



# Rescued is My Favorite Breed: An Academia-Community Partnership Targeting a Mutual Goal

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## INTRODUCTION

Community Engagement is defined by the Carnegie Foundation as a "collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity" (Carnegie Foundation, 2022). The recognition that both academia and the public sector hold a unique set of expertise allows for the categorization of the community as partners, collaborators, co-educators and/or public scholars (Welch & Plaxton-Moore, 2019).

Thus far, several practices which can strengthen community-engaged pedagogy have been identified. These include the recommendation that both partners 1) identify congruent goals while taking into account the expectations, capacities and limitations unique to each partner, 2) clearly define roles and responsibilities within the partnership while sharing the control of activities and decisions, 3) balance long-term commitment with frequent communication and continuous assessment of both process and outcomes, 4) foster familiarity with each partner's culture, norms, values, economic conditions, social-networks, political/power structures, demographic trends, and history.

## OBJECTIVES

In 2016, the "Canine Learning and Behavior" (CLB) undergraduate psychology course was developed as a partnership between faculty at Saint Francis University (SFU), the Central Pennsylvania Humane Society (CPHS), the Huntingdon County Humane Society (HCHS) and the Cambria County Humane Society (CCHS). The course was designed according to recommended practices in community engagement.

Identifying the care for shelter dogs was as a mutual goal for both partners and incorporating the knowledge, strengths and expertise unique to the community, the course was taught by faculty and community co-educators, and enrolled students learned to train shelter dogs and write shelter-specific grant applications. During the semester, students in the CLB course lived with the dogs (Picture 1) in approved residency units, attended faculty-delivered lectures and participated in community partner-led lab sessions in which they trained the dogs according to the course's curriculum or wrote grant applications on behalf of the community partner. The end of the semester was marked with a "Puppy Graduation Ceremony" (Picture 2).

## MATERIALS & METHODS

The assessment of learning outcomes included students enrolled in the CLB course and in the equally challenging "Sensation and Perception" (SnP) course, taught by the same faculty instructor within the same semesters. Twenty-one students were enrolled in the CLB course, and 47 students were enrolled in the SnP course in the fall semesters of 2021 and 2022. Six dogs were trained by students in the CLB course. All dogs had spent at least 4 months in the shelter prior to course inclusion and demonstrated a variety of maladaptive behaviors (e.g., excessive fear, lack of human/dog-socialization, complete lack of training).

Students' comprehension of course content was assessed in both courses using a simple distribution of final grades. Students' confidence in acquired skills and attitudes towards community-engaged pedagogy were evaluated using an anonymous self-report survey, administered in both courses at the beginning and end of the semester. The survey contained the following sub-scales: 1) ability to apply acquired knowledge towards dogs' behavioral analysis and modification (including obedience, agility and safe human-animal interactions, constructed to follow the American-Kennel-Club's Canine-Good-Citizen Test), 2) understanding of the grant writing process and capability to prepare and submit a grant application, 3) comprehension of the needs of the community, sense of responsibility towards the community, and appraised benefits of community-engaged pedagogy. Analysis excluded students in the SnP course who failed to complete the survey/parts of the survey at either time point. Final survey analysis included 21 students in the CLB, and 37 students in the SnP course. Responses within each course were combined.

The survey of students was approved by SFU's Institutional Review Board (PRO001000256). Dogs' training protocols were approved by SFU's Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (Protocol #00017).



Picture 1. Dogs trained by students enrolled in the "Canine Learning and Behavior" course, 2021-2022. Top left to right: Blue, Kya & Oakleigh; Bottom left to right: Belle, Vicky & Midnight.

## RESULTS

The findings demonstrated that the grade distribution of students enrolled in the CLB course was positively skewed compared with students enrolled in the SnP course. Across both years, a higher percentage of the grade "A" [89% (2021), 91.5% (2022)] was allotted to students enrolled in the CLB course, compared with students enrolled in the SnP course [(54.5% (2021), 56% (2022)).

