

Civic Infrastructure for College Access: A Participatory Action Research Study

Carol Cutler White, MPA, Ph.D.

Mississippi State University
PO Box 9730, 108 Herbert Street, IED Building
Mississippi State, MS 39762
United States

Abstract

Using Participatory Action Research (PAR), the purpose of this study was to establish college access civic infrastructure in a high poverty Southern U.S. city with a long-term goal to increase educational attainment. Raising educational attainment has potential to alleviate poverty and contributes to better health, stronger communities, and to improved civic engagement. The multi-year study engaged co-researchers in systematic inquiry through photo voice, Q Methodology, focus groups, action planning, program implementation, and fund development for sustainability. The action planning process established a college access network to reach students and families with college information in a community setting outside of the high school environment. Emergent findings uncovered issues of trust in the systems necessary to enroll in college. Findings also demonstrate the role of community trust in buffering the myopia of poverty. The PAR project offer offers important practical, policy, and theoretical implications for future research.

Keywords: participatory action research, civic infrastructure, trust, college access, community-engagement, community trust, poverty

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1. Introduction

Though most high school students across all racial and geographic demographic categories aspire to college (Means et al., 2016), gaps exist in college enrollment and completion which can be attributed to several factors including poor academic preparation, lack of college information, and lack of support for college entry processes (Balemian & Feng, 2013; Fishman, 2022). These challenges are often pervasive in rural and minoritized communities (Agger et al., 2018; Crandall et al., 2022) where educational attainment lags other demographic groups and geographic areas. Over the past two decades, interest among policymakers has focused on raising educational attainment to keep pace with emerging job requirements (Carnevale & Rose, 2015; Fishman, 2022). To achieve the goal of raising educational attainment, it is essential to support college entry among populations with lower postsecondary participation (referred to as college access).

College access can be conceptualized as the process and steps to enter college including the college and financial aid applications. For example, students must select a college to go to and fill out an application at the appropriate time for admission. In the case of open access two-year institutions such as community colleges, individuals fill out an application for entry, but there is no selectivity (Kisker et al., 2023). All are allowed to enroll in the institution, but some programs might be selective (i.e., nursing). If students are not able to complete the two-year application, the benefits of the open door two-year institution is canceled. For selective admissions institutions, such as most four-year colleges and universities, the process is more complex with negative consequences for those who lack knowledge of the process. Missing deadlines or failing to submit a complete application may lead to a rejection without review, even if the student is qualified for admission.

College access also refers to getting financial aid, where first-generation, low wealth, and minoritized student populations often need assistance with the complicated administrative process to receive U.S. federal financial aid (Bettinger & Long, 2010; Owen & Westlund, 2016). The U.S. federal government provides grants to low-income individuals to attend college, but the administrative process must be completed properly to receive an award. Filing the federal paperwork correctly is also influential in receiving many U.S. state supported financial aid programs. U.S. states use the federal estimates of aid for eligibility determination of financial aid awards. Without financial aid, lower income students may not choose to attend college due to the high cost.

In geographies with low educational attainment, college access services are especially important to reducing socioeconomic gaps with some scholars referring to college access as a national imperative (Miller et al., 2014; Perna & Finney, 2014). Raising educational attainment has potential to alleviate poverty, but there are also larger societal benefits. Higher levels of education are documented to contribute to better health and stronger communities (Ma et al., 2019) as well as to improved civic engagement (National Research Council 2014, 2014). Research indicates civic engagement improves with more education making a college educated citizenry a critically important focus for communities (Ma et al., 2016).

The U.S. funded Corporation for National and Community Service (AmeriCorps) agency monitors civic engagement and social cohesion across the U.S. through a variety of research projects (AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation, 2023). In 2018, AmeriCorps issued a call for Participatory Action Research (PAR) projects through the Community Conversations Research grant (AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation, 2017). The Community Conversations Research PAR project's goal was to actively engage citizens and local stakeholders in identifying a local issue of concern and to create a collaborative action plan to increase civic engagement to address the issue (AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation, n.d.). The study reported herein was funded by the 2018 AmeriCorps Community Conversations Research grant. The purpose of the study was to establish college access civic infrastructure in the Mississippi Delta with a long-term goal of increased educational attainment. This paper is a retrospective documenting the process of the community-based PAR project and offering practical, policy, and theoretical implications for future research.

