Embracing Community-Engaged Scholarship: Principles and Practices from the Center for Community Partnerships at UVA

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Abstract

Researchers across disciplines are moving towards embracing community-engaged scholarship. This article presents three key tenets that help define the principles of community-engaged scholarship: 1) practicing humility, 2) pursuing mutual benefit, and 3) building authentic partnerships. These are offered to foster reflections on practice and highlight successes and challenges researchers face when engaging in this work. The authors draw from their experiences at the Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Virginia, an organization created to transform university communities through humanizing research practices. The article provides examples from The Center as they conduct research that is community-driven. It also takes care to discuss challenges related to community-engaged research and how individuals and small university entities might work to overcome them in their own contexts.

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Introduction

There have been numerous calls for research to move away from the ivory tower or researcher-as-expert model and towards developing research that involves the participants directly impacted by the results of a project – a community-engaged research model (Brown Wilson, 2018; Minkler, 2004; Rowley, 2000; Shakesprere et al., 2021; Slack, 2022). Traditional research models are often unidirectional, with researchers conducting studies *on* community

members and documenting outcomes. Community-engaged scholarship challenges this framework by bringing community in as collaborators with an eye towards true impact.

In this manuscript, we draw on the authors' experience working at the Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Virginia, and one author working for the Charlottesville Public Housing Association of Residents, a community partner of the Center. All four authors are Charlottesville-area residents, who have extensive work experience in community-driven spaces such as schools and non-profits.

We define community-engaged scholarship as the generation of knowledge in ways that are mutually beneficial (Rogers et al., 2018), grounded in humility (Tangey, 2000), and rooted in authentic partnership (Chupp et al., 2021) (See Figure 1). We call for researchers to practice humility when engaging with community partners. We argue that research should not be extractive, moving from a top-down approach where researchers pull data from communities for personal benefit. Finally, we discuss the importance of building authentic partnerships centered on listening, trust, and showing up for the community.

Figure 1

Community-Engaged Scholarship

The Charlottesville/Albemarle region of Virginia has a history that is marked by systemic harms that disproportionately impacted low-income residents. The demolition of Vinegar Hill, a thriving business district in the 1960s, is one example of the area's long-lasting legacies. This urban renewal project that then displaced over 600 families and tore down over 30 businesses (Mitchell, 2024) has now led to economic disparities, limited affordable housing, and healthcare barriers for Charlottesville's low-income residents.

Founded in 2019, the Center for Community Partnerships grew out of many years of working to rectify this dynamic between UVA and the surrounding region, and the groundbreaking work of organizations and individuals who have worked tirelessly to call on the University to be in right relationship with the local community (Schoonover et al., 2025). In this article, we discuss key tenets before turning to examples from our work to present readers with reflections of the unique challenges and joys of pursuing community-engaged scholarship.

Key Tenets

Humility is the acknowledgment of one's own strengths and limitations, while encouraging and celebrating the strengths of others (Tangney, 2000). Researcher humility requires incorporating multiple sources of knowledge (Strand et al., 2003). Allowing for community voices to participate in the research effort leads to multifaceted understanding that enriches research and leads to tangible outcomes and actionable collaboration (Rogers et al., 2018). Community-engaged scholarship should be measured by partner-defined impacts so that the utility of the research is centered on addressing the community's needs.

Community-engaged research, when done well, is also grounded in the pursuit of mutual benefit (Israel et al., 1998; Jagosh et al., 2012; Wallerstein & Duran, 2010; Cargo & Mercer, 2008). Rogers et al. (2018) defined mutuality as the cultivation of respectful, reciprocal relationships built on trust and cooperation, where power and expertise are shared to address community needs and priorities. This shift allows for the building of right relationships and shared decision-making with those most proximal to the research foci (Jagosh et al., 2012). It can be difficult to assess mutual benefit, but researchers can use tools (Arnstein, 1969; Wallerstein & Duran, 2010) to investigate the

degree of mutual benefit and map power dynamics and means of engagement in sustainable ways.

