

**Expanding Interdisciplinarity from Campus to Communities:
Exploring Innovation in Collaborative Research**

Conference sponsored by
Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities

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Executive Summary

Conference Organizers:

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“Engagement is a principle that applies widely to nearly all social institutions...Engagement isn’t just the ethical or right thing to do, it is also critical to an institution’s long-term survival and success.”
– William Richardson, W.K.Kellogg Foundation (2004)

Overview

Our aim in convening this conference is to advance our understanding of collaborative forms of interdisciplinary research that are community based (community based participatory research, or CBPR). When such practice succeeds, it has a capacity to contribute to communities in ways that traditional research practices often cannot. While questions about whether and how this promise can be realized are the subject of active debate, this conference will focus on the academic, institutional impact of CBPR practices. We ask how they can transform and invigorate traditional academic research, sharing examples of best practices that illustrate the potential of collaborative practice to constructively reorient the design, the conduct, and the outcomes of research in a selection of biological, environmental, and socio-historical fields.

We will be assembling an invitational program of roughly thirty field-defining practitioners, community partners, and younger scholars to discuss these issues in a panel presentation and workshop format. Participants will be asked to examine the conceptual and methodological underpinnings of their collaborative practice. We are particularly interested in articulating an epistemic rationale for CBPR practice that extends its ethical and political mandate.

We expect to produce a collaboratively written report on the outcomes of this meeting, to be published as well as made available on-line for wide distribution among community-campus research networks and academic research institutions. Participants will also be invited to contribute to publications that address specific audiences including, for example, researchers within particular fields, community members and community-based organizations.

Problem Statement

It has been noted—by federal funders, foundations, community service organizations, and within communities themselves—that research intended to have a positive impact on public health, health disparities, community renewal, and environmental degradation routinely falls short of its promise. One explanation for this is that often there is a disconnect between academic researchers and the interests, needs, and collective knowledge of the communities they engage. The resulting projects lack relevance; consequently they get limited uptake or, worse, they cause harm and undermine public trust in the academy. A proposed solution, offered on both ethical and practical grounds, is to involve community members and organizations in all phases of the research, from planning to dissemination, to improve community-campus relationships and enhance opportunities for uptake and positive impact for the public.

We have found that while there are exemplars of successful community-campus partnerships in many research fields, the dominant culture in the academy maintains a researcher-driven, academy-centric model of research. What will it take to move researchers to engage in collaborative partnerships with communities? In this conference we focus on one set of considerations that particularly concern researchers embedded in academic contexts: we ask what the epistemic impact is of engaging in interdisciplinary research with communities. This question and, more generally, that of what makes for innovative and effective interdisciplinary partnerships, is our point of departure; we see these as a fruitful point of contact between the humanities and sciences. We know from experience that to open ourselves to alternative perspectives, quite different in terms of ontology and epistemology from one's own, requires equal measures of imagination, curiosity, and humility. Such engagement requires risk-taking; if we are to convince others to consider communities as potential research collaborators we need to explore the question of what is to be gained by pursuing research partnerships that fall outside entrenched conventions of practice.

Conference Objectives

The central objective of this conference is to clarify the epistemic and conceptual foundations of community based participatory research practice through close consideration of illustrative cases drawn from three areas in which innovative CBPR research has been taking shape: **community health, community forestry and ecological research, and collaborative forms of archaeological research.** We ask: How do participatory and collaborative forms of practice affect research practice and its outcomes? How does inclusiveness of this kind change the kinds of questions asked, enrich the range and quality of what we learn in attempting to answer them? In short, what is the epistemic payoff of a commitment to CBPR practice?

The normative principles animating participatory and collaborative research are clear enough; those who have a stake in the research process—as research subjects, as individuals or communities affected by the outcomes of research—should be engaged in the design and execution of research beyond simple rights of consent or refusal. What this requires in practice is often contentious and requires local negotiation; internal debate has been dominated by questions about how conflicting obligations should be balanced (e.g., between ideals of collaboration and of reciprocity). By contrast to this internal focus on ethical and methodological issues, the questions most often raised in external debate, when CBPR requires justification, have to do with productivity and the methodological and epistemic integrity of community based, participatory modes of research. We propose to bring these epistemological issues from background to foreground in this conference.

We take as our starting point science studies research on expertise and scientific practice as well as recent work on collaborative and interdisciplinary scholarship. The move to integrate community into traditionally academic research practice requires a flexible and adaptable response akin to other interdisciplinary work. Collaboration is often generative and self-transforming; it becomes something other than what it would have been if undertaken as an isolated venture. We will ask participants to characterize the models of collaborative or participatory research that they find effective, and to identify ways in which their research has been enriched—in design and execution, empirically and conceptually—

by their active engagement with communities of practice outside their disciplines. Our aim is to theorize these examples collectively; to draw out principles of practice that have proven to be productive in various locales and that may usefully be extended to other contexts; and to articulate their epistemic rationale, “from the ground up” and in relation to the growing literature on deliberative models of research practice.

Focal Questions for Panel Discussions:

In order to create bridges between diverse research areas, each speaker or team will be asked to organize their remarks and executive summaries around the following questions:

- How did your partnership begin?
- What challenges have you faced in this partnership and how have you overcome them?
- From both the academic and the community perspectives, what has been the pay-off of the collaborative research process?
- What were you able to do or to learn because of your partnership that would not have been possible otherwise?

We plan to synthesize our findings—about the strategies and the epistemic pay-off of effective collaborative research—in an online report that community-campus partnership organizations can use to answer frequently asked questions and to address common challenges to their practice. This report will also be used to reach out to academic researchers and community partners who may be interested in developing collaborative research projects. We expect that the outcomes of this project will also be of interest to practitioners in the fields represented and to the research ethics community, so we anticipate developing at least one article for a peer-reviewed publication that addresses the question of what it means to expand the notion of interdisciplinary research to community-campus partnerships.

Format

We envision a working conference built around thematic panels of participant-teams. Most participants will make presentations in the course of an all-day meeting, preceded by an evening public keynote panel and followed by a half-day of collective work aimed at synthesizing insights and observations.

The opening keynote panel is intended to showcase the main forms of CBPR research considered at this conference and to formulate the issues that will be the focus of the working sessions; this opening event will be advertised widely and is intended to address a broad university and public audience. The workshop sessions will be organized around thematic panels, with the emphasis on discussion and conceptual development. Participants in the working sessions will be asked to circulate, in advance of the meeting, a 3-5 page executive summary of their response to the issues central to the conference as a whole, with reference to their particular contexts of practice. The panels will be organized around brief individual presentations, of no more than 10 minutes, designed to foster discussion with conference participants. Two synthesis sessions scheduled for Saturday will provide participants an opportunity to debrief, to further explore focal issues, and to plan the projected conference report and related publications.

We have designed this conference to extend the work of the Critical Medical Humanities (CMH) research cluster and to complement the proposal for a two year Science Studies (STS) research network. CMH has built a network of scholars and students engaged in critical examination of the medical sciences; the Science Studies network takes “democratizing science” as one of its focal organizing themes. We take these aims to be central and defining contributions of CBPR research. By connecting this initiative to the research networks already in formation at the University of Washington, we expect that it will be possible to start the work of the conference at a higher level and to pursue the themes of the conference beyond its formal sessions, in the context of these ongoing research network projects.

Details of the program, with confirmed speakers and a link to the common workspace, will be posted on the conference website, hosted by the Simpson Center for the Humanities:

<http://www.simpsoncenter.org/science>