

Achieving the Promise of Community–Higher Education Partnerships: Community Partners Get Organized

Authored by the Community Partner Summit Group

“We are here because we are passionate about these partnerships, but they are not working.”

—*Ira SenGupta, Cross Cultural Health Care Program, Seattle, WA*

“We have identified what authentic partnerships are—what’s working and not working is our way of defining what is and isn’t authentic. We have come to some consensus about that.”

—*E. Yvonne Lewis, Faith Access to Community Economic Development, Flint, MI*

Partnerships between communities and higher educational institutions as a strategy for social change are gaining recognition and momentum. Despite being formed with the best of intentions, however, authentic partnerships are very difficult to achieve. Although academic partners have extensively documented their experiences and lessons learned, the voices of community partners are largely missing. We believe that if true partnerships are to be achieved, community partners must harness their own experiences, lessons learned, and collective wisdom into a national, organized effort to address this issue.

Twenty-three experienced community partners from across the country convened for the Community Partner Summit held April 24–26, 2006, at the Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, WI. The Summit was sponsored by Community-Campus Partnerships for Health, funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the Johnson Foundation, and Atlantic Philanthropies and supported by the Community-Based Public Health Caucus of the American Public Health Association, the National Community-Based Organization Network, and the National Community Committee of the CDC Prevention Research Centers Program. The overall purpose of the Summit was to advance authentic community–higher education

partnerships by mobilizing a network of experienced community partners. The intended outcomes of the Summit were to:

- Develop and gain clarity on the current state of community–higher education partnerships
- Uncover community perspectives on the key insights and ingredients of effective, authentic community–higher education partnerships
- Build the case for the importance of community–higher education partnerships
- Develop a set of actionable recommendations for maximizing the potential of community–higher education partnerships
- Develop ongoing mechanisms for increasing the number and effectiveness of community–higher education partnerships and ensuring that communities are involved in dialogues and decisions about these partnerships

This chapter summarizes the dialogue that occurred at the Summit, our review of the literature on community–higher education partnerships, and the collaborative work we have undertaken since the Summit. In articulating community partner perspectives on community–higher education partnerships, we hope this chapter serves to motivate readers to critically reflect on their partnerships and deepen them. We encourage readers to use this chapter as a tool to facilitate dialogue and action within and across partnerships.

The Current Reality of Community–Higher Education Partnerships

“Where is the respect for working in the community outside of this room? Outside of this room, there is an assumption that we’re doing this work because we couldn’t ‘do’ a PhD. But it’s a choice. It’s about what we value.”

—E. Yvonne Lewis, *Faith Access to Community Economic Development, Flint, MI*

“Many communities start doing community-based research with academics because the funding is there. But oftentimes, before any common ground is established through someone who can serve as a bridge or translator, the study moves forward and the community is left with a different understanding of what was supposed to happen.”

—Vince Crisostomo, *GUAM HIV/AIDS Network Project and Pacific Island Jurisdictions AIDS Action Group, Arlington, VA*

In order to understand the current reality of community–higher education partnerships, we began by reviewing and discussing the state of these kinds of partnerships on a national level and then assessing how they are being realized on a local level. We have summarized and categorized these into ten overarching observations from community partners about the current state of community–higher education partnerships:

1. **There is a “community engagement buzz” in higher education and funding circles, including a plethora of policy statements and organizations working in this arena.**

Higher educational institutions and funding agencies are getting on board with the idea of higher education community engagement. The number, range, and scope of these “community engagement” and “community-university partnership” initiatives and the funding for them are diverse and growing (Minkler, Blackwell, Thompson, & Tamir, 2003). Examples of funding agencies with specific community–higher education partnership initiatives are the National Institutes of Health, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Health Resources and Services Administration, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Some are beginning to understand what it takes to develop and sustain authentic partnerships. Yet a greater understanding is needed regarding the time, input, and resources required to create and sustain authentic partnerships, as well as ways to properly structure requests for proposals and review processes.

2. The predominant model of community–higher education partnerships is not a partnership; much of this is due to the fact that the playing field is not level.

Equal partnerships have yet to be realized on a broad scale, because of inequitable distributions of power and resources among the partners involved. Instead, these partnerships are often driven by the priorities and requirements of funding agencies and higher educational institutions. Funding tends to be invested in building campus infrastructure, not community infrastructure (Seifer, Shore, & Holmes, 2003). We need to level the playing field by employing a variety of strategies that cut to the core of these issues. As a result, there will be greater community participation in the partnership and increased relevancy and validity to the programs and research being conducted by the partnership.

