Who are we? And What are we doing?
An interview with TCRC Board Members

Tufts Community Research Center was formed in 2004 with the aim of bringing together the community representatives in the Tufts host communities and Tufts faculty, students and administrators interested in its local community issues, and with the ultimate goal of doing research that addresses the needs of its population and is beneficial to its communities. Two years since the inception of TCRC we have a diverse coalition of community members, and Tufts associates who are committed and are looking to develop a stronger identity and to advance and strengthen its mission and future goals. This report is based on the interviews we conducted with its Steering Committee members to better understand their visions and aspirations for the center and to plan its future directions.

We interviewed nine out of the sixteen TCRC’s Steering Committee members. Of the members interviewed five were Tufts faculty (Ostrander, Jennings, Bermudez, Martinez and Durant) three were community representatives (Pirie, Freeman and Laws) and the Tufts community relations director (Rubel).

The interview consisted of five basic questions. 1. What are your expectations for TCRC? 2. What do you want TCRC to be doing? 3. What are the strengths of TCRC? 4. What are the weaknesses of TCRC? and 5. How can TCRC be improved? Of these, question 2 and question 5 were most alike and people responded to these questions alike or rather, question 5 summarized and reemphasized all the points the interviewees responded to in Question 2. In order to avoid repetitiousness and redundancy, I have merged these questions together as ‘What do you want TCRC to be doing?’

What are your expectations for TCRC?

The expectations of the members (the steering committee members interviewed will be addressed as members hereon in this document) interviewed were largely similar. Most saw TCRC as “a research center with resources to do community based research.” Some others elaborated on the center “as a centrally important bridge between the academy and the community with the big goal of doing research that is both useful to the community and that creates some wider general knowledge." Another member hoped that “TCRC will take the lead for Tufts in promoting true community partnerships in conducting research.” TCRC was also seen “as a place the communities could come to with their problems needs and expectations.” And as “a vehicle on campus to get the community research moving forward.” In general, TCRC was defined as an entity that promotes and enables quality community based research and community partnership within Tufts.

The members also had expectations for the kind of research and community partnerships that TCRC should strive for. One of the members explained that, “CBPR research funds such as the NIH RFPs are often directed through the university and the CBPR projects are largely driven by the academy serving the goals of the academy, in this there is something very dishonest about CBPR. There is a contradiction.”. Challenging and questioning the current concepts of research were considered essential by many to
achieve the goals of CBR. In describing the goal of TCRC one member said that TCRC “shall strive to improve research...” Another member said “I am hoping that we can broaden what we mean by research… This initiative has to approach research in an applied manner connected to real issues. It is different from lab research. The idea of the faculty as an expert, and what is expertise is being questioned. So is merely using quantitative skills questioned.” Another member said that “Hard science and epidemiology may underestimate the needs of the community or knowledge may get compromised. Sociological and anthropological approach may best suit community based research. But there could be a problem when the social scientist does not agree with the views of the community.” “So what is quality research my sense is that we still do not have consensus on that.”

Some discussed the difference in values between the community and the academy and the need for finding a balance. “Community based research is a new idea, but it is not outside the ivory towers. (i.e., it is still largely within the reign of the university and is not really community driven) There are major differences in values between the community and academy. The community wants immediate pay off, where as academic do not share the same sense of urgency. For a community the knowledge is very local and unique to their problems and the community, for an academic needs a higher level of abstraction in theoretical categories that can be applied elsewhere. Community works forward on a credible action plan and thrives on networking and establishing relationships. Research does not actively engage people in order to avoid bias.” Though these differences exist, members thought that “This is an opportunity for Tufts to be involved and to address these problems to both rhetorically and structurally support community based research.” Most of the members agreed that, “Community issues provide important questions and opportunities for quality research that is grounded in and useful to addressing real world problems.” And that “Research agenda can be determined by community groups and that research should respond to community needs and expectations.”

On the kind of community partnership the members expected; one of the members questioned the definition of community in community based research. She said, “Community organizers alone does not equate to community.” The need for “getting community residents involved as opposed to just community organizers” was especially raised.

The members also had expectations on the kind of relationship that needs to be developed between the academy and the community. Developing community relations meant, “also sharing valuable resources with the community - the talent, knowledge, expertise within the academy.” The emphasis was on developing a mutually benefitting relationship where the university and community can work together collaboratively as a dynamic interactive group. The goal was that “TCRC can develop interaction between these isolated groups based on mutual trust and respect.” One of the members said that “For that to happen, the group should have good university and community representation.”

