

Community-Based Research Design Template
For summer 2006 CBR projects—Service Opportunities in Leadership

Part One: Defining and Refining Your Research Question

1. What is your research question?

My research question asks: What are the factors affecting Sub-Saharan African immigrants in the Bronx on the path to self-sufficiency? This question has two approaches: 1) to probe the specific hardships faced by and service needs of the sub-Saharan African community (i.e., Is housing a big issue for this demographic or are they more concerned with finding jobs or ESL classes?) and 2) to explore what linguistic and cultural factors distinguish them from native-born, English-speaking eligible clients (in other words, what are the best strategies to bridge the cultural divide?).

Little has changed in regard to my research question throughout the process. It was quite broad to begin with, so the changes have been in the nuances in things I want to find out. For example, would they be more likely to apply for services at community organizations they are already connected with, such as their local mosque or the Gambian Society, than WHEDCO? Just different aspects that go back to the central question. I adjust my smaller questions as I learn more about the community.

2. Why is this a worthwhile question? By investigating this question, what problem will you be helping your community partner to address?

WHEDCO strives to give low-income men, women and children the tools they need to become self-sufficient by providing integrated services in the area of housing, workforce development and microenterprise, family support and childcare. These programs are rooted in the community's complex needs for relief and assistance. The agency has played an integral role in the improvement of the South Bronx over the past decade. Crime, unemployment, child abuse, and poverty have all fallen since WHEDCO came to the Bronx in 1996. But despite the impressive decline in all of these statistics, this area of New York still has the poorest indicators for quality of life in the city. There is still much to be done.

While WHEDCO already has comprehensive baseline statistics for many of their program participants and the surrounding neighborhood, they lack a comprehensive understanding of a new, growing immigrant group: sub-Saharan Africans. WHEDCO provides many bilingual programs for the enormous Hispanic population in the borough, but as they are seeing more and more sub-Saharan Africans come through their doors they need to similarly learn how to respond more effectively to their needs. Immigrants are often linguistically and culturally isolated. As more than 50%

of Bronx County residents are Hispanic/Latino, these kinds of barriers are less of an issue because they are the majority. Sub-Saharan Africans present a new, multi-faceted challenge, especially as they speak many different dialects. This is a valuable issue to address now, in the nascency of this demographic trend, as it looks to be an enduring development in immigration. WHEDCO program managers and service providers have expressed their desire to know more about the cultural differences, daily life experiences, and particular needs for social services among this population. My research question aims to provide a comprehensive picture of this special population. With this information in hand, WEHDCO will be able to plan and tailor their programs to provide better solutions for hardships faced by sub-Saharan immigrants visiting the agency.

I am more firm in my belief that this is a worthwhile question, having heard personal accounts of the hardships faced by sub-Saharan African immigrants. Many of their issues – no English skills, poor education, lack of community – are interdependent. As one of WHEDCO's goals is to provide integrated services to help people become self-sufficient, they are a good organization to address this challenge.

3. What do you know so far about your research topic:

a. From your own experience or from your community partner?

I know so much more than I did first starting out on this project. I was relying mostly upon casual observations by program directors at the outset, but now having met with members of the community, I have become better acquainted with the challenges this community faces: linguistic isolation, lack of documentation, inadequate childcare, poor education and unemployment, a lack of community. I have also realized that “sub-Saharan Africans” is not a cohesive grouping; so much depends on which specific country they came from, why they came to the Bronx, their religion, etc. in influencing both their social service needs and their culture.

b. From the scholarly literature?

According to the 2004 American Community Survey, an estimated 411,584 (or 31%) of the Bronx County, New York, population are foreign-born. People of sub-Saharan ancestry now comprise nearly 4% of the Bronx population. Between 2000 and 2004, the magnitude of this population grew by over 15,000 persons, which was the largest increase proportionally among foreign groups. Of the 29,027 African language-speaking population, only 56% speak English “very well”. This statistic is only 4% higher than the Spanish-speaking population, a group that has so deeply entrenched itself in this area that there is virtually no need to speak English as everything is offered bilingually with Spanish. Sub-Saharan Africans do not have this kind of support structure – their linguistic isolation makes them difficult to reach for service agencies like WHEDCO. Across virtually all census indicators, foreign-born persons, those of sub-Saharan ancestry and/or birth, African language-speaking persons and the percentage of Blacks in Bronx county of foreign birth (up to 28% in 2004) have all increased

significantly since 1990, gaining more momentum since the 2000 Decennial Census.

