

Training for Older People in Applied Social Research Methods

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Introduction

Participation in an applied social research project can be a highly fruitful component of education for older people. A major aim of this paper is to illustrate how such an experience can be incorporated successfully into educational programs for older learners. A second purpose will be to advocate for the creation of settings in which older people who have developed social research skills can make use of those skills in research addressed to community needs.

Formal training in methods of social research is well established in the curriculum for undergraduate students in the United States who major in the social sciences. Courses devoted to training in research methods are particularly common in sociology. Contemporary training in research methods often provides students with hands-on experience with some aspects of the research process. Occasionally, these courses provide students with an opportunity to participate from beginning to end in an actual research project.

For the most, part I will draw upon experiences in Gerontology courses at the University of Massachusetts Boston that offer research training to older students. I will also go beyond what has been accomplished at the University of Massachusetts Boston to outline some promising directions for participation of skilled older people in applied social research addressed to community needs.

Rationale for Training in Research Methods

Training in methods of research often includes attention to a combination of conceptual issues and practical skills. The topics covered in full courses in methods of social research include the nature of the scientific process; the interplay between systematic observation of facts, testing of hypotheses, and development of theory; ethical issues in research; sources of data; approaches to measurement;

experimental and quasi-experimental design; management of data; analysis of data; and reporting of results. In the social sciences, research methods courses typically include extensive attention to survey research procedures both because surveys are widespread and the methods for conducting surveys are highly developed. Comprehensive methods courses also cover a variety of other data collection strategies including use of traditional library resources, use of electronic databases, use of the Internet, observational techniques, semi-structured individual interviewing, focus group interviewing, and secondary analysis of administrative data. Widely used text books in the United States for methods of social research include Singleton and Straits, 1999; Babbie, 1996; and Schutt, 1996.

In addition to showing how research contributes to the development of basic knowledge, courses in methods of social research can also focus on applied research, that is, research conducted primarily to contribute to the solution of practical problems. Courses can cover not only the special techniques of conducting applied social research but the various ways in which research can contribute to problem solving. They can show, for example, how applied research sometimes provides missing pieces of information in problems that are well understood and sometimes helps to recognize problems and frame social issues (Weiss, 1977).

In undergraduate education, methods courses are offered more because they are thought by faculty to be good for students rather than because students seek these courses. Most undergraduate students much prefer substantive courses to methods courses. Many undergraduate students find methods courses to be dry and difficult. Typically, only the most serious students are attracted to methods classes.

Why then should social research methods be part of a curriculum for older learners? In many cases, education for elders aims strictly to serve individual expressive needs. But, when learning for learning's sake is the guiding purpose of curriculum design, methods courses can be attractive to intellectually adventurous elders who are fascinated by the research process. Methods courses can teach students how systematic observation leads to development of theory—and how, in turn, theory is a source of testable hypotheses. Elders may also value methods courses as providing them with a better basis for understanding the findings of social research reported in the mass media. Elders may also appreciate the skills they gain in these courses in using printed documents in libraries, using electronic data bases, or searching the Internet because it helps them with various fact-finding efforts.

When education for older learners seeks also to serve instrumental purposes, there are additional reasons for training in research methods. Older adult education can also seek to increase the capacity of older people to make productive contributions (Caro, Bass, & Chen, 1993). One such aim can be to increase employability. Some older people want to remain in the work force. Some are interested in acquiring skills that enable them to enter a new field; others are interested in upgrading the skills in the fields in which they are already active. Some older workers may be more effective in their current jobs because they have acquired skills that enable them, for example, to organize and conduct a focus group interview or because they can design and administer a simple survey. Some older people may welcome training in research methods because it may help them in obtaining a job as a survey interviewer.