1.1 Community Context

This PAR study took place from 2018-2023 in the Mississippi Delta in a small city with a 2018 population of just under 29,000 residents. The Mississippi Delta has a long history of racial segregation and racism within public education (Donnor, 2021). Segregation of schools (and the associated lack of financial resources) leaves many students without adequate preparation for postsecondary success (Byun et al., 2012; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001), yet most students aspire to college (Irvin et al., 2011). Since 2018, the city lost population with nearly 6% fewer residents in 2022 than 2018 when the city had 75% Black and 21% White residents. The population loss was largely among Whites. In 2022, the Black population was 82% and the White population was 16%. Poverty (especially among Blacks), emanating from historical segregation and racism, was and is pervasive with nearly 33% of the population living in poverty, three times higher than the U.S. rate of 11% (United States Census Bureau, 2022). Computer ownership and home broadband lags the nation with just 80% of households reporting a computer and 60% of households reporting a broadband subscription compared to the national rate of 97% of households owning a computer and 87% with a home broadband subscription (United States Census Bureau, 2022).

The city's educational attainment lags the nation with high school graduation or higher among residents at 82% compared to the national average of approximately 89%. Completion of a bachelor's degree or higher is 20% among residents compared to the national average of approximately 38% (United States Census Bureau, 2022). The workforce and economic developers in the region are aware of the challenge of educational attainment stating:

With regard to income and education, these two factors must be one of the major focal points for improvement of the region. All other man-based factors are dependent on these things for improvement. The improvement of workforce training is helping to make the region more competitive in attracting skilled employment opportunities; however, as long as the level of educational attainment among the working age population is so much lower than the State and the Nation, significant economic development and high paying job opportunities will continue to pass the region by (South Delta Planning and Development District, 2018).

The Mississippi Delta city was selected as a partner in the PAR research based on these statistics and the need for a solution that could involve the community in raising educational attainment. Additionally, the city had (and has) strong municipal leadership. The city's mayor is a young Black male determined to see the community "do better". First elected in 2016, the mayor was reelected in 2020 and is running for reelection in 2024. In 2018, outreach to the mayor's office yielded a conversation about the potential PAR project where the project received his commitment to support and shepherd. The city's public relations staff was tasked with assisting the researcher in locating participants, meeting space, and city organizations to engage for the project. Throughout the project, the mayor and city council engaged to ensure the project's success.

2. Guiding Theoretical Frameworks

This PAR study utilized social capital theory and Perna's conceptual model of college choice as a conceptual framework to guide the project.

2.1 Social Capital

The theory of social capital was first espoused by Bourdieu (1986) followed by Coleman (1988). In Bourdieu's definition, social capital focuses on the resources available to a family through their social groups. To Bourdieu, social capital is a shared collective of capital belonging to members of the family and the family's connections. As such, families with high social capital have a large network on which to draw in making a college decision and navigating the processes to enroll. Coleman (1988) defines social capital more as a function of the relationships of and between individuals within social structures. In short, Coleman views social capital as the resources of one individual within the social network being available to all in the network. In the context of college access, social capital can be seen in parents interacting with other parents and students interacting with other students of similar social status.

Both Bourdieu and Coleman recognize the value of social connections and its associated capital in educational attainment (Rogošić & Baranović, 2016). Bourdieu and Coleman would agree that social capital (however defined) is beneficial for educational attainment through knowledge of college admissions processes and relationships to insider knowledge.

This project conceptualized volunteers as potential ambassadors of social capital to reach those disconnected from the systems necessary to benefit. Through the social tie to a known volunteer in the community, the individuals seeking college access services could draw from the volunteer's social capital while also developing their own social capital.

2.2 Perna's Conceptual Model of College Choice

Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice presents various layers or contexts in which individuals decide to go to college. In Perna's model, college choice is a product of an individual's context including their habitus (family background, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity), the available school and community resources for academic preparation and expectations of college going, the availability of higher education and admissions standards, and finally the social, political, and economic policy environment including the alignment of K-12 and higher education standards. Perna posits individuals decide to go to college by assessing their context and weighing the costs and benefits of investment in college. This project situates the civic infrastructure for college access within Perna's school and community resources context.

3. Methods

This Participatory Action Research (PAR) study sought to engage a Mississippi Delta high poverty community in building civic infrastructure to increase educational attainment. In keeping with a PAR paradigm, the multi-year study engaged co-researchers in systematic inquiry and investigation (Stringer & Ortiz Aragón, 2021) through multiple research PAR phases including: 1) photovoice, 2) Q Methodology, 3) focus groups, 4) action planning, 5) service implementation, 6) capacity building for sustainability, and 7) institutionalization of the effort in partnership with the local community foundation. PAR methodology is described first followed by a summary of each research approaches. For a more detailed description of the photovoice and Q Methodology processes, please see (Cutler White, 2022).

