

Envisioning the Engaged University through Intentional Development and Support of Community-Engaged Research

Emily B. Zimmerman¹ and Sarah E. Raskin²

¹ Department of Family Medicine and Population Health, Virginia Commonwealth University, ² Douglas Wilder School of Government, Virginia Commonwealth University

Cite as: Zimmerman, E.B., & Raskin, S.E. (2023). Envisioning the Engaged University through Intentional Development and Support of Community-Engaged Research. *Metropolitan Universities*, 34(5), 1-6. DOI: 10.18060/27619

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](#).

Guest Editors: Emily B. Zimmerman, Ph.D. and Sarah E. Raskin, Ph.D. **Editor:** Patrick M. Green, Ed.D.

This special issue of *Metropolitan Universities Journal* was conceived to further the discussion about the role of colleges and universities in supporting community-engaged research. Their investment in partnering with communities to promote positive social and economic change is prominent in initiatives that range from community service and service-learning to innovating in spaces such as workforce and community development. Community-engaged research is a critical component of the community engagement landscape, as well as broadening the research enterprise at urban campuses to include communities. Yet the importance of coordinating, tracking, creating relationships, training, funding, providing recognition, and other support for this work can slip between the cracks as research processes – from obtaining funding and planning to implementing and maintaining accountability to community members – are almost exclusively led by individual researchers and disparate research teams. Such research teams are often spread across departments, institutes, and even epistemological frameworks (see Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020, for an excellent list of the many frameworks, orientations, and approaches used in participatory research). The recent proliferation of specialized research centers and funding programs that incorporate community-engaged research creates increasing expectations and opportunities for this work to occur. Creating the essential infrastructure to support community-engaged research requires new ways of thinking about the role of institutions and interdisciplinary programs in community engagement, research development, and research support. Conceiving an institution's responsibilities to develop the infrastructure necessary to sustain impactful community-engaged research can

also be a step toward repairing past harms perpetuated by universities under the guise of community engagement, an urgent topic of reflection and action in the field today.

Before delving into these issues, we think it is important to define what community-engaged research is, along with the unique characteristics that differentiate it from the many other types of research across the university setting. Community-engaged research is conducted collaboratively with groups of people to address issues affecting their well-being (Clinical and Translational Science Awards Consortium, 2011). It encompasses a wide spectrum of activities. At the same time, research is the defining element; this spectrum includes activities related to community engagement (e.g., developing partnerships, building trust), translational work, knowledge dissemination, policy and advocacy work, and community action. A hallmark of community engagement is partnership with communities, which can be geographical units but also may be groups of people with shared characteristics, interests, needs, or experiences. Because community-engaged research represents a partnership with the people whose priorities are reflected in the work, it is a particularly important approach for addressing issues related to equity. Creating more equitable systems and programs requires prioritizing the lived experiences and cultural contexts of people who have been systematically excluded or marginalized.

The challenges unique to community-engaged research stem from conflicts between the epistemological values, processes, and norms geared toward authentic engagement and those of conventional positivist research approaches and institutional norms. Community-engaged research advocates for researchers to collaborate with those impacted by research in all phases of research – from identifying research priorities to planning and implementing research and disseminating results. From this approach stems the first hurdle – recognizing that the potential collaborators in community-engaged research vary tremendously: neighborhood residents, patients, minoritized individuals, professionals, organizational representatives, and grassroots organizations, to name a few. In practice, institutional support must adapt to understand the context of the partnership since collaboration, co-production, and power-sharing look different and require different investments depending on the community members and their context. To address these challenges, institutions commit to ensuring that all potential partners are identified, encouraged to participate, recognized in their participation, and supported to make that possible.

To do community-engaged research well, campuses must face the uncomfortable transformations required to reform existing power structures related to finance, prestige, and decision-making required to create an equitable playing field for authentic collaboration. While developing policies and programs in an ad hoc manner has likely been the most common

approach to these commitments thus far, theoretical frameworks can guide more systematic, sustainable, and equitable planning, implementation, and evaluation processes. Bell and Lewis (2023) provide a general conceptual model of the structural pressures influencing institutional support of community-engaged research focusing on epistemic issues, the neo-liberalization of universities (emphasizing productivity and metrics), and gender and racial biases. The authors recommend cultural and practical changes to counteract those pressures. Scanlon et al. (2017) created an institutional support model for community-engaged research that includes four components: readiness, capacity, partnership and project support, and monitoring and evaluation. Building on these models, several articles in this issue propose frameworks and tools for assessing and strengthening institutional support.

It is a given that universities invest heavily in their research infrastructure with the following examples: wet and dry lab space, specialized equipment, pre- and post-award funding support, institutional review boards, computing technology, care of animals, and specialized reagents and biologicals. Each discipline understands the nature of the investments required to plan and carry out its research agenda successfully. As a research approach that can foster trans- and inter-disciplinarity and embrace pluralistic research traditions beyond the positivist ones that dominate the academy, the different, lesser-understood or emergent support requirements of community-engaged research are often not prioritized, disregarded, or dismissed compared to disciplinary research. This special issue highlights some of those needs, explores the tensions of varying research epistemologies connecting to communities, and features potential solutions implemented in various college and university settings.

