Katie Linder: You're listening to Research in Action, episode 183. Welcome to Research in Action, a weekly podcast about topics and issues related to research in higher education featuring experts across a range of disciplines. I'm your host, Dr. Katie Linder, research director at Oregon State University Ecampus, a national leader in online education. Along with every episode we post show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, a full transcript, and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses. Visit our website at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast to find all of these resources.

Katie Linder: On this episode, I'm joined by Ron Mize, an associate professor in the School of Language, Culture, and Society at Oregon State University. He previously taught international relations, sociology, Latino studies, and ethnic studies at ITAM in Mexico City, Humboldt State University, Cornell University, the University of St. Francis Fort Wayne, California State University San Marcos, University of California San Diego, Southwestern College, Colorado State University, and the University of Wisconsin Rock County.

Katie Linder: His scholarly research focuses on the historical origins of racial, class, and gender oppression in the lives of Mexicanos and Mexicanas residing in the United States. He's the author of over 50 scholarly publications, including four books. Thanks so much for joining me on the show today, Ron.

Ron MIze: Thank you, Katie.

Katie Linder: I wanted to dive in a little bit to your research on immigrant labor, and I was wondering if you could first give us just a little bit of an overview about some of this research and what you're focusing on.

Ron MIze: Sure. So I've been interested, wow, over the past about 27 years about the issues that immigrants face coming to a new country. My work historically has always been on Mexican migration to the United States. It's an area that I probably feel like I know the best. It's part of the community that I come from. Well, I guess I'm fifth generation Mexican American. My mom's fourth generation. I grew up in Denver, Colorado, which has a large Mexican immigrant population.

Ron MIze: For me growing up, what I noticed very quickly was a big distinction between those of us who were citizens, Mexican Americans or Chicanos, and those of us who were more recent immigrants, Mexicanos, Mexicanas, and some of the divides within the community. I think my work started from the very beginning trying to understand the differences and similarities across those two communities and how we could learn better from one another.

Katie Linder: Okay. I know your work employs a lot of community-based research. Can you tell us a little bit about that and why you chose to go in that direction?

Ron MIze: Yeah. Community-based research has a really long history. In many ways, it helped to form many of the disciplines that I'm a part of. Ethnic studies, Chicano, Latino studies, all really sort of began with community-based research. It's really an idea that how we historically had done research with marginalized and racialized communities was done in the exact opposite way if the intention was to actually help communities, empower communities, get communities' voice. Historically what we saw was researchers that went in, took the information, explained what the respondents really meant, and then carved it into theories that we now talk about today, like the culture of poverty thesis, which comes from anthropology and has a long history of how both Puerto Ricans and Mexicans have been represented in academia with the idea that the reason why folks were poor was because of their own bad habits, being lazy or other things that were going on that were internal to the community.

Ron MIze: So I think when Chicano studies came along in the '70s, it really came along as a response to that culture of poverty hypothesis and really challenged the idea that communities were actively doing behaviors that led to their own poverty and that poverty is very much a function of much larger structural forces in our society. What we saw as those negative characteristics were often the results, the results of those structural mismatches, those asymmetries, not so much the reason why people were poor.

Ron MIze: Poverty became an expression through crime or through other things like that. The reality was that there were a lot of other behaviors that poor people were exhibiting, like taking care of one another, building kinship across community, really developing community strategies of self survival and community survival, and all that was getting missed. And I really think that I certainly was not around when Chicano studies formed as a discipline, but certainly those ideas very much sort of shaped the way that I have always gone into community to do the works that I do.

Katie Linder: Okay. So for our listeners who maybe are unfamiliar with community-based research, can you share a little bit about how this impacts how you would go about a research design or methodology in a different way than what you've described?

Ron MIze: Yeah. I think there's a certain model science that we often are trained to do. As a sociologist, I was trained to do this particular model, which is I generate a hypothesis based on some theories and I go out and I test those theories or those hypotheses out in the field to determine whether what I think should happen according to the literature actually happened. Community-based research actually starts the other way. It starts with the community itself and a community really coming to a collective understanding of what its needs are or what competing needs they may have within a community. So the work is often done by community organizers or done by organizations that serve communities, done by local residents. In the case of the work that I do, it's really Mexican immigrants themselves that are sort of defining the challenges that they're facing.

