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CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, CHICO: **INTERDISCIPLINARY COURSE ON HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS**

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QUICK FACTS

Year founded: **2017**

Project source: **Faculty**

Duration: **Semester-long**

Students per year: **80-100**

Interdisciplinary: **Yes**

Vertical integration: **No**

PROGRAM SUMMARY

This course brings together students across the disciplines of social work, political science, criminal justice and occasionally psychology to conduct community-based participatory research (CBPR) on issues relating to housing and homelessness in our community. Students enroll in a selected course in their major department (e.g., SWRK 485: Social Welfare, Policy, Programs and Services, or POLS 331: Introduction to Research Methods). These courses meet twice a week during the same time slots. Students meet in their disciplinary course once a week and then all gather for an interdisciplinary class on the other day, in a shared space with peers from the other discipline and all of the co-teaching professors. Most of the joint meeting times are dedicated to working in interdisciplinary groups on a selected CBPR project relating to housing and homelessness. Interdisciplinary teams focus on the broad question of how research informs policy and social change. At the end of the semester, students present their work in a public-facing presentation.

Year 1:

Community Survey Regarding Homelessness (Fall 2017): In the inaugural and pilot course, Professors Jennifer Wilking, Susan Roll and Mariah Kornbluh joined their three classes — POLS 331: Introduction to Research Methods; SWRK 485: Social Welfare, Policy, Programs and Services; and PSYC 401: Capstone in Community Psychology — totaling over 100 students. Joined sessions comprised approximately one-third of the class meetings and were held in the only available space at that time, a 400-seat auditorium with fixed seats. The research projects were selected by students and involved surveys of both housed and unhoused community members, regarding the greatest needs and challenges in the community around housing and homelessness. Over the course of the semester, students — working in interdisciplinary teams of 10–12 — designed the surveys, collected data and conducted preliminary analyses. Community agencies presented guest lectures in joint class meetings for the purpose

of informing the surveys, and students volunteered at a local shelter on National Make a Difference Day. Students presented their research at a campus research forum at the end of the semester. [Systematic assessment](#) of the first class demonstrated student growth in interdisciplinary collaboration, transference of course knowledge to real-world problems, critical consciousness, civic development and self-awareness.

Year 2:

Interviews with Unhoused Individuals Regarding Eight Policy Areas (Fall 2018): In the second iteration of the class, the same classes and professors participated, with over 100 students enrolled in the course. Joint sessions took up more of the class meetings — close to half the semester — and were held in a classroom intentionally designed for group work. The classroom includes 12 stations, each with a computer and monitor that could be independently controlled. The professors hired a community consultant from a local housing organization to assist in identifying eight areas of pressing community need around housing and homelessness, which included public health (bathrooms and handwashing stations, needle exchange and medical respite care for unhoused patients), public safety (housing for individuals with criminal records) and housing services (homelessness prevention, street outreach, tiny homes and permanent, supportive housing). Interdisciplinary teams of eight to 10 students designed interview questions relating to their specific topic, conducted interviews with individuals experiencing homelessness and analyzed the qualitative data. The community was involved in the course and in the research through the consultants who identified issue areas and held community consultation days, during which issue area experts from local agencies and nonprofits met with groups to provide feedback on the interview instrument and project direction. Students also volunteered at a local shelter on the same day they conducted interviews. Students voted on the best projects and representatives from the top three teams presented at a meeting of the Local City Council. All projects were on public display at the City Council chambers on that same evening.

Year 3:

Housing Insecurity and Homelessness Post-Camp Fire (Fall 2019): In the third iteration of the course, two classes were joined — POLS 331: Introduction to Research Methods and SWRK 485: Social Welfare, Policy, Programs and Services — for a total of 80 students. Students were tasked with developing and proposing a university/community collaboration focusing on one of three populations: students experiencing homelessness, survivors of the 2018 wildfire in the county (the Camp Fire) or chronically homeless individuals. Multiple groups, each consisting of eight to 10 students, focused on each population. Students worked with data from a previously designed and implemented mixed methods study (see publications [here](#) and [here](#)) conducted by Professors Wilking, Roll and Kornbluh, and funded by the California State University Chancellor’s Office. Each group created a website to present their proposed university/community collaboration. Community involvement included two consultation days, a volunteer day, and presentation of the group websites to campus and community members at a campus open house.

Year 4:

Understanding Barriers to Basic Needs Resources (Spring 2022): This interdisciplinary course joined SWRK 305: Community and Organizational Change with POLS 331: Introduction to Research Methods. Professors Roll and Wilking selected the project topic, Barriers to Accessing Basic Needs Services, and the community partner, the Basic Needs Project at Chico State. In this way, the course integrated with the professors' multi-year evaluation of the Basic Needs Project and the [College-Focused Rapid Re-Housing programs](#). Students worked in 12 groups of six to eight students and focused on developing campaigns to reduce barriers to Basic Needs Services, based on the findings of their semester-long research. Research involved the collaborative design and implementation of a survey, as well as engagement with low-income students on campus, to understand potential reasons students were not accessing available resources around food and housing. Community involvement included presentations and consultation days with Basic Needs Project staff. Students presented their ideas, informed by the research, at a campus open house during finals week.