The scholarly articles in this issue address some important supports and provide potential strategies for how campuses may respond to the infrastructure needs of community-engaged research. This collection addresses priorities that can create a culture of authentic community-engaged research with equity at its core, including building capacity, fostering research programs that cut across college and community spaces and actors, monitoring and evaluating community-engaged research, improving faculty incentives and supports, ensuring reciprocity and justice in relationships among all interested parties, and promoting knowledge dissemination that benefits communities.

Providing opportunities for community partners to develop research projects and receive funding is an institutional role that supports the traditions of capacity-building and power-sharing in community-based participatory research. Assari and colleagues describe a pilot grant program at Morgan State University that provided small community-based participatory research (CBPR) awards to new research partnerships and provided technical support and training. Through their evaluation, which mapped results of a qualitative assessment of

partnership assets, the authors found that assessing the ‘stage of partnership readiness’ was critical to tailoring technical assistance. The article also describes the specific impacts of this initiative on the development of new, enduring institutional structures for the continued engagement of community organizations with the university.

Developing authentic community engagement is an institutional effort that requires that diverse components work together, from a strong mission to leadership, reward structures, and investment of faculty time. Stuetzle and colleagues’ article focuses on the institutional transformations at Merrimack College as it grew its commitment to community-engaged research. The authors describe several useful tools for assessing and moving toward organizational change. They present a theoretical model (the Transdisciplinary Ecosystem Model) that effectively operationalizes the college assets leveraged to institutionalize community-engaged research. They utilize this model in a case study illustrating changes that focus on developing a Food Justice Research and Action Cluster, how previous advances in community engagement spurred it, and how it helped leaders further institutional advancement.

Faculty success is vital to the sustainability of community-engaged research, yet it has rarely been systematized within institutions. Wendling examines how promotion and tenure committee members assess peers’ community-engaged research. Traditional review frameworks impede the appropriate interpretation of engaged scholarship, for example, by incorrectly categorizing community-engaged research as service and limiting concepts of value and quality to myopic measures, such as peer-reviewed journal impact factors and national sources of funding and partnerships. Wendling concludes with four recommendations to systematically account for and value community-engaged research in the promotion and tenure process, including revising guidelines and metrics, as well as creating institutional supports to prepare units to evaluate the quality of engaged scholarship on its terms.

At many higher education institutions, service-learning serves as the jumping-off point for community-engaged research that deepens relationships with the local community while providing research experience to learners. Downey and colleagues describe the process of expanding community-based research (CBR) undertaken by faculty and undergraduate students through a process of articulated changes and commitments at the institutional level, from developing a university engagement office to recognizing achievements in CBR, hosting CBR publications and developing a faculty fellows program to train and support faculty. If service-learning often prompts initial community-engaged research, sharing findings typically completes the project cycle. Viehweg and colleagues evaluate a decade-long partnership between Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI)’s library and its Center for

Translating Research Into Practice (TRIP) to disseminate engaged scholarship in an accessible way. The open access repository's benefits, including visibility, strengthened knowledge application, and community accountability, are balanced by participation barriers, including time and knowledge limitations, copyright concerns, and competing services. The authors demonstrate how institutional resources to support community-engaged research include material resources, such as technology, FAQs to dispel misconceptions, promotional items, and non-material resources, such as ambassador-style champions and advocacy to recognize digital dissemination in promotion and tenure reviews.

Beyond the strengthening and impacts of community-engaged research at an individual campus or single community lies questions of strengthening the approach and its needed infrastructure across institutions. Wallerstein and colleagues describe the Engage for Equity PLUS intervention (E2 PLUS), in which three Academic Health Centers partnered to strengthen institutional supports for community-engaged research in their three settings, which were characterized as much by their unique qualities as by the commonality of being AHCs. Coached by mentors at the University of New Mexico's Center for Participatory Research, one of the nation's longest, continually operating, community-engaged research teams collaboratively identified and began championing institutional improvements in grant management, human subjects protections, data advocacy, and community empowerment. While the longevity of these changes remains to be seen, the mentored collaborative approach to identifying similar needs and potential solutions suggests the merits and potentials of such cross-pollination.

We cannot claim that the articles in this issue cover all the transformational elements needed to move from the current state of institutional support of community engagement to a more intentional, strategic, holistic, and impactful university program. Looking across the articles, however, there are common threads that draw our attention to not only the potential roadblocks but also the stepwise efforts and critical evaluation needed to move forward. Applying the models and frameworks in this issue will provide approaches for campuses to strengthen and commit to community-engaged research in strategic ways.

References

- Bell, & Lewis, N. (2023). Universities claim to value community-engaged scholarship: So why do they discourage it? *Public Understanding of Science (Bristol, England)*, 32(3), 304–321. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09636625221118779>
- Clinical and Translational Science Awards Consortium, United States, National Institutes of Health (U.S.), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (U.S.), and Clinical & Translational Science Awards Consortium. (2011). Principles of community engagement (second edition). (https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/communityengagement/pdf/PCE_Report_508_FINAL.pdf).
- Scanlon, D., Wolf, L., Chuang, C., Kraschnewski, J., Lengerich, E., McHale, S., . . . Penrod, J. (2017). A model for academic institution support for community-engaged research. *Journal of Clinical and Translational Science*, 1(5), 320-321. doi:10.1017/cts.2017.295
- Vaughn, L. M., & Jacquez, F. (2020). Participatory Research Methods – Choice Points in the Research Process. *Journal of Participatory Research Methods*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.35844/001c.13244>