

How to Develop Community-Engaged Research Questions

What is Community-Engaged Research?

Community-Engaged Research is an approach that promotes community and social change by involving community members in the research process and addressing locally identified issues that can transcend to a social level. The aim is to help community organizations and initiatives answer specific questions about an area of interest to advocate for a cause or support community action. It recognizes the value and legitimacy of community members' knowledge and emphasizes how that knowledge can be used with traditional research methods, data, and analysis to present a clear and reliable community story or case.

Once you have identified a topic of interest within your community, one of the easiest ways to focus your topic is to frame it as a question – but **how do you do this?**

Getting Started on Your Research Question

To get started, think about, and write down the issue you want to know more about through research. The more details you can provide about your issue, the better.

Consider the probing questions below:

- + What is the issue/project that you're aiming to work on (be detailed)?
- + Is there anything about this issue that you do not know about and would like to find out?
- + Is there anything about this issue that you think you know but need to confirm with more information?
- + Is the issue specific enough to focus on and meaningful enough to warrant research?
- + Who is involved and impacted by this issue?
- + Can you rephrase your issue into a question that can be definitively answered through research?

Why Create a Research Question?

A research question:

- + Helps you find out what you don't already know or test your assumptions.
- + Helps to focus what, how and why you collect data.
- + Defines the investigation, sets boundaries, and provides direction.
- + Provides all partners with a shared understanding of the goal of the research.
- + Ensures that the research conducted is addressing the specific issue identified.

Writing Your Research Question

When writing your research question, consider the following:

1. **Clarity:** Is your research question clear? Would someone reading your question immediately understand what you are attempting to answer?

Examples:

Unclear: Why are social networking sites harmful?

Clear: How are online users experiencing or addressing privacy issues on social networking sites like Instagram, SnapChat, and Facebook?

2. **Focused:** Is your research question specific enough? Avoid research questions that are too broad to be manageable.

Examples:

Unfocused: What is the effect on the environment from global warming?

Focused: How is glacial melting affecting penguins in Antarctica?

3. **Simple vs. Complex:** Is your question too simple or easily answered? It is better to take on a specific and focused question than to try to learn everything about a broad topic. A close look at a smaller part of a topic is often what gives you the best sense of the big issues. Questions should be appropriately complex, requiring further analysis through the research process. Questions should not be answerable with a simple “yes” or “no” or by easily-found facts. They often begin with “How” or “Why.”

Examples:

Too simple: How are doctors addressing diabetes?

Appropriately complex: What are common traits of those suffering from diabetes, and how can these commonalities be used to aid the medical community in prevention of the disease?

Ask Yourself:

- A. How will you to determine what resources are necessary to conduct the research project? Are you confident you can accomplish the project?
- B. How will you involve those affected by the issue in the project planning and research process?
- C. How will you ensure the project is focused? Are the goals clear and measurable?
- D. How will the results of this research be shared with the community?

Modifying Your Question

Often you will continue to modify your topic throughout the research process. How you modify your topic will depend upon:

- Whether there is too much information
- Whether there is too little information
- Whether new issues arise during the research process that need to be

How The Office of Community Engagement Can Help

The McMaster Research Shop works with community partners in Hamilton to provide plain-language answers to research questions. We can help with refining your research question and matching our volunteers with your project needs. Learn more: <https://community.mcmaster.ca/our-programs-and-initiatives/research-shop/>