

***Community-Academic Research Partnership:
A Key Recipe for Food Security***

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Prepared for

Advisory Committee on Food Security
Social Planning Council of Winnipeg

February 11, 2005

Science is sceptical. Community action is idealistic.... We need to nurture the drive for fundamental new understanding of social and community processes at the same time that we engage in action for community development and change (Price & Behrens, 2003).

Our experiences suggest that a community-academic research partnership is a key food security recipe to bring to the table. Our premise for this partnership is that the research knowledge gained helps the community build confidence to act on food security issues. This confidence for action arises because in the process of building a partnership we strengthen trusting relationships, increase the density of social networks, and shared community norms and sanctions (Kawachi, et. al., 1999; Coleman, 1988; Freudenberg, 1986). This builds collective efficacy (Morenoff et al., 2001; Sampson, et al., 1999; & Sampson, et al., 1977) whereby a community understands and engages in actions that demonstrate the shared belief that food insecurity is a drag on the well-being of both individuals and the community as a whole.

This community-academic research partnership is a long-term commitment that in less than two years has already achieved many successes, and in doing so has built new networks, solidified others and developed a trusting commitment among many to achieve both a greater awareness of food insecurity issues and to enhance the level of food security in the community. This partnership is ongoing and so a selected number of the successful initiatives are briefly explained, followed by a list of the recipe ingredients and directions for others to follow in developing a community-academic research partnership.

Examples of Outcomes of the Community-Academic Research Partnership Recipe

Many of the research activities in this partnership overlap and have developed in a nonlinear fashion that seized on ‘just-in-time’ opportunities. This includes unique

strengths and interests of individuals and available resources to further the local knowledge base on food security. These examples are not an exhaustive list but are to serve as catalysts for ideas as to how others may use our recipe to develop their own specific research outcomes. First, over an 18 month period, thirty-five emergency food distribution services came together to work with the academic partner in developing a survey to analyze the relationship between food needs and the extent of social challenges experienced among people who access emergency food services in the city of Thunder Bay and surrounding communities. Factors considered included job loss, high tuition, low fixed income, high housing costs or any other reasons that lead to food insecurity. Fourth year undergraduate students enrolled in a research methodology course distributed the survey. The words of the students, or future social workers, who will be interfacing directly with persons seeking help who have food security issues, best epitomizes some of the immediate outcomes of this partnership.

Dr. Nelson allowed us to participate in a Food Distribution Survey where we interviewed people in the community who attend food banks in Thunder Bay. In doing so, she allowed us to gain valuable hands on experience in the field, experience a unique understanding of the research process, and to illustrate how important it is to connect people and the concept of research.

By having us visit food banks throughout Thunder Bay and the District it became apparent how important our role as social workers is i.e. advocating for people who cannot speak for themselves. We heard first-hand stories of how the system has failed people within the community; an experience that will be forever engrained in my mind and inspire me to do better.

It was so hands on and seriously, on a daily basis in my career I am impacted by the lack of food resources for clients. I think about the study we did, the persons we met, and how the impact is tenfold. Without food, what else can a person accomplish.

Another outcome is a clearer articulation locally that emergency food services are a necessary band-aid for systemic issues of the working poor and of inadequate social assistance. More to the point, the community has acquired evidence-based knowledge to guide efforts to look beyond emergency food needs to broader food security issues. Subsequently, the partnership has enhanced receptor-capacity to receive and utilize research findings on food security issues. Likewise, awareness itself had lead to ‘peeling back the onion’ to deeper levels of awareness.

The face-to-face distribution of these surveys gave the participants a chance to convey first hand their support for the research. Many of these participants suggested that the survey was too narrow and that they wanted to enhance our understanding with more in depth stories of how they deal with food security. Building on this feedback, students are now carrying out a phenomenological study focusing on the broader issues of what happens to persons and families coping with food security concerns. This study, while not completed, is raising awareness about how emergency food distribution programs can reduce the person to the status of ‘victim’ of the problem. In the words of one of the participants “I think of our discussion at the Client Advisory meeting of last fall when we decided that this type of research was needed. We were talking about the social stereotype that we as people were being defined by.... It allows society to treat the victim as the one who needs help instead of the system that endorses the abuse or the poverty or the food need....I haven’t lost my fight – and many of the others are unwilling to give up their humanness to the political will as well. I think that others have been made to feel ashamed of their failure to measure up – being deemed ‘a waste of skin’ for those who would judge them unworthy of consideration”. Then advice from this participant to the

student researchers, “Pay attention for little things – pain is not always spoken of with tears and remember that the pain can be very deep”. Further, as a result of a class discussion, the graduate assistant for the course added these insights to help the students understand what they are observing and experiencing in this phenomenological study.