3.1 Participatory Action Research (PAR)

PAR as a research methodology emerged to counter the fact conventional methods failed to capture those with insider knowledge of the workings of communities, particularly underrepresented and marginalized communities (Schubotz, 2020). As a constructivist approach to research, PAR seeks to jointly create knowledge and action through collective inquiry and reflective processes with a researcher and those living the topic or problem to be addressed (Brown & Warwick, 2019; Sankaran et al., 2017). At its core, PAR is a form of empowerment to engage citizens in addressing the challenges facing their communities. PAR researchers recognize that knowledge sources among those who have been systematically excluded (especially youth) may be the most important element of creating successful solutions to longstanding community challenges (Camarota & Fine, 2008).

Insider knowledge of the topic can create transformative and social change. As such, PAR projects engage those living the challenge to explore practical and applicable knowledge (Schubotz, 2020) through a reflective and equitable process to achieve social justice and improved social conditions for the stakeholder group (Baum et al., 2006). From the researcher perspective, the insider knowledge enables understanding of the context and viability of potential solutions (Baum et al., 2006), and the research site is an opportunity to create action (Baum et al., 2006). The researcher and stakeholder group collect and analyze data, create an action plan, implement the action plan, and then reflect on the action.

3.2 Photovoice

The first PAR research approach was photovoice. Photovoice as a methodology is derived from Freire's theory of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) wherein groups define their strengths and concerns.

The mayor's public relations staff assisted the researcher with identifying six high school students, four local college students and four parents of high school students to conduct the photovoice research as co-researchers. After a discussion with the co-researchers about the purpose of the project, they went into the community to document the challenges of college access and places where college access might take place.

Following the photo collection process, a focus group with the students took place, to allow the students to reflect on their photos (Freire, 1970; Wang & Burris, 1997). The high school and college student photos depicted challenges such as not knowing anyone who went to college, having to work while in high school and not having time to think about college, not having a home computer to search for college information, lack of home internet, and the overall poverty of the city. The student photos of places where college access services could be deployed across the city pointed to the YMCA, the local library, the city recreation center, the city convention center, and various fast-food restaurants where youth gather after school.

While talking about their photos, students shared their own story of the struggle of wanting to go to college but being caught in a cycle of needing to work long hours while trying to make good grades in school. All the students were employed at least part-time. The students also shared stories of the general lack of aspiration among young people in the city after growing up in extreme poverty and seeing people they knew not being able to find a way out of the cycle of poverty. One student shared "there are lots of fast-food places, but nowhere to get information about college". Some students shared stories of knowing people who fell for financial aid scams which made them hesitant to trust information they receive especially email and postal mail advertising from unknown entities. Others shared stories of knowing people who were recruited to for-profit colleges. The college students had a life emergency or had to work and couldn't keep up their studies. The college students dropped out of college with high debt, a high student loan payment, and no skilled employment options in the city. Given these experiences, the students were cautious about where to get information and were unanimous that to have college information across the city, the location had to be a place that could be trusted with reputable people giving out the information.

Next the co-researcher parents met to reflect on their photos. The parent photos of challenges echoed the student photos but also added photos depicting the general deteriorated condition of the city, disconnected students, high school dropouts, and lack of college information supports. One of the parents worked with the high school dropout population in the city and shared

Students who live in unstable households have struggles to get parents to fill out college forms. Some students live with relatives and parents have essentially disowned them. Or sometimes parents don't think they can trust their child with financial information needed for college application.

Another parent noted getting information at the high school was a challenge for many students saying

The students just can't go to the counselor. They have to set up an appointment. The counselor might not be able to talk with them, because they're doing so many other things, especially if you are in a large school where they don't have enough counselors and the counselor got a lot of duties. They got a lot of paperwork to do, dealing with test scores and other things. They don't really have time to counsel the students with giving them advice and talking with them. Oftentimes preferential treatment and favoritism is shown towards certain students resulting in many students not given the opportunity to apply for scholarships.

