

research snapshot

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Graduate Students Can Improve Their Networking and Research Skills in Collaborative Research Projects with Community Partners

What is this research about?

The creation of new knowledge is an important part of the knowledge mobilization process. Partnerships between knowledge users and creators allow all stakeholders to be a part of that process. The Knowledge Mobilization (KMb) Unit is one department at York University that initiates these projects. The KmB unit brokers relationships between community partners and academics or students. One KmB program offers summer internships for graduate students. Usually, internships rely on partnerships at the level of the academy and an organization. However, the KmB Unit gives graduate students the opportunity to be more independent. Students create a research project related to their studies in partnership with an organization of their choice. This study examines the benefits gained by both graduate students and their community partners in this model. It also addresses whether the goal of knowledge mobilization was achieved.

What did the researcher do?

The researcher combined responses from students in both the 2007 and 2008 summer internships. She held four semi-structured interviews with students who participated in the program. Students in the program also completed surveys at three different time points in their internship. First, they completed a survey upon starting the program; second, they completed a time two survey following the completion of their internships; and third, they completed a time

What you need to know:

The KmB summer internship program for graduate students is a part of the university's goal for knowledge mobilization. It allows both graduate students and the community partners they work with to participate in the creation and use of knowledge. Through their experiences, students improve skills related to research. Also, academic institutions and community partners develop stronger relationships.

three survey one year after their internship. The researcher compared the students' responses from the first and second time points. The changes in survey responses from time one to time two were measured against three goals:

1. Building the research capacity of students and community organizations.
2. Creating new knowledge that would meet the needs of both parties.
3. Promoting long term partnerships beyond the internship between the two.

What did the researcher find?

Students shared two common goals upon starting the internships. First, they shared interest in achieving personal growth. This included gaining new academic knowledge and insight about the inner workings of their community partners. There was also a desire to network and be more employable. Second, students

were interested in the impact they would have on their community organization and its goals. For example, creating positive change in the community, and addressing specific and general goals of the organization.

Students and their community partners benefitted from the projects after their completion. Students commented that the internship gave them a unique work experience in applying knowledge in a practical way. This was not typical for them in their regular curriculum. The projects also allowed community organizations to consider research as a part of their future goals.

Survey respondents also commented on the quality of their research products at the end of their internship. Students found that they learned useful skills within the setting of a community organization. They improved skills like website development, presentation and writing. Students also commented on benefits gained by the organization. New knowledge was created about the issues addressed in their project.

A year later, about 77 percent of respondents still kept in contact with their organization. In the surveys, students noted that they gained concrete research skills. They learned how to conduct an interview, develop surveys and hold focus groups. They also improved their ability to make research more accessible to a non-academic audience, and to work in community partnerships.

Students suggested that there should be more communication with other KMB interns. It would allow students to learn from each others' experiences. They also suggested that the program include more mentorship and formal training. Finally, students recommended that there be more time to conduct their research projects. For some, community based research was a new experience in their internships.

How can you use this research?

This research offers ways to create more effective partnerships between community groups and academic spaces. It also serves educators, especially in the field of student research. It reveals the learning benefits from research projects like this one. Finally, the research sheds insight on how to make the research process more participant-based, through knowledge mobilization.

About the Researcher

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Knowledge Mobilization at York

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