“The Long Beach Community-Studies Project: How LBCC Faculty are making their community the subject of study and teaching community-based research,”

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Introduction

The following is an account of the evolution of the concept and practice of a community studies project at Long Beach City College from Spring 2002 until the present. It describes the developing structure of institutions and partnerships, both within and outside the college, that have formed the coalition in support of the project. It describes the work accomplished to date. And it offers insights into what students and faculty have learned as a result of becoming involved in the project. Finally, it looks at where the coalition hopes to go next with the project.

Long Beach is a city of nearly 500,000 residents, hosting one of the most ethnically and racially diverse populations in the United States. The city has undergone dramatic social, economic and demographic changes during the lifetimes of the students attending the college. The student population has also undergone dramatic changes in ethnic, racial, and social composition. The college now hosts a minority-majority, with a sizable contingent of immigrant and first generation college students. These changes have dramatically affected the nature and extent of opportunities in the city. To prepare students for the world they will enter as adults, the faculty felt it was essential that students develop an awareness of the communities of which they are a part. Teaching and applying research skills on topics of pressing concern proves to be a promising vehicle for making students into engaged, informed local, national, and global citizens.

Long Beach City College has moved steadily toward a community studies project focused on the city and community of Long Beach. Beginning in 2002, faculty from the humanities and social sciences has sought to engage students in activist politics. Next, a faculty member from the anthropology department engaged students in quality of life assessments focused on Long Beach, which has been ongoing. Finally, members of the Department of History linked with a Federal Agency to undertake research

1 The author would like to thank Craig Hendricks and Adrian Novotny for their invaluable suggestions and comments on this paper, and for their steadfast commitment to the LBCSP idea. Any mistakes herein are his own.
into the history of the city. The sum total of these efforts produced a Long Beach Community Studies Project in fall 2006. (Attached to this summary is an AACU Seminar Proposal on the project).

Phase I: Origins of the Community Studies Project

The initial impetus for community engagement came when faculty, administrators, staff, and students organized a group calling itself the Progressive Politics Working Group (PPWG) in spring 2002. The group advertised in the college on-line communication newsletter their intention to form a campus group to engage in the following efforts: to promote discussion of progressive political issues and agenda on campus and in the community; to engage students in service learning by linking classroom curriculum to political issues; and to build an organization of committed faculty, staff, and students. Plans were laid for the 2002-2003 school year.

In the 2002-2003 school year the PPWG developed a new student organization called the Campus Progressives. It also established links to community organizations such as the Long Beach Area Peace Network, Franklin Middle School, the Black History Month Organizing Committee, 2001+ Bookstore, and the City of Long Beach Human Dignity Program. LBCC “A Woman Like Me/Man to Man Mentoring Program,” Long Beach Police Department Anaheim Community Policing Division, Alianza Indigenous, Hip-Hop Congress, National Lawyers Guild, LBCC Black Student Alliance, Green Party, Democratic Party, Republican Party, University of California, Irvine, Long Beach State Campus Progressives.

PPWG linked the classroom and the community by focusing on targeted curriculum in the Social Science (Sociology) and History (History 10/11) disciplines. Themes selected by the faculty included Social Stratification-wealth and power, Poverty, Social Institutions, Social Movements, Multiculturalism-Race and Ethnic Relations, Nature, Role and Responsibility of Government, Globalization, Empire. The curriculum was integrated through Service Learning and Extra Credit activities, Commemoration Events, Elections, Community Issues; Public Schools, Community Violence, the Politics of Culture: Hip-hop, open-mike, issues of War and Peace, and a campus Book Club.

During the school year the organization mounted a number of related activities, including a week long program entitled “Alternative Perspectives on 9/11/01, a Music Fest, a 2002 Political Forum, a Gang Violence in Long Beach forum, a demonstrations on Martin Luther King, Jr’s. Birthday and in protest to the planned attack on Iraq, a silkscreen workshop (where students were taught the art of making political

The Campus Progressives attracted students wanting to make a difference in local, national, and global issues. The personal testimony of students engaged in the project was often powerful and is more measure of what students learned by becoming involved.

“My goal is to inspire hope by my actions as a student that may possibly enlighten someone else to do the same. Activism is a way of life.” Nelida Contreras, Campus Progressives, LBCC Viking, January 23, 2003.

