Research That Holds Residents at HEART
What is it like to raise your grandchildren? How can a community park be utilized in a better way? How can the educational landscape and community development be improved in a town without a school? How can senior citizens be involved in their volunteering?

University faculty members and students have long been engaged with their neighbors in Pittsburgh and around the world, but are stepping out of their labs and classrooms and into local communities in a new way, not only offering to share their minds, hearts and spirits, but including the community in their research projects. Duquesne is leading this type of cutting-edge research, called “Academic Community Engaged Research,” in the Pittsburgh region and has the community at its heart.

“It’s a way to relate our work to the larger community,” says Dr. Lina Dostilio, director of academic community engagement in the Office of Service-Learning, which helps to connect community and faculty.

Nationally and at Duquesne, this grass-roots research is becoming more highly valued as faculty, and often, students, forge beneficial partnerships within a community. The traditional research activities—technical reports or other products of academic work—are shared publicly and open for critique, making the researcher answerable to the community. The project doesn’t live in theory alone, but in the real world. Community members involved in the research have input in design and outcomes.

For example, this fall, Drs. Rebecca Kronk and Yvonne Weideman, assistant professors of nursing, will turn 10 grandparents raising grandchildren loose with digital cameras. This project, called Photovoice, will focus on what is important to grandparents raising their grandchildren by documenting a grandparent’s second round of parenting. The effort also will include interviews and analysis by sophomore nursing students, a photography show and a memory book for the family.

Kronk and Weideman developed the project after they discovered about 80 percent of one local community’s children are being raised by grandparents. What support do these grandparents need to raise a healthy third generation? Let them tell us, Kronk and Weideman say.

“The project gives a voice to people who haven’t been heard,” says Weideman.

“We’re learning about what’s going on from the sources,” says Kronk. “Sophomore students will go back into the community and do things like health screening, interviewing clients and health promotion.”

“Hopefully, students will have fun with it and try to focus on evidence-based practice, so that theory and research all tie together,” adds Weideman.

Using research and scholarship to help a community resolve issues is different from the academic norm, according to Dostilio, who says, “It brings us into closer relationships with our local communities and has potential for leveraging community change.”

Students benefit from tackling real-world problems while communities gain access to the resources and skills at Duquesne. Responsible social action is embedded in student work, says Dostilio.

“They see the tools to be used, the skills to be examined, the partnerships to be developed,” she says. “You develop programs together—with more usable outcomes.”

A model is formed for ongoing and future work, creating foundational building blocks for more real-life research in a process that is applicable in virtually every school at Duquesne. Some examples show how Duquesne professors and students are advancing knowledge in their fields with community partners.
Helping Troubled Teens Through Statistics

Dr. Amy Phelps, assistant professor of statistics, is using her expertise in new ways to help local nonprofit organizations. "Nobody else would think statistics is a good match for service and community research," says Phelps. Over six years, Phelps has shaped her vision of how students interact with data and programs, allowing four local nonprofits to develop programs to meet clients’ needs—and gain supportive information to pursue grants otherwise out of their reach.

In their initial project, Phelps and her students worked with Bethlehem Haven, a shelter for homeless women, to clarify thoughts about the use of mentors. The Duquesne researchers found that the women utilizing the shelter wanted to be more educated, specifically learning how to care for their families, finding benefits and obtaining health care. The women preferred this information to be shared through mentors, once-homeless women who have walked their journey.

This type of project employs descriptive statistics, which many agencies find helpful. How many people do they serve in a year? How long are people in the program, so budgets can be accurate?

“They use descriptive statistics to make inferences about their population,” says Phelps, “and we can help the organization to use the information to make better decisions.”

Phelps and her students have worked with the Rx Council, a human service organization that provides pharmaceuticals to the underinsured, and with Light of Life, a homeless shelter. But Phelps’ deepest relationship has developed with the Ward Home, which operates in Pittsburgh’s East McKeesport, Wilkinsburg and Friendship neighborhoods, and teaches independent living skills to older teens in the county system and bridges their transition into the on-your-own, adult world.

Phelps’ sophomore business students combed through boxes of paperwork from 2005-2010 for information on every student who exited the Ward Home program. How many finished high school? What kept them going? Information collected and analyzed in one semester was used to shape programming in another semester.

“This is what statisticians do in real life: look at inferential statistics and find out what the probable...
patterns and trends are,“ says Phelps. Students learn about sampling error and to provide context for their numbers. But a core benefit for students, according to Phelps, is learning civic duty.

The core benefit for the Ward Home was gaining a new appreciation for the stories that data can tell, according to Daryl Lucke, executive director. Before working with Phelps’ class, the agency did not have a formal outcome-based database.

“It was invaluable to us, actually. Amy and her students gave us a starting point. They used data collection to extract information about demographics, length of stay, the ability of teens to improve lifestyle skills in their time with us, differences from program to program, male to female, the age kids are most likely to run away and differences in learning life skills by race,” says Lucke. “What we thought was happening in the program isn’t always happening, in this case, so this work was beneficial in implementing strategic planning goals.”

