

## **Local Police: Introduction**

The New Haven Police Academy uses an innovative approach to training that builds relationships between police and members of the community. K. Codish, the Department's Director of Training and Education, created long-term, interactive, small group learning initiatives called term projects. These projects experiment with the arts as a way of developing empathy and problem solving skills, and creating occasions for constructive interaction between police and the community.

Susan Sturm was drawn to study and collaborate with the New Haven Police Academy because its approach resembled in important ways her work with Lani Guinier on building multi-racial learning communities. The police-community training emphasizes active learning to enable people to think differently about polarizing interactions. It creates opportunities for collaboration with other students, community members, and social service providers. See operating principles.

This section of the website and guidebook are a result of her collaboration with K. Codish and the participants in the New Haven Police Academy. With Ellen Reynolds, Sturm made a videotape about the New Haven Police Department's term project program.

### **What Are Term Projects?**

Term projects are problem-solving collaborations that use art to create relationships among small, diverse groups of police students and members of the community. These groups are assigned a problem of mutual and pressing concern. They then work together over an extended period of time toward a common goal: a work of art that deepens understanding of the problem and its impact on police/community interaction. Police students have approximately 18 weeks to complete their project, and work is done simultaneously with the scheduled daily academy program.

### **Goals of Term Projects:**

- to enable diverse groups of police students and community members to interact constructively over time and to confront stereotypes that limit their capacity to work together;
- to develop cross-group relationships with potential long-term partners;
- to improve police students' capacities to work effectively as a diverse team;
- to develop interdisciplinary research and problem solving skills;
- to broaden policing students' understanding of complex problems they will encounter as officers and their empathy for those involved; and

- to create memorable images of their interaction and learning for police and community audiences that provide a catalyst for further problem solving

**"Art allows people to see with new eyes. When you flip power around, and role plays is one of the best ways to do that, that's one of the best ways to get people to understand power, that there IS power... To the extent to which you can flip things around, it can create a great space for thinking about how race and power and gender work."**

Professor Harlan Dalton, Yale Law School

## **Getting Started**

### **Small but Diverse Groups**

At the beginning of the police academy, each student (officers in training in New Haven are referred to as "students" rather than "recruits" or "cadets") is assigned to a term project group of 5-6 police students. Efforts are made to construct diverse working groups, by race, ethnicity, and gender. This is important to enable learning and relationship building across racial, ethnic, and gender differences.

### **Problem-Oriented Focus**

Each group is assigned to research and create an art project about common concerns that come up regularly in the course of police-community dynamics. These issues traditionally have triggered or reinforced fear, distrust, and violence. For example, individuals inside and outside the police department identify police/youth of color interaction as a persistent problem affecting police, communities of color, and the city in general. Other topics addressed include mental illness, homelessness, and domestic violence.

### **Creating a Casual Setting**

Students meet outside of class, in casual settings, often in each others' homes and communities. This informal interaction creates opportunities for learning about each other's backgrounds and cultures, for interacting in creative ways, for uncovering and challenging stereotypes, and for building trust.

### **Group-Based Evaluation**

The students are graded collectively, and up to one third of each student's final academy grade is based upon the term project. Grades are based on collaboration, original research, creativity, organization, and presentation. Collective grading encourages students to work together as a group.

## **Facilitation by Community Advisors**

Each group is assigned two outside advisors:

- a subject matter expert in the problem area, and
- an artist with experience in using art as a tool for community problem solving. These artistic advisors both assist in the process of creating a finished work of art and facilitate conversations between students about the issues they are addressing.

Ideally, these outside advisors are “repeat players” who work regularly with the police department and the training academy on addressing community problems.

## **Building Bridges with Community**

Each policing student group participates in “clinical rotations,” visiting locations in the community like soup kitchens, battered women’s shelters, and centers for homeless and runaway youth. Students have frequent contact with members of the community during the term projects because community members with expertise in relevant areas are volunteer facilitators of the projects, and because students spend time interviewing New Haven residents about the topics they are addressing.

## **Classroom Methods**

### **Active, Hands-On Learning**

**“Tell me, and I’ll forget. Show me, and I may not remember. Involve me, and I’ll understand.”**

As part of each term group project, students learn more about the topic they are addressing, through both library research and through contact and interviews with community members. For instance, students working on mental illness spent time making rounds with staff of a local organization that provides services to homeless mentally ill people in New Haven. They then conducted extensive interviews of homeless people about their lives, their fears, their experience with police, and their needs. Students focusing on domestic violence researched domestic violence homicides over the past five years, interviewed women at a shelter for battered women, and spoke extensively with the court liaison and with advocates who work closely with domestic violence survivors.

