Challenge #1: “Who will plant the trees?”

In the *Urban Vulnerability to Climate Change* project, we want to work with community partners to understand climate vulnerability on the “street level.” We have a tentative agreement with neighborhood representatives from an area in Central South Phoenix to partner with us in participatory research. The residents have a stated goal for this collaboration, which is to obtain trees for their neighborhood that were promised by the city but never delivered.

What are the procedural and ethical issues that we are likely to encounter in working with community partners and what should we do?

*Results of student-led small group discussions:*

**Procedural recommendations**

1. Get approval for the human subjects research from the Institutional Review Board and provide training for students working on the project.

2. Do a community assessment of the neighborhoods as the first step, learning things such as: how does the community define itself, who are the leaders and spokespeople, who can you count on, what are their issues, what are the “politics” of community action, and is there a history of university presence there?

3. Develop trust between the residents and the researchers and do not violate the trust. Be forthright about the role of research, how long the researchers will be involved, and what researchers will do and what residents will do in the partnership.

4. Be very sensitive to cultural differences and the educational gap between residents and researchers. Educate the students on how to interact with residents.

5. Define the goals of the project and partnership together with the community and leave individuals choices about things such as what types of solutions to pursue or what types of trees to plant.

**Ethical issues that might arise**

1. Buying trees for the community might be a bribe. Researchers should play a supporting role in empowering the community to do fundraising and political activism to
acquire trees. Researchers could raise the environmental justice issue with the media to help the community.

2. Plan for when the partnership will end. If the agreement is for two years, leave legacies from the project, such as the educational programs in the schools and data that the community can continue to use.

3. Neighborhood interest in the partnership may drop off before the project is complete.

4. The residents may identify other environmental justice issues that are more important to them than vegetation and climate.

5. The partnership might be a success in terms of more resources, better environment for this community, but what if you are perceived as playing favorites in a city with many neighborhoods that have great needs?

Challenge #2: Managing your project when roadblocks are encountered

Mid-way through your project, you find that one of your collaborators is not being as productive as the others. This is a big problem because, in an integrated study, each component is critical to all the others.

What strategies will you employ to address this potentially serious issue?

*Results of student-led small group discussions:*

1. “Check” references on potential collaborators before inviting them to join the proposal/project or agreeing to involve them in it.

2. Appoint a project manager (budget for that in the proposal). Use project manager software tools.

3. Establish good communications at the outset of the project and clarify expectations about work that is to be done. Everyone may not have the same ideas so expectations need to be reconciled.

4. Keep investigators apprised of opportunities for career advancement opportunities that result from their work on the project. Different people have different motivations for involvement.

5. Advise investigators about the dangers of over-committing themselves on too many projects.
6. Hold frequent project meetings and meet with the co-PIs one-on-one. Some of the meetings should be social occasions and include family and significant others in the invitations. Providing food at meetings helps to create a sociable atmosphere.

7. When someone is falling behind, ask the person, “How can we help you get this done?”

8. Management strategies, such as those suggested above, help to keep communications open, progress transparent, and exert peer pressure on less productive members of the research team.

9. As a last resort, use the administrative route to remove money from the budget of the unproductive collaborator and redirect it to more productive uses in the project.

10. Graduate programs would be well-advised to add a course in project management to their curriculum.

Challenge #3: All projects come to an end

What end-products will indicate that your project is concluded successfully?

What processes need to put in place at the beginning, middle, and end of the project in order to ensure success?

Results of student-led small group discussions:

End-products

1. First priority has to be products that were promised to funders and partners. For federal funding agencies, this is often peer-reviewed publications.

2. Project team objectives are also a priority. These might include publications, theses, curriculum products, and community goals.

3. Debrief project team at the completion of the project. Report back to community partners.

4. Celebrate completion of the project. Include community partners in the celebration.

Early processes needed to ensure successful completion

1. Establish contingency plans in case an area of the project is not working as planned.

2. Identify target journals for publications.
3. Discuss how authorship on publications will be determined.

4. Determine the students’ needs for completing theses.

5. Create a “data management plan” that specifies where data will be centrally stored, how it will be documented, who is responsible for it, and when (in what condition) it will be publicly available.

6. Be clear with the community partners about when the project will end.

7. Decide how to deal with press and media relations. Who is the spokesperson(s)? When will you release results?

8. Have on-going evaluations of the models and methods used in the project.

9. Seek external advice from experienced investigators on what the end-game plan should be.

10. Set a tradition of celebrating interim successes as they occur.