Ron MIze: My job as a researcher in a community-based research model is to start those conversations with the community or tune in to those conversations and really develop research based on what the needs of the community are as they see them and how my research can help the community address those needs. We often impute a lot in academia about marginalized communities and the way they should act or the way they should be, the way they should understand the world. Community-based research starts with none of those preconceptions and starts with the basic knowledge that those that are dealing with social problems most directly are probably the best suited to provide the solutions to those problems.

Katie Linder: Okay. I would imagine, Ron, that this also impacts things like dissemination of the research because of the goals of what you're trying to do through community-based research. Can you talk about the later stages of a research project and how a community might be engaged in looking at the findings?

Ron MIze: Yeah, it does. It's actually a much more complicated process. I actually think of community-based research on a continuum because I don't think we ever fully approximate the model that we put forward for ourselves. So what I think I've seen over the course of my own career is moving closer and closer to really being community-based in my community-based research. The work that I'm doing now has ended up being a 15-year project. I never intended it to be a 15-year project. I would never tell a graduate student to start a 15-year project. I have the luxury of tenure that I can do this kind of work. But I did not have tenure when I started this project.

Ron MIze: People were expecting findings that I could have put out in the first year, but for a lot of the work that I was doing, a lot of the community partners that I was conducting this research with, they weren't ready yet. They weren't ready for information to be out public. They weren't ready for me to write about it. So that 15 years was a window that I gave a lot of the different organizations that I've been working with to come to a place where they are comfortable with. This was the work that we started. This is what we've learned. This is the challenges we have and this is where we're at currently.

Ron MIze: It's impossible to think of structural education reforms that happened in a year or two. Structural education reforms take a decade, take a couple decades to develop. If you're really attuned to the community and you want to report out in a way that's respectful of their voice and respectful of their own needs and their own interests, that means you delay publication until the time is really determined by those community partners as the time is right.

Katie Linder: Okay. I would love to dig into a little bit more about some of the research questions that you're exploring through this. Can you give us a little bit of an explanation of kind of what the research is focusing on?

Ron MIze: Sure. The project that is on the top of my mind, the 15-year project is primarily because I'm writing the book about it right now. So I've done other projects that have different approaches to community-based research, but let me just talk about the most recent one. I didn't actually start with a whole lot of research questions other than recognizing that the communities that I was interested in would be the basis of my start. Actually, my master's thesis back in the early '90s, I had come across a phenomena where the Vail Corporation, which is one of the large ski corporations across the country, was employing a group of temporary visa holders who came through in a program that's referred to as the H-2B visa program.

Ron MIze: The H-2B visa program basically allows people from other parts of the world to come to the United States if they're doing seasonal, what the US government defines as unskilled labor. So it's like landscaping, maids, other kinds of cleaning services, some basic construction work, et cetera. At a certain point, the Vail Corporation became the largest recipient of H-2B visa holders in the country. I was like, what the heck is going on? This is clearly something that's interesting to me primarily because the H-2B visa holders coming to Vail, which is a large ski town in the Rockies of Colorado, they were primarily coming from Mexico.

Ron MIze: I had done so much work on temporary programs before the H-2B visa program, that I was already kind of cued in and interested. But that was basically my only starting point. So then I started to talk to a series of community leaders, organizations that were either trying to provide services or were working on behalf of the immigrant population, the temporary visa holder population that was coming to, not Vail, but a little town north of Vail over a mountain pass called Leadville. If you had an H-2B visa, there's no way you could afford to live anywhere near Vail. So a lot of the housing prerequisites that other temporary worker programs had, this one did not have that. So people had to find their own housing and they ended up in this little town called Leadville.