Survey results pointed to differential self-evaluation scores within both courses. First, although at the beginning of the semester students' estimations of their dog training skills were comparable across both courses, only students in the CLB course experienced an increased confidence in their skills at the end of the semester. Second, students in the CLB course felt that their grant-writing skills improved throughout the semester, an impression not seen among students in the SnP course (Table 1).

|  | Beginning               |                         | End       |      | Course     |      | Time      |      | Course x Time |    |
|--|-------------------------|-------------------------|-----------|------|------------|------|-----------|------|---------------|----|
|  | M(SD)                   | M(SD)                   | F         | n2   | F          | n2   | F         | n2   | F             | n2 |
| <b>1. I am confident in my ability to train a dog to accept the approach, petting and grooming performed by a friendly stranger.</b> |                         |                         |           |      |            |      |           |      |               |    |
| CLB  | 4.19(1.40)              | 5.87(0.35) <sup>b</sup> | 19.05**** | 0.55 | 26.27****  | 0.31 | 23.07**** | 0.29 |               |    |
| SnP  | 3.59(1.44)              | 3.65(1.49)              |           |      |            |      |           |      |               |    |
| <b>2. I am confident in my ability to train a dog to walk on a loose leash and stay under my control when needed.</b>                |                         |                         |           |      |            |      |           |      |               |    |
| CLB  | 4.71(1.00)              | 5.47(0.68) <sup>b</sup> | 7.41**    | 0.41 | 6.87*      | 0.11 | 10.54**   | 0.15 |               |    |
| SnP  | 4.32(1.39)              | 4.24(1.27)              |           |      |            |      |           |      |               |    |
| <b>3. I am confident in my ability to train a dog to walk politely in pedestrian traffic and in public places.</b>                   |                         |                         |           |      |            |      |           |      |               |    |
| CLB  | 4.38(1.24)              | 5.62(0.66) <sup>b</sup> | 12.48***  | 0.40 | 12.26***   | 0.17 | 12.26***  | 0.17 |               |    |
| SnP  | 3.92(1.50)              | 3.92(1.36)              |           |      |            |      |           |      |               |    |
| <b>4. I am confident in my ability to train a dog to follow the cues: "sit", "down" and "stay".</b>                                  |                         |                         |           |      |            |      |           |      |               |    |
| CLB  | 5.28(0.71)              | 5.90(0.30) <sup>b</sup> | 11.01**   | 0.57 | 7.31**     | 0.11 | 8.71**    | 0.13 |               |    |
| SnP  | 4.67(1.35)              | 4.65(1.27)              |           |      |            |      |           |      |               |    |
| <b>5. I am confident in my ability to train a dog to "come" when I call it.</b>  |                         |                         |           |      |            |      |           |      |               |    |
| CLB  | 5.28(0.64)              | 5.90(0.30) <sup>b</sup> | 11.05**   | 0.51 | 6.69*      | 0.10 | 6.69*     | 0.10 |               |    |
| SnP  | 4.67(1.37)              | 4.67(1.20)              |           |      |            |      |           |      |               |    |
| <b>6. I am confident in my ability to train a dog to behave politely around other dogs.</b>  |                         |                         |           |      |            |      |           |      |               |    |
| CLB  | 4.33(1.31)              | 5.33(0.85) <sup>b</sup> | 6.96*     | 0.28 | 11.83**    | 0.17 | 5.50*     | 0.09 |               |    |
| SnP  | 3.92(1.38)              | 4.10(1.41)              |           |      |            |      |           |      |               |    |
| <b>7. I am confident in my ability to train a dog to be confident when faced with common distracting situations.</b>                 |                         |                         |           |      |            |      |           |      |               |    |
| CLB  | 4.23(1.41)              | 5.66(0.65) <sup>b</sup> | 16.84**** | 0.60 | 35.54****  | 0.38 | 15.27***  | 0.21 |               |    |
| SnP  | 3.46(1.36)              | 3.75(1.46)              |           |      |            |      |           |      |               |    |
| <b>8. I am confident in my ability to train a dog to be left with a trusted person and maintain good manners.</b>                    |                         |                         |           |      |            |      |           |      |               |    |
| CLB  | 4.47(1.21)              | 5.62(0.59) <sup>b</sup> | 13.16***  | 0.56 | 30.31****  | 0.35 | 7.65**    | 0.12 |               |    |
| SnP  | 3.67(1.45)              | 4.05(1.45)              |           |      |            |      |           |      |               |    |
| <b>9. I can list the key elements of a grant proposal.</b>   |                         |                         |           |      |            |      |           |      |               |    |
| CLB  | 2.23(1.22)              | 5.28(0.84) <sup>b</sup> | 49.47**** | 0.65 | 101.70**** | 0.64 | 82.21**** | 0.59 |               |    |
| SnP  | 2.05(0.91)              | 2.21(1.10)              |           |      |            |      |           |      |               |    |
| <b>10. I know how to combine all elements of a grant proposal into a logical, interesting and appealing application.</b>             |                         |                         |           |      |            |      |           |      |               |    |
| CLB  | 2.85(1.39)              | 5.14(0.91) <sup>b</sup> | 22.06**** | 0.48 | 44.85****  | 0.44 | 37.11**** | 0.39 |               |    |
| SnP  | 2.65(1.16)              | 2.75(1.28)              |           |      |            |      |           |      |               |    |
| <b>11. I am confident in my ability to write a fundable grant proposal.</b>  |                         |                         |           |      |            |      |           |      |               |    |
| CLB  | 2.90(1.41)              | 5.19(0.81) <sup>b</sup> | 37.00**** | 0.52 | 29.19****  | 0.34 | 35.28**** | 0.38 |               |    |
| SnP  | 2.51(1.17)              | 2.40(1.30)              |           |      |            |      |           |      |               |    |
| <b>12. I feel that grant writing has the potential to make a positive impact on the community.</b>                                   |                         |                         |           |      |            |      |           |      |               |    |
| CLB  | 4.76(1.48) <sup>b</sup> | 5.52(0.67) <sup>b</sup> | 39.30**** | 0.60 | 1.80       | 0.03 | 5.78*     | 0.09 |               |    |
| SnP  | 3.35(1.41)              | 3.13(1.43)              |           |      |            |      |           |      |               |    |

