

Methods for Community Engagement

RESEARCHER TOOLKIT FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN THE CHARLOTTESVILLE/ALBEMARLE REGION



The Center for Community Partnerships

Jones-Lewis, S., Harris, J., & Schoonover, N. (October, 2024). Methods for community engagement: Researcher toolkit for community engagement in the Charlottesville/Albemarle region. The Center for Community Partnerships.

October 2024

This toolkit is designed to provide you with a range of resources and strategies that will enhance your engagement skills and help you achieve community-focused goals. Inside, you'll find detailed guides, practical tips, and creative approaches tailored to meet different needs and learning styles. Whether you are a UVA first year, or seasoned professional, this toolkit offers valuable insights and tools to support you.

What is Community Engaged Scholarship?

Community-engaged scholarship is a transformative approach to research, teaching, and service that brings together academics and community members to address real-world problems. This framework ensures that communities—often marginalized or underrepresented—shape and benefit from research, rather than being treated as passive subjects; or worse, put in harm’s way. Unlike traditional academic research, which may operate within an "ivory tower," community-engaged scholarship centers mutual learning, shared power, and trust between researchers and community partners ([Minkler, 2004; Wallerstein & Duran, 2010](#)).

Community-engaged scholarship takes on many different forms, as communities are varied and complex. This toolkit seeks to explain the heart of this practice in a mid-sized city where the major anchor institution is a research university. The toolkit will focus on three key principles: practicing humility, pursuing mutual benefit, and building authentic partnerships. These principles allow for sustainable, meaningful relationships that align academic inquiry with community needs. This guide draws from The Center for Community Partnerships (The Center) at the University of Virginia (UVA), which provides a blueprint for how universities can engage ethically with surrounding communities. Through examples such as research-practice partnerships (RPPs), resident-driven initiatives, and data-sharing collaborations, this guide offers insights into the challenges and successes that emerge when scholars and community leaders work hand-in-hand.

Doing Your Homework: Understanding the Landscape

[The Urban Institute](#) emphasizes that “doing your homework” is the first step toward fostering sustainable partnerships. This means gaining a deep understanding of the community’s identity, history, and challenges while preparing to engage

thoughtfully with local partners. However, as the Urban Institute suggests, research alone is not enough—effective engagement also requires humility, active listening, and openness to multiple perspectives.

While it is essential to research the community’s background to avoid making uninformed assumptions, scholars must also recognize that they are engaging with experts—community members who know their realities better than any outsider could. Thus, engagement cannot rely on reading and synthesis alone. It requires direct interaction, respect for lived experiences, and a willingness to be corrected, challenged, or redirected by partners.

Key Elements to Consider:

1. Defining the Community Collaboratively: It is important to compare your initial definition of the community with how members see themselves. A narrow focus on one subset of the community can erase the complexities of the area and prove harmful. If one is focused on a specific demographic, the reasons should be clear, and one must be cognizant that they are not working to reinforce stereotypes and overlooking the intersectional and diverse nature of the region.

- Guiding Reflection:
 - How does my definition of the community differ from the way members define it?
 - How can I ensure I am listening to multiple voices within the community and not viewing any group/s of people as a monolith?

2. Understanding Historical and Structural Factors: The Charlottesville/Albemarle Region has a history that is marked by systemic harms rooted in slavery, segregation, and urban renewal initiatives that disproportionately impacted low-income residents. A key example is the demolition of Vinegar Hill, a

thriving business district in the 1960s. This urban renewal project displaced more than 600 families and over 30 businesses, resulting in significant economic loss and contributing to community mistrust toward local institutions, including the University of Virginia ([UVA Today](#), [Virginia Humanities](#)). Similar displacement occurred in the Gospel Hill neighborhood during UVA's medical system expansion in the 1970s and 1980s. As UVA acquired land to build medical facilities and parking lots, residents were uprooted, often without adequate compensation. The loss of these historic spaces further deepened mistrust, as residents saw the university prioritizing its expansion at the community's expense ([UVA Today](#), [Virginia Humanities](#)).

Today, economic disparities, limited affordable housing, and healthcare barriers continue to affect Charlottesville's low-income residents. The university's presence has driven up housing prices due to student demand, making affordable rental options increasingly scarce. This fuels the perception among residents that UVA primarily serves outsiders or elite interests, reinforcing a sense that the institution is "not for them"—a sentiment amplified by experiences of inadequate treatment at UVA's hospital system ([ProPublica](#), [Virginia Humanities](#)).

