



Scientific Method in the Real World: Experience Corps and the Johns Hopkins Study Teaching Note

Case Summary

Partnerships between academic institutions and community-based non-profits hold both the promise of synergy and the potential for conflict. Each side gets something it needs. Academic researchers may gain legitimacy in the community, making it easier—or possible—to recruit subjects for a study, to access a school, or to evaluate a local health intervention program. Community groups typically gain access to money, whether from the academic institution directly, or through grants that would have been unobtainable otherwise (from federal agencies or large foundations, for example). A high-profile academic study can make it easier for the community group to attract local donors, too.

But conflict is also to be expected, as each side caters to different stakeholders with differing, and sometimes opposing, agendas. A successful partnership may entail more compromise than the partners anticipated when they entered the relationship.

This case is about one such partnership. In 1998, researchers at Johns Hopkins' Center on Aging and Health (COAH), led by Dr. Linda Fried, joined forces with a local Baltimore non-profit, Greater Homewood Community Corporation (GHCC), to deliver and evaluate one of several branches of Experience Corps, an innovative health and education program that Fried had helped design. Experience Corps put senior volunteers into elementary school classrooms to support students academically and emotionally. Early evaluation had shown benefits for both the children and the seniors.

In the early years of the partnership, Fried and her counterpart at GHCC, Sylvia McGill, worked by consensus. Although they sometimes disagreed about how Experience Corps should be implemented and evaluated, personal affinity allowed the two leaders to resolve differences amicably. Both sides were getting much out of the collaboration: COAH was able to enter elementary schools where GHCC had long-standing relationships with principals, and to recruit volunteers in a low-income area where there was general distrust of Johns Hopkins University. GHCC was able to introduce a promising new program,

with the potential of helping both the elderly and at-risk students, to the neighborhood. Funding from COAH and its grantees helped fuel a rapid expansion of the program in Baltimore, and bolster GHCC's reputation.

Even as Experience Corps expanded into more schools and took on more volunteers, however, tension between the partners was mounting. GHCC was increasingly concerned about methodology COAH had developed for a five-year randomized control trial (RCT), for which COAH was seeking funding from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in 2005. The RCT would randomly place both schools and volunteers into "treatment" and "control" groups. McGill and her colleagues knew that GHCC's constituents, including school principals, the mayor, the City Council, various donors, and senior volunteers themselves, were all opposed to randomization; it seemed to needlessly deprive kids and seniors of an exciting opportunity to benefit from Experience Corps.

From the point of view of Fried and COAH, however, a large-scale, longitudinal RCT was the gold standard in research. Findings from robust research would carry a lot of weight, potentially winning significant political and financial support for Experience Corps for years to come. This was a chance to turn the tide on two major societal ills: academic underachievement among poor children, and declining health and mental wellbeing among retirees. Fried wanted to prove that Experience Corps could make a difference.

In 2005, as COAH was preparing a grant application to NIH for the five-year RCT, there was increasing pushback from GHCC and its constituents. Fried had to consider whether to alter the methodology of the proposed study to take into account the objections to the randomization of schools, or to pursue strict randomization.

Teaching Objectives

This case highlights the challenges of an academic-community partnership, and of conducting public health research in a real world setting. It also looks at the intersection between public health and public services, such as education. COAH was, first and foremost, interested in the health and welfare of seniors. But most of Experience Corps' donors and supporters, including city officials, were primarily interested in improving the academic performance of children. GHCC was challenged to work with COAH on a program aimed at seniors, while proving to its other stakeholders the program's impact on children.

Use the case to discuss how such partnerships can be negotiated and how research methods can be adapted (or not) to different circumstances. Ask students to consider not only the specifics of the case, but more generally the value and purpose of large-scale scientific studies of community programs. What can they accomplish that simpler modes of evaluation cannot? What are the risks?

At the heart of the tension between COAH and GHCC is the fact that the two parties had different stakeholders with conflicting expectations. As a community group that had

worked within the Baltimore public schools for decades, GHCC was focused on children and their education. Its relationship with school principals, the mayor and City Council were hard---won and critical to its ability to operate. It also had funders to consider, including local donors, institutions, and the participating schools themselves—nearly all contributed on an annual basis. All of these constituents wanted to see immediate results, especially in the form of improved academic performance among participating children. They could not wait years for COAH’s results to be published in an academic journal. They were less concerned about scientific integrity; simple evaluations and anecdotal findings would be sufficient.

