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Implementing a Wellness Program with Trenton Youth: Undergraduate Student Reflections about Community-Engaged Research

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Introduction

Participation in community psychology-based experiences has provided a multitude of benefits for undergraduate students, such as challenging students to critically think about and engage in conversation about social issues, and increasing their awareness of social inequities (Henderson, Majors, & Wright, 2021). Furthermore, these experiences reinforce the importance of community engagement, increasing students' competence in advocating the complexities of social issues in and around their communities (Henderson et al., 2021), and can increase students' commitment to pursuing socially responsible careers (Ellison, 2018). Thus, the experiential learning experience provided by many community psychology courses allows students to utilize their abilities directly in the field, developing useful skills that are highly transferable (McKibban & Steltenpohl, 2019).

The increase in poor mental health conditions among youth in the United States is a prominent social issue that community psychologists are currently striving to improve (Murthy, 2022). In 2021, approximately 42% of youth reported enduring continuous feelings of sadness and/or hopelessness (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Additionally, the Office of the Surgeon General, in 2021, has reported that rates of anxiety and depressive symptoms have doubled in around 20% of young individuals.

Numerous environmental factors have been contributing to the ongoing youth mental health crisis including social media, bullying, isolation from the COVID-19 pandemic, and high levels of stress (Abrams, 2023). In addition, marginalized youth, including racial and ethnic minorities and LGBTQ+ youth, continue to be disproportionately affected by the youth mental health crisis (Murthy, 2022) due to environmental factors such as discrimination, racism, violence, bullying, and experiences of trauma (Abrams, 2023). The accumulation of not only biological but also life experiences has exacerbated the mental health struggles young individuals go through (Office of the Surgeon General, 2021). Furthermore, members of marginalized communities are less likely to seek mental health services due to factors such as stigma and mistrust, which ultimately decreases access to mental healthcare and resources for marginalized children (Narendorf, Munson, Ben-David, Cole, & Scott, 2018).

The College of New Jersey (TCNJ) is located in Ewing, New Jersey, and Community Engaged Learning (CEL), especially with partner organizations in Trenton, is a Signature Experience required for all students. Although adjacent to each other, there are significant differences between the two communities. Ewing has a predominantly white population, with only

41% of the town's residents being non-white, while Trenton has a non-white population of approximately 70% (predominantly African-American and Hispanic residents). While the median household income in Ewing is about \$78,000/year, it is \$40,000/year in Trenton, with 28% of people living below the poverty line, with Ewing being 12% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Finally, in 2020, Trenton reported 40 homicides, while Ewing had three (MidJersey News, 2022; NJ State Police, 2022). The current paper will delve into a partnership between TCNJ and UrbanPromise Trenton (UPT). We describe the process of program development and implementation to address mental health issues among youth in Trenton, offering insights and reflections from the authors throughout.

Program Description and Lessons Learned

Fostering Trust and Shared Vision: Building Partnerships for Community Engagement

[UrbanPromise Trenton](#) (UPT; UrbanPromise Trenton, 2023) is a non-profit organization based in Trenton, New Jersey dedicated to empowering 1st through 12th-grade urban students for their future academic and professional endeavors. UPT has 4 main principles upon which they build their programming: academic achievement, life skills management, spiritual growth, and Christian leadership. The organization offers a multitude of programs including after-school drop-in sessions, summer camps, and youth college readiness initiatives, all designed to foster growth, leadership, and personal development for every youth member involved.

During the 2022-2023 academic year, our Research on Engagement, Adjustment, and Community Health (REACH) lab at TCNJ joined forces with UPT to address the pressing concern of youth mental health in the Trenton community. Our specific focus was on UPT's StreetLeaders program, which consists of two groups of high school students, aged 14 to 18. These students play a pivotal role in the development and implementation of after-school activities for the younger, elementary students while engaging in leadership development, community service, college preparation, and mentoring activities themselves.

Every Friday, the StreetLeaders (SLs) partake in enrichment meetings, in which they hone their own personal and professional development skills. As our lab began to work with UPT during the 2022-2023 academic year, we engaged in various discussions about what type of project would benefit their youth the most. The program's Executive Director noted concerns about the students' overall wellness, especially in the aftermath of the pandemic, as well as the lack of resources and awareness on these issues. Therefore, in winter 2022, the REACH lab and UPT came to the collaborative decision of mental health and wellness as the topic of the year's upcoming enrichment program. Our lab then modified and implemented a six-week wellness intervention program with the students. This program centered on fostering behaviors, thoughts, and actions that help promote well-being and positive mental health outcomes. As we delved into this endeavor, we aimed to equip our students with the tools and knowledge to navigate the complexities of mental health while offering them a safe space to develop personally and professionally. Our collaborative initiative is a testament to the power of community partnership in addressing critical issues and nurturing the potential of Trenton's youth.

