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Critical Reflection Report 2

Despite the initial challenges my SOL placement presented, the rest of the research process has flown by without much difficulty. Maybe this is because nothing could seem as overwhelming as a CBO canceling the internship. In any case, I got the biggest obstacle of the summer out of the way before I even began, and the seven weeks I have been out in the field have been more fulfilling than I would ever have expected.

While I have not changed my original research question (to paraphrase, what are the needs of the sub-Saharan African immigrant community in the Bronx?), in talking to members of this community and program directors who deal with them, I have developed a greater appreciation for its importance. When I first started, my impetus came from the casual observations of WHEDCO staff members, which were confirmed when I looked at statistics. Now, my desire to find out more and my dedication to this community has become more personal, as I have talked with individuals who can put a face to the extraordinary difficulties of low-income immigrants with a lack of community, education, and English comprehension. The first thing one woman said to me when we met was, "Thank you. This is so important for us." The more I hear, the more people I meet, the more pleased I am with my research question.

Likewise, the staff at WHEDCO has become even more supportive and enthusiastic about my research. My supervisor, Barbara, will usually sit me down once a day and ask me to tell her about any new insights I have. In my last critical reflection, I said: "Developing a better understanding of this population will be imperative for the development of effective programming in the future." I won't formally present my findings until the manager's meeting on Friday morning, but Barbara has already talked about organizing an ESL class or adult education programs in French and African languages for 2007. Everyone has been incredibly helpful—from taking the time to recruit individuals from their programs to participate, to looking over my outlines for interviews and focus groups and then advising me on what questions they are most curious about, to simply asking me how it's going. I think what I am doing is something they really can use to guide their programming.

My only complaint is that has sometimes been frustrating to have other people recruit for me. I agree with the directors that they would be able to convince more people to speak with me, since they already have relationships with and have gained the trust of their clients of sub-Saharan ancestry, but they have so much to deal with as it is that my project has not been a huge priority. This has led to a fair amount of last-minute planning and communication gaps, but nothing insurmountable. I must also concede that some of my frustration probably stems from my distrust of others to take care of "my baby" (sometimes it is warranted, but it can also be a weakness).

Overall, I'm pleased with my original research method design. I started out with a great set of questions that seem to answer almost everything (within reason) that I need to adequately respond to my central research question. But I have come to realize that I was overly optimistic about two things: my ability to communicate with individuals who lack a strong command of English, and the number of participants I would be able to recruit in such a short time. Most of my interviews have been fine, but a handful were punctuated with more "I don't understand" and futile gestures than real answers. These particular interviews were done with immigrants who had been in the States more than five years and had been in at least one year of daily English classes, so I was very surprised, but it just goes to show how difficult it is for these people to learn English. As I did not find as many participants as I had hoped, I interviewed all of them instead of using the survey, since I think the one-on-one conversations are more useful in formulating a community narrative than the multiple choice answers. But I don't feel like I wasted my time putting together that piece of my research design, as I have passed it on to WHEDCO for potential use in a community assessment they are compiling on the neighborhood surrounding their new facility that opens next year (I had used a survey put together by Dr. Jentleson as my guide, so it goes to show the longevity one's contributions can have, even if it is for different purposes). I also wish I had organized to meet with community leaders, such as the imams of the local mosques where many immigrants pray, or the directors of African CBOs in the Bronx and Manhattan. I will be including a list of potential community partners of this kind in my final product, so even though I was not able to make the initial contacts and gain their insight, at least WHEDCO will know who they are.

One thing I have become more appreciative of since I started talking to immigrants has been the vulnerability of this population. This makes my commitment to ethical inquiry even greater. Many of these individuals don't speak the language, are not documented and therefore can't receive many city services, have little formal education even in their native country, and have no real community to support them. I have heard about women getting scammed by people who offer to find them jobs. I try to present myself and WHEDCO as trustworthy. I explain the informed consent process to them and give all respondents a list of local support services for everything from housing to food stamps to free legal services. Even so, I wish there were more I could do, but their vulnerability is part of a complex set of issues that cannot be solved single-handedly. What is needed is systematic change; hence many of the staff at WHEDCO engage in advocacy outside of their responsibilities here.

My research has confirmed many of the program directors' observations about the needs of the sub-Saharan African community. From the statistics and testimonies I have gathered, the imperative to address the linguistic isolation, vulnerability, misunderstanding, and poverty traps (i.e., lack of education, documentation status) is clear. It has also revealed some nuances that differentiate these immigrants' culture from mainstream America. One woman told me she was offended when people say her son's name is rare. I have complimented people before by saying that they have interesting names, but will be more aware of whom I say this to in future, as immigrants might be made uncomfortable by such comments that further point out that they are "different." I

am fascinated by all of the responses I have gathered. Many of these people are getting by in spite of incredible adversity. Next Friday, I will be presenting the highlights of my findings and handing over the complete document at the WHEDCO managers' meeting.

There is a new intern upstairs, a second-year master's student at Hunter College. We had lunch the other day, and she told me she was completely surprised that I am only a junior in college. Since she is also doing a community needs assessment, I've been teaching her about all of the resources I have found and informally serving as her mentor on the project. This is my first time doing research, so I am very flattered and a bit shocked that WHEDCO wants me to teach someone else. I think it speaks equally to my strengths and the preparation Duke provides.

For my friends in I-Banking internships downtown, their summer experiences serve as very long job interviews. Since my SOL experience is nothing like the 80 hours-a-week, decadent (their jobs have incredible perks) work experiences of my friends, I never thought the function of my internship was anything like the traditional sort. In spite of my outlook, Barbara sent me an email the other day: "Come back next year and we'll pay you!" I did not expect that kind of an offer, and as much as I love WHEDCO, I'm not sure I would want to be at the same organization, anywhere, for two summers. I am thrilled that I have made such a good impression, but I actually think the greater value (besides future job prospects) in a summer internship is in discovering my own interests and values. What I have found this summer: I could definitely see myself in the public service sector. Hearing the clients' stories and watching WHEDCO empower them to become self-sufficient has been transformative. The people here are amazing—both the employees and the clients. I am more appreciative of how fortunate I am and what I can offer those who are struggling. A lot of the immigrants I've interviewed talk about how lucky they are to have a green card, or a job, or a good apartment; I think I'm lucky to have had this experience.