The need for social change, and “work in a way the communities can be empowered,” was ultimate goal expressed by the members. One of the members emphasized that, “We
have to look into substantive ways of involving the community that leads to change and a paradigm shift rather than the token ways of community involvement.”

Summary: TCRC was defined as an entity that promotes and enables quality community based research and community partnership within Tufts with the goal of improving research where the research is praxis oriented addressing the real community problems heeding to the needs and expectations of the community, involving the community, as well the residents, working together sharing resources as an interactive dynamic group based on trust and mutual respect and with the ultimate goal of making substantive change and a paradigm shift in the community.

What are the strengths of TCRC?
Mostly it was all praise for TCRC. “It is a very solid idea, strong idea. It is a big step in the right direction. It is respectable stuff to do. It is of benefit to the community. It is ahead of the curve, though it is in the early stages of envisioning it. It is commendable, it is pioneering stuff.”

People also appreciated the efforts put in by Doug. “Having a steering committee with some decision making authority at Tufts that includes community people is historic at tufts. So, doug has done it. Some of us have been trying to make this happen for years.” And talking about Doug per say: “We have a good leader and he knows a lot of people who do this. Doug’s track record is good. He is highly respected and successful. The fact that the current director is a person with community experience outside of the university is a strength and he is sympathetic to community organizing and its needs. “

People commented on the members in the steering committee and commented that, “Doug has put together a good board. The board has a good spectrum of people and support from Tisch. We have brought an interesting group of people together. And this group of people has been around for a while. The strength is the steering committee. It is a good group, if it gets bigger, it could get dysfunctional. This interview itself exhibits the strength of the group.”

People also thought that TCRC has a good community and university representation. “The committee is diverse with people from different disciplines. There is a good community representation. We have a number of strong community partners and they seem committed to TCRC. There is strength of expertise as well as good community focus. Bringing together community and university is a strength where we have many things to share and learn. The faculties’ engagement from all the campuses, Medford, Boston also enriches the group a lot. What resources people bring in is extremely helpful. The role is also independent from the university.” The only critique was that, “The board could include more grassroots people than just the good advocates, or staff of organizations for the community.”

One of the member commended TCRC on being process oriented. “Processes are more important than the product. It has to be process oriented and this strength is still there on the table. But at some point we also want to see the product!”
Summary: TCRC is a good initiative. We have a good membership and a good leader who is experienced. There is a good community representation as well as wide range of scholars representing all the schools within tufts. The center is process oriented but we are ready to see the product.

What are the weaknesses of TCRC?

One of the biggest weakness expressed by the members was the vagueness of TCRC, though members had a general idea of the purpose of the group, people did not have a clear idea of what TCRC is, what its goals and mission are. It seemed that this group of people have come together with the hope of realizing their vision of community based research. The comments of the members ranged from “This is still very new and fragile. We struggle with the vagueness of who we are and what we are doing and we have to learn how it works. We do not have something concrete and tangible around which to coalesce this group. We have to figure out the structure of the board and figure out the appropriate role. To set our own research agenda and do what we want to do. The long term prospects of the center are not clear.” But one of the member commented that “We haven’t done anything so it might be too early for weaknesses.”

Most were struggling to understand it better and was riddled with questions as “What is TCRC? Is it a holder of money that will be distributed or is it an organization that fosters and supports faculty in community based research. How does TCRC position itself with the university? Do the researchers go to TCRC to aid their community research. And how does Tufts engage community as opposed to Doug doing it? How does Tufts define community engagement? How do you work with communities and get a research agenda? How do you communicate with the community? What is the role of the community? How do you identify community issues around cultural sensitivity? These are challenges.”

One of the members thought that “there was a lot of focus on individuals. We haven’t done a lot of collaborative work with community partners on the table. There are disparate interests and disparate communities on the table as groups interested in Somerville, Medford, and Chinatown. This is a conflict that needs to be sorted out. It is a challenge to bring these groups together. I think it is a weakness, but I am not sure.”

