

Speaking Up and Speaking Out: Community Engagement as a Civically-Engaged Professional

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One of the most influential statements I was ever told came from my old undergraduate research mentor Dr. Jason Ng: "People who work at universities are servants to their communities." While it took me a few years to fully realize what he meant by that statement, it has always stuck with me because of the significance of its implications. Fast forward five years later, I now realize that this statement has inherently guided my philosophy around what I do as a community-based researcher—and underpins everything that I do as a professional.

What it means for me to be a community-based researcher has evolved over the years. The importance of community was instilled in me from my culture and my upbringing in a Mexican-immigrant community. Admittedly though, I had no idea how this mentality and culture could be channeled into research until after I began my Ph.D. It took the COVID-19 pandemic and living in a city with significant health disparities (Brantley, 2018) for me to truly understand the importance of community engagement.

Community engagement is at the core of my work nowadays—with the primary aim being to build stakeholder networks and community capacity to promote physical activity (PA) for underrepresented racial minority (i.e., Black, Latino, etc.) adults.

Our team partners extensively with local health-based groups to facilitate community engagement around PA and promote healthy behaviors. Our overarching goal is to promote positive long-term health behaviors that reduce the risk of disease for individuals and foster healthier communities.

Advancing and fostering community engagement to me is not just about doing research with communities. To me, true community engagement requires civic engagement in the various domains of day-to-day life. It requires me to take on the role of a servant leader (Greenleaf, 1977) that helps build bridges; empower others; and see to it that the generations of accumulated knowledge discovered through scientific exploration be transferred to the communities that I serve.

At its core, community-engaged research is about serving others. It is about using the privilege, knowledge, and resources I have disposable to me as an academic to make direct, tangible impacts on people's lives. Community engagement is also about fostering mutually beneficial relationships and passing on the tools and resources necessary for communities to thrive.

Working with our community partners has taught me that it is not enough to merely publish papers and stay in our ivory towers hoping that our work somehow trickles down to the general public. Rather, I must take on the responsibility of directly engaging with communities on a variety of levels. These efforts for me include advocating for health policies in our local/state governments (Alamilla, Keith, et al., 2023; Broz, 2023), serving on community committees, or taking the time to disseminate science in a way that is understandable to the layperson (Alamilla, Georgiadis, et al., 2023; Alamilla & Keith, 2021). It is vital that I make every effort to be engaged in my community and advocate for decisions that benefit the health of my community.

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References

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