Ron MIze: So I started working with the school district, started working with community partners, started working with advocates for the community. Beginning from that starting point, that's where I began to see the issues that they were addressing, issues that I wouldn't have thought of in my own research. These were issues of transportation. There was no public transport that got you between Leadville and Vail. There is now, but for the first, I'd say 20 years of that relationship there was not. I'm not a transportation expert. I don't know much about transportation, so I had to learn a lot about transportation to understand how this worked, both informal and formal public and private forms of transportation.

Ron MIze: Everybody in Leadville who worked for the Vail Corporation, not everybody, most lived in one of three trailer parks. I'm not an expert in trailer park housing, but trailer park housing became a very important issue because the way in which trailer parks operate are very different than like if you own a house or you live in an apartment. You have to pay for the pad, which is the actual land that you live on, which is a rental that you pay. You may actually own your trailer, but you still have to pay a land fee, a pad fee is what it's often referred to. There's other fees that go along with this that most of us who, like I said, own a home or own our apartment or condo simply don't have to pay for.

Ron MIze: Often what I was finding was that those rents just kept getting upped and upped and upped. Even when people were getting much more comfortable in terms of owning their home, then they found that their pad fees kept going up. So they were constantly, constantly running to catch up. That was their issue that was most interesting and most compelling to them, so that became my issue. That's the work that I ended up doing over several years, tracking these different trailer parks.

Katie Linder: Okay. I'm really curious, Ron. You mentioned kind of the longitudinal nature of this work. Who are the key audiences for how you're trying to disseminate this work? What are the findings and who do you think are going to be interested in the findings that are coming out of this research?

Ron MIze: Yeah. Definitely in years past I always thought that I wrote excessively for a public audience as well as specialized for an academic audience. I was trained as a journalist, so I think I know the difference between academic writing and everyday writing. I was never particularly good at writing non-academically. It took me a long time to relearn those skills that I developed back in my bachelor's degree to write to a general public. So this is the first book that I'm writing that's really aimed as a general public read.

Ron MIze: I love all the technical details of my discipline. I love theory. I love methods. I love forms of analysis. I write about that a lot in particularly my prior work. Somehow that will show up in the new book, but it's going to show up in a very different way. I'm really telling a particular narrative and a particular story. The reason why I've shifted my writing style is a recognition that the communities that I'm doing my research in, it's not just Vail. It's actually Vail, Aspen, Park City, and Jackson. In that, it's also those little towns that where people are living that they can't afford to live in those four towns.

Ron MIze: So it's Driggs and Victor, Idaho. It's Carbondale and Basalt and Heber City, next to Park City. People are really interested in what I'm going to write because I've been talking with them for so many years. Part of community-based research is you go back and you sort of develop a feedback loop so that when you find something and you want to write about it, you share it with the people that shared it with you and say, "Did I get this right?" Or is this really an accurate statement? The way that I am portraying it, is this what you meant to say when you said it?" So a lot of people that are directly invested in the experiences of Latinos in these ski resort towns are really interested in what I'm going to write.

Ron MIze: Many of them are actually seeing it and providing feedback before it actually ends up in a final book form. This will be the very first time, I think, where I've always written in a community-based model, but I don't know if I've been this connected back to the community through every stage of the process like I am in this particular project. So what it means for me is that there's a whole new audience that always should have been there, that was always intended in my mind, but that's actually being cultivated by the process of writing this book and the ways in which community voices are being heard throughout the entire research process.

Katie Linder: Okay. So Ron, I'm just really curious how you are going about structuring this book because I would imagine it would be kind of challenging coming at it from this perspective to think about how to frame the book. Can you talk a little bit about that process?

Ron MIze: Yeah. So currently at this point, my chapters are pretty much designed by the needs of the community. I've been a part of several needs assessments that the local community programs have done. I've read everything that other community partners have put together. So the number one issue in each of these communities, no matter how you cut it or slice it, is housing. My first chapter is housing. Then jobs is the second chapter because that's the other main issue. For those who have children, education becomes a third. If somebody gets sick and doesn't have access to health insurance, healthcare becomes the other issue.