Students, who participated in the Campus Progressives learned organizing skills, discourse and debate, and developed self-esteem. In one spectacular case an immigrant Latina student grew so self confident that she proposed a “Malcolm X Day” in honor of the civil rights activist’s birthday in spring 2004. The event actually took place over three days, at both LBCC campuses, invited guest speakers from the community, and led discussions following the showing of a documentary and the Spike Lee film on him. The student’s academic goals rose dramatically. She was eventually accepted into UC Berkeley with a plan to become a civil rights lawyer. Even Administrators found things to admire about the heightened student activism.

“It’s wonderful that there are still students who feel strongly about issues important in all of our lives. These are issues that shouldn’t be issues anymore.” John Fylpaa, Dean of Student Affairs, LBCC Viking, January 23, 2003.

The faculty members most closely involved in the PPWG presented a report to the faculty in Spring 2003 on their project. The report, entitled “Making Citizens, Making Activists,” was delivered on Flex Day in March 2003 to a nearly packed classroom.

The next school year was a repeat of the first year’s efforts, but faculty involved in the PPWG found that the Campus Progressive student group experienced many of the difficulties typical of a community college commuter school, especially the difficulty of maintaining continuity of the student group. The experience pointed to the need to rethink how student engagement should be integrated into the curriculum.

**Phase II: Making Citizens, Making Scholars**

In spring 2005, community research at LBCC took a new turn with the development of a student
community research initiative. The change came about because by fall 2004, faculty involved in the PPWG were looking for another way to engage students in citizenship awareness, as well as a more satisfying and engaging way to integrate their concerns about wealth, power, privilege into the curriculum. One member of the group, while on sabbatical had joined the Long Beach Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union. Disturbed by the challenges to civil liberties generated by the War on Terrorism, and impressed by the idea that, as a community college Long Beach had the intellectual resources to engage in assessments of the quality of life in the city, he proposed that the faculty direct students to consider undertaking research as the basis for what he called, “A Civil Liberties Report Card.” Report Cards grading the quality of life in metropolitan urban areas such as Long Beach had been the stock in trade of City Associations for some time. Why not civil liberties? The LB ACLU embraced the idea and agreed to approach the faculty at LBCC with the idea.

The challenge was to find a vehicle for such research within the LBCC curriculum. Many students attending LBCC lacked the reading and writing skills required for research. But one group in particular were seen as already having more advanced undergraduate skills, students in the Honors Program at the college. A faculty member took up the invitation from LB ACLU from the Anthropology Department. Cultural Anthropology seemed the perfect vehicle for the kind of research a community group such as LB ACLU was interested in. The idea of partnering with a nonprofit public service agency to conduct research represented a forum of community-based research (CBR). The research constituted a collaborative inquiry that could be dedicated primarily to serving the research or information needs of the agency. Part of the preparation for the research involved a visit to the honor’s class to present the ideas of a civil liberties report card. The faculty member wanted a broader definition of the project and so students were offered more options than research focused entirely on civil liberties or even civil rights. Students engaged in a discussion with the faculty member as to what should be researched. A key goal of the project is to connect instruction in research methods with questions about the quality of life in Long Beach. Generally, students were eager to undertake such research.

Hence, in spring 2005 Honors Cultural Anthropology became the latest component of community-based research on Long Beach. This format was repeated again in the 2005-2006 school year. Examples of earlier research projects included the LB Public Health Department, Public Housing Department, LB
Unified School District, Port of Long Beach, and LB Police Department Commission. Student researchers interviewed experts from these institutions. Students were organized into teams of three to four students. They were held to a rigorous set of milestones related to the topics they selected, including concept definition, outlines, draft reports, and a final report, including areas for future research. This latter feature facilitated the taking up of topics by students in subsequent semesters. The Honors Cultural Anthropology community research project continued in the 2005-2006 school year. The topics for spring 2006 semester included.