Another potential productive aim of education for older people may be to strengthen their capacity to contribute to their communities as informed and concerned citizens. Democratic societies

function best when citizens are well informed. At a minimum, citizens need to be able to make good judgments in the electoral process. Informed and concerned citizens with strong communication skills can also play a vital role in shaping public opinion on community issues. In some countries, including the United States community, life also relies heavily upon the efforts of volunteers. Older people are potentially important as voters, opinion leaders, and volunteers in community service. Older people can play a particularly useful role in shaping public opinion because they can draw upon extensive experience. Further, older people often have more discretionary time available to seek information for themselves about current issues, to reflect on issues, and to engage in discourse with others about issues. Young elders are particularly important resources for community-service volunteering because they are typically healthy and are often no longer engaged in full-time employment (Morris & Caro, 1997). Educational programs for older learners may explicitly seek to improve the capacity of students to be effective citizens. From this perspective, training in methods of social research can be helpful to students in enabling them to interpret the polling and survey data that are widely used by governmental agencies, political parties, and various interest groups to shape public opinion on policy issues.

Training in research methods can also be helpful to students in participating in public discourse about contemporary ethical issues associated with social research. Ethical issues in health services research are likely to be of particular interest to older people because of their extensive use of health services. Courses can invite students to grapple with some of the ethical issues that confront researchers. How much information about the risks associated with participation in an experimental medical procedure, for example, should be provided to potential research subjects? In experimental health services research, how can information about the risks associated with the intervention be

conveyed to potential participants in ways that are clear, concise and yet sufficiently informative? How can subjects be informed about risks without invoking excessive concern about minor and unlikely risks? Training in research methods can help older people to understand the competing principles involved in resolving these ethical dilemmas associated with health services research.

Another contemporary ethical issue of potential concern to older people involves use of computerized administrative files for research purposes. Advocates for the privacy rights of citizens are urging strict limitations on the manner in which computerized records containing data on sensitive matters such as income and health problems are used. They are particularly worried about the merging of clinical records and administrative files that include individual identifiers. The source of the concern of these advocates for privacy rights is that the merged files might get into the hands of those who would use the information to the disadvantage of the individual. For policy researchers concerned with the effectiveness of publicly funded programs, clinical records and administrative files are extremely important as data sources. Further, the merging of these files on the basis of individual identifiers is essential in establishing relationships between individual characteristics as well as both access to services and intervention outcomes. In this instance, the needs of policy researchers for administrative data conflicts with advocates for privacy rights. Training in research methods can help older people understand why clinical records and administrative data are attractive for research purposes, how files can be merged, and what measures can be taken to protect confidentiality. Older people who are well informed on these issues can play a constructive role in the public discussion that is needed to resolve these issues.

Training for Older Learners at the University of Massachusetts Boston

Training in applied social research is a major portion of the curriculum offered to older learners at the University of Massachusetts Boston (O'Brien, 1996). The University offers a one-year certificate program in Gerontology that is designed primarily to serve people 60 years of age and older. The certificate program seeks explicitly to strengthen the ability of graduates to make effective contributions in aging services and to serve as advocates for the elderly. Students learn about the needs of older people, service programs to address those needs, the role of the public sector in financing services for the elderly, and the manner in which publicly funded programs are shaped through the political process. The program attracts many people who are already active in aging services – some as paid employees but more as volunteers. Each year as many as 60 students enroll in the program. Although it is open to people of all ages, typically over 80 percent of the students are 60 years of age and older. The program is particularly attractive to people 60 and older, because they can enroll without paying tuition and most of the fees. (In Massachusetts, people who are 60 years of age and older are eligible for tuition waivers in public institutions of higher education on a space-available basis. Similar tuition waivers are available in some other states and in many private institutions in the United States.) The older people attracted to the program are diverse in their educational backgrounds. Historically, 46 percent hold undergraduate college degrees. Overall, 84 percent have had some previous education beyond high school (O'Brien, 1996).

Participants in the certificate program can obtain college credit toward an undergraduate degree. In every cohort, a number of older students take advantage of that opportunity.

Students receive their training in applied social research in a one-semester course that meets two-and-one-half hours per week. The course is built around an applied research project that lends

itself to survey research. The topic is selected in advance by the instructor. Students learn about the substantive issue addressed by the research, survey research design, questionnaire construction, and structured telephone interviewing. The instructor assumes responsibility for identifying a sample. Students collect the data through telephone interviews. A graduate assistant assumes responsibility for data entry. The graduate assistant and the instructor analyze the data and prepare a written report. Typically, the report includes recommendations for interventions to address the issues that were studied. In several instances, the research has received mass media attention in Massachusetts. In a few cases, research findings have been published in professional journals.