Table 1. Self-Evaluation of Dog-Training Skills and Grant Writing Skills, Reported by Students Enrolled in the "Canine Learning and Behavior" (CLB) and in the "Sensation and Perception" (SnP) Courses, 2021-2022. Scores were calculated using the following Likert Scale: 6 = strongly agree, 5 = agree, 4 = somewhat agree, 3 = somewhat disagree, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree. <sup>a</sup> = compared to scores collected at the beginning of the semester within the same course, <sup>b</sup> = compared to scores collected at the same time point of the semester, between both courses. \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001; \*\*\*\*p < .0001.

Third, although students in both courses self-assessed their comprehension of the needs of their community, awareness of their community's financial issues, and sense of responsibility for the community in an equivalent fashion at the beginning of the semester, these evaluations were higher at the end of the semester only among students in the CLB course. At the end of the semester, students in the CLB course were also more likely to agree that they learn course content better when connections to the needs of the community are made and that the combination of course work with community engagement should be practiced in additional campus courses, an increase not seen in students in the SnP course. Importantly, students' scores across several attitudinal items remained constant in both courses throughout the semester. These included the beliefs that it is important to be informed of community issues, volunteer in the community and financially support charitable organizations in the community (Table 2).

|  | Beginning  |                         | End       |      | Course    |      | Time      |      | Course x Time |    |
|--|------------|-------------------------|-----------|------|-----------|------|-----------|------|---------------|----|
|  | M(SD)      | M(SD)                   | F         | n2   | F         | n2   | F         | n2   | F             | n2 |
| <b>1. I have a good understanding of the problems facing the community in which I live.</b>                                  |            |                         |           |      |           |      |           |      |               |    |
| CLB  | 4.57(1.02) | 5.43(0.59) <sup>b</sup> | 7.83**    | 0.32 | 8.53**    | 0.13 | 8.53**    | 0.13 |               |    |
| SnP  | 4.24(1.23) | 4.24(1.27)              |           |      |           |      |           |      |               |    |
| <b>2. I am aware of the needs of my community when it comes to funding issues.</b>   |            |                         |           |      |           |      |           |      |               |    |
| CLB  | 3.33(1.52) | 5.43(0.59) <sup>b</sup> | 27.54**** | 0.48 | 36.41**** | 0.39 | 24.06**** | 0.30 |               |    |
| SnP  | 2.89(1.10) | 3.10(1.30)              |           |      |           |      |           |      |               |    |
| <b>3. I feel responsible for my community.</b>   |            |                         |           |      |           |      |           |      |               |    |
| CLB  | 4.43(1.32) | 5.24(0.76) <sup>b</sup> | 2.31      | 0.10 | 11.18**   | 0.16 | 4.31*     | 0.07 |               |    |
| SnP  | 4.35(1.11) | 4.54(1.04)              |           |      |           |      |           |      |               |    |
| <b>4. I believe that it is important to be informed of community issues.</b>   |            |                         |           |      |           |      |           |      |               |    |
| CLB  | 5.28(0.71) | 5.57(0.50) <sup>b</sup> | 2.45      | 0.13 | 2.52      | 0.04 | 2.52      | 0.04 |               |    |
| SnP  | 5.16(0.68) | 5.16(0.80)              |           |      |           |      |           |      |               |    |
| <b>5. I believe that it is important to volunteer in the community.</b>  |            |                         |           |      |           |      |           |      |               |    |
| CLB  | 5.29(0.74) | 5.57(0.67)              | 0.95      | 0.10 | 0.57      | 0.00 | 1.24      | 0.02 |               |    |