Finally, building and maintaining authentic partnerships between the research team and community members is another essential step to effective community-engaged scholarship (Henrick et al., 2017; Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014; Paris, 2011). As Chupp et al. (2021) wrote, authentic partnership requires universities to "establish reciprocity in learning and engagement that creates a flow between the institution and the residents" (p. 437). Community-engaged scholarship that is humanizing (Paris, 2011) requires a methodological shift that elevates the importance of care and dignity for the involved members in the project. These humanizing research designs require us to move beyond tradition and push against "researcher versus participant" and move towards "researcher as listener, learner, advocate, and participant" (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014, p. 28).

Examples of Practice: The Center for Community Partnerships at UVA

Community-engaged scholarship is key to the Center for Community Partnership at UVA's theory of change following practices of a) research-practice partnerships, b) resident-driven research, and c) community-centered analysis. These examples are presented here to offer ideas on processes and honest reflections on challenges.

Research-Practice Partnerships

Research-practice partnerships (RPPs) between institutions are defined as "long-term, mutually beneficial collaborations that promote the production and use of research" (William T. Grant Foundation, 2024). The Center is currently engaged in an RPP with a local school district adjacent to the university. This partnership connects university resources to the schools to collaboratively design research agendas, conduct projects relevant to the needs of the district, and provide meaningful findings that directly impact policy and practice. Rather than working in "separate spheres" (Tseng & Nutley, 2017, p. 171), the RPP aims to sustain collaboration and push forward research that brings institutional change.

An early success of the project has been the strong relationship between the district and university data and research teams. The university's research team leverages their resources to support the district by submitting IRB protocols and co-building research agendas to study the impacts of interventions, as well as supporting data visualization, presentations, and data-informed decision making.

Given the importance of mutual benefit, it is important to note how the school district supports the efforts of the university. For UVA, the goals of the RPP include elevating community-engaged scholarship across university research projects and in the tenure and promotion processes for junior faculty. One example of this engagement is through workshops and toolkits (Jones-Lewis et al., 2024) about best practices for community-engagement. Another example has been the community of faculty who partner with the Center to engage in research aligned with district goals and meet regularly to share reflections and best practices with other scholars doing similar work.

The work of research-practice partnerships is not without challenges. For example, the initial research design and timeline proposed by the university research team did not directly align with the curricular schedule at the schools. In the RPP between the Center and the school districts, these logistical challenges found most success when the teams identified areas where the RPP's research agenda strongly aligned with the school division's priorities.

While there are frameworks for measuring the impacts of RPPs (Soland, 2024), it can still be difficult to understand the effectiveness of these long-term partnerships. Conducting regular health checks is an example of a process that ensures transparency among partnerships. These reflections should be centered on decision-making and informal power dynamics, ethical and transparent research and data practices, and monitoring effective communication to understand how

partners are implementing the tenets of community-engaged scholarship.

Resident Driven Research

The Community Fellows-in-Residence (CFR) program is a short-term, professional development opportunity run by the Center designed for individuals who have a history of actively working to reduce disparity in the community and have a project that could benefit from access to UVA support and resources. Being a Fellow at the Center assists with project completion through mentorship, information, and access to resources (University of Virginia, 2021).

The CFR program serves as a reminder to university faculty and staff that the community has done, and will continue to do, important work, and this work can be assisted through partnerships with university entities. Additionally, by centering community knowledge keepers (Turner et al., 2022), the programs bring into focus those who work actively to positively transform their communities. Fellows are compensated for their work on a level akin to academic faculty, thus honoring their work, time, and energy.

The CFR program provides mutual benefit to the university, the community, and the fellows. On Arnstein's *Ladder of Citizen Participation*, it is squarely at the top in the citizen control rung (Arnstein, 1969). By providing funding and opportunities to those who participate, the Center equips individuals to do impactful work. There is an engendering of goodwill and working to be a good neighbor, as well as work done to repair damaged trust.