Maintaining Effective Communication that Supports Partnership

Building upon TCNJ's existing partnership with UPT proved to be an essential factor in the success of our program. As undergraduate students engaged in community-based research, we quickly grasped the importance of effective communication with our community partner. In our

experience, we learned that clear and compassionate communication was the foundation of trust and productive collaboration.

UPT, being a dynamic organization with numerous programs and projects that run concurrently, often had staff engaged in various activities throughout the year, making certain periods exceptionally busy. During one such instance, our research group sought the input of a Senior StreetLeader on an activity we were planning. Despite our initial outreach, we had not received a response, but we were also aware that the students in the program had an upcoming performance that they had been preparing for.

In a move to maintain a harmonious partnership, we decided to take a more personal approach. Rather than sending additional emails, we opted to arrive at the site of one of our sessions early, allowing us to engage with the Senior StreetLeader directly and discuss our plans. This approach proved to be fruitful, as it not only facilitated productive dialogue but also ensured that we did not overwhelm our community partner with excessive communication. The lesson we learned in effective, considerate communication during this instance became a guiding principle that carried from the planning stages through the rest of our program implementation efforts.

Building Knowledge and Fostering Connections

To prepare for our work with UPT, all undergraduate lab members completed a series of comprehensive training programs. These included Flourish Agenda's Healing Centered Engagement training, active listening training, the National Council for Mental Wellbeing's certification for Youth Mental Health First Aid Training, and the completion of the University of Michigan's online course on Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR). Our training was focused on enhancing our understanding of mental health, wellness, and trauma-informed, healing-centered approaches. This preparation not only equipped us with essential knowledge but also enabled us to think critically about our own motivations for engaging in wellness-focused work. Additionally, it allowed us to hone our facilitation skills, which proved invaluable in establishing meaningful connections with our students.

Yale University professor Dr. Laurie Santos's free online course, "The Science of Well-Being for Teens," was used as a framework to guide the design of our sessions. The six-week course aims to combat the current youth mental health crisis by helping teenagers build healthier habits through a combination of presenting scientific findings about happiness in the field of psychology and homework assignments that help students put those findings into practice. Course content includes six modules: Misconceptions about happiness, Biases that get in the way of happiness, Behaviors that make us happy, Thoughts that make us happy, Feelings that make us happy, and Achieving happiness goals (Santos, 2021). This framework provided a well-structured and evidence-based foundation for our sessions.

Although SLs are usually split up into two camps at different locations, each with about ten students, we thought it was best to meet with the entire group for the first session. This time was dedicated to introducing them to the course content, and, more importantly, establishing the groundwork for building relationships, connections, and trust with our students. A particularly effective strategy involved each facilitator taking turns to share their personal motivations for participating in the implementation of the program. Another activity that worked well was playing a trivia game with the students to gauge their current understanding of mental health and well-being. Some sample questions asked were, "What are some benefits of practicing mindfulness?" and "What is the percentage of teens that say social media platforms make them feel like they have people who can support them through tough times?" Based on the response to this activity, it was

clear that interactive activities were effective in encouraging discussion and connection among the SLs and between the SLs and our team. Overall, this initial session to introduce course content and familiarize ourselves with our students was beneficial in forming foundational connections that we aimed to nurture and deepen as the program progressed.

Embracing Flexibility to Maximize Student Engagement

Throughout our sessions, maximizing student engagement was a top priority while ensuring we still effectively delivered the course content. Sessions were structured around quizzes covering the previous session, watching Dr. Santos's videos, tying content to interactive activities to involve students, and reflective journal entries. However, after collecting input about the program structure through the journal entries and with direct questions, we found that students were disengaged with the videos because they were a passive activity, and at times, they struggled to relate to the content within. In response to this feedback, we revamped our entire framework of program implementation, shifting to a completely activity-based structure with time for group discussion and individual reflection.

A lesson learned from this particular experience is the value of flexibility. Being able to stay open-minded, and adjust and modify plans when faced with unexpected challenges is a valuable skill that we have all now had tangible experience with, as well as seen evidence of its success. This experience has also taught us the importance of taking setbacks in stride. In future endeavors, we are sure to face more situations in which our initial plans or strategies fall short of expectations. Still, we are now better equipped to embrace unforeseen circumstances as opportunities for growth and learning in our future pursuits.