3. The benefits of partnering with higher educational institutions are not readily apparent to many community members.

Partnerships with higher educational institutions are not on the radar screen of many community members, because of daily social, professional, and financial responsibilities on the job and at home. It is completely reasonable, then, that the average community member is not aware of the benefits of these partnerships. Even if they do see the benefits, the chance that they have the time it takes to meaningfully participate in these partnerships is low. However, we can respect community members’ daily responsibilities and raise awareness about the benefits of these partnerships by pairing the two together. For example, partnerships can develop values, structures, and activities that reflect community members’ needs, priorities, and responsibilities. Compensating community members for their participation; providing them with child care, transportation and interpretation services; and hiring them in staff roles with the partnership are all strategies for meaningful community engagement. For those community members who are aware of the benefits of these partnerships, many will have a “healthy suspicion” of “outside” institutions. Such sentiments often stem from the history of the dominant culture’s exploitation of marginalized communities—a history that needs to be explicitly acknowledged and addressed before moving forward in partnership. At the same time, community members who are experienced in community–higher education partnerships need to share with their peers the benefits of these partnerships and seek their input and advice on how we might be

able to structure and implement partnerships in ways that meet and respect each partner's priorities and realities.

4. Community–higher education partnerships benefit a variety of stakeholder groups.

We recognize that community–higher education partnerships can bring tangible benefits to all involved. These include, but are not limited to, the following. For community: building of community capacity and community wealth. For example, building an educational pipeline in which local youth gain the knowledge and tools to return to the community to build infrastructure, creating jobs for community members (Ybarra & Postma, 2003). For students: transformational learning, developing and clarifying one's values in relation to broader social justice issues and sense of self, practical skills for the workplace (Richards, 1996). For faculty: transformational learning, fulfillment of personal values and beliefs, external funding, new areas of scholarship (Gelmon, Holland, Seifer, & Shinnamon, 1998). For colleges and universities: transformational learning, student recruitment and retention, increased alumni giving, improved public relations, research participant recruitment, institutional accreditation (Gelmon et al., 1998).

5. The relationship between community and campus partners is largely based on individuals and funding and is not institutionalized.

It is challenging to create change when there is so little institutional memory and no strong relationship between campus and community groups over time. In order to sustain partnerships beyond the specific people at an institution with whom we have relationships, institutions must recognize that there is inherent value of these partnerships to the institution; partnerships need to be sustained for any significant change to take place in the community; and partnerships need to be institutionalized—in other words, the commitment to the partnership will survive despite changes in funding, faculty positions, or campus leadership.

We cannot achieve these goals and realize the full promise of community–higher education partnerships unless the entire institution invests in partnerships as a key strategy and ongoing priority. There is a problem when partnerships develop and continue only because of the availability of resources. A partnership cannot achieve greater social change unless there is a strategy to sustain funding over time.

6. Many of us working in this arena are not “community members,” but rather translators and bridge-builders between community members and academic institutions—roles that are often critical to the success of community–higher education partnerships.

Many of us are serving in bridge-building roles between the community and the academy, in some cases as employees of an academic institution. These individuals are often critical to the success of a partnership. The existence of these bridge-builders does not mean that campus-based faculty members can “check out” and delegate community relationship-building to others. Although this may be a convenient approach, communities find this to be an indicator of the level of true interest that the faculty member has in working collaboratively with the community. Without personally getting to know the community members,

the faculty member’s work is in name only. Community groups can sometimes lose their community ties and legitimacy by partnering with higher educational institutions over time—an even greater risk for community members who serve in bridge-building roles as college or university employees. In either role, we need to be vigilant about keeping ourselves grounded, accessible, and accountable to our communities, while continuing to develop relationships with academic partners.

7. Academic institutions, funding agencies, and policy makers often assume that community groups need the academy to have legitimate conversations and that academic knowledge has a greater value than knowledge from the community.

There is often a presumption that university knowledge is more credible than community knowledge. Many researchers do not want to be challenged on their research methods and disregard our points of view. On the other hand, we want the university to be open to input on how their research methods can be tailored to be more sensitive to and appropriate for our communities. We need to convey to our academic partners that community knowledge is credible and invaluable to achieving a successful community–higher education partnership and generating knowledge for a purpose. At the same time, some of us have been mistakenly identified as “Dr.” as if it’s expected that we have or need advanced degrees to be credible or to be heard.

8. Building community capacity through strong community-based organizations (CBOs) is not a major conversation or an explicit goal of many community–higher education partnerships.

Community capacity building and social justice are not explicit goals of most community–higher education partnerships (Seifer & Sgambelluri, 2008). In most cases, it is not something that is even considered as a goal. Partnerships more often invest in the development of individual community leaders rather than the CBOs with which they are connected. It is not enough, for example, for institutions to observe that “community leaders and community partners come and go” without doing something to address the underlying reasons. Such a model does not build capacity or sustainability within CBOs. Building capacity in deprived neighborhoods is a particular challenge we face. We can address this dynamic by advocating for support for community capacity building and community infrastructure through these partnerships.