Parents were positive the community would support the work and had a variety of thoughts on where services might be provided. In identifying places to deliver services, the parent co-researchers focused intentionally on

themes of safety and trust in the location and in the people giving out college information. Specifically, the parents noted that parking should be well lit at night and there should be security present if nighttime hours are offered. One parent mentioned that daytime hours would be good for some parents to get information saying “Because, if a person worked all night and they could come in and if a person worked and got off at three o'clock, they could come also”. Another parent thought the local shopping mall would be a good place to distribute college information because both parents and students are there.

Following the two focus groups, plans were made to host a community-wide event to gauge interest in the work. The student and parent co-researcher photos became a source of data to engage the community in the planning process through a Q Methodology study.

3.3 Q Methodology

Q Methodology is a methodology to compare individual viewpoints or perspectives to each other providing a glimpse into common mental models across and between participants (S. R. Brown, 1993; Watts & Stenner, 2012). The methodology involves sorting statements (or in this case photos) onto a grid from least to most according to the focus of the study. Based on the focus groups, the focus of this PAR photo sorting was identifying consensus mental models of trusted places. The participants sorted the photos from least trusted to most trusted. By person factor analysis was conducted on the individual sorted grids and participants with similar viewpoints were grouped for consensus (Coogan & Herrington, 2011).

The entire community was invited to participate in the Q-Methodology study and over 50 community members were present. The study was conducted from 5-7 pm and included a buffet dinner to encourage participation. The participants were asked to sort the photos into trusted places within the city where college access services might be provided. Factor analysis identified three viewpoints: 1) participants who viewed trusted college access sites through a traditional education focused lens (i.e., trusted locations were the school district office and higher education center), 2) participants who viewed trusted sites as the public library and public recreation centers, and 3) participants who viewed trusted sites as places where youth gather such as McDonald's or other recognizable locations such as local banks. In Q-Methodology a post sort survey captures individual description of the viewpoints. The post sort surveys reinforced themes from the student and parent focus groups including safety, security, and daytime and evening hours.

3.4 Action Planning and Implementation

The next step in the PAR process was to create an action plan to address the challenge. Three parents and two college co-researchers worked to develop the plan with the researcher. The Action Plan established the operational guidance for the community-based college access services including a goal to build a shared vision of educational attainment across city stakeholders, a goal to recruit and train volunteers to provide the college access services, and a goal to build a sustainable organizational structure focused on educational attainment within the mayor's office. The Action Plan was adopted through a resolution by the City Council in January 2020. A press event announcing the initiative was held in February 2020 just prior to the Covid-19 lockdown. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, services to students and families did not immediately launch, however once public schools were back to face-to-face sessions, volunteers were recruited from local fraternities and sororities and trained in college and financial aid applications to support students and families. Though the services were limited more than originally planned due to the ongoing Covid pandemic, volunteers were able to assist over 50 students and families during the fall of 202 and the spring of 2021.

3.5 Volunteer Focus Group

Following the initial service implementation, ten volunteers took part in a focus group to reflect and to explore how the services were delivered and received. Interestingly, over half of the volunteers had some connection to education in the city. Two volunteers were teachers in the high school, one volunteer was on the school board, and three volunteers were retired teachers. Given this background, the volunteers had good understanding of high school age students and parents. During the focus group the volunteers expressed a common theme that for the financial aid application particularly, a great deal of trust was needed as sharing of income information is required for processing federal aid. The volunteers providing services to students and families saw first-hand the people in need of the community-based college access services. This insider view of the value or challenges of the program model provided an opportunity for additional research.

The volunteers shared how some parents of students wanting to go to college were mistrustful of the institutions of financial aid. Volunteers noted issues of trust in multiple circumstances and recommended the high school might be able to refer students and parents to the community-based sites rather than expect parents to come to the school. Some volunteers noted the individuals served may have had a bad experience with the high school as a student themselves and were therefore hesitant to trust the school. Other volunteers heard student and family experiences with financial aid scams created a hesitancy to trust. The fact the volunteer was from the community with something in common with the individuals provided a basis of trust. The volunteers also shared experiences of how they worked to let the student and parent know they were trustworthy by socializing a bit before starting the application. They indicated the socializing helped break the ice and open the door to a discussion of income and finances. The time taken to build trust was particularly important as many financial aid applications required follow up to complete.

