

Research Brief
Geography of Broadening Participation Conference
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Chicago State University is a predominately African-American institution on the far South Side of Chicago with an overall enrollment of around 7000. It is primarily a teaching-oriented university, with roots as a normal school. The undergraduate population is approximately 85% African-American and 10% Hispanic. The vast majority of CSU undergraduates come from within ten miles of the school, many from within 5 miles. Chicago State has strong undergraduate programs in Biological Sciences, Sociology, and Psychology. However, both the hard sciences (Chemistry and Physics) and Geography have had difficulty attracting undergraduate majors. In addition, the environmental option in Biology has had very few students, and a multi-disciplinary Environmental Studies minor that has been in place for approximately ten years has had very few graduates. The Geography program itself has been generally focused on its MA and GIS and Community Development certificate programs. These programs are generally successful (with an overall enrollment of 25 in spring 2012 and about 30 active students) while the undergraduate major is very small.

The core question for the undergraduate Geography program at Chicago State has been how to attract students from its service region to a discipline that few have heard of and see (erroneously) as not leading to a career. The program has partnered visited high schools, where there is often interest in Chicago State as institution, but little interest in geography as a discipline (a frequently asked question is “can you tell me about the criminal justice major?”). A developing partnership with a high school with a GIS program ended when the program was disbanded. A NOAA sponsored grant to support a meteorology program that spanned a community college and Chicago State attracted a total of one student. While these traditional methodologies are still being tried, particularly articulation agreements with community colleges, new methodologies are needed if the undergraduate major is to survive university budget cuts.

One way that Chicago State’s Geography program stands out from many other programs, both at CSU and elsewhere, is its long history of community based research, Contained within the program is the Fred Blum Neighborhood Assistance Center (NAC), a community engagement center which has the following areas of focus:

- Assisting in the development of neighborhood planning projects in ways that enable neighborhood residents to develop their own strategies for neighborhood maintenance and revitalization.
- Performing land use and housing quality surveys, feasibility studies, market analyses, food and social service access analyses, grant writing assistance, and database construction.
- Mapping assistance and spatial analyses using the department's Geographic Information System (GIS) laboratory.

In practice, for the past five years much of the current work of the NAC has rotated around work related to food systems and health inequities. The NAC has led or participated in the development of four food access studies, including a large study covering the entire six-county Chicago metropolitan area. In many cases, these studies combined GIS and qualitative research techniques and involved partnerships with both public health scholars and practitioners as well as a large variety of neighborhood organizations. The NAC also hosts the Roseland-Pullman Urban Agriculture Network, a network of urban agriculture and community garden organizations performing what Guthman (2008) calls “community food practice” on Chicago’s far South Side.

The food focus has led to related community-based work in health disparities and medical geography. An example is a current project working on to map and survey Chicago Community Health Workers (also called Promotoras de Salud, health navigators, and many other names). Community health workers helped create the survey being used and are currently participating in the analysis and dissemination phase of the project. Many of these projects fall within what researchers in public health label Community Based Participatory Research, or CBPR. While levels of participation vary greatly between CBPR projects, a focus of CBPR is on broadening community participation in research and creating research that is more closely tied to the needs of communities. Within geography, the NAC is part of a growing number of centers and faculty focused on doing “community geography,” community-engaged geographic work that involves close, and often long-standing, partnerships with community organizations in a university’s service area. A leading example of this is Syracuse University’s Community Geographer, a faculty position and associated center devoted to the completion of community-based geographic research.

CBPR is by definition, participatory, and food geography is a perfect subject to utilize such participatory methods since food consumption and buying is an important part of most adult’s lives and one in which they often a strong bodies of

knowledge about. In addition, people often understand and articulate difference through the landscapes of their communities, including the services provided to them such as supermarkets, and the quality of those services. An example of this is this statement from an African-American consumer from a West Side Chicago community from a 2003 focus group: “In the predominately white neighborhood, I have went to the produce, seen unusual vegetables and fruits. But near the vegetables and fruits they would have little pamphlets, explaining, talking about the nutrition of fruit, where it comes from, what it’s supposed to taste like, and how it should be used. But I’ve never seen that in my neighborhood.” The study of food access and community production thus becomes a tool for community members to learn more about their own communities and to organize responses to problems.

CBPR principles involve integrating community members into the research process itself. Community members are, through this process, trained to work on, and even lead, academic research projects. In addition, community members help tailor a research project to meet community needs, and, if done well, the research itself will be more useful to the community. If done correctly, CBPR is particularly good at translating scientific findings and methods to the public and broadening participation in geographic and related research.

As depicted in the NSF report “Framework for Evaluating Impacts of Broadening Participation,” community outreach/dissemination is an integral portion of broadening participation, and both CBPR and community geography go beyond outreach or dissemination to participation in the actual research process, perhaps to an even higher standard than NSF intended. However, such participation does not necessarily lead to new majors. To address this, the NAC is leading an effort to build a multi-institution South Side urban agriculture educational network, linking youth programs that utilize urban agriculture, community colleges and a new multi-disciplinary urban agriculture program within the geography and biology programs. Still, a key question is how to integrate CBPR learning into traditional teaching and utilize it to help attract new students into geography and other STEM disciplines. In addition, it is somewhat unclear how to evaluate the connection between CBPR and enrollment unless specific participants in a CBPR project enroll in the program.