9. There are significant ongoing challenges to community–higher education partnerships, but we keep at this work because we know there can be benefits, and because we want to protect our communities.

Many times, funding agencies and academic partners look for immediate progress in partnerships. Building trust takes time, and to expect an immediate return on our investment is unrealistic. The energy invested in establishing a strong foundation for a partnership is well spent. Real change takes place over time through relationships that are built over the long term. We have identified a number of ongoing challenges in our partnerships with higher educational institutions. These reflect our collective observations, and are not necessarily present in every situation:

- Persistent community distrust of academic institutions
- Insufficient respect for community knowledge and expertise
- Unethical behaviors
- Unequal power and distribution of funds
- Academics' resistance to change and loss of control
- The academic culture of needs-based and expert approaches—looking at community problems and needs rather than community assets and capacities
- The conflict between scientific rigor and community acceptability/feasibility
- Faculty review, promotion, and tenure policies that do not value and honor community-engaged scholarship
- Recruitment and hiring of campus-based partnership staff without the input of community partners
- Institutional review board policies that do not consider community consent, participation, and benefit
- Funders that require community partnerships but don't include appropriate review criteria or community-based reviewers
- Communities that harm themselves because of intracommunity conflicts
- Communities that do not speak with a united voice, making it difficult to identify, understand, and address community priorities

10. Despite the challenges, there is good news for communities who are new to partnerships with colleges and universities: Communities are realizing their power to change the nature of their relationships with higher educational institutions.

Formerly, there was no significant community participation in these partnerships—it was in name only. Now, as communities are beginning to learn from each other and becoming more sophisticated over time, they are identifying and sharing best practices for developing authentic partnerships (Freeman, 2003; Leiderman, Furco, Zapf, & Goss, 2002; Mayfield & Lucas, 2000; Sandy & Holland, 2006). Though there is still a long way to go on a national level, capacity within community partner organizations is increasing. As a group, we are getting serious about changing the culture of partnerships and the paradigm of research, leading to more mutually beneficial outcomes. For example:

- Communities are conducting their own research (Freeman, Brugge, Bennett-Bradley, Levy, & Carrasco, 2006; Heaney, Wilson, & Wilson, 2007).
- Communities are forming their own research committees, community advisory boards and institutional review boards—many with real decision-making power (Brugge & Missaghian, 2006; Quinn, 2004).
- Communities are developing principles for how to effectively interface with those outside the community who are interested in partnering with them (Blumenthal, 2006).

Along with the maturation of these partnerships comes the need for resources that address their unique needs. Numerous “cookbooks” and tools for emerging partnerships are widely available, but fewer resources exist for mature partnerships. If we aim to bring these partnerships to a higher level, then these resources should be developed and widely disseminated.

What’s Working, What’s Not Working, and Why

“Our experience has been that the university was there for the community, to share knowledge, not to empower per se. We have had a long history of working together.”

—Lola Sablan Santos, *Guam Communications Network, Long Beach, CA*

“Researchers need to ask communities early on what kind of support is needed and what kind of support can be given—instead of making assumptions. If the grant is already written, then it’s too late.”

—Mrs. E. Hill DeLoney, *Flint Odyssey House Health Awareness Center, Flint, MI*

What’s working: When community–higher education partnerships are structured in a manner that develops skills among community members and builds infrastructure for partnerships within the community and the academy. *What’s not working:* When university researchers involve the community only as subjects, not as participants and planners of the research; when the community lacks the infrastructure to fully engage in the partnership.

Supportive factors include:

- Articulating clear roles and expectations of all partners through written documents (such as memoranda of understanding, policies, contracts, scopes of work) that help to prevent misunderstanding about respective roles and expectations
- Creating policies and work processes for the partnership that honor each partner, such as policies around how decisions will be made, how conflicts will be resolved, and how information will be communicated
- Employing a community-academic liaison familiar with both community and academic contexts, who can play a “translational role” between each partner
- Appropriately compensating community members for their time and expertise
- Building infrastructure and capacity of the community and CBOs through job placement, training, and indirect overhead costs of CBOs associated with the partnership
- Institutionalizing support and the importance of maintaining authentic partnerships within the college or university

Community knowledge and expertise are often not valued in the academy. This devaluation can lead to little or no funds being written into grants to pay community members for their participation in the partnership. Distribution of resources is one of the most important elements of a partnership and should not be overlooked. At the very beginning of a partnership and during the planning phase for any grant proposals, partners need to be transparent about where and how resources will be shared (Yonas et al., 2006). Disparity between academic and community partners’ job expectations and salaries is not always accounted for by academics. Community partner compensation for the time and expertise they devote to their work with academic partners is essential; often, they must take time off of work without pay, or make up their work hours on their own time. Although community participants can be given titles and positions that seem to convey that they have power or receive equal

funding, this may not be the case. Finally, it goes without saying that the direct and indirect costs of a CBO's participation in a partnership should be built into grant proposals.