4. Critical reflection on your research question:

- a. Is it clear, specific, and feasible for you to answer adequately in the time available?

With only six weeks to collect, analyze and present the data, this was a complex research question, and I put together a very ambitious proposal – surveys, interviews, and focus groups. Given the time frame, I think I overestimated the response I would get, but I was able to talk to enough people to answer my research question. I've had to nix the surveys and interviews with the children. The first, because with so few respondents I felt it was important to gather as much information from each of them as possible, and the latter because school ended, there was a two week vacation and with the frenzy of the first weeks of camp (more than 60 kids they had not planned for showed up), getting parental approval and talking to the kids just was not feasible. As this was not critical to answer my research question, I am not too upset that I had to cut back (although it would have been fun). Overall, I think I have more than enough data to create a community narrative of sub-Saharan African immigrants in the Bronx and provide WHEDCO with practical strategies to address their particular barriers.

- b. What kind of question are you asking? For instance, do you have a hypothesis you are testing? Or is your research more exploratory and inductive, so that your goal is to *develop* rather than to *test* a hypothesis?

My research question is more exploratory and inductive in nature. I am not seeking to prove a correlation between poverty or service needs and sub-Saharan African birth, but rather to probe the self-reported needs and characteristics of this community and use this information alongside the statistics to devise a set of recommendations for my community partner to make their outreach with this community more effective. I can see this when I look over the transcripts of my interviews and focus groups – exploratory would be exactly the word I would use to describe the tone.

- c. By the way you have framed your question, is it clear that you understand the distinction between research and (political or organizational) advocacy? Will your research respect the principles of open inquiry?

Yes. I framed my question as an open-ended inquiry into the barriers to self-sufficiency for the sub-Saharan African community in the Bronx. It has directed how I have designed my research methods, but it does not point to an expected or desired answer.

5. Who else is on your project team?

- a. Faculty Mentor Barbara Jentleson
- b. Community Partner WHEDCO, EVP Barbara Zerzan

c. Others?

Part Two: What is your Research Design? What steps will you follow to answer your question?

1. What data do you need to collect? How will you decide the parameters of this data? (**For instance, if you will be studying a particular population, who belongs and who doesn't? If you will be collecting data from documents, what documents will you need, over what timeframe, etc.?**)

My goal is to gather a variety of responses that will highlight the needs of the sub-Saharan African community in the Bronx and that I can analyze in order to provide recommendations to my community partner. I am looking to find out where their concerns are with the borough as a place to live (including safety, schools, community relationships, health care, housing and jobs), why they left their country of origin and how they chose to settle in the Bronx (Do they come here because of its proximity to NYC? Because they have friends or family already here?), what social services they are most interested in, why they do not seek out other services, their perception of their community in the Bronx and what hardships they have faced and the impact on their lives since moving here. The survey, one-on-one interviews and focus groups will address these issues in different contexts. My intention is for the more easily administered survey to provide an overall view of the community's needs, while the interviews and focus groups can explicate further and provide a narrative context for my recommendations. By interviewing children, I hope to get an idea of what it is like for this community coming through the schools and for their perspective on cultural differences between the U.S. and their country of origin.

The specific sub-Saharan African immigrants I am most interested in are those in a low-income demographic. While I will not be screening participants for their income level (although I do ask for it in some of the questions), I anticipate that most respondents will be of a lower socioeconomic class because of my means of recruitment (through services provided to this population). Even if a respondent is not near or below the poverty line, there is still value in hearing their story as a sub-Saharan African immigrant. They may even be better prepared to offer explanations and recommendations for effective services for these people, as they have overcome barriers as an immigrant and succeeded in America.

