

Shifting from Community-Engaged to Community-Partnered Teaching: Co-Creating a Program Evaluation Class

In 2021, the University of Illinois School of Public Health (UIC-SPH) launched its *Community Course Alignment* initiative. Funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the project aligns student learning with community partner needs. As part of *Course Alignment*, community collaborators and faculty members receive compensation and administrative support for their efforts to commit to community-engaged teaching.

Piloted in 2023, Community-Engaged Program Evaluation, sprung from this initiative. Rather than designing hypothetical evaluations based on case studies or hearing from professionals about their experiences, two instructors, 23 students, and five program staff from Lawrence Hall, a local community-based organization, collaborated weekly to co-develop a program evaluation plan for one of the agency’s youth-development and recidivism-prevention programs. By the end of the term, our “evaluation team” had produce a stakeholder analysis, comprehensive program theory, logic model, process and outcome evaluation plans, and a set of literature reviews.

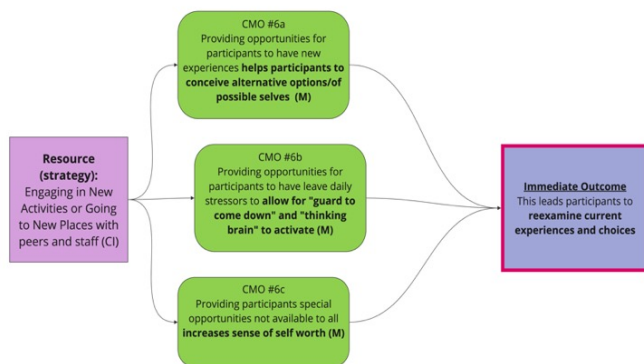


Our class and community partners at a visit to their office

While practice-based teaching is not unusual in schools of public health, this class reflects a shift to *community-partnered teaching*. From its inception, the class was co-developed with our collaborators, and each week, up to five Lawrence Hall staff attended class (in person) as full members of our learning community (with complete access to university resources). Frequently, our collaborators the lead in class discussions, and as the semester progressed, an atmosphere of genuine co-learning emerged as students and faculty looked to the program staff as experts in real-world program design, and they looked to us as experts in public health, theory-building, and evaluation.

Grounded in community-centered inquiry, our evaluation plan intentionally centered the voices and expertise of the program staff and participants. The program at the heart of our class emerged from the lived experience of a staff

member who grew up in the community on Chicago’s South Side and experienced gang life, systemic racism, poverty, and incarceration. The program’s components are rooted in his experiences and those of the youth he serves, not in public health theory, conceptual models, or scientific evidence, and the outcomes he and the other staff care about are transformational. The class relied on realist and theory-driven evaluation approaches, creating in-depth descriptions of each of the four components of the program. Students interviewed former program participants to learn how they experienced the program and what they thought was important, and created diagrams of the program theory, thinking about how existing scientific theories might apply and making changes



A sample of our program theory pathway

iteratively as they worked. Literature reviews were completed for each program component, providing our partners with academic justification that supported what the program staff already knew. Finally, evaluation questions were generated that were guided by this program theory, and by the interests of the program staff.

This synergy from co-creating our evaluation plan impacted our community partners as much as our students. As we crafted the program theory, they saw places where the connections between activities and outcomes were less clear, and questions asked by students led them to consider programmatic changes. Participating in this class, they told us, allowed them to think deeply about the program in ways they had neither the time nor the capacity to do before. Moreover, by sharing these revelations with the class, asking us the hard questions, and helping us to think through the answers, our students saw the power that comes out of genuine community-academic collaboration.