Research for Organizing

Moving from Problem to Issue

Research for Organizing: Moving from Problem to Issue

In community organizing, successful action for change is bolstered by concerted work in narrowing, defining, gathering evidence on, and proposing solutions for a selected issue of importance. In the following pages, we take a closer look at this key piece of the organizing cycle: Research. From narrowing down a broad problem to an actionable issue that resonates with your community, to defining key questions and methodologies, to linking what you learn to potential solutions, good research for organizing ultimately leads to effective action for meaningful change.

Research in Our Daily Lives

We all do research every day. For example, when we are looking where to move, how to save money, or how to best support our children, we gather information from a variety of sources – friends, family, colleagues, books, newspapers, the internet, and more. In our daily lives, we do research to inform our actions around questions that we want answered or issues that we want resolved. See Figure 1 for an everyday example.

Research is systematic because we give it parameters based on our needs, capacities, and core concerns. If my child wants to go to summer camp and I want her close to our home in New Hampshire, I will not spend my nights researching international exchange programs. Additionally, if this is a concern that needs immediate action, I may spend less time reading books about the big-picture merits of summer camps and focus my energy on tapping into my existing networks of knowledge close to home: friends, family, community organizations, etc. Finally, research also helps us determine whether our choices lead to desired outcomes. If I choose the YMCA in the above example because I believe that my child will access math programming, but find that she continues to struggle with basic arithmetic, I may begin to wonder whether the camp is successful at addressing our needs.

As we negotiate daily questions and issues that require immediate action, research is a tool. It empowers us to make choices between multiple alternatives, to allocate our resources and time accordingly, and to evaluate whether our choices are successful.

FIGURE 1

ISSUE
My child wants to go to summer camp

RESEARCH TOPICS
Cost? Location? Transportation? Value? Offered programs?

PROPOSED SOLUTION
The YMCA offers a free summer camp that meets our needs and is in our neighborhood

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

• When did you last undertake research?

• What needs and core concerns did you have?

• What was your capacity to do research and how did this impact how and where you looked for information?

Research as a Tool for Organizing

Through personal experiences and conversations with others we may be able to identify a problem in our community that we feel needs to be addressed. Organizers work with community leaders to do research that helps identify more specific issues within the larger problem and develop actionable solutions for these more specific issues. More simply, in organizing work, research is a tool to (1) gather information about a problem or issue, (2) identify the different parts of a problem to select an issue, and (3) develop an actionable solution to address the issue.

For example, academic achievement gaps are a problem in education. After doing research, it might become clear that some important issues related to this problem include a lack of culturally relevant curriculum, inequitable educational opportunities and supports for different populations, or a disengaged student body. It is important to remember that there are many issues you could address to tackle a community problem, and research helps organizers and leaders "cut" the issues to decide how to frame issues and related solutions in ways that will gain interest and support.

RESEARCH NOTE

Problem: The "big picture" challenge or broad area of concern.

Issue: An aspect of a problem that can be addressed as part of the solution.

Example: Our town has a *problem* with wildfires in the summer and one *issue* is the need for more effective public education about fire safety and wildfire prevention.
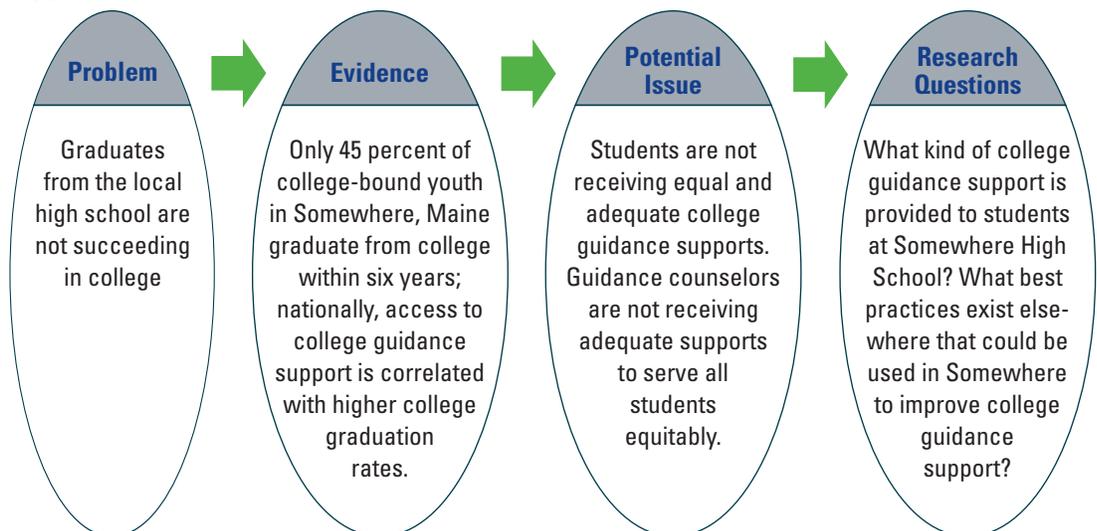
Choosing Research Questions for Organizing