The sheer volume of data collected is impressive. The questionnaires regularly measure well over 100 variables. In several cases, more than 400 interviews were completed within a three-week period. The substantial accomplishment in data collection is made possible by several factors: conversion of a class room into a telephone bank, a large cadre of student interviewers (up to 60 in number), thorough training of students in survey administration, a large sample frame, an emphasis on weekend interviewing, and strong administrative arrangements while the interviews are being carried out. These arrangements include tight controls over the assignment of cases to interviewers and immediate review of each completed interview with supervisory personnel.

The topics covered are varied but always involve issues of concern to elders. One study in which students were involved examined the participation of poor older people in the Supplemental Security Income program, a public income assistance program for poor elders (Silverstein & Rosenberg, 1995). Historically, only half of those eligible have enrolled in the Supplemental Security Income program in spite of outreach efforts. The study was particularly concerned with the barriers to

the effectiveness of one such outreach effort. The project was requested by the advocacy organization that had carried out the outreach effort. In that study, interviews were conducted with low-income elders to whom outreach efforts had been directed.

Another study was concerned with one aspect of the impact of the closing of three public chronic disease hospitals in Massachusetts that had served many older people (Caro et al., 1997). For cost-savings reasons, the hospitals had been closed and patients had been moved to other institutions -- mostly nursing homes. In response to concerns raised by advocates for patients, the state of Massachusetts requested research to determine the effects of the closings on patients. Advocates were concerned about transfer trauma, that is, the possibility that the process through which patients were relocated might adversely affect patients. Also of concern was the quality of the facilities to which patients had been moved. The perception of family representatives regarding the impact of the closings was an aspect of the larger study that could involve students. Because many of the patients had serious cognitive limitations, interviewing of family representatives was easier than interviewing of patients. The reactions of family representatives was important also because the Department of Public Health sought to take family concerns into consideration in the relocation process. The Department sought particularly to minimize the travel time for family members to visit their institutionalized relatives. Family representatives were asked on a number of dimensions to compare the quality of the new institutional arrangements with those previously experienced by patients in state hospitals. Family representatives were asked also how well officials of the state department of Public Health carried out the process of transferring their relative from the state hospital to another facility. The study found that most family

representatives were satisfied with the manner in which the relocation had been carried out and rated the new facilities highly in comparison to the state hospitals. State officials were highly pleased to have evidence of family satisfaction with the relocation process and its impact on patients. (Other components of the hospital closing study had less favorable findings. Most notably, the transfer of older patients from the largest of the hospitals was found to accelerate death rates.)

Another study addressed questions about interest among clients of a publicly funded home care program in greater responsibility for directing their own care (Glickman, Stocker, & Caro, 1997). Historically, publicly funded home care programs for the elderly in the United States have been based upon strong case management: case managers have assessed need, determined eligibility for publicly-subsidized services, planned services, arranged for their provision, monitored service delivery, and periodically reassessed need and updated service plans. Some advocates for the elderly argue that clients can get more out of service resources if they are given greater discretion over the manner in which resources are used and if they play an important role in supervising in-home workers. The study focused upon clients in a home care program administered for elders in the state of Massachusetts by the state unit on aging. Clients were asked about their satisfaction with the case management they received and about their possible interest in greater responsibility for direction of their own care. Approximately one-fifth of the clients expressed interest in taking more responsibility. The report attracted interest among service planners elsewhere in the United States who were seeking to expand opportunities for self-direction for elders in various publicly funded home care programs.

Another study focused on people 85 years of age and older living outside of institutions (Silverstein & Wu, 1997). The project was conducted in collaboration with councils on aging in several

suburban communities near Boston. Councils on aging are publicly-sponsored local organizations concerned with various needs of elders. The scope of services offered by councils varies greatly from one locality to another, reflecting differences in perceived need, resources, and local initiative. In more active councils on aging, services include congregate meals, information and referral, assistance with transportation, medical escorts, group recreation, adult day care, and telephone reassurance. Study participants were identified through the census conducted annually by towns throughout Massachusetts. The town census provides a basis for sorting residents by age and listing the very old by name and address. The study examined problems experienced by the very old who were interviewed by students. The study also documented the continuing involvement of many of those interviewed in family and community activities. The findings provided guidance to councils on aging about how they might better address the needs of very old citizens.