One immediate change was to assign staff to monitor the teens and clarify questions while in the initial assessment, so that the data grew more reliable. That instant change, plus changes in programming following the data analysis “impacted us very deeply, very positively,” says Lucke, “allowing us to focus on the areas we really need to give a little more attention to.”

Phelps talks of 22 Ward Home students who completed high school, then headed to more schooling or to work. Some even serve on nonprofit boards.

“I like to believe that my students had a hand in their outcomes and in what the Ward Home is doing differently. When they make a difference in 22 kids’ lives, they make a difference in perpetuity for a handful of them,” says Phelps, now a member of the Ward Home executive board.

A Revitalized Neighborhood Park = A Richer Community

Dr. Eva Simms, a psychologist and environmentalist who focuses on child psychology and psychology of place, is a Duquesne pioneer in community-based research and community-engaged scholarship. Every semester since 2007, she has developed a project involving students in her senior seminar class and the Mount Washington community of Pittsburgh. This work, in partnership with the nonprofit Mount Washington Community Development Corp., has focused on the 260-acre Emerald View Park, among the city’s newest—and perhaps most unrecognized—green areas.

“People didn’t even know they had green spaces at the end of their street,” says Simms. Hiking trails in the formerly mined area were all but invisible; the park was seen as belonging to those living on life’s seamier side.

Students knocked on 300 doors to ask residents what they would want in a park. This information guided the park’s development, leading to the opening of a nearby boxing club, and showed residents that the more people in the park, the greater the children’s safety.

Simms formed neighborhood focus groups “that re-established the cultural memory. People became attached to and cared more for the green spaces they used to use as children.” With her class archiving information, the data was shared with private foundations and led to grants being secured for park improvements.

Other students examined issues of homelessness related to the park and observed that emergency medical providers typically are not trained to deal with homeless clients, who are often repeat users of the system. After surveying local providers, the students adapted a curriculum, then coordinated provider training.

“I firmly believe in the intellectual capital we have in students,” says Simms. “I multiply my power 20-fold when I have a group of 20.

“The students are so idealistic, so committed once they see a need, to apply themselves to it. If you have a good relationship with a community partner, it can be very targeted and you can see the impact almost immediately. It’s a kind of research that has an effect because it matters to the students and...
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people in the local communities.”

Even after students graduate, many offer to give presentations and want to be apprised of new developments. Then they carry their work with them into other communities.

“It gives them a model to apply to other situations,” says Simms. “Wherever they live, they can plug in.”

Research and education, says Simms, are what universities do. Every community has needs. “So,” asks Simms, “how can our research contribute to the community?”

That question also begs how the community can contribute. Dr. Ilyssa Manspeizer, director of park development and conservation for the Mount Washington Community Development Corp. (MWCDC), appreciates her invitation to address Simms’ class every semester.

“The reciprocity of this relationship is exceptionally strong—I know that I am contributing toward Dr. Simms’ students’ learning about community and civic engagement, but students also enable me the time and space to rethink how we engage our own community members with the park and other local development initiatives.”

For example, if recent graduate Shanelle Blackman had not been at the Mount Washington Recreational Center, she wouldn’t have observed that few girls come to the center and those who do don’t voice their opinions often.

As a result, she and a classmate polled students on their interests and saw that career information ranked highly, so they scheduled a Girls Game Night. About 10 girls ages 11 to 16 showed up to play board games, scoop ice cream and talk informally with Blackman about college admissions, schedules and what it’s like to live on campus. The girls also visited Duquesne and got a first-hand look inside a residence hall.

“I think it gave me confidence that I could work with kids,” says Blackman, who was new to this experience. “I think that’s one point of the class: to learn that what we have studied is applicable to the community. You go through school and learn from text books, but actually doing it gives you so much more confidence and preparation for going out into the real world. So all that stuff I read about and spent all night studying, I can actually put it to use. It’s really nice to give back.”

The result, says Manspeizer, is a richer community.

“All of Dr. Simms’ projects, whether dealing with aging, recreational trails, the homeless or park planning, have provided vital information about community issues that have enabled MWCDC to tackle problems in more comprehensive, accurate and equitable ways,” says Manspeizer. “Because of her efforts, Emerald View Park is a cleaner, safer and more beautiful place for community members of all ages and walks of life.”

Pushing to the Next Level:

**Occupational Therapy Students, Faculty and Partners**

Dr. Anne Marie Hansen, assistant professor of occupational therapy, has long worked with students and community partners. But this year, the thread of continuity grew even stronger.

Students spent three semesters developing nine different community-based research projects, working across many populations: homeless veterans, special needs students, disabled adults, ex-offenders seeking jobs, seniors hungry for computer skills, seniors developing volunteer skills and the global issue of human trafficking.

For the first two semesters, students spent time getting to know their populations, their needs and their communities, then using strategies of evidence-based practice, developing and providing services that would help to improve people’s situations.

Then, in the third semester, students envisioned their work as a complete program.

“If I hired an occupational therapist to enhance the agency’s service, what would it look like, based on the literature and my experiences?” asks Hansen.

The students answered by mapping out a comprehensive program to be implemented—and by pinpointing a potential source of foundation or other funding for the position. These proposals are shared with the community partners, who then can decide whether to actually submit them.