3.6 Building Sustainability

The PAR work next turned to building a foundation for sustainable funding and the capacity to carry out the work. Local corporations investing in social good in the city were interested in supporting the work. Targeted outreach to the largest corporation in the city yielded a financial donation and volunteer support for the work. The corporation recruited a second funding partner. The accounting structure of the city did not allow for donations to be managed through the city accounting system. This created an opportunity for partnership with the local community foundation to manage the funds and to give visibility to the work. The community foundation established an account with the mayor's signature and the corporations were able to deposit their donation in the designated project fund. The fund agreement allows the corporations some oversight for use of the funds. The city can reimburse approved budget expenditures through the designated fund. The expansion of the program to include the community foundation established the work as legitimate and long-term. Funding enables the city to conduct activities to reach students and parents and to provide scholarships.

A second area of sustainability is capacity to do the work after the AmeriCorps grant concludes. Because the AmeriCorps grant funded the work throughout the life of the PAR cycle, consideration for extending the work beyond the life of the grant was needed. The researcher and city staff investigated an AmeriCorps State and National Service grant wherein the city would host AmeriCorps members to carry out direct college access services in the community complementing and supplementing the community volunteers. The challenge with the grant program was the need for matching funds, the need for oversight of members at multiple sites, and the lack of city funding for staff to operate the program. The city decided the AmeriCorps program was not a viable option.

The researcher and city staff next investigated an AmeriCorps Volunteers In Service to America (VISTA) grant. The VISTA program is a capacity building program wherein the AmeriCorps members can assist the city with developing a fundraising, marketing, or volunteer recruitment and management plan, develop a technology plan to increase organizational effectiveness, developing a plan to measure performance, and other capacity focused topics. The VISTA program seems to be a suitable program for the city with fewer supervision and monitoring issues to overcome. Plans are under consideration to apply for a VISTA grant in the next cycle in fall 2023. The VISTA volunteers would assist the city with needed structural capacity to carry out the intended action plan.

4. Discussion

PAR projects focus on action as the outcome rather than specific findings. In this way the project achieved its goal of creating action within one community context and empowering the community to improve educational attainment. The project resulted from dedicated co-researchers and volunteers. The five-year project weathered the Covid-19 pandemic, numerous staff changes at the mayor's office and other disruptions, but the community's commitment to the cause is strong. PAR projects also focus on empowerment as an outcome. The project assisted the community in organizing and planning for the work and it gave voice to students and parents in identifying their challenges and solutions. The two constants in the project were the researcher and the mayor's commitment to the city. In the long-term future research will need to examine the quantitative outcomes from the work to document increased educational attainment. In addition to action, the PAR study resulted in practical, policy, and theoretical implications discussed next.

4.1 Practical Implications for PAR researchers

A key component of PAR research is entering the community of interest. As an outsider to the community, the researcher recognized the need to establish credibility. In reaching out to city hall, the researcher found an ally in the mayor's office. The mayor not only championed the cause of the project but committed staff to assist with the

work. Finding a prominent voice within the community is important. PAR projects are unusual in that the project mixes research with action. PAR researchers should plan for long periods of time to accomplish the intended goal. In this case the community needed to be able to identify priorities and create a civic infrastructure of volunteers to do the work. The work takes time. In addition, PAR researchers need to plan for staffing changes and how the project might change depending on the knowledge and abilities of front facing staff. Lastly, communities should be viewed through a positive lens no matter where they are in the capacity to carry out the work. The mayor's office program staffer once said, "we're doing the best we can with what we have". In the context of high poverty, racism, and segregation, the enduring motivation to improve served the project well.

Though not an experimental study, the findings have implications for college access programs and services. Even in small cities and towns with the demographics of this PAR study site, the school may unknowingly create inequalities with school counselors providing advice not meeting the goals of the students (Holland, 2020). Trusted community members may fill this gap in access to information. Volunteers can provide the social capital needed to build trust that college enrollment will have payoffs for the future, and to guide a college decision.

4.2 Policy Implications

The study yielded policy implications for federal programs. Though most agencies are siloed, communities are not. Education doesn't stop when the school bell rings. Cross-agency collaboration could be encouraged to address significant challenges. For example, the U.S. Department of Education could co-sponsor programs with Housing and Urban Development or with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to link the systems operating in communities together. Though this is not likely to happen based on the political nature of federal agencies, single agencies could take a wholistic view of communities. This is especially true of the U.S. Department of Education and grant programs. Priorities within grant programs (or new programs using a PAR approach) could require collaboration with parents and communities in problem solving. The community schools movement is an excellent example of schools, parents, and communities coming together to improve academic outcomes through supports for learning and social services (National Education Association, n.d.). Communities have a vested interest in the product of K-12 education outside of the standard curriculum. Education is essential to creating civic engagement and strong communities. Recognizing the power of partnerships may relieve schools of some of the burden of managing social programs in addition to curriculum. Federal agencies can play a role through funding priorities.