If the partnership is to be sustainable and worthwhile, community partners must gain just as many benefits as academic partners do from the partnership. Training community members in research methods builds community capacity and enables them to participate as equal partners in all phases of the research. Community members can gain transferable skills as part of their involvement in the research process, such as how to design and administer survey and focus groups, how to analyze data, how to present research findings, and how to write grants and papers. When a community–higher education partnership loses a valued faculty member or has only a limited number of faculty involved who understand how to develop and sustain authentic partnerships, the community has to educate and train that person's replacement, engage new faculty members, and build and establish the partnership all over again. There needs to be a shift within many universities to value institutionalizing these partnerships and making a commitment to supporting and sustaining faculty involvement in them.

What's working: Partnerships that are developed and implemented in a way that is transparent, equitable, sustainable, and accountable to both community and academic partners. *What's not working:* Unilateral decision making, inequitable distribution of power and resources, and lack of a partner commitment to the community's future.

Partnerships with strong relationships of trust, honesty, transparency, respect, and equity are based on:

- Shared resources, power and decision making
- Honest communication and joint learning processes
- Shared commitment to meaningful, sustainable community outcomes
- The use of history, context, lessons learned, and best practices to inform the partnership

CBOs and academic institutions must both be accountable to their primary missions, yet also establish a common ground to achieve shared goals. Community advisory boards need to be accountable to multiple opinions in the community, because the community is not monolithic and does not speak with one voice. There is disagreement among community partners regarding whether community leaders and community boards as “community gatekeepers” are working. Although many of us feel that it was important to have advocates in place to protect communities, others raised the question of “who speaks for the community?” and expressed concern over community gatekeepers who become too powerful. There is never just one spokesperson for a given community. Yet funders and academia often have a more simplistic view of community, and follow a one-spokesperson model.

Higher education partners need to be aware that their actions in the community must be held accountable to members of the community. They need to recognize, for example, that the work that is being done as part of the partnership can, and will, have effects and consequences on the lives of community members, and the work should be done responsibly and ethically. Community engagement is a promise that needs to last and cannot just end when the funding runs out. In most cases, all partners involved in community–higher education partnerships are participating out of some sort of self-interest. This is only natural

and to be expected. However, conducting oneself within a partnership that only serves one's self-interest is quite different from conducting oneself in a way that serves all partners of a partnership. Only when everyone's self-interest is out on the table for all to see can partners truly begin the honest dialogue needed to negotiate an equal partnership that creates mutual benefit. Without mutual benefit, the partnership becomes unstable and unsustainable.

When partners treat each other as they would like to be treated, and value each other's expertise and what they bring to the table, a transformation occurs within the partnership that ultimately creates the "glue" that holds the partnership together. It is imperative for partners to educate each other about their history and current realities, and what they need to establish trust and respect within the partnership.

What's working: When there is an ongoing two-way engagement process whereby community partners and academic partners have an understanding of the reality and context of each other's environments. *What's not working:* When partners fail to learn about each other's unique needs and daily reality, and insist on their needs being met without taking into consideration the reality of their partners.

Partners may think they are ready to fully engage in a partnership, but relationship dynamics are not yet clear. There needs to be sufficient attention to relationship building over time before those dynamics between both partners become clear. For true engagement to take place, partners must be willing to continue despite the inevitable conflicts that arise. Before academic partners enter the community, they must learn about their academic institution's history with the community, be aware of the current political landscape, and be intentional about fostering a meaningful, two-way dialogue. Similarly, community partners need to understand the daily realities that academics have to face within their institutions, departments, disciplines, and professions and be willing to strategize ways in which they can work with their academic partners to bring about needed changes in the academy. Frequently, academic partners leave a partnership after the funding that supports their participation dries up. Although there is recognition that academics have multiple projects on their plate and are pressured to work only on funded projects, there needs to be greater awareness among university presidents, provosts, deans, and department chairs about the time and effort their faculty members need to do community-based work.

What's working: When research topics, questions, and methods are developed and structured in ways that are relevant to the community. *What's not working:* When research topics, questions, and methods are not relevant to the community. In order for research to benefit communities, the topics chosen, the questions asked, and the methods employed must be determined in collaboration with the involved community and must resonate within that community.

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) in particular holds great promise as an approach to research capable of ensuring these aims are met. As defined by the Kellogg Health Scholars Program, CBPR is "a collaborative approach to research that equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings. CBPR begins with a research topic of importance to the community and has the aim of combining knowledge with action and achieving social change" (Kellogg Health Scholars Program, n.d.).

What's working: Partnership support from funding agencies that understand how authentic community–higher education partnerships are developed and sustained, and incorporate their understanding into their guidelines and proposal review processes. *What's not working:* Funding agencies that at best don't support and at worst undermine authentic community–higher education partnerships through their guidelines and proposal review processes.