Suppose Claron is an organizer in Somewhere, Maine, and after talking with many parents and students realizes that a commonly identified problem is that many students who graduate from the local high school do not succeed in college. Through some preliminary research, Claron finds that:

• Only 45 percent of college-bound students from Somewhere High School graduate from college within six years.

• Nationally, students with consistent college guidance support in high school are able to graduate college at higher rates than those who do not have consistent access.

After her research, Claron comes up with a potential issue: *Access to college guidance support at Somewhere High School.*

By gathering information, Claron learns more about the problem being identified in her community. Given her research, Claron wonders if an underlying *issue* that needs to be addressed is ensuring equal access to and adequate support for guidance counselors at Somewhere High School. The next step would then be to frame the perceived issue with questions that can be researched and analyzed

FIGURE 2

Problem → **Evidence** → **Potential Issue** → **Research Questions**

Problem: Graduates from the local high school are not succeeding in college

Evidence: Only 45 percent of college-bound youth in Somewhere, Maine graduate from college within six years; nationally, access to college guidance support is correlated with higher college graduation rates.

Potential Issue: Students are not receiving equal and adequate college guidance supports. Guidance counselors are not receiving adequate supports to serve all students equitably.

Research Questions: What kind of college guidance support is provided to students at Somewhere High School? What best practices exist elsewhere that could be used in Somewhere to improve college guidance support?

and then lead to organizing action. See Figure 2 for an example of this research process.

Methods: Moving from Questions to Action-Based Research

Once research questions are developed, organizers and leaders can do further research to refine the issue and identify areas of opportunity for action. Considering the following four factors will help organizers to develop an action-based research plan from their central research questions:

Scope

- What level of change do we hope to effect (neighborhood, city, state, national)?
- What relevant data and information is accessible based on our desired scope?

Methodology

- What information do we need to answer our research questions and how can we get that information (surveys, focus groups, interviews, public meetings, online records, etc)?

  Note: Research methods should be chosen based on what methods will best produce the information needed to answer the research questions.

Action

- As we gather information and conduct research, how do we keep track of opportunities for "intervention" where we can take action in order to make change?
- How do we develop leadership and build relationships through our research process that will support our action?

Capacity

- What is our timeline for the research process and what time do we have to undertake different methods of research (interviews vs. surveys vs. internet research)?
- How can we distribute research responsibilities across our team?

You may find new information that will lead your team to revisit underlying assumptions, question evidence, rethink problems, identify new issues, or explore various research methods. Research, issue refinement, strategizing, and question development are iterative processes that can be revisited at any point within the larger organizing research and action process.

It is important to remember that in organizing, the overarching objective of the research process is to inform action. The research process also provides an opportunity to empower community members, develop leaders, build relationships, and identify allies around an issue.

Research, or the gathering of information, serves the needs of the communities who undertake it rather than the needs or interests of outside observers. In organizing, research and action intersect and overlap through the process of uncovering a problem, identifying an actionable issue, and taking action to effect change.

An LCP Case Study: Parents and Youth for Change

After a successful organizing action about ensuring that report cards were family friendly and accessible to communities, Parents and Youth for Change (Burlington and Winooski, Vermont) received feedback from parent leaders that addressing this issue would not resolve a larger problem important to them: a lack of career and college readiness.

Determining the Problem

After speaking with numerous community members, Parents and Youth for Change decided to look more deeply at the problem of college and career readiness.

Through this information-gathering, Parents and Youth for Change formulated the problem they wanted to address.

As Parents and Youth for Change began to gather information from local- and state-level sources, the data demonstrated that low-income youth were not going to college at the same rates as their peers and that students who did go to college struggled to persist through to graduation. Their findings suggested that high school graduation meant students spent twelve years in school, not that when they graduated they were ready to attend and complete college.