One of the other big concerns was lack of funding and insufficient capacity, “We do not have a funding base besides Tisch. It is not sustainable if we just rely on Tisch. The relationship between Tisch and TCRC is not very clear. We need to find out more than one funding source. There are good external sources. TCRC needs unencumbered funding capacity. We have to find funding that funds the capacity of the organization. The weakness is insufficient capacity.” One of the members feared that “Lack of resources may compel us to do things in the wrong order. What would be nice is for a grant to provide us the ability to do some good ground work and organizing and identify community concerns.”

One member expressed the concern that, “We rely on one person to keep this moving and going. He is pulling all the things and it could be tiring for him and high risk when one
person tries to do everything, dangerous. There is not enough interaction. We need more involvement and participation of all members, it is crucial.” The member thought that “people should be more involved, more proactive.” Another member said “More community representation would be good.” The issue of distance also came up, “It is not in one place, it is all over, in Boston, Medford. Electronic communication can accommodate for that.”

Summary: TCRC is vague. We have to decide who we are and what we are doing and what our long term goals are. There are disparate interests on the table. This is a conflict that needs to be sorted out. We need to build capacity and find unencumbered source of funding. We need more involvement and participation from all the members.

What do you want TCRC to be doing?

Mission: Generally the members were not clear and seemed quite confused about the mission of TCRC. They felt that we have to “Get people talking. We need a clear vision and need to develop a mission, who we are and what we are doing. What are the objectives? Visioning process is important to identify goals. Keep moving forward and keep clarifying the vision.”

Positioning TCRC within Tufts: Three of the members felt that TCRC should be positioned within Tufts and that Tufts should be one of the primary funders of TCRC. “It is a challenge for all universities to develop structure for community engagement. Tufts has to profess commitment to its communities or a single community. They need to give some thought to it. We need to have an open discussion about universities commitment to TCRC. TCRC should be embedded in the university. The investment has to be from the highest level of the university. I do not know if Tufts understands the potential importance of putting TCRC on the map. I would like to see Tufts put some money for a director and research assistant. Tufts could create incentives to do community research as encourage participants, give award to buy books. It is a logical extension of universities commitment and they have to support it.” One of the members wondered how to move the university in this direction and has offered to talk to the provosts at Medford and Chinatown.

One member felt that TCRC should be identified as a university based center for CBPR. “This initiative is about setting up a CBPR center for the university and the communities of tufts as opposed to individual researchers doing CBPR research. TCRC can prioritize on community engagement and CBPR and be committed in wetting it in the university.” This member also emphasized that the challenge is not about doing community based research but setting up a CBPR center within the university.

Funding: While some thought that TCRC should be university based some thought that TCRC need an independent funding base. But all the members agreed the need for more resources to move TCRC forward. “We need more resources, people. We also need to get project related funding. We need to find ways to support the faculty to do such community work; we need to figure out how resources can be directed towards the needs
of the community, or services of the community. TCRC can support research at school and the community. Giving resources to prepare a grant or a community project was a good start.”

One of the members also pointed out that we should not take only $$$ intensive projects but also projects that does not require huge amounts of funding. “The center should have a big enough umbrella to include projects that do not require huge amounts of funding. Also I want us to be able to do projects that do not require a lot of funding. It would be helpful if TCRC could hire a part-time research assistant to support such projects.”

Another member thought that TCRC should have a larger focus than just on public health. “The funding cannot be just health or public health related. It has to be a variety of funding, including funding technical assistance to community groups. Research and knowledge can arise from tech assistance that university provides. It opens the doors to whole new series of questions that can be asked. We need a permanent research assistant to provide technical support.”

Another member thought about the process of CBPR to be vague itself till the community decides what they want to focus on and suggested that the funder has to support the concept and process of CBPR than just fund a certain project, knowing that the community will decide what is the most important and crucial for them. He said, “It is tough to get funding to study something that is not clearly defined or without knowing the payoff. But funders have to fund the concept.” This is an especially key point for a ‘CBPR center’ who is not only looking to do community based research, but perhaps functions as an initiator or an enabler of CBPR at Tufts, or as a liaison between Tufts and its host communities. In that the success of the center would be the increase in community interest and research at Tufts, and the number of successful community partnerships enabled by TCRC. And gradually creating an eventual shift itself in the process of learning and doing research where it is never separate from its socio-cultural milieu, where it is praxis oriented.

*On Building relationships:* the members said “We have to provide an interface with the community where the community people are on equal footing with the university.”