1. Social Welfare in Long Beach: Successes and Failures  
2. The Socialization of Adolescents in Long Beach on MySpace.com  
3. Crime and Punishment: The Long Beach Criminal Justice System (team project)  
4. The Redevelopment Agency of Long Beach and the Policy of Eminent Domain  
5. Transportation In Long Beach: Are Our Roads Safe? (team project)  
6. The Gentrification of Downtown Long Beach: The Case of East Village (team project)  
7. Homelessness in Long Beach: The Extent and Severity  

As suggested by the (team project) note above, the instructor gave the students the option of working alone or in teams of two since the class has a small enrollment (10 students). Thus, by fall 2006 the project had generated three consecutive semesters of student work on the city. The faculty member involved presented the initial results of the research to the Long Beach City Counsel, the LBCC Board of Trustees, and LB ACLU in Spring 2005.

The faculty assessment of the project noted how students learned research skills and community awareness. Because much of the focus has been on public agencies, students learned techniques for the solicitations of information from both elected and non-elected community leaders. Using observation and interview techniques, students learned not just content about their subject, they also learned about the difficulties of gathering information using these techniques. On the plus side, students learned about the complexity of their city, the challenges related to the running of a major metropolitan city, and the depth of the social crisis facing the community. They also learned the language of city management and the complications related to problem solving in the city, what problems were being and which were not being addressed. Students also learned how inquiry could produce a backlash from public agencies. In the course of inquiry, students learned that the city isn’t necessarily transparent. It can be opaque to the researcher, if public agencies choose not to cooperate.
In fall 2006, Honors Physical Anthropology was offered for the first time. The plan was to offer alternative cultural and physical anthropology courses in the fall and spring. The inclusion of Honors Physical Anthropology meant future Honors courses could now consider biological aspects of living in Long Beach. The instructor expected students to research measurable levels of air, ground and water pollution in the city, pathologies of disease and their location within the community, and the impact of ocean pollution on access to swimming and aquatic activities. In short, the quality of life issues raised in the cultural anthropology courses was being shifted or augmented to include biological issues. The goal now had become, as the instructor put it, to “demonstrate to the community what anthropology has to offer in terms of assessing the social and biological components of metropolitan areas like Long Beach.”

Phase III: Toward a Long Beach Community Studies Project

Impressed by the success of the Honors Cultural Anthropology research experience, faculty members in History accelerated their efforts to also engage students in community research. In December 2005, faculty members from the History Department initiated contact with the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Regional Offices in Laguna Niguel with the idea of partnering to determine the feasibility and accessibility of record archived there dealing with the role of the Federal government in the development of the City of Long Beach. These contacts generated a very productive dialogue on archival holdings, and in Summer 2006, two historians attended a weeklong workshop on community research at the facility. Following the research model generated by anthropology of having honors students research the city, these faculty members designed Honors version of the department’s Early and Recent American History courses to have students research the city’s recent and early (or pre-Long Beach) past. The curriculum committee of the College approved these courses in spring 2006. Built into these design of each course was a major research project linked to the NARA archives.

At the same time, faculty members in the humanities and the social sciences at Long Beach City College decided to call their effort the Long Beach Community Studies Project (LBCSP). The purpose of the project is to enable undergraduates to participate in social science research, learning research methods and protocols, and to connect meaningfully with their community as active and responsible citizens by investigating the past, present, and future the community in which the students live. The former aspect fosters learning and skills on the behalf of the student, while the latter helps students develop civic
awareness. The LBCSP, as an undergraduate research project, involves close faculty mentoring in which students engage in relevant research projects, sometimes draw from the students own design, sometimes working as an apprentice in a research project designed by the faculty.

The LBCSP has potential as part of the service-learning movement in higher education. As students research the community in which they live, they draw connections with the real world. The research students perform can provide a direct service to organizations and agencies in their community. LBCSP faculty has devised projects in which the student enjoys the further benefit of direct faculty role modeling and engagement in research. The core idea is for students to engage in collaborative inquiry to conduct research and write up the results. Since the students are engaged in research on their local communities, they are socialized as public scholars. They learn how the research process can be applied to real social issues.

