



Office of Research and Evaluation
Research Grantee Study Summary

Fielding Graduate University

Folk Education Network: Strengthening a Distributed Network through Participatory Approaches

What is the background for this study?

This study examines how social cohesion and collaboration between loosely linked independent local organizations may be supported by participatory research approaches. This research also investigates how to scale these participatory approaches to strengthen a decentralized Folk Education Network (FEN) composed of 98 learning centers across the United States. Through a community-based participatory action research (CPAR) approach, the university and its partners gather in dialogue and launch three CPAR hubs to facilitate regional implementation of research plans centered on shared concerns.

What are the research questions?

The purpose of this CPAR study is to investigate civic infrastructure needed to strengthen and scale the FEN. The research questions are:

1. How can participatory approaches be scaled and used to strengthen the FEN for long-term and sustainable impact?
2. How often are AmeriCorps programs integrated within CPAR-initiated studies and how do these national service programs strengthen civic infrastructure connected to the Folk School Movement?

Who are your community partners?

The study is co-led by Fielding Graduate University and community partners from FEN, the Folk Education Association of America, the African American Craft Alliance, Center for Belonging Folk School, Life.School.House, John C. Campbell Folk School, Washington State Park Folklife Programs, and ServeWA.

How are community members engaged in the research to action process?

The study's research team includes representatives from community partners, FEN members, university and student researchers, and community researchers who engage in every stage of the research study. Community members and stakeholders choose how much they engage in the study according to their availability and capacity, modeling an "all who want to participate can" approach. A community advisory board builds consensus and shared understanding of each partner's agenda and promotes trust building, transparency, and shared decision-making through the development, implementation, and analysis of CPAR plans and analysis.

Study At-A-Glance

Study Title

Folk Education Network: Strengthening a Distributed Network through Participatory Approaches

Researchers

David Blake Willis, PhD
Dawn Jackman Murphy

Grant Cohort 2022

Timeline 2022-2025

Study Location Brasstown, North Carolina; Decorah, Iowa; and Olympia, Washington

Study Topic Area(s)

Arts and Culture
Economic Opportunity and Employment
Education Across the Life Course
Volunteering, Nonprofit Studies, and National Service

What data and methods are used in this study?

This study includes two main vehicles for sampling and data collection: the Dialogue Conference and a network of three CPAR hubs hosted by folk schools in the Midwest, Northwest, and Southeast. Participants for the study are community partner leaders and folklife practitioners. The Dialogue Conference introduces participants to practices and forms of CPAR. Participants develop CPAR plans then use in hub-supported regional network communities for implementation. Community researchers collect data at these local sites in a real-world laboratory. This study primarily uses qualitative methodologies, including literature reviews, observations of participants in dialogue, reflexive journaling, focus groups, surveys, digital storytelling, and audio or video recording, with some survey implementation and analysis.

How does this research translate to community action?

Folk schools have a rich history of developing out of justice movements and participating in community action. This study builds upon this history by providing resources and practices to facilitate co-learning and co-knowledge production and supports the use of regional action research, increasing regional cohesion. Through access to a collaborative learning center, community partners, researchers, and regional hubs create learning materials and knowledge aids as a result of their CPAR studies. Therefore, the study helps build networks that will persist in communities even after the end of the research period.

What are potential opportunities to apply study findings and/or build on this research?

This research promotes a better understanding of civic infrastructure and change processes explored by the hubs. It also informs the field of civic engagement and volunteerism by showing how CPAR can foster cohesion and collaboration between organizational networks.

For more information on the study:

Study Website	Folk Education Association of America / Folk School Alliance - Projects			
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