Ron MIze: so the chapters are following based on the needs of how the community has been expressed ... how those needs have been expressed to me by the community. The one sort of authorial decision that I made on my part was that I think what we often is a historical perspective, particularly when we get caught up in contemporary issues and issues that are very politicized as we'll probably talk about later. Each of these towns, their origins primarily as mining towns in three of them and in large-scale grazing and ranching town, all of those communities when they were first formed were formed by immigrants, including Mexican immigrants that we often miss in the story of the Old West and how the Old West was populated by immigrants usually from Southern or Eastern Europe.

Ron MIze: Those immigrants that are certainly erased from the contemporary stories of an Aspen or a Park City are absolutely fundamental for understanding how the town is formed in the way that it has. So in my healthcare chapter, we will start actually probably in Park City because the Western Federation of Miners Local in Park City, the union that was often defined as very militant, if not socialist, if not communist, actually built the first hospital in Park City because the mine wouldn't build it for its miners. So they used the resources that were developed by collecting the union dues to build the very first hospital.

Ron MIze: I can tell you 99% of the people that live in Park City have no idea that their first hospital came from the union. So I feel like that's the part that I'm sort of asserting a little authority in terms of my authorial intent to ensure that we don't forget that immigration stories are fundamental to the development of these towns, not just their contemporary reality.

Katie Linder: Okay. Well, Ron, this has been such a fascinating start to hearing a little bit more about your work in community-based research. We're going to take a brief break. When we come back, we'll hear a little bit more from Ron about researching politicized and controversial topics. Back in a moment.

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Katie Linder: Ron, one of the things I wanted to talk with you about today was this idea of researching politicized or controversial topics. We know that immigrants and immigrant labor has been quite the topic of late in our political landscape here in the US. I'm wondering if you can talk about some of the challenges of researching topics that can be perceived as political or controversial.

Ron MIze: Sure. I always start with the idea that I like to think of my research is not political. When I say that, I know that it's disarming to people that only think of immigration as a politicized process because it has been so hyper-politicized over the last 30 to 40 years. But the reality is that we've been moving from place to place as people, as homo-sapiens for the entire history of our lives on this planet. Movement is probably the only constant that we can actually point to. When immigration becomes politicized, it's less about the issue of movement even though we always talk about it in that way. It's much more the issues around nation-state borders, around inequalities across nations, about access to resources, blocked access to opportunities. Those are the aspects that I think are fundamentally political in nature and should be explored for their politicized aspects.

Ron MIze: But somebody moving from one place to another place, if it's not over a nation-state border, we don't even bat an eye. We don't even think about it. But this crossing over that border and bringing into sharp relief the distinction between lesser-developed nations and overdeveloped nations, that's when it becomes defined as politicized. So I really do wish my work wasn't politicized. I would imagine for most immigrants in this country, they really wish their immigration status wasn't politicized. But the reality is that we clearly live in a very different reality and the scapegoating of immigrants has become so prominent in our daily discourse, public discourse, that I clearly have to address these issues and deal with these issues.

Ron MIze: Part of this is a really practical issue. The research that I conducted intentionally doesn't address and I actually don't interview immigrants in my latest project. I made that as a fundamental decision back when I was at my previous university because most of us as immigration researchers received a knock on the door by Immigration and Customs Enforcement asking for our data a few years ago. This was probably about 10, 15 years ago, 10 years ago. I would never give over my data to any government agency, but it was not a demand. It wasn't a subpoena. It was simply a request. But I realized that I had collected information about folks that could really put them in harm's way.

Ron MIze: I knew about some folks' immigration status if they were visa overstayers. I knew a lot of things about people that were in my records at that time for a previous project that I would never allow to be publicly available. I go through IRB protocols, Institutional Review Board protocols, to ensure that that information is never made public and never made available. So to get a request by a government agency, a friendly knock on the door to get this information, it was in the context of me developing this project that I'm currently talking about and I made a commitment at that point not to collect information on immigrants and actually not interview immigrants.

Ron MIze: When I say that immigration shouldn't be politicized or shouldn't be thought of as politicized, it's also related to that fact that when I think about what makes a community amenable and welcoming to immigrants, it's usually not the work the immigrants are doing. It's not immigrants themselves that do that work. It's the community. It's the community's responsibility if they're going to be a welcoming place to provide transportation systems that get people from point A to point B and the ways that make it possible, that provide housing that's decent, that's acceptable, that allows for a quality of life that we come to expect and not a two-tiered system of housing for poor people and housing for not so poor folks. That's the communities.