Another recent project was directed to older adult education at the University of Massachusetts Boston itself. The study addressed the fact that the University enrolls a significant number of students who are well beyond traditional college age in programs throughout the University. All registered students 50 years of age and older were included in the sample frame. Again, these students were interviewed by older people--their peers. The study examined reasons for enrolling, future plans, and obstacles to learning that might be age-related. One aim of the study was to sensitize administrators to the special educational supports that might be needed by older learners.

Applied research projects involving older people at the University of Massachusetts Boston are also carried out through an Advanced Certificate program. This program involves courses spread over two semesters in which an instructor works with a small group of students. Typically, 10 to 15 students

are enrolled. All of the work is focused on a special topic on which the instructor has expertise. Often, the first semester is devoted to instruction about the topic. The project, then, is carried out in the second semester. Reflecting the smaller number of students participating, the methods employed are different.

One project was concerned with the performance of a state agency responsible for adjudicating complaints about age discrimination in employment (Caro, Motika, & O'Brien, 1992). The study sought to highlight difficulties experienced by claimants in getting favorable attention. The project involved tracking the fate of age discrimination in employment complaints filed with the agency during the course of one year. From case records, data were extracted regarding the timeliness with which the cases had been processed and their outcomes for claimants. The study found that at best only 15 percent of claims led to a favorable outcome for claimants. Some of the older people who participated in the study subsequently initiated a service advising individuals with complaints about age discrimination in employment on how to seek effective remedies. The service was staffed by trained older volunteers.

Another study was concerned with physician knowledge of drug prices. Contemporary health care for the elderly in the United States relies heavily upon prescription drugs that are sometimes very expensive. In the United States, Medicare, the public program which finances health care for older people does not cover the costs of prescription drugs. Unless they have supplementary insurance, older people are responsible for paying for prescription drugs themselves. Physicians may prescribe medications without being fully aware of the cost of the drugs and without taking into consideration the ability of older people to pay for them. Adding to the complexity of the subject is the fact that pharmacies often vary substantially in the prices that they charge for drugs. It tested physicians on their knowledge

of the cost of drugs they commonly prescribe for older patients. The study also examined the role of physicians in providing patients with guidance in coping with drug costs. Older students went to a sample of drug stores in the area to obtain prices on a standard set of drugs. The instructor took responsibility for administering a survey of physicians in which they were asked to estimate the cost of the same set of drugs for which the students obtained actual price information. With only a modest amount of training, several of the students keyed in the data employing computer software specially designed to facilitate the entry of survey data. The project led to a publication in a professional geriatrics journal that called attention to the fact that physicians typically had very limited knowledge of the prices of the drugs they were prescribing. Studies of this kind have led to growing public efforts to help older people in the United State cope with the high price of prescription drugs by subsidizing their drug purchases.

Projects in the advanced certificate program do not always involve social science research methods. One project, for example, sought to make basic information widely available to elders about such matters as estate planning and designation of a health care power of attorney. The latter provides elders with an opportunity to set limits on the emergency life-saving measures that they want taken on their own behalf and designates an individual to represent them in the interpretation of their health care preferences. The product of the class was a 62-page booklet that has been reprinted several times and distributed to over 25,000 people throughout Massachusetts.

Roles for Older Learners in Research Training Projects

In the applied research projects that involve older learners at the University of Massachusetts Boston, students play a vital but limited role. The process is initiated by the instructor who selects the

topic. With the aid from research assistants, instructors develop a variable list and draft research questions. In their substantive discussions of the topics in class, students make contributions similar to those of focus groups. Since the studies address issues of concern to elders, students often bring experience and insight on these subjects to class discussions. Sometimes they lead instructors to add variables to the survey agenda.

Students also contribute to the wording of items. Instructors and research assistants propose the wording of questions. Students, however, critique the questions drafted by instructors and research assistants. Sometimes they are helpful simply by identifying problems with item wording; in addition, students sometimes also provide useful suggestions for the refinement of item wording.