Addressing this history is crucial to building trust and fostering authentic community partnerships. Researchers and institutions must acknowledge past harms, engage transparently, and align their efforts with community priorities to rebuild relationships and create meaningful outcomes.

- Guiding Reflection:
 - Have the specific people or communities I am working with been involved in research partnerships before, and how were those experiences perceived?
 - How am I engaging with the community's history of exclusion and harm in a transparent and respectful way?

- What steps am I taking to demonstrate my commitment to rebuilding trust through accountability and sustained action?

3. Navigating Social Dynamics and Power Differentials: Communities are not monolithic, and internal power dynamics can affect partnerships. In the Charlottesville/Albemarle region, nonprofit leaders, neighborhood associations, activists, and informal networks all hold different forms of influence. Understanding these dynamics is critical to identifying key stakeholders and potential challenges, such as tensions between local government agencies and grassroots organizations. It is also important to note that partner capacities and limitations will be varied. When working with local nonprofits, schools, or healthcare providers, it is important to recognize that your research may impact their daily operations. Some organizations operate with limited staff or resources, meaning they might not have the capacity to support research demands.

- Guiding Reflection:
 - Who holds formal and informal leadership in the community?
 - What social and economic harms exist within the community, and how can your partnership address them?
 - How will your research affect your partners' ability to serve their community?

Doing your homework provides a critical foundation for community engagement, but it is only the first step, according to [The Urban Institute](#). Not everything can be learned through reading alone; meaningful engagement requires direct dialogue, deep listening, and openness to new perspectives. The real experts are the community members themselves, who bring valuable lived experience to the table. Scholars must be ready to relinquish control, listen without defensiveness, and adjust their plans (where possible) based on community feedback.

This thoughtful preparation enables researchers to build authentic, mutually beneficial partnerships that reflect the real needs, priorities, and capacities of the community. By understanding the ecosystem as a whole—including the social, historical, and economic context—researchers can avoid extractive practices and foster trust, respect, and long-term collaboration.



Practicing Humility: Research Practice Partnerships in Action

Humility in community-engaged scholarship requires academics to acknowledge the limits of their expertise and actively seek out and elevate community knowledge. This principle shifts the balance of authority, enabling bidirectional learning where both scholars and community partners contribute meaningfully to the research

process (Tangney, 2000). At The Center for Community Partnerships, this principle is exemplified through Research-Practice Partnerships (RPPs) with local school districts.

Examples: Research Practice Partnerships in Action

- **Building Contextual Knowledge:** The Center's community research team and others attend school board meetings, back-to-school events, and other community gatherings to understand the district's culture and challenges. Additionally, a high percentage of the staff lives in the Greater Charlottesville region. This proximity assists them in better understanding the challenges and joys that the local area has to offer.
- **Technical Assistance and Mentorship:** The Center's researchers work with district staff on data analytics, enabling them to better identify gaps and implement focused solutions.
- **Capacity Building and Data Sharing:** Researchers co-develop questions, tools, and visualizations with school officials to improve informed decision-making with the goal of producing better outcomes for students.

Impactful Projects

- [**Starr Hill Pathways**](#): A program developed by The Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Virginia in partnership with Albemarle County Public Schools and Charlottesville City Schools, is an innovative, long-term collaboration designed to address systemic educational disparities in the Charlottesville-Albemarle region. This program reflects the values of research-practice partnerships (RPPs) by aligning university resources with the specific needs of local students and families. The primary goal of Starr Hill Pathways is to expand college and career opportunities for under-resourced and

underrepresented students, providing year-round academic and social support from 7th grade through high school graduation.

- **[Orange Dot Report](#)**: An example of an RPP between [Network2Work](#), [The United Way of Greater Charlottesville](#), and The Center. The partnership stands as a powerful example of how collaboration can drive positive outcomes, particularly in a region where disparities are pronounced. The Orange Dot Report is used to inform the work of Network2Work and drives goals for The United Way of Greater Charlottesville. The overarching goal is to enhance the well-being of the community, ensuring that fewer families are left behind in the pursuit of a better quality of life, with a focus on developing programs and policies that support families in achieving economic self-sufficiency.

Challenges:

- **Timeline Conflicts**: University research projects often operate on academic schedules that may conflict with community priorities.
- **Power Dynamics**: Even well-meaning researchers may unconsciously dominate decision-making, undermining community input. Therefore, it is important to understand and embody the ethos of community and to have a concrete plan for doing so with checks and balances.
- **Skepticism and Distrust**: Communities that have experienced extractive research practices are often wary of new partnerships, requiring significant time to build trust. Therefore, understanding this and building in the space, time, and opportunity to do so is the gold standard. However, when this is not possible, one should seek to leverage trust from adjacent organizations, with the goal of furthering said trust.