| SnP  | 5.32(0.62) | 5.30(0.74)              |           |      |           |      |           |      |               |    |
| <b>6. I believe that it is important to financially support charitable organizations in the community.</b>                   |            |                         |           |      |           |      |           |      |               |    |
| CLB  | 4.95(0.97) | 5.19(0.75) <sup>b</sup> | 3.39      | 0.11 | 3.30      | 0.05 | 0.01      | 0.00 |               |    |
| SnP  | 4.59(0.83) | 4.84(0.86)              |           |      |           |      |           |      |               |    |
| <b>7. I learn course content better when connections to the needs of my community are made.</b>                              |            |                         |           |      |           |      |           |      |               |    |
| CLB  | 4.66(1.42) | 5.52(0.75) <sup>b</sup> | 3.86      | 0.11 | 7.27**    | 0.11 | 4.37*     | 0.07 |               |    |
| SnP  | 4.56(1.01) | 4.67(1.13)              |           |      |           |      |           |      |               |    |
| <b>8. The combination of course work with community engagement should be practiced in additional courses on this campus.</b> |            |                         |           |      |           |      |           |      |               |    |
| CLB  | 4.85(1.55) | 5.57(0.59) <sup>b</sup> | 2.69      | 0.07 | 4.72*     | 0.07 | 4.06*     | 0.06 |               |    |
| SnP  | 4.83(0.95) | 4.86(0.88)              |           |      |           |      |           |      |               |    |

Table 2. Self-Evaluation of Attitudes Towards Community Engagement, Reported by Students Enrolled in the "Canine Learning and Behavior" (CLB) and in the "Sensation and Perception" (SnP) Courses, 2021-2022. Scores were calculated using the following Likert Scale: 6 = strongly agree, 5 = agree, 4 = somewhat agree, 3 = somewhat disagree, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree. <sup>a</sup> = compared to scores collected at the beginning of the semester within the same course, <sup>b</sup> = compared to scores collected at the same time point of the semester, between both courses. \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001; \*\*\*\*p < .0001.

Finally, all trained dogs successfully "graduated" and were adopted at the end of the fall 2021 and 2022 semesters. All grant applications prepared in 2021 and 2022 were submitted. Thus far, none of the 2021-submitted applications were funded, but some encouraging communication regarding the 2022-submitted applications has been received.



Picture 2. Scenes from the "Puppy Graduations", organized by students enrolled in the "Canine Learning & Behavior" course. Top row: 2021; middle row: 2022; bottom row: 2021 and 2022.



Picture 3. Students & community co-educators, 2021-2022. Bottom left: Ms. Megan Stanton, CPHS representative and professional dog trainer. Bottom middle: Ms. Lisa Boland, HCHS director.

## CONCLUSIONS

The project aimed to create a reciprocal academia-community partnership, designed according to recommended community engagement practices. The CLB course was thus built to combine the aspiration of higher-education instructors to provide their students with a transformational learning experience, and the desire of animal-shelter personnel to improve the well-being of sheltered dogs. The course was taught by both the community and the academic partners, serving as co-educators and decision makers, creating a mutual exchange of knowledge and expertise. Efforts to clearly define roles and responsibilities, facilitate frequent communication, and nurture each partner's familiarity with the expectations, capabilities and limitations of their collaborators, created a long-term alliance which benefits humans and animals alike (Pictures 3 and 4). It is our hope that additional educators decide to take a leap of faith and adopt a community-engaged pedagogy into their curricula.



Picture 4. Students, roommates, faculty and community co-educators at the Cambria County Humane Society.

## REFERENCES

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