Had a thought about today's class. There seemed to be a theme around research partners avoiding discussing their food needs. Here is a possible hypotheses as to why that may be: Over the last decade or more those living in poverty have been presented in a very negative light by the dominant narrative. This social construction of the poor creates an environment in which the mistreatment of our fellow citizens both adults and children can be seen by the public as the right thing to do. We are all influenced by this constant stream of messages, which influences how we perceive poverty and what it is to be poor - none of us lives in a vacuum. This includes your research partners who also receive these same messages. They are also told that poor and all things associated with poverty are negative which would include themselves and the people they love. The message they also constantly receive is: to be good they must be something other than who they happen to be - they must be more like those who have judged them inadequate - they must present those attributes which others have deemed of value. Have no illusions about this: to challenge the dominant narrative internally or externally of self is no easy task for you or your research partners. So, maybe what these people are tiring to tell you with their discussions about other things is : please believe me, I am a good person.

The intended long-term outcome of this phenomenological study is to give voice to food security issues so that those who experience them and those who are in policy positions can more closely align solutions.

Another completed outcome was a graduate research phenomenological study to explore how community gardening experiences from the perspective of the participant who is dealing with emergency food needs can affect perceptions of self-sufficiency, quality of life, and level of food security. The outcome of this study showed that people who must use emergency food resources seemed to have very little control over their lives. They are forced to deal with the survival that accompanies not having enough

money or resources to acquire basic needs. The current social policies adopted by the government and other funding bodies contribute to this lack of control and powerlessness, and can inhibit a move away from a life of poverty. Study findings suggest that this powerlessness and lack of control is transferred to activities that are meant to improve self-sufficiency like community gardening. Thus, the community has learned from this research that for community gardens to be successful there must be a focus on the underlying systemic issues that drive food insecurity (Kerr, 2004).

In addition one graduate and two undergraduate field practicums have helped to promote self-sufficiency through gardening, helped establish a new and vibrant food distribution association, helped rejuvenate participation in the local national Hunger Count, and assisted in building GIS (Geographic Information System) maps locating emergency food programs in relation to community resources and socio-economic characteristics. All of these efforts have helped to establish trusting relationships, shared community norms and enhanced the density of community networks in food security.

Ingredients for the Community-Academic Research Partnership Recipe

'Model of Practice' framework. The Contextual Fluidity model of practice contains five essential characteristics that guide the recipe for the community-academic partnership model, Figure 1 (Nelson & McPherson, 2004; Nelson & McPherson, 2003). The partnership embraces a fluid process that focuses on building resilience, robustness, diversity and ductility. This **fluid process** assumes life is with its vicissitudes and simply accepts this. Formal and informal interactions occur within dynamic and

ever-changing **webs of networks** that have no designated centre. Instead, these interactions are grounded within **context**. The anchor remains the **vision**. In this case, our belief is that “food security exists when every member of the community can with dignity put food on their own table”. The contextual space-time is in constant motion as network interactions receive, relay and interpret information through both formal and informal linkages. Thus, Contextual Fluidity practice model endorses the ‘**strange attractors**’ of formal and informal, planned and unplanned, and conscious and unconscious interactions in distinct and at times distant parts of the partnership.



Figure 1: Five Essential Characteristics of the Contextual Fluidity Model of Practice

Community-capacity building principles. These principles include a focus on vision as a driving force for action, the strength of multiple relationships, the building of shared values, the importance of participation in the process, a keen ear for listening to all community voices, be an insider engaging as a community member, focus on strengths not problems, be opportunistic in using available and a diversity of resources, find ways to respect and bring out the unique gifts of individuals and groups, put more

energy into the process than into definitive plans, accept and build from mistakes, and engage all (Nelson & Stadey, 2004a, 2004b).

Recipe Directions. Stir the following.

- Begin with one committed member of the academic system and one committed member from the community system who share a way of being, doing, and practicing their skills.
- Bring the two together in a common concern for the larger community to which they both belong.
- Involve them in a vision shared by others that can be assisted in its achievement by a community-academic partnership.
- Open up the opportunity and extend the invitation with others to participate within both the academic and community context.
- Blend gently and purposefully with the Contextual Fluidity model of practice.
- Add a sprinkle all of the interactions, with liberal portions of the principles of community capacity building. This empowers the many individual participants to be still or move as they see fit and to take their place in the community building process. At the same time, it allows the networks to ripple, expand, grow, overlap, dissolve, regroup and start over as needed, while the multi-partnerships move through the process.
- Respect the pace that best serves the collective movement toward fulfilling the desired outcome as set by the company of participants.
- Garnish the interactions with understanding, patience and compassion; with smiles, friendship and laughter; with tolerance, strength and trust.
- Serve generous helpings of celebration as steps are accomplished to encourage and nurture continued efforts toward the common goal.

With nurture and dedication, science and community action can be united to produce incredible outcomes, as we have experienced in our community. In order to establish food secure communities, we must understand social and community process to create fundamental change. Use our ingredients and follow our directions to create a community-academic partnership in your community. We feel confident that you will be delighted and engaged with both expected and unexpected benefits of this process.

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