Funding agencies that understand how authentic partnerships are developed and sustained are those that encourage communities to identify research and service priorities themselves and then engage academic partners to help in carrying them out. Such funding agencies structure their guidelines and “requests for proposals” so that academic partners and community partners are able to take the time they need to build trust and come to a shared understanding of the aims of their partnership before submitting a proposal for funding. The California Breast Cancer Research Program is one example of a funding agency that models this approach through its Community Research Collaborative grants program (Plumb, 2007). Currently, most funding agencies do not use comprehensive criteria to assess whether a partnership is authentic or not. These criteria should explicitly ask how the community was involved in developing and writing the proposal, the history of the partnership, and the longevity and depth of the relationship among the partners. A number of us have served on federal peer-review panels in which academic perspectives dominated the discussion and determinations of scientific rigor and research methods were based on traditional approaches to research, not CBPR approaches—and these were panels formed specifically to review community-based participatory research proposals! There was no acknowledgment that implementing a CBPR approach to research could actually increase scientific rigor and strengthen the research methods.

Why Community–Higher Education Partnerships Are So Challenging

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“We need to shape ourselves as a counterbalance to existing forces. This is about community reasserting itself in these partnerships.”

—Daniella Levine, *Human Services Coalition of Dade County, Miami, FL*

“Community-campus partnerships are one vehicle. We need to connect with other movements and be a collective force for change.”

—Ira SenGupta, *Cross Cultural Health Care Program, Seattle, WA*

There is very little access to lessons learned from the community perspective, like those that were shared among Summit participants (Hanssmann & Grignon, 2007). As a result, new partnerships are not informed by history. There is no accessible forum for community partners to share ideas and experiences with each other. Most of the literature on community–higher education partnerships is written from academic perspectives, and conferences can be expensive and dominated by academics. As a result, many of us end up recreating the wheel and not benefiting from the wisdom of those that have come before us. This is also

due to a result of a lack of knowledge about history, or resistance to acknowledging and confronting past injustices or “open wounds.” Community partners should exercise their power—through asking questions, making demands, saying “no”—even walking away from a partnership that doesn’t suit their needs.

Frequently, community partners do not share their concerns with their academic partners. The infrastructure of these partnerships often does not allow the space for this to take place. It is important for community partners to feel comfortable asking questions of academic partners from the beginning of a relationship. If we do not actively do this, we may end up having to accept the consequences of our inaction. For example, during the process of writing a grant, if questions, concerns, or differences arise around who the fiscal agent should be, how the budget will be determined, or exactly how the project will be implemented, community partners need to speak up. If powerful players are able to hijack the agenda, and the other partners are not in a position to challenge it in a timely manner, then the window of opportunity can be lost. Community partners need to ask for, and take care of, their own needs, rather than waiting for someone else to take care of them.

This dynamic is also related to the need for more community capacity and technical assistance, because for community partners to know what questions to ask in the first place, they must have the requisite background. Sometimes, academics point to the funding agency or their grant administrators as the culprit when they themselves may not have even questioned the status quo and whether it could be changed (for example, assuming a budget cannot be renegotiated or a portion of indirect expenses cannot come back to the project). Community partners must exert their rights and push back when necessary, or be comfortable with implementing exit strategies (such as, for example, the popular education model of “amicable parting”). However, if community partners are not already organized and mobilized, this is difficult to do. The partnership process is rarely community driven, and communities rarely have decision-making power. Whoever holds the purse strings holds the power.

It is rare that community participates as an equal partner. In most cases, there is an imbalance of power from the beginning. Questions about “Who is the community?” and “Whose voice is at the table?” are rarely explored by partnerships to the extent that they should. Even partnerships that have community boards are often structured as advisory and not decision making, and in some cases are populated by administrative directors of community agencies who may not be knowledgeable about the issues the community cares about. Community decision-making power must be built into the structure of community–higher education partnerships. Examples of this would be partnership boards that have a majority of members from the community, community-based principal investigators, and funding that flows from a CBO to the campus partner, with the campus partner as a subcontractor.

Researchers are often most comfortable doing traditional research, not building community capacity or engaging in community advocacy. Similarly, the research that is proposed by academic institutions tends to be narrowly focused. Communities tend to define health more broadly. Faculty members often have an unwavering academic orientation to research and a tendency to funnel everything into a traditional research model, rather

than thinking about how research can be translated to practice, whether through interventions or public policy. Most researchers aren't trained to think strategically in this realm; some are averse to taking a stand and advocating for change, because of a fear of not being seen as objective or undermining their prospects for promotion or tenure. There are exceptions, of course—including among the faculty members with whom we are partnering. But these remain systemic challenges within higher education. By defining health more broadly (including physical, mental, spiritual, and economic health) and not just viewing it through the lens of an academic discipline or profession, one will start to see the intersection of all of the factors that interweave themselves and threaten the health of individuals and their communities, such as lack of access to education, healthy food, educational opportunities, capital, and jobs. We as community partners are in a unique and important position to educate our academic partners in this regard. We need to have more direct roles in the classroom, in faculty development programs and in curriculum development, for example (appropriately structured and compensated, of course). It is difficult to document and measure ways in which community–higher education partnerships build social capital.

