases, therefore, vary slightly. For funded grants, these include identifying a need, defining the need, project design, proposal submission, action step/implementation, evaluation, and dissemination.

Phase 1: Identifying a Need

Grant professionals may not be a core contributor to this area. Here, community members will observe a challenge or problem in need of a solution. These observers may be community leaders, members of disenfranchised groups, or any other observers. Once the need is identified, then grant professionals work with community members through the remaining project phases.

- Example: A community college recognizes students from low-income families are not meeting academic outcomes at the same rate as other student populations.

Phase 2: Define the Need

Where identifying the need is based primarily in observation, defining the need will be a participatory process. In this instance, those who are in need will share more experience with the grant professional and other project leaders. The goal for the grant professional and other project personnel will be to fully understand the need in relation to the specific context. The prioritized groups will need to be engaged here, as their lived experience of the need should inform the design of any interventions.

- PAR best practices: Students from low-income families, as the prioritized group, complete a survey and are invited into focus groups. By administering this survey and focus groups, researchers are able to obtain more details from students about the causes of the lower rate of academic outcomes.

Phase 3: Project Design

With the project need better understood, practitioners will work with grant professionals, community partners, prioritized groups, and other collaborators to develop a solution. Here, the needs expressed by the community will be addressed directly. Partners outside of the prospective participants will be engaged to suggest resources, tools, and partners. The prospective participants will share their own suggestions for solutions. As the project design is drafted, community input will be gathered through listening sessions and data verification through member checking.

Member checking is a process in action research in which participants in a study review analyzed data to validate conclusions (Candela, 2019; Caretta & Perez, 2019). In participatory grants development, member checking will be used through multiple phases for the same purpose. In this phase, the goal of member checking will be to verify that proposed project activities will address the expressed needs.

- PAR best practices: During the project design, a representative of the project's core audience participates in developing the project. A series of listening sessions are also conducted throughout the drafting process to solicit feedback from collaborators who may directly benefit from the project. The grants development team includes this feedback in updated drafts and the final proposal.

Phase 4: Proposal Submission

This phase will vary depending on the specific timeline. For some projects, this phase will simply be submitting the designed project to an identified funder. For others, it might mean identifying one or

more grant opportunities and tailoring proposals to the specific requests of grant makers.

- PAR best practices: The grant professional identifies several funding opportunities which collectively fund the project activities. Proposals are prepared based on the project design with feedback from the community and submitted for approval.

Phase 5: Action and Evaluation

Once funded, the project is launched, and community members are engaged in activities funded through the project. Throughout the project, formative evaluations will include feedback from the community, *even if not required by the funder*. These formative evaluations will allow project leaders to adapt and make changes to address evolving community needs. At the conclusion of the project, participants can be further engaged in completing any final evaluations. For both formative and summative evaluations, member checking can once again be used to validate feedback.

- PAR best practices: The principal investigator (PI) ensures project activities are carried out and evaluated regularly. When participants share that a particular activity is ineffective, the activity is either adapted or replaced. The PI verifies any conclusions drawn from feedback with members of the community.

Phase 6: Dissemination

Upon the conclusion of the project, results will be shared with all collaborators. This will include submitting any required reports. Additionally, results can be shared through community listening sessions, including sessions specifically for prioritized groups. This is a means for sharing project results more broadly and potentially informing future activities within the same context or those in other contexts. The goal of dissemination is to show both effective and ineffective strategies based on the local experience. Others can then use this new knowledge to improve their own practice.

- PAR best practices: The PI completes the final report and develops a presentation for the community and for other professionals in the field.

Challenges and Opportunities with Participatory Grants Development

Grant development can be an important strategy for developing solutions to community-based challenges. Leveraging the community throughout the process can ensure that grant activities are informed by those most likely to engage in the project, once funded. Pitfalls do exist, however. Participatory projects will be far more time consuming than those with less active community engagement processes. Dedicating time for engaging with the community throughout the development process may necessitate a longer lead time for grant development. Some funders do not offer much time between releasing a funding opportunity and their submission deadline which may limit the ability to engage potential participants. Another challenge emerges when participants disagree on solutions or even needs. Lastly, even if community engagement is wanted and solicited, there is no guarantee of participation throughout the process. For external grant professionals (e.g., consultant grant writers), a lack of connection to the community could further lead to delays and/or limit participation.

Projects which are designed with the key community members engaged are likely to see higher levels of success. Additionally, by engaging participants in grant development and project design, grant professionals can develop proposals that address equity gaps which may not be apparent from speaking only with project leaders. The above challenges can also be mitigated through developing strategic project plans which can then be adapted to meet the requirements of funding agencies. Grant professionals could play a role in planning projects across funding opportunities through developing concept papers prior to grant announcements.

Conclusion

Participatory action research (PAR) began as a means to engage the recipients of community interventions in identification of challenges, design of solutions, and evaluation of activities. Action research has been used heavily in sectors which emphasize supporting underserved and underrepresented communities. Grant professionals can leverage the skills of the action researcher

in participatory grants development. Though the process requires more time prior to proposal submission, the efforts of engaging the community and prioritized groups will help to ensure successful implementation to meet outcomes in the grant proposal. Grant professionals can leverage these strategies to design projects with the support of those who benefit most.

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