As with other aspects of community-engaged work, undertaking initiatives like the CFR program comes with its challenges. One significant challenge is ensuring sustained engagement and commitment from both the fellows and university stakeholders throughout the program. Maintaining momentum and enthusiasm for projects can be challenging, especially when faced with competing priorities or resource constraints. By prioritizing transparent communication, building right relationships, and providing adequate support, individuals and entities involved in programs like CFR navigate challenges effectively. The Center measures the impact of these partnerships through the ongoing and sustained trust, partnership, and collaboration with the network of Fellows involved in the local community.

Community-Centered Analysis

The Center is continuously committed to building authentic partnerships, and one of example of this has been a partnership with the City of Charlottesville. The *Stepping Stones Report and Supplement* (Charlottesville Department of Human Services & UVA Equity Center, 2023a; 2023b) was based on a report originally produced by the Charlottesville/Albemarle Commission on Children in Families in 2000, and most recently, the Center partnered with the Charlottesville Department of Human Services to produce an updated *Stepping Stones Report and Supplement*. This new report represented a collection of over 40 different metrics related to the wellbeing of children and families in the area and a supplement disaggregating eight of the measures by race and ethnicity.

In addition to gathering, cleaning, and visualizing the data in multiple ways to meet community needs, Center staff also worked on a dissemination plan around the report and supplement. This included presenting to a) community-serving organizations, b) individuals in the region, c) UVA entities, and d) wider academic audiences. The presentations, combined with a press release, multiple interviews, an explainer video, a one-pager that details findings, and paper handouts on the data helped to ensure that community organizations working to better support children and families received the information that they needed. In the short term, the impact of this work was evaluated through the use of a post-presentation feedback form. Evidence of longer-term impact is reflected in feedback from local grantmaking agencies reporting increased use of data by applicants in their proposals and decision-making processes.

Sustaining long-term engagement and impact requires ongoing commitment and resources. However, despite these hurdles, the work can be effectively carried out through strategic prioritization, collaboration with community partners, and leveraging available resources (Weech-Maldonado & Merrill, 2000) to build authentic partnerships. Throughout this broad dissemination, numerous partners have shared the utility of the report in supporting them with grant-writing and allocating funding for services. This wide-reaching impact helps to highlight the power of conducting local, community-centered work.

Considerations for Other Communities

While the examples shared in this article are unique to a particular context, the principles and frameworks shared above can be applied to many communities. As teams undertake community-engaged work, the following steps (Jones-Lewis et al., 2024) may prove helpful:

1. Work to collaboratively define community. Without this shared definition, one subset of the community might be over- or under-emphasized, causing further harm and leading to less impactful outcomes. Teams should make the focus population clear in a way that centers the voices most proximate to the work.
2. Consider historical and structural factors. Researchers and institutions must acknowledge past harms, engage transparently with stakeholders, and align their efforts with community priorities to rebuild relationships and create meaningful outcomes. Taking time at the beginning of the project to consider local contexts ensures the outcomes of the project might have tangible and direct implications.
3. Be prepared to navigate social dynamics and power differentials. Efforts must go beyond mere understanding and move towards continuously addressing and acknowledging power dynamics. Adapting language and adjusting processes can ensure the project does not inadvertently cause harm.

Conclusion

Though community-engaged scholarship requires substantial commitments, it ultimately yields more actionable results. This work will not only produce more accurate knowledge, but it will also lead to knowledge that can be communicated to a wider range of audiences. Through community-engagement, the relationship between the research institution and the community can be built, strengthened, or repaired, resulting in transformation. As more researchers embrace community-engaged scholarship, it is critical to reflect on humility, prioritize mutual benefit, and commit to fostering authentic partnerships to move towards more thoughtful, humanizing, and responsive scholarship.

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