

PRACTICE BRIEF
**Success with ACCESS: Use of Community-Based Participatory
Research for Implementation**

**Carolyn Eilola
Kathryn Fishman
Arielle Greenberg
Crystal Dea Moore
Andrew Schrijver
Jamin Totino
Skidmore College**

Abstract

The process of a community-based participatory research initiative to implement the Assessment of Campus Climate to Enhance Student Success survey (ACCESS) is described. A collaborative team of students, a faculty member, and the Coordinator for Students with Disabilities used ACCESS to increase awareness of disability issues and provide a framework for institutional intervention.

The Assessment of Campus Climate to Enhance Student Success survey (ACCESS) is a set of four questionnaires designed to elicit feedback from five campus constituencies including faculty, administration, staff, students with disabilities, and students without disabilities “to use in planning and garnering support for meaningful activities and changes” related to disabilities issues in higher education (Vogel, 2009, p. 35). ACCESS measures knowledge about, attitudes toward, and perceptions of disability issues. Not designed to evaluate campus climate, ACCESS is intended to assist institutions of higher education in planning strategies to better meet the needs of students with disabilities (Vogel, 2009; see Vogel, Holt, Sligar, & Leake, 2008 for the history of ACCESS development).

To realize the full potential of ACCESS as a catalyst to fuel the discussion about and planning for disability issues at Skidmore College, ACCESS was implemented via community-based participatory research (CBPR) methodology. CBPR is a model where researchers and members of a target community collaborate in the research process with the goals of promoting social action and change. Contrasted with methods that focus on conducting research “on” a community, CBPR seeks to make community members full partners in the process where they are empowered to ask questions that are most meaningful and engage in research methods that are sensitive to their specific needs (DePoy, Hartman, & Haslett, 1999). Given that CBPR builds on the strengths and resources in the community, promotes empowerment, and acknowledges that community members are the experts on their own strengths and capacities (Heckel & Moore, 2009; Higgins & Metzler, 2001), it was identified as an ideal research method to employ in the implementation of ACCESS.

Problem

Skidmore College recently invested in several efforts to promote academic achievement and retention among students with disabilities. These initiatives include changing the Coordinator for Students with Disabilities (CSD) position from a part-time to a full-time post and expanding the breadth of the job to address a wider range of service and compliance responsibilities. Subsequent to the restructuring of this position, Skidmore received a generous gift from the Simcha Foundation of the Jewish Community Endowment Fund to support efforts to develop a more inclusive campus community for students with disabilities. In order to set the stage for long-term planning, the college contracted with AHEAD to implement ACCESS in the fall of 2008 using a CBPR approach.

Students and Location Information

Located in upstate New York, Skidmore is:

a highly selective liberal arts college with a reputation for its creative approaches to just about everything. With its relatively small size and student-faculty ratio, the College is a close-knit academic community. Skidmore is known for its faculty of teacher-scholars devoted to the instruction and mentoring of undergraduates— approximately 2,400 talented men and women (Skidmore College, 2010).

This academic context coupled with the college's initiative to improve services to students with disabilities set the stage for ACCESS implementation utilizing an innovative CBPR strategy.

Strategy

The ACCESS CBPR project was completed in an upper-division interdisciplinary course in social work, Research in the Community, in collaboration with the Coordinator for Students with Disabilities (CSD). The course goals included introducing students to the philosophy, theory, ethics, and methods of community-based participatory research through the completion of a community project. Employing an active pedagogy, the focus was on "learning by doing" through service. Students were admitted to the course only by permission and interviewed by the professor to assess suitability. With the assistance of the CSD, a group of students were identified that had an interest in such a course and four were enrolled to work on ACCESS; two of the students had disabilities and two did not.

The professor employed hooks' (1992) paradigm of "engaged pedagogy" in course delivery. Based on the work of Freire (1970), this approach promotes self-actualization among students and their teachers, considers both the heart and mind of the participants in the learning process, focuses on the connections between course content and overall life experiences, and pushes students to take responsibilities for their choices. At the beginning of the course, students were told that the primary objective was to complete their chosen research project in collaboration with their team and disseminate the results to the target community in a manner that best served social change ends – the way in which these ends were accomplished was up to them. The

professor acted as a team member, a research consultant, and at times, a mediator when group dynamics became difficult.

The ACCESS team (four students, the professor, and the CSD) met on a weekly basis, and the students much more often. Early in the semester, the team chose the date on which ACCESS would be launched, and much of the work before the launch was devoted to publicizing the purpose and importance of this effort. Given the challenges associated with achieving robust response rates to ACCESS (e.g., Vogel et al., 2008; Vogel, Leyser, Burgstahler, Sligar, & Zecker, 2006), the team focused on a variety of efforts to increase the response rate while simultaneously raising consciousness on campus regarding disability issues.