4.3 Conceptual and Theoretical Implications

There are several conceptual and theoretical implications pointing to the need for future research. First, trust in any form is not included in common models of college access which draw on economic and sociological theories (e.g., Perna, 2006). Scholars note that poverty is a trap impeding long-term financial decision making (Farah & Hook, 2017) thereby lowering financial well-being by choosing the immediate rather than the long-term. Farah and Hook note in the case of choosing college, the myopia trap leads individuals to choose unskilled (but paid) work over investing in education thereby setting up smaller economic benefits from work over the long term. Though the myopia of poverty may cloud low socioeconomic individual's financial decision-making, Jachimowicz et al. (2017) found community trust could buffer the myopia, so individuals are able to make long-term financial decisions more effectively. Trust is built through a lived experience and observations with higher income individuals having positive experiences with institutions such as banks and education, but lower income individuals having negative experiences reinforcing their lack of trust in the institutions (Jachimowicz et al., 2017). The negative life experiences of low-income individuals therefore create uncertainty in their future environment. Higher levels of community trust enable low-income individuals to be less myopic in their intertemporal decisions. This trust may lead to college enrollment and completion.

Models of college access further do not examine the influence of trust within various racial groups on college decision making. This is a salient point for communities facing historical oppression such as African Americans in the rural South. Mmari et al.(2016) report poverty and social disruption can lower community trust and similarities in social background and race can increase trust. Adding trust and racial considerations as a component within the college decision making models would expand the scope of research into understanding the mechanisms of decision making among lower socioeconomic and minoritized communities. This could be significant for college access practitioners working in low-income communities as reduced myopia for the future may lead to more students attending college. Examining community trust may be a means to formulating an effective service plan as well as key to moving the needle on college going among the very poor. For college access programs, this may mean moving some programs and services into the community rather than a sole focus on high school delivery of services. Further, engaging community members in the delivery of college access services can signal community trust to those needing the services.

Second, few college access studies have focused on the positive role and the agency of the Black community in fostering educational success. Studies that examine the historical role of the Black family in fostering resilience in their children demonstrate that achievement in all areas of life, especially in education, has always been crucial in achieving racial uplift (Jayakumar et al., 2013, p. 552). Jayakumar notes the specific role of community-initiated efforts to facilitate college aspirations and success has received little attention. Jayakumar and colleagues assert: Literature on college access has not meaningfully considered the wealth of students' own communities in designing school environments and cultures that promote college pathways (p. 557). Future research could focus on the ways in which the wealth of the students' communities influence and support college choice.

Third, regarding civic engagement and civic infrastructure, the influence of the trusting relationships between the volunteers, students, and families is an area with future research potential. Boeck (2022) found students turned to family members and peers in the absence of trusted relationships in high school. The study found students questioned the validity of information provided by people they did not know or have a relationship with. Episodic community volunteers may be able to bridge the trust divide. Episodic volunteers are reflective of "new volunteerism" (Macduff, 2009) characterized by volunteers choosing a field of action based on a taste for topical issues, a decentralized structure, and loose networks much like the community-engaged college access context studied here.

Rehnborg (2005) notes civic service volunteers within the public sector focus on more difficult problems with societal benefits. One such difficult problem is the issue of college access which fits well within a civic service episodic volunteer model due to the cyclical nature of the college admissions process. Rehnborg concludes "citizen participation is more than an alternative delivery system for public services. It is one of the key resources of a democracy (p. 102). Future research could more deeply explore the role of civic service volunteers in expanding civic engagement, civic infrastructure, and trust.

Lastly, PAR as a research methodology proved useful in identifying unresearched theoretical topics as well as creating an emergent action plan to solve a large societal problem. The uniqueness of the community came through in the solution building process. Funders (both governmental and nonprofit) can consider the use of PAR to examine a large societal problem through a new lens. PAR is a means to empower communities often left behind or with no voice. PAR research should be in the toolbox of governmental, corporate, and philanthropic funders as a consideration to address large societal problems. Patience will be needed to allow the initiative to emerge, grow, and produce tangible and measurable outcomes.

5. Conclusion

This PAR study examined the process of activating college access services and building civic infrastructure in a community setting. Through multiple stages of engagement, the PAR researcher and community members developed a network of volunteers and services to provide community-based college access. The project achieved the goals of PAR research to empower marginalized communities in building civic infrastructure to address a large societal problem.

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