Interviewing is the most conspicuous student contribution. All of the interviews are conducted by students.

Typically, the role of students is modest after the data collection is completed. In some cases, older learners are recruited to help with data entry. They may be asked to use a word processing program to key in answers to open-ended questions.

When feasible, students are invited to a feedback session at which preliminary results are presented. Only the most basic descriptive data are reported at these meetings. Interaction with students about the implications of findings can also be helpful to instructors in developing their interpretation of data.

In short, the research projects are driven by instructors and their graduate assistants. The projects would not be possible without student assistance, but yet, older learners play no more than a supporting role.

Some of the projects carried out at the University of Massachusetts Boston involving older learners have special qualities that set them somewhat apart from applied research in general. At least one of the projects described above combines needs assessment and outreach. The methodology employed in the study of those 85 years of age and older can play a dual purpose. As described above, the survey method can be used to develop a statistical portrait of very old people and their general needs. However, the method can also be used to inform those with unmet needs--such as this group of elderly people--about service resources. Survey interviewers are characteristically trained to limit their role to data collection, but they can distribute written information about service resources and help respondents make contact with service workers. One of the students who participated in the 85 plus project subsequently took a position in another town where she organized an outreach effort to the very old; she adapted the methods that she learned in the applied research class.

Survey methods can also be used strategically in community organizing efforts. Community organizers occasionally seek to heighten public concern about an issue by drawing citizens into a survey about the issue. The survey may be mounted primarily for the education that it provides for the citizens who participate in the project. The organizer hopes that once informed about the problems, the aroused citizens will come together to address the problem constructively. The University of Massachusetts Boston projects inform the student participants about the issues studied through the research. The social policy orientation of the Certificate program encourages the students to consider measures that the public sector may wish to take to remedy the problems that are illuminated through the studies. At the same time, no effort is made through the class to encourage the students to follow through in an organized manner to seek social reforms.

In some cases, instructors make strategic use of project advisory committees. For the applied research projects, advisory committees are designated that include representatives of the organizations for which the studies are conducted and other stakeholders. The advisory committee is convened twice -- once before the data collection begins and for a second time when preliminary results can be reported. In the early stages, the advice of the advisory committee is sought about issues to be addressed through the survey. In the late stages, the major role of the advisory committee is to assist in formulating recommendations. Advisory committees of the kind described here can be convened in an attempt to create a standing committee to address a common set of concerns. The survey of older learners at the University of Massachusetts Boston illustrates the possibility. At the University, there is no organized set of administrators, faculty, or students concerned explicitly with campus-wide older-learner issues. The Gerontology faculty and students are well organized but their concerns tend to be limited to offerings in Gerontology and activities organized by the Gerontology Institute, a campus-based public service organization closely tied to the academic programs in Gerontology. A survey of all students on the campus 50 years of age and older provided an occasion to inform faculty and administrators that this is a significant constituency of the University that deserves special attention. The ad hoc advisory committee for the study could be encouraged to recommend and support the creation of a standing committee on affairs of older students. The ad hoc committee could also recommend and lobby for the designation of an administrative office responsible on a continuing basis for supporting the needs of mature students.

In the applied research approach used at the University of Massachusetts Boston, the instructor is responsible for the combination of applied research and community organizing strategies employed in

a particular project. Students have no systematic involvement in the formation of advisory committees, the conduct of the initial committee meetings, or the interaction with committee members when the results are presented and recommendations are discussed.

Ongoing Participation of Older People in Applied Research

I have argued generally for the merits of providing older learners with some training in social research methods. My major point is that training in applied social research methods can strengthen the ability of older people to be effective citizens in their communities. I have described the training in applied research at the University of Massachusetts Boston that provides opportunities for older people to participate in projects addressed to the needs of older people in the community.

The approach deserves to be carried further. If the training is effective, some of the older learners should come away from their research classes with an appetite for further participation in applied research projects. Like basic science, applied research is carried out in an organized context. For older learners who have developed some interest in applied research through their studies, there should be an organized setting in which they can continue to be engaged in this activity. As they gain experience and skill in conducting applied social research, older participants should have opportunities to assume increasingly responsible roles in these projects.

