

Tips for Fruitful Community-University Partnerships and Research

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Common knowledge suggests that the partnership between two people or organizations should be mutually beneficial. Collaboration promotes synergy by filling the gaps of each partner, whether it be through opportunity, knowledge, skills, resources, etc., to tackle mutually-held issues and/or accomplish goals. The development of this kind of relationship between communities and universities is of increasing interest to many organizations. That being said, historically relationships between “town” and “gown” have been tension-filled at best and, at worst, detrimental to the community. The following is a list of considerations for university researchers who seek partnerships in a community.

1. Mutual Benefit/Accountability – While this seems obvious, many university-community relationships struggle due to the one-sided approach that one or both partners may take. Luckily, strategies exist to combat this dilemma. For example, the use of a “boundary object” has been shown to be effective. This concept involves the mutual goal to build/maintain a collection of resources/information, database, etc. for the varying individual purposes of both respective partners. For example, a researcher may need data for a project and a community member might use the data to apply for a local foundation grant. Equal access and upkeep will help reinforce the interest of both groups, and help dispel feelings of “being used.” It’s not uncommon for community members to feel that they are only part of an experiment.

2. Rapport – By extending the invite of some events to the community, a university can improve their appearance and assist in the creation of future relationships. This strategy is best implemented continuously rather than only when a partnership is being sought after. Another well-accepted strategy is the infusion of students into the community, commonly through internships and/or volunteer work. Both sides benefit as students develop real-world experience to couple with their academic work.

3. Communication & Understanding – Ensuring open communication and mutual understanding is paramount. Do all parties know what is expected of them and each other? Are roles defined? When issues arise, do communication lines enable problems to be mutually addressed?

4. Realism – This can often be difficult due to the expectations of funders and/or overzealous partner(s). While remaining ambitious is vital, expectations should be tempered. The ability to solve entire systemic problems with limited time and capital may prove more difficult than sustained effort accomplishing more manageable projects.

5. Voice – Consider how community members will be given a voice in the research process. This may go as far as co-creation of the research agenda with community partners and their direct participation in all aspects of the research process.

6. Sustainability – Initial interest may diminish as time progresses, amplifying the importance of frequent communication. Member turnover, and its potential, influence member interests, necessitating regular meetings and solid organization. Each meeting should have a clear purpose, whether it is to inform community members to assist in their contribution and collaboration or to discuss future plans. Finding some funding for food is helpful, too.

The above are just a few issues to consider before planning a research project involving community partners. Many resources can be found at sites such as <http://compact.org>.

References:

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