Ron MIze: That's where I decided to put my focus is on how communities and their organizations are serving Latino immigrants and how they're making strategic choices to either welcome or to make their communities less than welcome.

Katie Linder: Ron, can you talk a little bit about how the context of your research impacts things like building trust with these community-based partners? Because I would imagine with some of the politicization, the controversialness of the topics, there's some concern with the community partners about what will happen with the findings or that there may just be some challenges to the trust-building component.

Ron MIze: Absolutely. I would say that the single most important thing about conducting community-based research is building and maintaining trust. I don't think you'd do community-based research without that trust element and that doesn't happen overnight. It doesn't happen in one visit. It's the fact that I've gone back every other year, that I keep in constant contact with my partners when an issue comes up. When Trump was elected in 2016, the amount of fear that spread across the immigrant community in this nation was palpable and unbelievable. It was so hard to even get accurate information because executive orders just came off the shelves left and right. It was an attack on DACA, the Muslim ban, the travel ban, the reducing of legal immigration, the building of the wall. All of those things the community was really keyed into and they were also unsure of their own status and their own experience.

Ron MIze: I do a lot of historical work and I know that there's a long history of Mexicans getting deported en masse. Happened during the Great Depression, happened again in 1954, and it didn't matter in those two times whether we were immigrants, whether we were here lawfully or unlawfully, whether we were us citizens, whether we were multigenerational citizens. Many of us were rounded up because we hung out in the places where large numbers of Mexicans were and were summarily, without any rights protected, deported to Mexico. So there's a reason why communities would be really concerned and really fearful.

Ron MIze: Here in Oregon, we moved really quickly on this issue, developed rapid response teams so that we could let people know when ICE was in a community and whether they were going to a particular farm to pick up people. That rapid response team was a model that certainly didn't originate in Oregon, but we moved on it really quickly. We developed the documentation. We also developed a whole series of documentation to help mixed status families, maybe whose kids were born in the US and are therefore US citizens, but their parents are not documented. If their parents were deported, what happens to their kids?

Ron MIze: If you don't provide any paperwork or documentation, those kids automatically go into the social service system. So providing documents about guardianship and power of attorney, all of that was really created very early on here in Oregon. I shared that with most of our partners because they were way behind in Colorado, not so much Colorado, but definitely Utah and Wyoming and certain parts of Colorado. This was information that I asked my partners that I work here in Oregon with if I would be able to share them. And then I shared them with those community members so that they could prepare their communities as well.

Ron MIze: So that trust building is not just a one-way street. I really am giving to a community in a way that I have, even though I'm not a resident in the community, I'm not there 365 days a year. There are community partners know that they can rely on me when something happens, when they need something, when they need to understand what a process is that's going on or when they have information that they'd like to share with their other community partners. So the folks in Park City and Jackson talk a lot to each other now about education because they're really developing similar education models for Latino immigrant children.

Ron MIze: I have one group in Carbondale called Valley Settlement, which is an incredibly successful immigrant incorporation organization. Many of the other organizations that I work with have visited Valley Settlement to learn from them how to do that work. So it becomes part of a network really. Sometimes I'm the network node that is sending people in all those different directions. Sometimes I'm not on the fringes of the network and just simply observing how these communities are kind of coming into conversation with one another. But that is really a network of trust that has to develop over time. It's not going to go away when I finished the book. They know that they can call on me 10 years down the road, 15 years down the road, or tomorrow, whatever is needed.

Katie Linder: Can you also elaborate, Ron, on how the context of this research as being a little bit more political impacts how you write up or disseminate the findings that might be coming out of this research?

Ron MIze: Yeah. In many ways, I'm actually following the lead. A lot of the social service agencies that I interviewed and worked with who basically operate on a model that they ... It's kind of a don't ask, don't tell model, which is we don't ask about immigration status. We don't talk about immigration status. If you need services, you are here. In many ways, when I write about folks I'm writing in a don't ask, don't tell model. I didn't ask their immigration status. I don't want to know their immigration status. I'm interested in the services that they were provided and if those services helped them improve the quality of life in the way that they were intended to.