One of the significant potential benefits of community–higher education partnerships is the building of social capital. Valid measures of social capital are difficult to capture during the timeframe that most community–higher education partnerships work within. The popularity and interest in “evidence-based” approaches makes it difficult for community partners to continue to receive funding for partnership-based programs, when in reality, building social capital is a long-term process that takes years.

For a variety of reasons, service-learning often doesn't lend itself well to community participatory approaches, authentic partnerships, community capacity building, or social change. The academic calendar, the short period of time that students are usually in the community, and the lack of faculty involvement with students in the community all contribute to explaining why this is the case. Colleges and universities need to understand the difference between these two approaches and work with their community partners to transform service-learning into a field that ultimately views community participation, authentic partnerships, capacity building, and social change as core values and practices. There is often a presumption at many colleges and universities that service-learning and community-based participatory research are equivalent, when communities often view them very differently.

Toward Authentic Community–Higher Education Partnerships

“Nobody expects that investment in the stock market will yield an immediate return. Partnerships take time. We need to put more energy into the partnership itself and to better understand each other.”

—Gerry Roll, Hazard Perry County Community Ministries, Inc., Hazard, KY

We believe that three ingredients are essential for authentic community–higher education partnerships:

1. Authentic partnerships embrace quality processes.

“Without establishing clear structures and processes in a partnership, it is easy for partners to perceive any conflict as personal. With these structures and processes in place at the beginning of a partnership, it’s easier to work through these issues, because they have been depersonalized.”

—*Eve Wenger, Pocono Healthy Communities Alliance, Stroudsburg, PA*

“We are not just talking about a process that involves partners. There needs to be a process of shared decision making.”

—*Ella Greene-Moton, Flint Odyssey House Health Awareness Center, Flint, MI*

“Without equal respect, there can be no shared ownership of the partnership.”

—*Lisette Lahoz, Latinos for Healthy Communities, Allentown, PA*

Quality processes include those that are open, honest and respectful; supportive of a shared vision and agenda; and allow for shared power and decision making, mutual benefit, transparency, declaring of self-interest, having difficult discussions up front, and clarifying the definition of community.

2. Authentic partnerships achieve meaningful outcomes.

“It is unaffordable to live in Boston. Universities make dollars off of dorms. We took the \$25 million subsidy and created condos and townhouses, and now 75 families own homes in the neighborhood. Some units were built for student and faculty housing. Both the community and the university benefited.”

—*Elmer Freeman, Center for Community Health Education, Research and Service, Boston, MA*

“OK, we can work together on community-based participatory research, but only if you support our kids in the pipeline. Bring them to campus for programs, teach them skills they can use to be more marketable, give them academic credit.”

—*Vickie Ybarra, Yakima Valley Farmworkers Clinic, Yakima, WA*

Tangible and relevant outcomes need to be agreed on and articulated by the partnership. These could include, for example, eliminating health disparities, developing affordable housing, closing the achievement gap in K-12 education, developing communities and their local economies, and undoing institutionalized racism.

3. Authentic partnerships are transformative at multiple levels.

“We must consider the larger context of knowledge production. Creation of knowledge is a political act. We need to change how knowledge is produced, used and valued.”

—*Douglas Taylor, Southeast Center for Community Research, Atlanta, GA*

“We build social capital when we're doing this work. We don't often talk about that.”

—Loretta Jones, *Healthy African American Families II, Los Angeles, CA*

By multiple levels, we mean:

- Societal transformation: Focusing on the big picture, looking towards achieving social justice through changing systems, policies and how we fundamentally understand community, science, knowledge and evidence
- Institutional and organizational transformation: Challenging and changing institutional and organizational assumptions, systems, policies and values
- Personal transformation: Engaging in self-reflection, increasing one's political consciousness, developing a vision of a “different kind of society”

To realize our vision of authentic community–higher education partnerships, multiple strategies are necessary—we must “attack from all fronts.” During the Summit, we identified “big ideas” that can support and stimulate more authentic community–higher education partnerships. Taken together, these ideas represent an ambitious agenda for policy development, capacity building, and support for community partners. Community involvement and capacity building are needed at every level. We need to share our lessons with our peers, and be open to learning from others, so that we can collectively strengthen each other. It is important to actively develop community members and CBOs to occupy places at the partnership table by increasing their knowledge and familiarity with this work. There are few opportunities within partnerships to develop community partners as civic leaders and change agents. As one Summit participant noted, “Students are learning and being developed in our agencies, but where are the community and agency folks being developed?”

