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Mobilizing Partnerships for Social Change

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Community Campus Partnerships for Health

How do we combine the knowledge and wisdom in communities and in academic institutions to solve the major health, social and economic challenges facing our society? How do we ensure that community-driven social change is central to service-learning and community-based participatory research (CBPR)?

Answering these critical questions was the central purpose of the Community-Campus Partnerships for Health (CCPH) 10th anniversary conference and the special section of conference papers appearing in this issue. The conference, “Mobilizing Partnerships for Social Change,” sought to nurture a growing network of community-campus partnerships that are striving to achieve the systems and policy changes needed to address the root causes of health, social and economic inequalities.

The conference convened a diverse group of over 650 CCPH members from 40 states and the District of Columbia in the United States, 10 provinces in Canada, the Central African Republic, Germany, Ghana, Kenya, Nepal, Nigeria, Norway, South Africa, Sudan, Uganda and the United Kingdom for four days of skill-building, networking, and agenda-setting. Generous scholarship support from conference cosponsors contributed to an equitable mix of participants from community and institutional settings, with an especially strong contingent from Aboriginal and Indigenous communities. As CCPH’s first conference in Canada, participants were able to learn from Canadian experiences with community-campus partnerships and the social determinants of health, and to explore synergies across North America and beyond. Further, holding the conference in one of the most diverse cities in the world enabled participants to explore critical issues of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, wealth and culture. Through plenary presentations, interactive workshops, story-telling sessions, posters, exhibits and community site visits, the conference sought to build knowledge, skills and actions for achieving healthy and just societies.

The papers appearing in the CCPH theme section tackle critical issues of significance to community-academic partnerships and CBPR that are of broad interest to readers of the journal. Davis and her colleagues voice what many of us feel: “When working on social justice issues, it is easy to become overwhelmed by the problems faced.”¹ These papers provide creative, practical and replicable strategies for solving the major health, social and economic challenges facing our society.

Two papers make a compelling case for communities as the center of learning, discovery and engagement. In their paper, May and Law demonstrate how building the capacity of community-based organizations to conduct CBPR can yield research findings that galvanize communities to take action.² Similarly, Davis et. al. show how engaging community members in documenting their experiences with homelessness through numbers, stories and photos can raise awareness and action on a social justice issue that is often overlooked or ignored.¹

In theory, CBPR involves community participation in every phase of the research process, but in practice this rarely happens. Three papers explore the practicalities, challenges and rewards of community participation in research. Jackson describes in depth the participatory group process she used to analyze qualitative data.³ Fernández-Peña and his colleagues present community-developed guidelines to support researchers in disseminating findings in ways that reach community constituencies.⁴ Plumb and her colleagues report on an evaluation of seven grantees that sought to determine whether the collaborative process contributed to their projects’ outcomes.⁵ Although the findings are inconclusive, they point to an essential area of further inquiry as CBPR skeptics continue to question the “added value” of CBPR over traditional approaches to research.

Finally, two papers address perceived gaps in the field. Responding to the predominance of lecture- and textbook-based approaches to teaching the social determinants of health, Rossiter and Reeve offer an experiential tool.⁶ Taking the idea of “walking in someone else’s shoes” to a participatory level, “The Last Straw” helps people gain a new appreciation of what advantage and disadvantage means in our society. Responding to debates about what constitutes “evidence” and “quality” in community-based prevention, Wright and his colleagues are testing a rigorous participatory peer review process that aims to develop valid and widely accepted indicators by synthesizing diverse perspectives.⁷

Taken together, these papers offer inspirational approaches to combining the knowledge and wisdom in communities and in academic institutions as we seek to achieve social justice. As CCPH board chair Chuck Conner remarked in his speech at the start of the conference, “Our members have created an extensive toolbox of recognized and published resources that give further value to the work that each of us is involved in.” We invite you to contribute to this growing toolbox – and indeed this growing movement – by participating in CCPH’s 11th conference, April 29 – May 2, 2009 in Milwaukee, WI USA.

Note: Additional papers based on CCPH conference presentations appear in the December 2007 issue of *Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Indigenous and Aboriginal Community Health*, available at <http://www.pimatisiwin.com/Issues/AllIssues.html>. To view the conference program, visit <http://depts.washington.edu/ccph/conf-overview.html>

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