### **Experimentation with Formats**

Each term project group experiments with role plays, interviews, clinical rotations, and other experiential learning formats designed to build students' communication skills and broaden their perspective. This work has included simulating the experience of homelessness, brainstorming with kids about the stereotypes each group held of the other, interviewing victims of domestic violence, and using role plays to rethink police/community interactions.

### **Collaboration**

Police students collectively research their topic, work together on defining and implementing their art project, and present their work as a group. Collaboration helps police officers learn to work productively with each other and the community.

### **Examining Assumptions and Modeling Role Innovation**

An important goal of the term projects is to challenge individuals' stereotypes and preconceptions about various communities and their problems. Students have the opportunity to interact informally and over time with people throughout the city, both as term project group members and as community liaisons. This sustained interaction enables them to build trust with members of unfamiliar groups. They also work with community activists, service providers, and artists, all of whom have extensive knowledge and a long track record working with local groups.

### **Why Art?**

Students work with artists to develop their capacity to observe without prejudging. Art also provides opportunities for police students and community members to interact in ways that break out of familiar (and sometimes confining) patterns.

**“The art projects allowed police to step out and look at how they interact with the community, how they respond to situations, what their role is, and how they might want to see their role change.”**

### **When It Works**

The term projects have yielded surprising and inspiring results. The work groups have produced plays about police/youth interaction with groups of teenagers of color, created a sculpture of a tree representing the experiences of families with mentally ill children, shot a video from the perspective of a homeless mentally ill individual, and generated a three-dimensional representation of the experience of domestic violence. At least some of the police participants have developed long-term relationships with service

providers and community members that continue to inform their work as officers.

**"The masks brought out different features and emotions and forced us to think, when we go on a scene, what is this person going through?"**

For example, many former students developed a long-term relationship with a mental health access team that works with homeless clients. What used to be frustrating interactions with officers who had little understanding of or patience for the agency's clients has become a working partnership between agency staff and some police officers.

**"My initial reaction was – what does mental illness have to do with police work? I now realize that most of the job is dealing with this kind of stuff. I thought it was about chasing bad guys. My views about the term project changed after I started working and I saw that this was part of the job."**

**"If I know someone has a mental condition and they are constantly on the street, I know what to do, who to call. It's recognizing the difference between who needs to be arrested and who needs help."**

## **When It Doesn't Work**

### **Resistance**

Police academy students are often resistant to the term projects, particularly at the outset. They question the projects' relevance and validity. The reactions of veteran police officers schooled in a more militaristic style buttress the students' resistance. Community members' skepticism about the value of working with the police mirrors the students' initial reactions. This resistance can be overcome, at least in the short run, once the relevance and the value of the term projects becomes apparent. This requires careful selection of the problems addressed by term projects, strong support from leaders within the policing organization, and institutional recognition for successful participation.

### **Inadequate Institutional Support**

Term projects are time and resource intensive. They cannot succeed without sustained interaction over a number of weeks, participation by experts and community members, and strong support from the top. The department leadership needs to communicate the value of the term projects within the department and to the public.

### **Time**

State curricular requirements impose heavy workloads on policing students, in addition to term project work. A time crunch, or undue stress associated with getting the work done, can undercut the creative and transformative potential of the term projects.

### **An Inconsistent Police Culture**

No training or educational program can alone transform the culture of an organization. If police academy students graduate into an organization that does not value respectful interaction, community involvement, and problem solving, the impact of the term projects is likely to be short-lived. Also, police academy students must learn how to square problem solving and community participation with the more militaristic aspects of their role (firearms training, defensive tactics, etc.) This is a larger problem, which can only be addressed as part of an overall organizational project.

### **Lack of Diversity, Community Organization, or Activism**

The success of the term projects depends on active participation over a sustained period of time with community members, social service providers, and artists. If racially and professionally diverse community partners do not exist, or if potential partners do not have working relationships with the police, the bridge-building aspects of the term project program will be quite difficult to attain. Similarly, a police department that cannot build diversity into its workgroups, preferably with both policing students and community members, will lose a crucial dimension of the term project experience.

### **Lack of Attention to Learning Across Difference**

Genuine learning often requires skill in facilitating difficult conversations, in interpreting silence, and in sustaining meaningful participation over time by all participants. Some artistic and community participants may have limited experience with this form of facilitation, and may be tempted to steer clear of what they don't know in order to avoid conflict or failure. Attention to process and to the challenges of facilitating open, honest, and productive conversations about race, gender, and other forms of difference may be necessary to enable term project groups to deal effectively with conflict that inevitably accompanies multi-racial problem solving.