One of the members discussed different ways of building community relationships and getting more people involved. “TCRC is a place for research but it could also be a venue to discuss and debate issues such as “where is Somerville going? What makes Chinatown, Chinatown? How do you fight unhealthy development? Tufts could be seen as a neutral place to hold discussions. Academic perspective would be interesting. Models from other communities would be interesting.” This starts at the core and it is a good way to get the community residents involved. This is not only a good discussion to have but it is also a good way to get community residents involved. Tufts is blamed somewhat for gentrification and for making Somerville expensive, considering that, Tufts has an obligation to its low income communities.” Talking about holding discussion groups on community related issues, the member said, “The discussions should have a
focus on low income immigrant community. This is an important discussion to have.” Make connections with community residents. We could invite them for a talk.”

Another member thought that extending the library services out to the community could be a good step in Tufts opening up to its communities and breaking the knowledge hierarchies within the university. “We have to figure out how knowledge can be shared between community and university. Community cannot afford library services that a university has, extending the university services to the community and also having interpretation services of the information being accessed will also be good. Loosen the control of the information from the university and use jargon less language so community people can understand. The flow of information between the university needs to be improved, something that is of use to the community and information that can be understood by the community. Also facilitating community conferences would be a good addition.”

Collaborative research proposals: The members felt that “We should build a long-term research agenda with the community. That is helpful on the ground and that can help build general knowledge. Start with the community. Research can be community driven than academy driven. We need to have projects were we are working with them. There are issues in the community that the community is struggling to deal with, we can start there and it could have potential research capability.”

Another member thought that “We should bring the diverse communities at Tufts to work together. Develop on-going relationship between faculty at Tufts on all campuses and the outside community. Further, create on-going teams of people for each host communities of researchers, students and community leaders. Maybe the team needs to be broken down into different issues to begin to set some long-term research agenda for each community.”

One of the members thought that, “TCRC should start with community organizing and planning phase. Do a needs assessment in the community to figure out what we want and work in that direction. We have to do research designed to stimulate action. The community is going to want that.” Another member thought that we can strengthen a community by “training community groups on writing grants, putting together proposals and giving them these tools.

On starting a CBPR project, one of the members said that, “Trying to identify the projects is a challenge. Projects are largely driven by funds and the kind of funds you can get. So the project is going to be somewhat pre-dicted. The initial focus is going to be what the dictates are. You can initially shop it around to funders. We can RFA it for specific diseases or interventions. How we get funded is the initial criteria. It will be projects positioning TCRC to deal with some of the tough issues between tufts and its communities. Is TCRC willing to push the envelope and look at things differently?”
Addressing the different communities on the table at TCRC, one of the member said “Translational research can be an effective model where a central idea can be replicated in different communities.”

On strengthening the relationship between faculty and the community some member said, “We have to strengthen the connection between faculty and the community so they can see the full breadth of things that can be done. Community leaders and activists can get an idea of the science and academic perspective to the community to identify tensions more effectively. Academy is seen as snobbish and elitist, they look down their noses, I wonder if community based research suffers from this stigma.”

**Training:** Most members thought that, “There is a need for education on both sides. We should organize workshops about how to do community-based research, and bring in outside people. The fall workshop will be good.” One member thought that “We can bring people who are well known in the CBPR field as Randy Stoecker to do workshops for all of us for a day.” While another member felt having a facilitator is more crucial. “We need a facilitator who would help with a group process without an agenda. We need a neutral person someone who is not coming with an academic view. There is varying disparate interests on the table, it takes a facilitator that is familiar with the group process, human behavior to move this forward.”

**Publicity:** To broaden our reach and services, some members thought that, “We have to have strategies to spread the word. It would be good to have a webpage that reports all the community listings. Newsletters were you can incorporate new messages to get more people interested.”

**Summary**
Develop mission and goals.

**Tufts and TCRC:**
TCRC should be positioned within Tufts.
Tufts should invest in TCRC

**Funding:**
Need independent funding base, resources people
Should not only look for budget intensive projects.
Should not only do public health related projects.
Should look for a funding organization that funs the concept than a project

**On building relationships:**
Start discussion group.
Make library services for the community.

**On conducting community based research:**
Develop long term agenda, create on-going teams of people for each host communities of researchers, students and community leaders. Maybe based on different issues.
Start with a community
Start with community organizing and needs assessment.
Do translational research.
Education: workshops

Publicity: Webpage, Newsletter