Even in Boston where aging-related activities are well organized and involve well-educated personnel as paid staff and volunteers, opportunities for older people to participate in applied research are limited. Periodically, the state unit on aging carries out a state-wide assessment of needs of older people with the cooperation of councils on aging. That project provides an opportunity for trained citizens to contribute to an applied research project on a volunteer basis. Such opportunities, however,

are an exception. For the most part, aging service organizations and aging advocacy organizations have a limited capacity to organize even modest research projects. If these organizations are to develop research projects, they need study leaders with skills beyond those of the older people trained at the University. Rarely are staff of service and advocacy organizations both able and available to lead applied research projects with or without the involvement of older people in research roles.

Institutions of higher education have the potential to serve as organizational sponsors of applied social research groups that focus on community needs and systematically involve trained older people. In the United States, the community service tradition is particularly well established in public universities designated as land-grant institutions. In the United States in the nineteenth century, federal funds were provided to each state to enable a designated university to develop a capacity to provide service to the citizens of the state. Originally, the mission of the land grant institutions was largely to train farmers in scientific agricultural techniques. The underlying aim was to provide a continuous supply of affordable food to rapidly growing urban populations. The land grant mandate drew universities into public service and applied research. Over the years, the public service and applied research mandate has extended well beyond agriculture to include many other subjects.

The Gerontology Institute at the University of Massachusetts Boston reflects the University's tradition as a land-grant institution. The Institute was created to be a campus-based vehicle for continued involvement of graduates of the Manning Certificate Program in applied social research on aging issues. As the Institute has evolved, the participation of older people in applied research takes place largely through their enrollment in the advanced certificate program described previously. The commitment to an extensive involvement of older people in its research sets the Gerontology Institute

apart from more typical campus-based public service institutes. In principle, the model developed at the University of Massachusetts Boston's Gerontology Institute can be emulated elsewhere, within or apart from the land-grant tradition.

While the Gerontology Institute offers a useful precedent for involvement of older people in applied social research, it also illustrates the counter pressures in a university which that the potential for this approach. In response to pressures from the University for the Institute to contribute to the development of a Ph.D. program in Gerontology and to engage in professional research that can attract external financial support, the Institute has developed a bifurcated approach. The major emphasis of the Institute is now on more complex, externally funded faculty research addressed to national issues. To the extent to which there is an emphasis on training, faculty seek to provide apprenticeship experiences for Ph.D. students. In these studies, no systematic effort is made to involve older people. Projects designed to involve older people continue on a limited basis in the advanced certificate program, but they are distinctly separate from the major thrust of the Institute's development.

An important limitation of most university-based applied research organizations is that they are largely driven by the search for grant funds. University research centers and institutes must cover the salaries of their personnel largely through grant funds.

Funding for applied research addressed to community needs is particularly difficult to obtain. Community groups often come to universities asking for research assistance in documenting and analyzing their needs but lack funds to pay for the research. In the United State, even state and local governments have weak traditions of allocating money to pay for applied research. Federal agencies support basic research and applied research addressed to national issues. Foundations are reluctant to

support applied social research focused on local needs. The Gerontology Institute, for example, regularly receives requests from local councils on aging seeking help with assessments of needs of elders in their community. Neither the councils nor the Institute can expect to generate external funding for this research. Typically, these local organizations are hoping that the research can be conducted entirely with the donated effort of faculty and students.

A New Model of Civic Research Based upon Older Volunteers

Going beyond the university-based applied social research that I have described, I am proposing the development of applied social research organizations that address community needs through a cadre of committed, well-trained older volunteers. I envision these as free-standing organizations that are independent of governmental agencies, independent of service-providing organizations, and largely independent of universities. The independence from government and service providers is needed to assure that the organizations will be free to set their own agendas and free to speak out on their conclusions. Independence from universities will enable these organizations to focus on applied community service without being distracted by the other more powerful agendas in universities. A loose affiliation with universities, however, is desirable so that they can draw upon their technical resources.

The most attractive model is an applied social research organization that operates entirely as a volunteer effort. Technical leadership for research projects would be provided by research professionals. Retired professional social researchers would be encouraged to contribute their time as study directors. (Retired researchers with primary professional experience in basic research may

welcome the opportunity to direct applied research projects on immediate and visible community issues.) Older people trained in social research methods through programs like those offered by the University of Massachusetts Boston would be recruited to assume supporting roles.