The table below summarizes specific attributes of the course, such as levels of student involvement in the research and reciprocity with community partners, over the different iterations of the course.

Class strengths and weaknesses	2017: Student-designed community survey regarding homelessness	2018: Student-designed interview of homeless individuals around 8 issue areas	2019: Mixed methods study of housing insecurity and homelessness, post-Camp Fire	2022: Understanding barriers to Basic Needs resources
Student involvement in research	High	High	Moderate	High
Quality of research	Low	Low	High	High
Community involvement and reciprocity	Low	High	Moderate	Moderate
Impact of the projects	Low	High	High	Low

RESOURCES AND ADMINISTRATIVE MODEL

The courses are “unofficially” joined, in part to reduce the need for resources. Each department funds the individual course involved, and enrolled students count toward that department’s full-time equivalent students. The primary resources required are space and instructor time and commitment.

With respect to space, the class requires a classroom for each individual class on Tuesdays, and then a shared, larger space on Thursdays. Ideally, the shared space facilitates effective

group work. The class involves extensive planning, collaboration with community partners and development of research projects prior to the start of each semester. While co-teaching can reduce some of the required preparation for the involved instructors, the complexity involved in an interdisciplinary/CBPR course has required more time than a traditional class.

BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED

The major strength of the course is the combination of teaching, interdisciplinarity and community-based participatory research, which becomes more impactful than its individual components, for both students and faculty. This integration could impact broader goals beyond student outcomes and faculty professional development, such as increasing enrollment and enhancing the relevance and legitimacy of institutions of higher education.

Extensive research supports the impact of interdisciplinarity and CBPR as independent pedagogies on student outcomes such as ability to work in a team, empowerment, understanding of the research process and civic engagement (e.g., Bach & Weinzimmer, 2011; Lichtenstein et al., 2011; Mahoney & Brown, 2013; Stocking & Cutforth, 2006). These pedagogies are complementary — CBPR involves collaboration to address real-world problems that inherently involve more than one discipline (Sternberg, 2008). In this way, CBPR naturally encourages the breaking down of disciplinary boundaries and fosters collaboration with the local community (Dutton et al., 2015; Jung, 2017). Given this complementarity, more limited research, including our own, suggests that the combination of interdisciplinarity with CBPR is especially impactful for student empowerment, civic engagement and the ability to apply course concepts to real-world problems (Dunbar et al., 2013; Dutton et al., 2015; Jung, 2017; Kornbluh et al., 2020).

In addition to the positive impacts for students, integrating CBPR with instruction is also beneficial for faculty, especially at large, regional public institutions where teaching loads can be onerous. For example, across the California State University (CSU) system, the nation's largest system of higher education, many instructors teach four courses per semester and have research and service responsibilities. The integration of community-based participatory research with instruction is a way to efficiently satisfy service and research requirements via instruction. Additionally, team teaching not only brings in interdisciplinarity (in cross-discipline teams), but is essential given the complexity of the course, and helps to facilitate meaningful engagement with community partners. Moreover, and in our experience, co-teaching this CBPR course has been one of the most rewarding experiences of our careers.

Beyond benefits for students and faculty, systematically integrating CBPR and interdisciplinarity into the curriculum has potential for broader impacts. For example, providing greater access to CBPR may help strengthen university and community bonds, empower students to

facilitate change in their communities and increase the likelihood of students returning to rural communities. In the current context of a demographic shift resulting in fewer traditional college-age students, rethinking curricula to promote interdisciplinarity and project-based learning focused on community challenges may be a way forward in increasing enrollment.

CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES FOR THE FUTURE

The primary challenge for the model is scaling beyond the one class a year taught by Professors Wilking and Roll. In fall 2019, three lecturers attempted to replicate the model around the issue of sustainability, informally joining classes in political science, sociology and biology. Ultimately, the additional workload around planning and coordination made the approach untenable for non-tenure track faculty. Additionally, while Professors Roll and Wilking regularly discuss developing a joint class over two semesters in order to address larger and longer-term research projects, the time commitment required of the co-taught CBPR course has thus far been prohibitive. In a similar vein, Professors Roll and Wilking established the [Housing Research Group](#) (HRG) to better facilitate community-based research (and potentially teaching) around issues of housing and homelessness at Chico State. While the HRG has expanded beyond Professors Roll and Wilking to include two additional researchers with active, ongoing projects, interest among full-time faculty is impeded by limited time and resources.

The primary goal is to overcome this challenge and increase the number of students able to participate in interdisciplinary, CBPR courses. Given the current lack of external grant resources to fund course buyouts for participating faculty, we are exploring curricular innovations that would enable faculty and students to receive credit for the extra work that this type of course entails. For example, creating a one-unit course associated with each discipline would provide students with an additional unit of credit for participation in the extra research activities associated with the course. If the additional one-unit course were coded at .1 weighted teaching unit per student, and enrolled 30 students, this would effectively count the interdisciplinary course as two classes for faculty workload. Banking systems for participation in this type of high-intensity course could also incentivize faculty member participation.

Chico State is part of the California State University (CSU) system and is located in northern California. As part of the nation's largest public university system, Chico State is committed to increasing access to higher education and is a Hispanic-Serving Institution. A majority of Chico's 14,000 students are first-generation and 77% receive financial aid.

References

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