

INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL CONCERNS COMMUNITY CASES

MANAGING DUAL ROLES IN COMMUNITY PRACTICE

SUMMARY: Navigating the dual responsibilities of community engagement and research.

CASE TYPE: Practical

Practical cases offer procedures and strategies for handling situations that one might encounter in community engaged work. These cases have answers that would be considered appropriate and others that would be ill advised.

This case follows a student navigating the dual roles of community support worker and academic researcher. Although this dynamic creates complex ethical tensions, the following text focuses exclusively on practical considerations. For the ethical perspective, please refer to the companion case: [“The Ethics of Engagement and Inquiry.”](#)

FOCUS AREAS	LEARNING OBJECTIVES
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Navigating Dual Roles• Cultural Humility• Learning from Discomfort	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Identify strategies for clearly defining and communicating distinct roles within a community organization.2. Analyze the practical challenges of balancing service delivery with academic requirements.3. Develop actionable protocols for time management and stakeholder communication in immersive settings.4. Explore methods for soliciting and incorporating feedback from community partners to improve workflow.

SCENARIO

Sarah, a sophomore political science student, is spending the summer living in a small community and working with a grassroots nonprofit which provides transitional housing and support to formerly incarcerated women. Sarah’s primary role at the site is to support their reentry services, specifically assisting women with resume writing and online job applications. At the same time, Sarah has been tasked with gathering data for a faculty-mentored research project. She has chosen to study the specific bureaucratic barriers faced by women when seeking employment after incarceration.

Sarah attempts to integrate her research into her daily service work. She frequently transitions between helping a resident navigate a job portal and asking them questions for her data set regarding the barriers they are encountering. She assumes this is efficient, but she notices that the work is becoming disorganized. Residents often seem confused about whether a conversation is confidential assistance or an interview for her project. One afternoon, after approaching a resident to ask a follow-up question for her data set, the resident looks frustrated and asks, “Wait, are you here to help us or study us? I thought we were working on my housing

application.” Sarah realizes her lack of clear boundaries is causing operational friction and confusion. She worries that by trying to do both things simultaneously, she is doing neither effectively.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What challenges come with trying to be both a researcher and a participant in a community? Do you feel it is possible to effectively do both?
2. What practical steps could Sarah have taken at the beginning of the summer to clearly distinguish her two roles (volunteer vs. researcher)?
3. How can Sarah communicate her objectives to the residents in a way that eliminates confusion? What scripts or strategies might be useful here?
4. What strategies could help build trust while still meeting research goals? Could Sarah adapt her project? Should she pause or revise it? When might this become necessary?
5. How would you effectively schedule a week to ensure you meet both the service needs of the organization (resumes/housing) and your academic deliverables?
6. If Sarah needs to "reset" expectations with the residents and staff, how should she go about doing that pragmatically?
7. What feedback mechanisms could Sarah put in place to ensure her presence isn't disrupting the workflow of the house?

FACILITATOR CONSIDERATIONS

- **DEFINE ROLES.** Students often blur lines between friendship, professional service, and academic observation. Help them brainstorm concrete ways to signal which "hat" they are wearing (e.g., wearing a badge during research hours, using different physical spaces).
- **COMMUNICATION IS KEY.** Focus on the "how-to" of communication. Students need to practice explaining complex projects in simple, transparent terms to community stakeholders.
- **PROBLEM SOLVING.** Move the discussion toward actionable solutions. If the current method isn't working, what is Plan B? How do we troubleshoot logistics in a busy nonprofit environment?
- **FIND MUTUAL BENEFIT.** Students often feel that authentic engagement with a community is separate from research or academic activities. It can be helpful to outline the potential mutual benefits between the two considerations and how one can strengthen the other.

CLOSING QUESTIONS

- What is one concrete strategy you learned today that you could apply to your own time management in the field?
- How does clear communication and role definition contribute to a more effective partnership for both the student and the community organization?