

Students as Community-Engaged Researchers in Responding to Crises: Insights From the Embedded Thesis Model

Adhika Ezra and Shasta Grant

The Community-Campus Responses to Crisis project, led by Community Campus Engage Canada and the University of Regina, explores how postsecondary institutions can best support community initiatives that address social impacts of climate change. The project aims to strengthen universities' capacity to support community initiatives and build a pan-national knowledge-sharing network that centralizes effective crisis response strategies. The project involves case studies at Canadian institutions, two of which—the University of Regina and Acadia University—focused on community engagement efforts with homelessness-related organizations. These two case studies used an embedded thesis model that allows graduate students to lead the community engagement process, determine the direction of the research, and integrate the study into their thesis. This reflection explores the experiences of two master's students (Adhika, University of Regina, and Shasta, Acadia University) who participated in the embedded thesis model.

Overview of the Case Studies

Adhika

The case study in Regina, Saskatchewan, focused on homeless governance and extreme weather response in the city. I used the concept of governmentality to explore how various stakeholders (governmental and nongovernmental) respond to support people experiencing homelessness (PEH) during extreme weather, taking into consideration existing structures that influence extreme weather response and disaster mitigation. I analyzed how existing forms of homeless governance in Regina marginalize PEH and put them at risk during extreme weather, contextualized challenges service providers face in supporting PEH under neoliberalism, and explored potential solutions proposed by stakeholders.

Shasta

The case study in Wolfville, Nova Scotia,

followed the story of Homeless No More (HNM), an initiative that aims to end rural homelessness in the Annapolis Valley. HNM brings together community organizations, government, and academic institutions to consult, support, and advocate on behalf of the homelessness-serving sector, which includes nonprofit organizations and the public systems of government, health, and education. My research examined the partnership between Acadia and HNM, focusing on how it can accelerate the goal of ending rural homelessness. Partnership activities that I observed worked to address community stigma and policies that perpetuate homelessness. My research also considered the compounded challenges of climate change in the current homelessness crisis.

Community-Campus Engagement: Student Experiences of the Embedded Thesis Model

Adhika

I met various stakeholders engaged in homeless governance and extreme weather response and discussed the current conditions of homelessness in the city and the challenges in supporting PEH during extreme weather. I then created a report on what has been effective and what practices can be implemented to better coordinate responses during extreme weather. I also analyzed the city of Regina's existing Extreme Weather Strategy to provide recommendations based on the voices of stakeholders.

Throughout the year I witnessed grassroots organizations doing their best to support unmet needs amid limited resources. I also saw grassroots organizations' need for more volunteers and noted that the existing volunteer opportunities for University of Regina students are mostly with registered nonprofits. My supervisor and I connected a grassroots organization with the experiential learning office on campus, potentially broadening student placements to now include grassroots organizations. While still a work in progress, this is one example of building new relationships in which students can partake. I

supported the homeless community by distributing food and clothing, conducting outreach, and cutting people's hair. While the outcome of my involvement in addressing these crises is marginal, the integrated thesis model encourages students like me to be active in society and to understand that students are responsible for shaping a more just society.

Shasta

My experience has been a participatory process built on existing relationships in the community, particularly those developed by my supervisor and a previous master's student. A significant aspect of my research involved attending HNM meetings and following the progression of the partnership, observing decision-making in real time, and interviewing principal HNM partners about the initiative's past, present, and future. I also observed and supported collaborative projects led by my supervisor and members of the HNM team that engaged undergraduate students in service-learning initiatives. One such project was the hosting of one of HNM's annual events to gather feedback from service providers. Another was an art workshop hosted for PEH. Using guided questions, workshop participants created paintings and collages to express what they felt connected to.

The Value of the Embedded Thesis Model

Adhika

The embedded thesis project model carved space for me to dialectically engage theory and practice through three processes.

1. Use social theory—in my case critical realism and governmentality—to help me understand the complexity of extreme weather response and homeless governance under a neoliberal settler colonial system.
2. Analyze the fit between theory and the on-the-ground intricacies of governance and response reported by various service providers.
3. Use my thesis to provide suggestions that organizations can implement to better respond to the needs of PEH during extreme weather.

The opportunity to learn from different actors engaging in different aspects of governance was a valuable experience. I came to understand the nuances and contradictions of responding to such a complex issue. I also began to understand the multifaceted nature of the dual crises of climate change and homelessness, including how various

stakeholders frame these issues differently based on the organization they belong to (e.g., governmental or nongovernmental). Through this project, I also gained insight into how to strengthen community-campus partnerships. I was given the opportunity to think through possible avenues for streamlining the university's material resources to aid the city's current extreme weather response plan.

These past 2 years have been transformative for me. My academic work informs my understanding of issues faced by my community. My eyes were opened to the gravity of these crises and, at the same time, I was inspired by advocates' commitment to tackling injustices. I realized how academic work and community work should not be mutually exclusive, and I became empowered to work to advance social justice both inside and outside of academia.