Guiding Questions:

- How can I ensure that community voices help to shape the research design and outcomes?
- What steps am I taking to recognize, plan for, and adjust power imbalances?
- Have I demonstrated long-term commitment beyond the scope of the research project?

Pursuing Mutual Benefit: Learning for All the Experts

Mutual benefit ensures that both the university and the community gain meaningful outcomes from the partnership. One way in which The Center and many others uphold this principle is through the use of its honorarium guide. Other examples include shared decision-making, resource distribution, and alignment of goals between scholars and community members (Israel et al., 1998; Cargo & Mercer, 2008). At The Center, the Community Fellows-in-Residence Program embodies this principle by compensating local leaders to develop community-driven projects while also enriching the university's research ecosystem.

Example: Community Fellows-in-Residence Program



Support and Mentorship: Fellows are granted funding and provided with access to UVA's resources to carry out initiatives that tackle systemic issues in Charlottesville City and Albemarle County. Scholars are selected based on their personal backgrounds in community engagement and their visions for the future.

Reciprocal Learning: Fellows collaborate with faculty, students, and various community partners through workshops and guest lectures, infusing community insights into the classroom. Additionally, they have contributed alongside UVA faculty and staff on various boards and committees. To further enhance their personal knowledge, fellows also have the opportunity to audit a class of their choice.

Impactful Projects

- *Conecta2:* *Conecta2* is an innovative initiative that has significantly impacted the lives of many Latinx families by bridging the technology access gaps that often hinder their progress. Under the leadership of Maria Rodriguez and Edgar Lara, the program focused on training Latinx leaders to empower their communities with essential digital skills and resources. After the successful completion of the *Conecta2* project, Edgar Lara transitioned into a new role as the Executive Director at [Sin Barreras/Without Barriers](#). In that position, he continued to advocate for immigrant rights and work towards dismantling systemic barriers that prevent marginalized communities from thriving. Currently Edgar serves as the Director of Community Engagement, and his leadership at Sin Barreras serves as a testament to the ripple effect of *Conecta2*, as he worked to expand the organization's reach, ensuring that the lessons learned and connections made during the initiative continued to benefit those in need.
- *Community Engagers:* Sandra Aviles, a community organizer for [Charlottesville United for Public Education](#) successfully launched a community engager program, where school-based engagers work to lift the voices of community members. This innovative initiative is designed to elevate the voices of residents by equipping these engagers with the tools and resources they need to actively

participate in the decision-making processes that affect their children's education and the broader community. The program recognizes that those who are most impacted by educational policies and practices—namely the parents, guardians, and students—often have invaluable insights and perspectives that can significantly inform and enhance the conversations surrounding education in Charlottesville. The work of the engagers was used to inform recommendations to school board and city council.

Challenges:

- **Sustaining Engagement:** Ensuring mutual benefit requires ongoing commitment, even after the formal partnership ends, and oftentimes before it begins. Therefore it is sometimes necessary to leverage the trust of others in your orbit and build upon it, especially for shorter-term projects/research.
- **Resource Constraints:** Limited funding may hinder the ability to fully support both academic and community goals, but some funding is better than no funding. Ensure that you are working to center community members and organizations in your budget so that this becomes the norm.

Guiding Questions:

- How can I align academic goals with the community's priorities to ensure mutual benefit?
- Are community partners being fairly compensated and acknowledged for their contributions?
- How will the partnership continue to benefit both parties after the project's conclusion?

Building Authentic Partnerships

Authentic partnerships are the foundation of successful community-engaged scholarship. These relationships require trust, transparency, and consistent engagement over time (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014). A recent example of this is the manner in which The Center modeled the building of authentic partnerships through its collaboration with the Charlottesville Department of Human Services on the [Stepping Stones Report](#).

Authentic partnerships are grounded in iterative, meaningful contact. When forming partnerships, it is important to enter humbly and ensure that all decision points are clear. Many times some of the decision points in a project are non-negotiable. When this is the case, it should be clearly expressed to community members and partners.