The emphasis on volunteers is important for a number of reasons. The fact that the research work is done by volunteers would enhance the moral credibility of recommendations. The participation of volunteers at all levels would also minimize the potential for strain between paid professionals and volunteers. As a practical matter, reliance upon volunteers would also reduce the need for external funding. For that reason, the potential for the constraints of funding to compromise the independence of the organization in agenda setting would be reduced.

Whether or not they have previous experience in social research, some older people would welcome the opportunity to participate in the proposed civic research organizations if they were offered challenging volunteer assignments. In its projects that involve older people, the Gerontology Institute has a strong record in attracting highly capable older people who are eager for opportunities to engage in meaningful volunteer activities. For some, the opportunity to be engaged in an activity of social value is intrinsically attractive. Further, the research role suits many well educated people. Many have made their major contributions as adults through the development and communication of ideas. Some will welcome the opportunity to do so in different ways in a new venue. If successfully engaged in applied social research, some older people will continue to be active as volunteers year after year. Older volunteers can provide stability to an applied social research organization that cannot be achieved with undergraduate or graduate students who come and go. Some well-educated older people can also afford to devote significant time to volunteer activities because they have adequate pensions.

Central to the proposed civic research organizations are the following principles:

- A vision of civic welfare shared by participants.

Participants must have a common understanding of how to balance civic ideals with pragmatism. They must be in substantial agreement on how much they will insist upon ambitious reforms or, alternately, how much they will emphasize more attainable goals.

- A commitment to advancing civic welfare through initiatives based upon well-crafted applied social research.

Participants must be well grounded in social research methods. At the same time they must share an understanding of how to apply these methods to address practical problems. They must have a shared understanding about the extent to which they will accept compromises in the application of standard research methods and the extent to which they may take liberties in interpreting research data.

- Independence from other organizations in agenda setting and interpretation of research findings.

Civic research organizations can make the most effective contributions when they set their own research agendas and draw conclusions independently.

- Internal governance that achieves a balance between wide participation of members in key decisions and efficient organizational management.

If civic research organizations are to retain the committed participation of skilled older volunteers, the organizations must provide a forum through which volunteers can move into positions of greater responsibility in accordance with their ability and effort. Those who begin in modest support roles must have an opportunity to assume more

responsible positions as they gain experience. At the same time, the organization must balance its commitment to wide participation with commitment also to efficient project administration and high-quality products.

- A work environment that fosters collaboration between paid employees and volunteers.

Some paid employees will probably be necessary, if only in support roles. Paid employees and volunteers have different interests. Unless the organizational culture respects the legitimate interests of both roles, one is likely to be adversely affected by the other. The organizations must resist the experience of many organizations which began as volunteer efforts but in which volunteers were displaced eventually by professionals.

- An approach to fund raising that does not compromise organizational independence.

Even if organizations are staffed entirely by volunteers, funds are needed to pay for space, equipment, telephone service, and other expenses. Fund-raising approaches should be used that emphasize general support for the organization rather than financing of specific projects. The interest in maintaining independence will also be served by raising smaller amounts from multiple donors rather than larger amounts from fewer sources.

My vision of what can be accomplished through an independent applied social research organization is based in part on my experience as director of research at the Community Service Society of New York, a large, private social welfare agency. During my tenure with the organization, it was fully professional in its staffing. (The Community Service Society's predecessor organizations were operated

by volunteers when they were founded in the nineteenth century.) I was employed there from 1974 to 1988. The Community Service Society had two important qualities: independence and breadth of vision. The Community Service Society was broadly concerned with the well-being of disadvantaged populations in New York City. It was not confined by the concerns of government agencies, religious sponsors, professional organizations, or even wealthy donors.