Shasta

My experience with the embedded thesis model has been both more challenging and far more rewarding than a traditional research assistant role. Dedicating my master's to supporting the case study made the experience demanding, but it also provided me with a unique opportunity to be fully immersed in a collaborative, community-driven process. Rather than starting from scratch to build new community relationships, I was able to step into a role with strong preexisting connections. This allowed me to focus on understanding the issues relevant to the case study while contributing to the development of the partnership.

Having no prior experience in the homelessness sector, engaging with experts and community members has vastly expanded my knowledge. Spending time with the HNM lead team deepened my understanding of broader systemic factors driving the crisis, the local context in which it unfolds, and the relationships that are crucial for addressing it. It allowed me to form meaningful connections with professionals in the sector who care deeply about housing issues. HNM's emphasis on producing quality research contributed to their support of my involvement from the outset.

My involvement in student service-learning initiatives was another highly rewarding aspect of the experience. I got to collaborate with senior undergraduate students to plan and host the art workshop, and the resulting artworks were showcased at the HNM event. Throughout each initiative, I engaged in reflection with students about their experiences working with HNM,

which they tended to describe as challenging yet extremely fulfilling. These hands-on projects not only allowed me to bridge theory and practice, drawing on my undergraduate studies in community development, but also provided an opportunity to explore how creativity can contribute to addressing complex social issues like homelessness.

By supporting and reflecting on student participation in HNM's work, I was able to help deepen the relationship between Acadia and the broader community. By design, this work can inform how the university can best support HNM's efforts and identify future student initiatives that respond to the evolving needs of the homelessness sector.

Challenges and Limitations

Adhika

My first challenge pertains to reporting the findings. I gathered diverse—and at times, opposing—viewpoints from various stakeholders from different sectors. I then analyzed the data on my own to report the findings, as opposed to other community-engaged projects that involve participants in analyzing data. I presented an account that represents the stakeholders' experiences based on available information, but the report might not be wholly representative of all participants. The analysis highlights some fundamental contradictions linked to the root causes of these crises. By identifying structural problems and their causes, I draw attention to the issues that must be addressed.

The second limitation pertains to PEH's involvement in the project. The voices of PEH were incorporated into the study, and I was engaged with outreach work on the ground. At the same time, it would have been beneficial if the project could aid homeless advocacy initiatives more directly (e.g., organizing a campaign connected to the study, etc.). This may have been better facilitated if I had worked with a single organization.

The final limitation relates to resources and timing. My supervisors and I leveraged existing relationships to build campus-community partnerships. While individual connections are a good first step in establishing or strengthening partnerships, additional time and resources are needed to formalize partnerships to ensure their sustainability. Without additional infrastructure to ensure that the relationship between the grassroots organization, the student engagement office, and the city's extreme weather committee continues

to grow, the partnership might not fully bloom or might do so at a slower pace, especially after students complete their programs.

Shasta

While my interest in the housing crisis and alternative housing solutions made this research a natural fit, joining a project with clearly defined parameters provided no guarantee that the research would directly connect to my career path. Some of the student projects were set in advance, providing inherent structure and direction for my study, but it could limit flexibility for other graduate students who prefer more freedom in designing their research.

There are also limitations to my contributions, primarily due to time constraints and the temporary nature of my involvement. Partnership activities continued after my observation period, making it difficult to know when to officially end my data collection. HNM's lead team membership is also fluid in nature and shifted during my involvement, which meant my research only captured a snapshot of a dynamic process.

Lastly, this community campus engagement is not formally acknowledged or supported by the university. My supervisor's role is the main connection tying the university to the partnership. This means finding the time and resources to continue the work is often a challenge.

Takeaways and Suggestions

The Community-Campus Responses to Crisis project and embedded thesis model offer valuable insights into how community-campus partnerships can address complex crises like climate change and homelessness. Both of our experiences show the benefits of this model for students: It helps them build valuable skills through the integration of theory and practice, allows them to engage meaningfully in new or ongoing community projects, and helps support the growth of crucial networks within communities experiencing marginalization. Adhika's experience highlights the value of theory-driven analysis and fluidity when building relationships with different community actors. Shasta's experience shows how the model provides an immersive research project that addresses community issues with local experts while also expanding student participation. Shasta's participatory experience with HNM also exemplifies the benefit of pre-established relationships with community partners. At the same time, we both agree that partnership-building

and conducting research with and for communities require time beyond what is available.

The challenges we encountered offer insights for potential refinements of the model. Both projects suggest that more formalized institutional support for ongoing community engagement could enhance universities' capacity to sustain partnerships beyond individual student projects. This support could help address administrative barriers and ensure the long-term success and sustainability of community collaborations.

About the Authors

Adhika Ezra is a graduate student in the Department of Sociology and Social Studies at the University of Regina. Shasta Grant is a graduate student in the Department of Community Development at Acadia University.