COAH, on the other hand, sought airtight data on the impact Experience Corps made on the health of senior volunteers. Funders such as NIH would commit to years of funding, but only for the most credible studies. Ask students to reflect on these competing forces. Was conflict between COAH and GHCC inevitable? Was it all a matter of money?

The case also explores decision---making within a loose organizational structure. When COAH and GHCC began working together in 1998, and for several years after, the program relied heavily on the personal rapport between Fried and McGill. As Experience Corps expanded, and as COAH’s research team grew ahead of the five---year RTC, the decision---making process became more fraught. McGill was heavily out---numbered by COAH researchers. Ask students to consider the benefits and risks of an informal, collegial organizational structure. At what point should formal processes be put into place? What is lost?

A fundamental question the case raises is: What is the value of scientific research? McGill and her supervisor at GHCC, William Miller, valued the RCT, but doubted that their constituents—including funders, city officials and school principals—needed or wanted this level of evaluation. Ask students to think about the distinction between an “evaluation” and a “scientific study.” What is the difference? Do they play separate roles?

On a more practical level, students should consider how they would design a scientific study of Baltimore Experience Corps. What changes, if any, would they make to COAH’s design? Can they anticipate any problems that might arise as the study is carried out, or when the data is analyzed five years hence?

Class plan

Use this case in a course about community---based research, public health studies (especially randomized control trials), and academic/non---profit partnerships. It can also complement any course that looks at reform in public health and public education in the US.

Pre-class: Help students prepare for class by assigning the following question.

- 1) Should Fried alter the methodology of the RCT in her grant application to NIH?

Instructors may find it useful to engage students ahead of class by asking them to post brief responses (no more than 250 words) to questions in an online forum. Writing short comments challenges students to distill their thoughts and express them succinctly. The instructor can use the students' work both to craft talking points ahead of class, and to identify particular students to call upon during the discussion.

In-class questions: The homework assignment is a useful starting point for preliminary discussion, after which the instructor could pose any of the following questions to promote an 80- to 90-minute discussion. The choice of questions will be determined by what the instructor would like the students to learn from the class discussion. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in some depth is preferable to trying to cover them all.

- a) Experience Corps was designed to address two quite different societal problems: declining health and mental wellbeing among retirees, and low levels of literacy among poor children. Were these goals related? Can an intervention effectively meet the diverse needs of two distinct groups?
- b) Stipends added significant costs to the program, at times threatening its survival. Could Experience Corps have continued without offering volunteers a stipend? How should program designers decide how much, or if, they should compensate volunteers?
- c) Why did the academic-community group partnership become more difficult as the program became more successful? How could each side have improved the situation?
- d) Which is more important for the success of Experience Corps: annual assessment or a longitudinal RTC? How do the two forms of evaluation differ?
- e) According to GHCC director Miller, "Everybody talks about the need for measurable data and quantifiable data and all of that. But as much as they all say that, my experience with foundations is, they make their decisions based on anecdotal information." What is the value of anecdotal evidence—for example, a principal saying that students in classrooms with Experience Corps volunteers are better behaved? Can researchers incorporate anecdotal evidence into scientific studies?
- f) What is preferable: a clear organizational structure that defines decision---making processes, or a culture in which compatible people work together, problem----solving and compromising as needed? Discuss in the context of Experience Corps in Baltimore.
- g) What would happen if Fried insisted upon strict randomization of schools? What are the best-case and worst-case scenarios?
- h) As Experience Corps expanded, city officials became more interested in it, and wanted to take a more active role in shaping the RTC. Should they have been

brought into the decision---making process to define the RTC's methodology earlier?
Or kept out?

- i) How did funding issues put the partners at odds? Could they have addressed their conflict more effectively?
- j) McGill recalls constant challenge in getting potential Experience Corps volunteers to agree to take part in a control study. Fried recalls recruitment being easier than many in academia presume; potential volunteers quickly grasped the value of having control groups. Could they have done more to make the study appealing to would---be participants?