Because of its independence and breadth of concern, Community Service Society was able to take on issues that others overlooked. In the mid 1970s, for example, Community Service Society was willing to investigate the circumstances of adults in public places in New York City who appeared to be poor and chronically mentally ill. The subject was highly visible but systematically ignored by public agencies, professionals, and the press. A modest but well-crafted research project was conducted by Community Service Society to improve understanding of the phenomena (Baxter & Hopper, 1981) The project was funded, in part, by a private foundation concerned with mental health. Using qualitative methods, two researchers spent many months getting acquainted with people on the streets and observing the settings in which they lived. The study was successful in documenting serious limitations in the housing and social service resources available to this population. The research report received extensive local and national attention and played a key role in making homelessness a public issue in New York City and elsewhere in the United States.

The Community Service Society was also willing to examine consumer protection issues that rarely receive attention. We studied, for example, the experience of consumers in collecting monies owed them when they had won claims from businesses in Small Claims Court (Caro & Weis, 1984). In that court, consumers can readily represent themselves when they have disputes of a modest dollar

value with businesses. Consumers, for example, have a forum in Small Claims Court when they are unsuccessful in gaining a satisfactory settlement from a merchant in a dispute about defective merchandise. The problem is that consumers who win in Small Claims Court are often unsuccessful in collecting. This is a matter that can be very annoying to consumers but falls between the cracks of major institutions. We were able to conduct a modest survey of people who had won in Small Claims Court to determine the extent of their difficulties in collecting. In this instance, consumers who won judgments in Small Claims Court in a period some months prior to the initiation of the study were identified by examination of court records. Mailed questionnaires were used to obtain information from consumers. By documenting that nearly half were unable to collect, the study was successful in bringing renewed attention to the subject. With evidence in hand of the problems confronted by consumers in collecting in disputes involving businesses, we were able to convene the major stakeholders, which included the state Attorney General's office, the City Department of Consumer Affairs, and the Civil Court, who pledged themselves to a series of promising measures to alleviate the problem.

If an independent civic research organization with a similarly broad mandate and volunteer staffing existed in Boston, I would propose that its agenda include the restoration of civility among drivers of automotive vehicles. Boston is notorious in the United States for the complexity of its street patterns. Boston drivers have adapted to a difficult road configuration by driving very aggressively. Enforcement of traffic regulations is minimal. Blatant violations of traffic regulations are commonplace. Visitors to the city are often frightened when they drive or ride in automobiles. The bad driving habits of Bostonians make them hazardous drivers when they visit other cities. Boston can truly be said to have produced a culture of hazardous drivers.

An independent civic research organization staffed by volunteers could take on the issue. In this instance, structured observation techniques would be used. Systematic documentation would be relatively easy since the grossly objectionable driving patterns take place frequently in predictable locations. These behaviors include running red lights, lane violations in turning, and double parking. This research topic lends itself to investigation by an independent organization operating without official approval since it would be concerned with highly visible behavior that takes place on public roads. A call for action to address the problem based on careful research by a respectable citizen's group is likely to receive serious attention. A study of driving behavior conducted largely by older people would attract special interest since older people enjoy a reputation as bad drivers for reasons other than aggressive driving. In this instance, the research findings would command attention because the issues are important, affect much of the population, and the research would be carefully designed and executed. Since the pattern of hazardous driving is deeply entrenched in Boston, quick remedies cannot be expected. A stable, independent, civic research organization would have the potential to give the issue the persistent attention needed if substantial, long-term improvements are to be achieved.

A project of this nature would provide multiple opportunities for volunteers. In addition to offering roles for researchers, the project might enlist volunteers to write about the issues, examine policy options to improve driving behavior, and organize public forums to discuss the issues.

Admittedly, the proposal for the creation of independent civic research organizations staffed largely by older volunteers taking on major community issues is ambitious. The approach goes well beyond the opportunities for older people in training and participation in social research projects that is currently provided by the University of Massachusetts Boston. However, if we are serious about

inviting elders into the world of applied social research, we have to assure that there are settings in which elders with research skills can apply them. Universities have reason to play a role in launching these civic research organizations. The research organizations would provide a valuable forum for important volunteer work on the part of well-trained products of older adult education. In addition, alert civic-minded older people would be attracted to educational programs offering training that leads to opportunities for participation in civic research enterprises. Older adults, universities, and communities all stand to gain by creating these civic research enterprises that build upon the talent and effort of well-trained older volunteers.

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