There are specific actions that need to be taken to realize the full potential of authentic community–higher education partnerships. These include:

Facilitating training and technical assistance for community members and organizations that are new to community–higher education partnerships, equipping them with the tools needed for developing and sustaining authentic partnerships. Community conversations and working conferences, for example, can allow participants to walk away with practical tools and templates for building authentic community–higher education partnerships.

Building infrastructure (such as training, mentoring, and funding) to support people of color and those from marginalized communities who do community based work to become community-based researchers. With such investments, a greater number of academics who conduct their work in a respectful manner will be available to partner with communities. This is a key step toward shifting the traditional research paradigm. The Harlem Community & Academic Partnership Urban Health Internship Program in New York City, for example, is working to solve this problem by training the next generation of community-engaged faculty.

Creating spaces and structures for CBOs to support each other and exert their power; for example, by forming a collective body of community partners on the national level. For

example, at the local level in Flint, Michigan, CBOs involved in a community–higher education partnership (the Michigan Prevention Research Center) came together to form their own space through the Community-Based Organization Partners. Rather than have each CBO speak for themselves at the partnership table, they now have a collective voice that is a more powerful counterbalance to the unified voice presented by the academic partners at the table.

Developing principles of participation to clarify terms of engagement and expectations in our partnerships with academic partners. It is important for communities to develop principles of participation to clarify terms of engagement and expectations in their partnerships with academic partners—each partnership needs to discuss and negotiate these for themselves. Having the dialogue between partners to establish these principles is critical. We can also offer a framework on how to address issues that arise consistently, and provide a process and structure for having that dialogue. Such a framework will not stifle dialogue and can also prevent partnerships from having to reinvent the wheel.

Sharing our collective wisdom and knowledge with both academic institutions and funding agencies is a crucial piece of our agenda, if we are to not only transform our current partnerships, but also plant seeds for future authentic community–higher education partnerships. Community-authored and -disseminated publications and presentations are important vehicles of change and play a role in initiating a dialogue with higher educational institutions. These can include op-ed pieces, journal articles, case stories, monographs, conference presentations, videos, popular education, and other media. Pieces prepared with academic partners should include them as co-authors if they so desire. When our academic partners seek to publish articles and make presentations based on our partnership work, we should articulate how we wish to be involved and recognized.

By educating funders about the current reality of community–higher education partnerships, community partners can advocate to change funding priorities, what is funded and how funds are distributed. In community–higher education partnerships, money ultimately bestows power. If we want to change the power imbalance, we have to work on changing the practices of funders and other groups that provide resources so that community involvement is required at every level of the process. We need to educate them about the current reality of community–higher education partnerships, and how funding programs can be designed to maximize the ability of communities to participate as equal partners. This will require challenging deeply entrenched views and policies that serve to maintain college and university control over teaching and research. The emerging research paradigm gives us an unprecedented opportunity to redefine the rules. For example, the National Institutes of Health is increasingly expecting biomedical research to be community-engaged. We can hold NIH accountable and help support this paradigm shift through advocacy and representation on agency advisory committees such as its Council of Public Representatives. In many respects, the ideal situation is for CBOs to be fiscal agents for partnership funding, with any indirect funds going to build their infrastructure and support their sustainability. Academic institutions, as well as experienced community partners, can train CBOs as needed on how to serve as fiscal agents and manage grants.

Educational and economic development must be explicitly linked to these partnerships. Consistent with the transformational nature we articulated in our vision of authentic partnerships, these partnerships have significant opportunities for educational and economic development that are often overlooked. Community partners need to negotiate with their academic partners to integrally link these to their partnerships. For example, community–higher education partnerships can:

- Create jobs in the community
- Create low-income and mixed-income housing in the community
- Provide academic credit for the training that is provided to community partners and community participants
- Create opportunities for K–12 students to be exposed to higher education and health careers

Community partners must insinuate themselves into the culture of higher education, and vice versa. Community partners can start to shift academic culture towards valuing and embracing community–higher education partnerships through such campus-based activities as:

- Teaching in the classroom
- Mentoring students and younger/newer community-oriented faculty members and staff
- Serving on admissions committees
- Voicing concerns about promotion and tenure policies, which currently often undermine the ability of faculty to engage in partnerships
- Submitting letters of support for faculty members involved in their partnerships
- Serving on Institutional Review Boards

Similarly, academic partners can better understand the daily realities of community partners through:

- Participating in community events and meetings
- Understanding the multiple issues affecting their lives through listening and observation
- Shadowing a staff member at a CBO
- Serving on boards of directors or organizational committees

Community partners must work together with academic allies to elevate the credibility and recognition for the life/work experience and context of community partners. Although community partners are often asked by academic institutions to give presentations, conduct trainings, supervise students, and provide input and feedback, they are rarely recognized or rewarded for sharing their expertise. For example, they are usually not compensated or granted faculty status. Similarly, funders expect community partner involvement in service-learning and research but rarely consider them to be qualified for principal investigator roles on community-academic partnership grants. Academic partners can use their influence in collaboration with their community partners to change this dynamic by pushing for greater community partner recognition by academic institutions and funding agencies.