Suggested Readings

Lori De Milto, *Growing Experience Corps: Expanding and Assessing Experience Corps and Establishing it as an Independent Nonprofit Organization*. Princeton, NJ: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2013.

SYNOPSIS: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) was among the largest supporters of Experience Corps nationally, granting it \$6.8 million over the period 2001-07, and additional funds later. This report, compiled by RWJF through interviews with executives at Experience Corps and Civic Ventures, summarizes the organizational history of Experience Corps through 2013. It describes the results of evaluation studies, lists major funding sources, and outlines plans for the program's expansion.

Marc Freedman and Linda Fried, *Launching Experience Corps: Findings from a Two-Year Pilot Project Mobilizing Older Americans to Help Inner-City Elementary Schools*. Oakland: Civic Ventures, 1999.

SYNOPSIS: This monograph describes the origins of Experience Corps and the results of a five-city demonstration of the program in 1995-97. It was written by the program's co-founders. Spliced into the narrative are excerpts from interviews with senior volunteers, discussing the meaning of the program in their lives and sharing anecdotes of their interactions with children.

Nancy Morrow-Howell et al. *Evaluation of Experience Corps: Student Reading Outcomes*. Washington University in St. Louis: 2009.

SYNOPSIS: In 2006, researchers at Washington University were awarded a grant from The Atlantic Philanthropies to conduct a randomized study of 1,000 students in the Experience Corps

program across 23 schools in three cities: Boston; Bronx, New York; and Port Arthur, Texas. This paper analyzes the results of the study, showing “statistically significant and substantively important” effects on reading ability.

Erwin J. Tan et al. “The Evolution of an Academic-Community Partnership in the Design, Implementation, and Evaluation of Experience Corps Baltimore City: A Courtship Model,” *The Gerontologist*, 54 (2014).

SYNOPSIS: This article describes the evolution of the relationship between COAH and GHCC, from 1998 when Experience Corps was launched in Baltimore, to 2007, when the partners signed an MoU aimed at formalizing decision-making processes and reducing tensions.

Other Academic Papers on Experience Corps:

Fried et al. “A Social Model for Health Promotion for an Aging Population: Initial Evidence on the Experience Corps Model,” *Journal of Urban Health*, 81 (2004).

SYNOPSIS: This article reports the results of a pilot study of Experience Corps in Baltimore, 1999-2000.

Iveris L. Martinez et al., “Older Adults and Retired Teachers Address Teacher Retention in Urban Schools,” *Educational Gerontology*, 36 (2010).

SYNOPSIS: Researchers interviewed 20 teachers and six principals in the Baltimore Experience Corps program, along with six senior volunteers who were retired educators. The researchers coded the transcripts to create quantitative data. The results showed that the volunteers improved the classroom environment and made the teachers feel more effective. The study did not show a direct correlation between having volunteers in the classroom and teacher retention, but suggests volunteers may contribute indirectly to reducing teacher burnout and attrition.

Tan et al. “The Long-Term Relationship Between High-Intensity Volunteering and Physical Activity in Older African American Women,” *Journal of Gerontology*, 64 (2009).

SYNOPSIS: In this study, researchers use data from the pilot study of Baltimore Experience Corps and compare health indicators between 71 African-American women who volunteered in the program with 150 African-American women in the Women’s Health and Aging Studies I and II. The results showed that the Experience Corps volunteers had a sustained increase in physical activity, compared to the cohort group.

Tan et al. "Marketing Public Health Through Older Adult Volunteering: Experience Corps as a Social Marketing Intervention," American Journal of Public Health, 100 (2010).

SYNOPSIS: This paper examines the effectiveness of marketing messages used to recruit senior volunteers to the Baltimore Experience Corps RCT in 2006-07. The researchers found that volunteers responded primarily to messages about "generativity" (that is, making a difference in the lives of the next generation), rather than messages about potential health benefits for themselves. The conclusion: "Public health interventions embedded in civic engagement have the potential to engage older adults who might not respond to a direct appeal to improve their health."