The students created flyers and postcards that described the importance of ACCESS, and these were posted around campus and put in all faculty mailboxes. Considerable time was spent on deciding if incentives should be utilized to increase the response rate, and based on the students' research, it was determined that a small incentive (a coupon for a hot beverage) would be most effective. To make each campus office aware of the impending survey, the students visited office heads (including the college president and upper-level deans) and urged them to encourage their employees to complete ACCESS. Students also made an appeal to all faculty members at a monthly faculty meeting. The team set up computer kiosks around campus and encouraged passers-by to complete the brief survey at that time. An announcement was also made on the widely-read blog, SkidmoreUnofficial, and the team crafted e-mails for each constituency and made strategic decisions as to who would send out the original and follow-up e-mail. To honor confidentiality, the CSD was the only person who communicated with the students with disabilities group. All four constituencies were surveyed simultaneously during a three-week period mid-semester and follow-up e-mails were sent to encourage broader participation.

Observed Outcomes

As a result of these efforts, the overall response rate was 26% (see Table 1). Once the survey was closed and data compiled by AHEAD, the students presented the findings and distributed an Executive Summary to approximately 75 members of the Dean of Students staff. The team made various recommendations that included the development of an Advisory Board for Disability Issues that will be considered next academic year (see Table 2).

Implications

In conclusion, this method for ACCESS implementation, successful at Skidmore College, could be replicated at other institutions. Considerations include time needed for the research, buy-in from the administration, strategic selection of research team members, and funding for project expenses. This project proved to be time consuming and the team felt it would have been preferable to implement ACCESS over a full academic year. The students reported that their research, communication, and collaboration skills were challenged and ultimately improved; the students without disabilities found that working with students with disabilities was not any different from

other academic experiences with other students. Actively including different campus groups in the ACCESS process helped to make our data collection strategies more relevant and appealing to each constituency which resulted in the inclusion of more voices in the survey data. The direction, structure, and legitimacy of the discussion about disability issues on campus is informed by our diverse group, and the team looks forward to continuing this discussion and working for change next academic year.

Table 1 Response Rates to ACCESS for Campus Constituencies

Constituency	Response Rate
Faculty	39% (123 of 316)
Administration/Staff	26% (151 of 595)
Students with Disabilities	45% (83 of 185)
Students without Disabilities	23% (485 of 2128)
Total Participants	26% (842 of 3224)

Table 2 Recommendations for Change Based on ACCESS Data

Survey results indicate that Skidmore College needs to develop a greater awareness of students with disabilities and the process of accommodation
Data reveals a stronger relationship is needed between the faculty and the Office of Disability Services.
Advisory board comprised of students, faculty, administration and staff should be convened to further interpret this data and plan future initiatives that promote inclusion.

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About the Authors

Carolyn Eilola received her BS in Social Work and BA in Psychology from Skidmore College in May 2010. As a social work major, she completed an internship working with older adults in a nursing home and short-term rehabilitation unit at a local hospital. She has been part of several research projects while a student at Skidmore. She can be reached by email at: ceilola@skidmore.edu

Kathryn Fishman received her BS in Social Work from Skidmore College in May 2010. As a social work major, she completed an internship at a drug rehabilitation center providing group counseling services to clients struggling with addictions issues. An avid athlete and researcher, she has completed other work examining the intersection of athletics and academics among college students. She can be reached by email at: kfishman8@gmail.com

Arielle Greenberg is majoring in economics with a minor in Spanish at Skidmore College and will graduate in 2011. Her experience includes working as an economics tutor and teaching assistant, and camp counselor. Her future goal is to become a nurse practitioner and work in hospital administration, hopefully centered in a Spanish-speaking community. She can be reached by email at: agreenbe@skidmore.edu

Crystal Dea Moore received her Ph.D. and M.S.W. from the University at Albany, State University of New York and her M.A. and B.A. in psychology from California State University, Bakersfield. She has been a college-level educator for almost 20 years and is currently the Social Work Program Director at Skidmore College. She can be reached by e-mail at: cmoore@skidmore.edu

Andrew Schrijver is majoring in American Studies at Skidmore College and will graduate in 2011. His experience includes working with the 2010 Census and studying abroad in Germany during the spring of 2010. He can be reached by e-mail at aschrijv@skidmore.edu

Jamin Totino received his BS degree in Sociology from The College of Saint Rose and M.S.W. from the University at Albany, State University of New York. He has over 14 years of experience providing student support and working as an administrator in higher education. Jamin currently serves as an Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs at the College of St. Rose in Albany, New York. He can be reached by e-mail at: totinoj@strose.edu