Ron MIze: It's incredible. I have no idea how this is going to get peer-reviewed. So when a book goes through the process, other academics read this book and this will be read primarily by immigration scholars who I can guarantee have not ... This is one of the fundamental questions we almost always ask in immigration studies of the distinction between documented and undocumented folks, people have that papers and not and the different immigration statuses, mixed status families, et cetera. These are all areas of research that we conduct in. I simply said, "I'm not going to look into that."

Ron MIze: In many ways, I think it's an important argument to make because, in many ways, the way that people are impacted by the current climate in which we live in, it doesn't matter whether you're documented or not, it doesn't matter whether you're a citizen or not. When you have a president who's talking about Mexicans as rapists and criminals, it doesn't matter whether you were born in the US or not. That racialized language is getting imparted onto the entire community and the entire community has to deal with the repercussions of that. Regardless of whether they're documented or not, the perception that all Latinos are immigrants and that all Latino immigrants are undocumented impacts everybody regardless of what one's status is.

Katie Linder: Ron, I think you've touched on this a little bit, but do you want to see anything more about any unique research opportunities that you've been able to engage in because of the context of your research topics?

Ron MIze: Yeah. I do think there's some challenges to this, which is really hard to bring in students, for instance, on this research project because there's such a level of trust that I simply have built up that there are moments where I can work with students that are situated in the community and I'm happy to work with those students. But taking OSU students and bringing them into the field, I've never quite figured out how to do that in a way that maintains that level of trust and maintains the relationships that I've spent most of my 15 years building.

Ron MIze: So I do think there is a challenge to this work. It's so much better when you're able to do this in a team with a large number of researchers where folks can come in and out, where students can be much more integral to the process. But it just simply wasn't the way that I developed this project and it never shaped up to a community, I'm sorry, a community of scholars project. It was me in relation to the community kind of scholarship. I will tell you, I know things about this community, each of the four communities that I'm studying that I know nobody else knows. My outsider status by not living in the community often gives me access to things that people say things to me that they would not say to their neighbor, that they wouldn't say to their coworker, that they wouldn't say to their client.

Ron MIze: I do have to be really careful with that. That's part of the process of that feedback is I go back to I can think of a particular school administration official who has shared a lot of information with me over the years. I have to go back to to them and say, "This is what I'm actually going to be writing about. Are you comfortable with me writing about this? Because I know this was a conversation that I was holding in trust, your perceptions of what was going on. You didn't tell anybody else. You were only telling me." So it does become a much more cumbersome process because it's not quick and it's not easy. It means that everything goes through another layer of scrutiny and revision as a result.

Ron MIze: But I think in many ways it's a much more honest story, the honesty that people can share with me. If they're willing to share that publicly, I actually think we learn so much more than when you we get the official line of this is how we're supposed to act to this particular scandal or issue or dilemma. I know I'll be writing about some things that the media could have been covering, huge issues. These small towns, the media chose not to cover it. So I'll be writing about things that everybody in the community knows about but have never actually seen in print before because the local media never covered the issues.

Ron MIze: So that's the benefit of doing community-based research, of committing to a community over a long period of time and following closely as things develop and constantly in this iterative loop of coming up with findings and sharing those findings with your community partners to revise those findings in a way that make more sense in the current context in which we're trying to understand these issues.

Katie Linder: Well, Ron, this has been so fascinating. Thank you so much for coming on the show and sharing about your work on immigrant labor and also community-based research.

Ron MIze: Yeah, thank you for inviting me. Appreciate it.

Katie Linder: Thanks also to our listeners for joining us for this week's episode of Research in Action. The Research in Action Podcast is a resource funded by Oregon State University Ecampus, a national leader in online education that delivers transformative learning experiences to students around the world. Learn more by visiting ecampus.oregonstate.edu. This podcast is produced by the award-winning OSU Ecampus multimedia team.