This coming year, for the first time, the incoming group of fourth-year Clinical Reasoning I students will build on the work of the preceding class, continuing to refine the program.

“My view is always to be concerned with sustainability and with moving a program to a new level of expertise,” explains Hansen. “We can do that if we build more skills and capacity, in the students and in the agencies. There is no guarantee that the agencies will submit these grant proposals because it is an academic exercise. But it does become another option for them.”
In some cases, students themselves might exercise the option. For instance, one student group has seen how volunteering, via a program they named Seniors Serving the City, could produce multifaceted benefits. Not only would the volunteer work by seniors improve the community’s quality of life, they would increase their social participation, developing a deeper sense of meaning and purpose.

The graduate students involved—Emily Leech, Marla Veschio, Lindsey Byrd and Kasey Leidy—have been so sold on their project that they intend to lay plans to start the agency as an avocation, developing a plan to provide transportation to seniors from different locations. Not only would the seniors be giving back, but the students would as well, Hansen points out.

Because a survey at an adult day center showed that participants were interested in community service, the students decided to connect their donations with community organizations. Seniors made fleece blankets and scarves for homeless veterans, “care packages” for veterans overseas and the Humane Society, and hand-painted flower pots and coloring books for the Children’s Institute.

“We were not able to take all the seniors out in the community so we brought the community to them, in a way,” explains Leech, who will graduate in January. The activities generated conversations, for instance, about family members who had been in the service and favorite pets.

“From an occupational therapy perspective, the hands-on learning was invaluable,” says Leech. “We were really humbled by the experience.”

Community Leaders Team With DU Faculty, Students on Neighborhood Redevelopment

Four years ago, Dr. Rodney Hopson decided on seismic change. He had led work in Namibia but hadn’t mentored students beyond his campus classrooms in Pittsburgh.

“I thought how utterly and academically weak their knowledge would be if they didn’t do the work, see the work affecting lives in a place-based community,” says Hopson, professor in the School of Education’s Department of Foundations and Leadership. He promised himself that his students would no longer have their learning bounded by a building.

“Challenge,” says Hopson, “must be turned into opportunity.”

Opportunity is not one-sided learning for students and faculty, but the chance to build momentum and turn the wheels of change in a community.

Hopson and colleagues across the School of Education and other schools at Duquesne have been working with community partners on educational and other social justice issues in Pittsburgh’s Hazelwood neighborhood, where the city’s last working steel mill once stood.

Hopson, Pastor Tim Smith of the Center of Life and Keystone Church of Hazelwood, and other
Duquesne faculty and students crisscross paths on many different avenues. An Honors Class led by Dr. Evan Stoddard, associate dean of the McAnulty College, built an outdoor classroom at the Hazelwood YMCA. The Center of Life’s Fusion program, which emphasizes tutoring families, led to a collaboration with students and faculty in the Rangos School of Health Sciences, guided by Dr. David Somers, and in the School of Education, led by Dr. Temple Lovelace. Hopson’s graduate classes have viewed Hazelwood’s school-less state through the eyes of nonprofits, government and business, creating marketing proposals, improving information flow and working toward a charter school in the community where children attend seven different Pittsburgh Public Schools. Volunteers assist a basketball program and a music program called KRUNK, which produced a Next Generation Jazz Festival winner earlier this year.

“It’s making us feel more connected—and we had been disconnected for some time,” says Smith, a longtime activist and former investment banker. “This is not just my perspective but what people are saying: People have seen a constant presence from Duquesne University. This has not been the case with other universities. It really makes a difference; each time, we’re not starting new. In particular, Duquesne is looking at the impact of formal education and making it more accessible to Hazelwood, a community without a school.”

In a sense, the town has become a research laboratory, but in “experiments” of its choosing. Smith sees regular access to Duquesne resources as critical for the community, just three miles from Downtown and on the verge of an upswing.

The University serves as a resource, not as a dictator of change. “We’re making sure we are touching felt needs, not doing something good for the community as determined by University personnel,” says Hopson.

For Hopson, community-based research links Duquesne’s legacy, its mission of service and its future of promise to its neighbors’ well-being and to an action plan. It provides students with a critical understanding of urban environments and a base of compassion that will allow them to be caring leaders.

Hopson, with colleagues from his department and school, escorted a busload of national and international visitors at May’s Duquesne Educational Leadership Symposium to Hazelwood as they discussed social justice and could see, first-hand, the issues.

“These are the kinds of things we do and we should be doing. It’s ethical and moral obligatory work, by virtue of what we are: still committed to the community. We’re no longer a university over a bakery but there’s still an obligation to be expressed to the community in other ways: exposure, involvement, commitment, engagement.

“It’s a push to think even more deliberately about the things that we do,” continues Hopson. “In the spirit of partnership with the Hazelwood community, for instance, we’re working on the hopes and dreams of what the community intends for itself. We help residents become players in the process, not where they see things happening around them and to them, but with them.”

“We’re no longer a university over a bakery but there’s still an obligation to be expressed to the community in other ways: exposure, involvement, commitment, engagement.”