In addition to the research with human subjects, I will also be looking at the internal data collected by WHEDCO on sub-Saharan Africans who have enlisted their services. I have already completed an analysis of census data on immigrants for Bronx County (for statistics for the President of WHEDCO to give to the New York Times reporter working on a story about the 14 different languages spoken by children at the Head Start center – 9 are African dialects), which was formulaic in the development of my research question and served as a nice introduction to the demographic I am interested in.

2. What method or methods will you use to collect data? (e.g., **one-on-one interviews, surveys, focus groups, questionnaires, direct observation, analysis of documents, etc.**)

Survey:

The survey should take no longer than 15 minutes to complete. Respondents will choose among fixed responses to most questions, which asks their feelings about the Bronx, daily life and social services and asks for information regarding use of various social programs and demographics. There is space for some open-ended response at the end of the survey.

Interview (Adult):

Interviews will last approximately one half-hour and will begin by asking for preliminary demographic information (age, gender, country of origin, employment status, family composition and education) and move on to the questions regarding the reasons for their immigration, daily life experience and feelings regarding social services in the Bronx.

Interview (Children):

Interviews will last approximately 10 minutes in length. They will ask for some basic demographic information (age, gender, country of origin, grade, time spent in U.S.) and move on to questions regarding daily life, school experience, their support networks, and feelings about living in the Bronx.

Focus group:

Like the survey and interview agendas, the focus group will be structured to cover topics of the Bronx as a place to live, daily life and social services. It will delve deeper into these subjects and be an opportunity for longer, personal responses from a larger group.

Data analysis:

I will be looking into the WHEDCO databases to quantify the program managers' observations that the number of sub-Saharan Africans they are seeing are increasing. While the consistency of data is a bit spotty in the databases, there should be enough information to find general trends in the numbers of sub-Saharan Africans who are utilizing WHEDCO resources, which services they are seeking out in greatest numbers and what other barriers they have to self-sufficiency (drug addiction, past incarceration, homelessness, etc.).

3. What is your project timeline? What are the "lock-in" dates for your project to ensure that you are able to leave a research product with your community partner before you leave? (*Dates in parentheses are a suggested project timeline for a 10-week summer research internship*)

a. Lock-in Date #1: Finalizing your research question and research design

(End of week 2)

My lock-in date #1 is: June 9

b. Lock-in Date #2: Completing your “data collection” phase

(End of week 6)

My lock-in date #2 is: July 7

c. Lock-in Date #3: Completing your “data analysis” phase

(End of week 8)

My lock-in date #3 is: July 14

d. Lock-in Date #4: Completing your research synthesis, conclusions, and recommendations and giving your research product to your community partner

(End of week 10)

My lock-in date #4 is: July 21

4. What *logistical* issues do you need to think about in collecting your data?

My main logistical issue will be to navigate the language barrier I may face with some respondents. While I expect most of the research subjects to be able to answer my questions in English, I also need to be prepared to gather responses from persons who are on the low end of the do not speak English “very well” spectrum. Through my contacts in WHEDCO programs I hope to find a translator to assist in some cases.

I also need to anticipate the time crunch for collecting, analyzing and compiling data. Focus groups must be planned and advertised in advance.

5. What *ethical* issues do you need to think about in collecting your data?

The primary ethical issue to be aware of as I collect my data is to respect the privacy and feelings of the participants. A lot of the issues I am interested in could be perceived as intrusive and are also associated with stigmatized conditions, such as being homeless, unemployed or poor (all three of which may come up in a survey, interview and focus groups). The topic of the participant's hardship may be embarrassing and/or painful. This is a sensitive area. It is also possible that participants may reveal illegal activity, although questions will not directly ask for any such disclosure. In this case, protecting their confidentiality will be critical. The other ethical concern is that participants could misconstrue their participation with an expectation that they will gain immediate benefits. Through the consent-assent process I will deal with the IRB, I will address these ethical concerns by making it explicit that a) participants may decline to participate at any time and b) participation is not tantamount to entitlement to housing, childcare or welfare resources (but information for services in all of these areas will be available at research sites).