Deciding on an Issue

Career and college readiness is a large area of concern with many potential issues and intervention points. In other words, there are many contributing factors that could support or hinder students' readiness for postsecondary success. Parents and Youth for Change began to delve deeper into understanding career and college readiness in an effort to identify an actionable issue.

In addition to seeking research support from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform about the broader trends in college and career readiness, organizers at Parents and Youth for Change planned and implemented a series of local research meetings called a Research Marathon. Key organization leaders and community representatives with more extensive knowledge about local programs, supports, and services related to career and college readiness met with and answered questions crafted by parent and youth leaders. The Research Marathon had multiple benefits. It:

- helped to craft a shared definition of career and college readiness,
- exposed community members to resources and opportunities in the community,
- enabled different groups within the community to work together,
- provided organizations with community perspectives that allowed for self-reflection,
- supported relationship building and leadership development for participants, and
- deepened the community's sense of advocacy around the problem.

Inherent in a community-based research process is the importance of allowing authentic growth and participation among all participants. Parents and Youth for Change organizer Meg Cline stressed the importance of being mindful of the path and development of all participants in order to ensure that the process was not top-down, but rather emerged from community needs and priorities.

Parents and Youth for Change organizer Infinite Culcleasure noted the importance of being strategic in identifying and working on an issue while consistently reflecting on the potential implementation of proposed solutions.

In the end, Parents and Youth for Change identified the issue of needing to implement a strong and effective advisory system at Burlington High School. The selection of this issue was based on strong background research, surveys, and research meetings that led to the conclusion that there were an abundance of opportunities for students to gain more support to stay on track for college and career readiness, but that not enough families and students knew about or were taking advantage of these opportunities. In addition, they learned that Burlington was one of the few districts in Vermont without a rigorous advisory program for its students.

In selecting this as the issue, Parents and Youth for Change could easily propose a positive solution that was actionable: implement a strong and effective advisory system. Leaders could move from naming and complaining about a problem to taking positive action on an issue. They have since secured commitments from school and district leaders to implement an advisory system at Burlington High School.

Conclusion

Research is a powerful tool for empowering communities to organize around issues that matter most to them. Additionally, research for organizing is a dynamic process that enables deeper relationship building, leadership development, and community empowerment. As always, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform is here to help Lead Community Partners make their way through this exciting work.

Related Resources

Training for Change:
   https://www.trainingforchange.org/tools

Community Development Project:
   http://cdp-ny.org/

Community Toolbox:
   http://ctb.ku.edu/en/toolkits

Research for Organizing Worksheet

Use this worksheet to create your own research for organizing strategy. Most likely, you will not be able to answer these questions all at once, but rather at different points in the process as you move toward organizing and action around a solution. Your answers and ideas may change, too, as you gather evidence and perform research.

Identify Problem	
What is a problem in your community that you want to address?	

Gather Evidence	
What data sources can you use to learn more about this problem? Once identified, what information about the problem have these data sources given you?	

Select an Issue	
What aspect or aspects of the problem do you think you should address in order to find an action-able solution? How can you frame the issue in a way that will gain interest and sup-port?	

Develop Research Questions	
What are some ques-tions based on this issue that can be researched and ana-lyzed and then lead to organizing action?	

Determine Research Method and Plan	
Considering scope, methodology, action, and capacity (see page 5 for definitions), what research can you perform to move toward a solution? What questions would you ask? To whom would you ask them?[1]	

Make a Plan for Action	
Based on this research, what are the possible solutions that you want to organize around?	

[1] Some research methods are internet research, interviews, focus groups, and research marathons. For more on on other methods, see Research for Organizing's "Getting Your Data" at www.researchfororganizing.org/index.php?page=getting-your-data.

Cutting an Issue Checklist: The 4 Ts
Tangible, Targeted, Tactical, and Timely

When determining an issue to organize around, it is important to keep the following characteristics in mind. The 4 Ts provide helpful guidance to decide whether or not your issue is one that will lead to actionable solutions and change. Use the space provided to reflect on how well a potential organizing issue meets the criteria laid out by the 4 Ts.

YOUR ISSUE _____

An Organizing Issue. . .	Notes
TANGIBLE • Is consistent with your vision and values • Is worthwhile; will result in a real improvement in people's lives • Is widely and deeply felt • Is easy to understand	
TARGETED • Has a clear focus • Has a clear target for intervention or influence	
TACTICAL • Is non-divisive • Is winnable • Builds leadership	
TIMELY • Has a clear time frame	