Understanding, Cultural Relevance, and Ethical Engagement

Conducting community-based research has afforded us the opportunity to grasp the significance of understanding the specific population we are working with and adapting to their needs and interests. The demographics and personalities of the SLs varied significantly between the two UPT locations. While one location had a predominantly female participant base, the other included more male participants. We observed differences in communication styles; the former group tended to be more communicative when placed in a large group setting while the latter shared their stories more in small groups. Consequently, we have come to appreciate that even when participants may come from similar backgrounds, we, as community-based researchers, must invest in understanding the needs of the specific group of people that we are working with and their interests. Thorough comprehension of the group allows us to tailor our approaches to best align with our partners' needs, creating environments that resonate with their nature. In future projects, we envision conducting preliminary observations of the population before project commencement, actively taking note of characteristics essential to their identity.

We also learned the importance of ensuring that our sessions were culturally relevant for the SLs. Much of the content from Dr. Santos's well-being course failed to account for barriers related to race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. Notably, issues such as racism, discrimination, sexism, community violence, or oppression were rarely addressed in relation to their profound impact on an individual's happiness and well-being. One of our lab's primary objectives was to approach the program through the lens of cultural humility, aiming to be aware of the limitations of our own cultural experiences while maintaining an open-minded perspective that involves respect and understanding of individual experience (Dacis, Owen, DeBlaere, & Hook, 2017). We made it a point to emphasize that individual circumstances and differences

significantly influence personal health and that it is entirely normal to feel distressed, angry, or upset in an unfair society or when one does not feel heard, respected, or valued. Therefore, attempting to ‘generalize’ a well-being approach to fit every individual and their needs proved inadequate, and we are committed to keeping this critical lesson in mind as we continue our work within diverse communities.

Furthermore, this project has underscored the importance of working alongside participants, keeping their best interests at heart, and ensuring that our work is ethical and will ultimately benefit our participants and society in a meaningful way. Regrettably, there has been an unfortunate history of mistreatment and discrimination of racial and ethnic minorities in the realm of research, exemplified by instances such as the Tuskegee Syphilis Study (Lincoln et al., 2021), resulting in cultural trauma and mistrust of researchers’ intentions. As researchers, our objective extends beyond data collection and analysis; instead, it is driven by a commitment to pursue research and convey results in a way that ensures trust amongst participants, actively incorporating the voices and input of all involved.

Final Conclusions

Future suggestions

For those seeking to implement a similar program, we recommend a fully collaborative project from start to finish. While the program shared valuable content and activities, designing the sessions together with program staff would have better prepared us to get students involved; we realized that program directors and site leaders have valuable insight regarding what works for their students. In the same vein, we would also suggest a larger emphasis placed on forming connections with the students in one’s program. We found that students were willing to share honest feedback and provide insight on discussion topics towards the end of the program after they had become more familiar with us.

We focused on the learning aspect of our program, making sure that students understood the concepts about mental well-being and happiness being taught. We found that when students were able to practice during sessions, they seemed to realize the benefits of their efforts. Indeed, research suggests that consistent practice is important for improving psychological well-being. Future program leaders should seek to integrate practice activities into the sessions themselves rather than only assigning them for homework.

Personal and Professional Development

During our time working with UPT, we, as a team, have gained valuable insights into our own career interests and about what it takes to partner with a community to deliver a project that will create lasting change. Working directly in the field as part of a community-based research experience has better equipped each of us to have success in pursuing future opportunities related to social change.

Throughout the entire project, our Professor placed a heavy emphasis on process-evaluation methods and outcome-evaluation methodology. Thus, rather than just focusing on the success of the well-being program, we were also able to focus on implementation and how community-based research contributes to program development. In a world that often only highlights the success and impact of programs, such methodology is essential to understanding the root of development and change. It is necessary to focus on the context, the available resources, the system, and the problems faced to move forward into outcomes. We believe this is a necessary mindset for all who want to go further in community-related programs.

Moreover, witnessing the positive impact on our students' engagement was truly gratifying. For instance, during our revised activity-based sessions, we observed students actively participating and eagerly sharing their thoughts. This has reinforced our belief in the importance of passion and purpose in our professional pursuits, serving as an example of the empowerment and fulfillment that come from aligning our work with a meaningful cause. It has motivated us to seek out further opportunities that allow us to make a genuine difference in people's lives.

The ability to apply skills directly in the field makes the lessons we took away from this experience all the more valuable. Not only are we more motivated to be involved in social change projects, but we have also built a strong foundation of skills that make us more capable of achieving our professional and personal goals. We are incredibly grateful for the opportunity to have partnered with UrbanPromise Trenton to promote well-being. This project has undoubtedly left a lasting impact on each one of us and our future pursuits.

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