Policy-based options for equalizing power must be explored, such as the potential of community benefits laws as a leverage point for change within higher educational institutions. There has been a massive shift around community benefits of hospitals in order to maintain their tax-exempt status (Barnett, 2007). Higher educational institutions could have a similar obligation. Perhaps higher educational institutions could donate a percentage of their revenues/endowment to community organizations and community capacity building, in line with their mission and tax-exempt status. In Boston, for example, communities have had some success in leveraging such resources from teaching hospitals (Council of Boston Teaching Hospitals, 2007). It is critical to effect change at a structural level. For example, if funding priorities changed and CBOs were better funded, they would be on more equal footing with higher educational institutions and the dynamics of those relationships would change and improve. We must capitalize on policy and advocacy opportunities as they arise.

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Toward an Organized Network of Community Partners

“We are engaged as a collective—we are committed to change. We need to negotiate, build consensus, and move forward as a unit.”

—Vickie Ybarra, *Yakima Valley Farmworkers Clinic, Yakima, WA*

“We need colleagues to be willing to go deep in this work . . . we need to support each other in various ways. We need to know what it is to be a leader and hold ourselves accountable to a leadership role that truly benefits the greater good. To sustain ourselves, we need to be there for a cause, not just a project.”

—Susan Gust, *GRASS Routes, Minneapolis, MN*

Many community partners engaged in community–higher education partnerships work in isolation, whether due to geography, the lack of regular community partner convenings by academic partners, or the lack of funds to meet with their peers at workshops and trainings. Both during the Summit and in the months and years since, participants have remarked again and again about how one of the most valuable benefits of the Summit was that it provided them with a support network of community partner peers that they had not realized existed, to share skills and provide a “safe” place for seeking advice on community–higher education partnership matters. Community partners need a collective body to reduce their feelings of isolation and increase their capacity through mentoring, networking and advocacy.

As a collective of community partners, we aspire to have an effect, to be applicable and influential in the following ways:

- We want to shape conversations, not just add to them
- We want to convey the spirit behind the message, so that those who were not in the room can understand its context and full meaning
- We want to influence policy

- We want to promote networking and collaboration among community partners
- We want to elevate the credibility and recognition for the life and work experiences of community partners and the context and environment in which we do our work
- We want to eliminate the need for community “translators” who help interpret and negotiate between the worlds of community and academy, which would indicate how the current reality of these partnerships has truly been transformed

A number of products have been developed and disseminated since the Summit. These include Summit proceedings, community-authored case stories, a colorful traveling poster with photos and quotes from the Summit, and a slide show for more formal presentations about the Summit (Community Partner Summit). The Summit has also been replicated in Chicago.

We have formed two “authentic partnership” work groups and an electronic discussion group (Community Partner Listserv, 2007) to continue dialogue and action beyond the Summit. The groups have been meeting via conference call since June 2006, with staff support from Community-Campus Partnerships for Health. The Mentoring Work Group has been working to develop and implement peer mentoring and leadership development activities that build the capacity of community partners to engage in authentic community–higher education partnerships and succeed in their community-building work (Palermo & Fortin, 2006). The Policy Work Group has been working to develop and advocate for policies that support authentic community–higher education partnerships. This includes several community partner-authored policy statements submitted to the National Institutes of Health (Greene-Moton et al., 2007; Palermo, Park, Seifer, Wong, & Ybarra, 2007; Seifer & Greene-Moton, 2007).

The Summit was a transformational experience for many of us. When asked “What word describes how you were feeling when you arrived at the Summit, and what word describes you upon your departure?” responses included: “from curious to engaged,” “from skeptical to determined,” “from privileged to empowered,” “from interested to invigorated,” “from alone to powerful,” and “from ambivalent to grateful.” We have continued sharing and learning together as a collective. We have broadened participation to include other experienced community partners who couldn’t come to the Summit. Although we engage our academic partners and others in academia, we want to protect the space we have created for ourselves as community partners.

We have built a strong foundation from our beginnings at the Summit, and invite community partners to join with us to shape our collective agenda for the future. [Community partners who are interested in joining the network should contact us through Community-Campus Partnerships for Health at ccph@mcw.edu.] Together, we can move from rhetoric to reality in the conduct of community–higher education partnerships and the social justice outcomes they achieve.

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