LBCSP faculty continues to desire to see LBCC students produce public scholarship designed to further the public good. In generating the activities described above, faculty working in the LBCSP expects to create new alliances with community organizations that can be recruited as partners in the design and conduct of research. For example, preliminary findings from the investigations by the historians at the National Archives regional office indicated that NARA had a wealth of information about the relationship of the federal government to the making of the modern city and port of Long Beach. The huge holdings at NARA lend themselves to the kind of collaborative student research projects already developed in the Honors Anthropology courses. Moreover, the potential opportunities are palpable for both faculty and student publications using this material. The possibility exists for the creations of a new historical narrative literature focused on the City of Long Beach. Informal conversations between history faculty and port authorities has already led to the suggestion that promising institutional cooperation and even funding may result from student research projects in this area. The NARA foundation, a private agency supporting the National Archives, has also suggested that bringing students to the regional offices to conduct their research project could be an imminently “grantable” project. These developments suggest that community studies at LBCC have a promising future for both faculty and students engaged in the effort.

In the long term, LBCSP is thinking about a Long Beach City College Community Studies Website as the vehicle for the publication and archiving of the research developed under the program. It is
even well within the realm of possibility that a student competition could be developed along the lines of
the Jacaranda model for these products. Such a development would have to await the success of outside
funding, of course. But it would undoubtedly be a rewarding experience for students engaged in the effort.

But the faculty is not content to see community studies at the College remain an offering of only
the best and the brightest at LBCC. They understand that the designers of the project need to think of ways
to extend the opportunity to undertake such learning to non-Honors students as well. This goal seems
particularly vital because the Honors student population is a miniscule portion of the student body. So
much more could be accomplished if more students could be brought into the effort. Moreover, more could
be done on campus to promote and publicize the achievements of student researchers. Why not
competitions for the best researched essays on Long Beach as an annual event, to parallel the Jacaranda
competition? The research could then be published in an annual Journal of Long Beach Studies. An
exploration of these issues will be the focus of the next phase of the LBCSP’s efforts.
Attachment: AACU Seminar Proposal (Spring 2007)
The proposal outlined below was submitted to the American Association of Colleges and Universities Conference to be held in April 2007 at the Long Beach Convention.²

Session Outcomes: (What will participants know and be able to do after your session?)

Participants will know how faculty and administrators at a large urban community college developed and implemented a concept of student community research and civic engagement using disciplines drawn from the humanities and social sciences.

Theme: (What issue, model, practice, or process does your session address? Please summarize data, theories, arguments, or evidence.)

The concept of community-based research often links together activism, citizenship, and scholarship, but typically through alliances with non-governmental organizations. Long Beach City College evolved a community based research project that generated alliances with both Federal and City officials. Students produced research on the quality of life and the recent and distant history of the city, which was shared with public officials.

Transferability: (How will your session be useful to participants from other types of institutions?)

Faculty and administrators interested in development projects linking civic engagement, community service, community research, the construction of alliances with public and non-governmental agencies and organizations will find this presentation useful because LBCC produced a Community Studies Project which generated a cooperative research project with the National Archives and Records Administration Regional Office and the Port of Long Beach, as well as research projects looking at quality of life issues in the city using public health, housing, safety, and police records.

Participant Engagement: (How will your session engage your audience in active learning?)

The seminar will ask participants to evaluate several versions of the Community Studies Project. Each version corresponds to a concept faculty at Long Beach City College evolved over a period of four years, as they conceptualized and practiced community based research. Participants will see the strengths and weaknesses of each concept and come to understand that community based research is an ever evolving project, reflecting the learning experiences of the faculty and students engaged in the process.

² Julian DelGaudio would like to thank Dean Linda Umbdenstock for her vigorous encouragement of the development of the LBCSP idea and for suggesting the LBCSP participants apply to this conference.
Faculty and administrators at a large urban community college developed and implemented a concept of student community research and civic engagement using disciplines drawn from the humanities and social sciences. The College evolved research project that generated alliances with both Federal and City officials. The project linked civic engagement, community service, community research, the construction of alliances with governmental agencies and organizations, as well as research projects looking at quality of life issues in the city using public health, housing, safety, and police records. This seminar asks participants to evaluate several versions of the Community Studies Project. Each version corresponds to a concept faculty at Long Beach City College evolved over a period of four years, as they conceptualized and practiced community based research. Participants will see the strengths and weaknesses of each concept and come to understand that community based research is an ever evolving project, reflecting the learning experiences of the faculty and students engaged in the process.