Example: The Stepping Stones Report

- **Collaborative Data Collection and Visualization:** The Center worked closely with the Charlottesville Department of Human Services to understand the necessary data points that should be included in the Stepping Stones Report. Then, staff, with support from a community-engaged policy class, worked to collect and visualize data to highlight the state of children and families in Albemarle County, Charlottesville City, and the wider Charlottesville/Albemarle community.
- **Focused Dissemination:** The report was shared with close community partners first, then shared with wider youth-focused organizations, and shared online to a wider audience, including policymakers. The dissemination team focused on accessibility with consideration for Lexile level, language translation, and format.
- **Ongoing Feedback and Adaptation:** Community feedback was actively incorporated to refine the report, fostering continuous improvement and trust. This occurred because the teams at The Center understand the past harm caused

by some researchers, including the invitation for voices that were then not taken into account.

Challenges:

- **Leadership Transitions:** Changes within partner organizations can disrupt progress and require adjustments to maintain continuity. This is especially true when the partnerships that you are leveraging are person-to-person, instead of person-to-organization or organization-to-organization.
- **Trust Building:** Establishing trust, especially with communities that have experienced harm from previous university-led projects, takes time and intentionality.
- **Sustained Engagement:** Authentic partnerships require long-term involvement, which can be challenging with limited resources or shifting academic priorities.

Guiding Questions:

- How will I maintain open communication and trust with community partners?
- What processes are in place to manage transitions effectively?
- How am I ensuring the research findings are accessible and actionable for the community?

Additional Resources for Community Engagement

[UVA Library Libra Open](#)

It is important to share knowledge openly, ensuring that research and community work is accessible, especially to the communities engaged in its creation. This requires a commitment to transparency, preservation, and respect in dissemination practices, ensuring that community-informed research is shared in ways that honor the contributions of all participants.

Open access refers to the practice of making research products freely available to the public, supporting access to knowledge. All students and faculty are encouraged to use the UVA Library's institutional repository, Libra, to share reports and other research products. Libra provides a reliable platform for sharing work publicly or with engaged communities, offering an option for long-term preservation. For those with access to other platforms, such as personal webpages or GitHub, Libra can complement these by ensuring a stable and searchable archive. The library team is also available to provide guidance and create searchable tags that highlight local research for broader community visibility.

[Honorarium Guide](#)

We promote and recognize the important and invaluable contributions, perspectives, and knowledge of our community members, elders, leaders, and knowledge keepers. We hold ourselves in a place of truth, honesty, respect, and reciprocity with our community relationships which extends into how we exchange knowledge and expertise for compensation. UVA

Honorarium Definition: An honorarium is a token of appreciation paid to an individual for services performed when payment is not required. The arrangement

between the individual is informal. It does not involve a contract, and invoicing is not required.

Service/Knowledge Provided from Community Expert	UVA "Academic" Equivalent	Average Time Commitment	Compensation Exchanged
Participation in a panel discussion	Professor	1 hour of time 1 plus planning	\$150 per panel member (or \$75/hr)
Advising program design, program implementation, data analysis or program evaluation	Program Evaluator or TA Provider	Varies, 5+ hours	\$375 (or \$75/hr)
Community mentoring	College/Career Advisor	15+ hours	\$500
Facilitator of a discussion	Visiting Professor/Special Guest	2 hours of prep + discussion time	\$600 (or \$200/hr)
Leadership committee (chair or co-chair), knowledge group, or community knowledge council	Professor, Consultant	Ongoing, yearly, or quarterly commitment.	\$5,000
Participation in a committee, knowledge group, or community knowledge council	Professor	Ongoing, yearly, or quarterly commitment.	\$550
Co-researcher	Professor, Research Specialist	\$75 per hour	Budgeted based on length and scope of research project. Could also be an invoiced service.
Traditional Knowledge Keeper, Elder, or Spiritual Advisor	M.D. or Clinical Psychologist	\$100+ per hour	Per hour rate of services rendered for the community or knowledge exchanged.

[Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation](#)

According to Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation, the levels of citizen participation can be thought of as a ladder consisting of eight rungs, each representing a different degree of citizen involvement in decision-making processes.

While achieving the highest rungs of the ladder, such as citizen control, can seem desirable, it may not always be practical or realistic for all community members.

Some may prefer a lower level of involvement due to time constraints, lack of interest, or concerns about accountability and responsibility. It is essential to recognize that meaningful participation can occur at various levels, and the goal

should be to facilitate engagement that aligns with the community's needs and capacities.

1. **Manipulation:** This is the lowest level of participation where citizens are essentially used as pawns by those in power. Their involvement is superficial, and they have no real influence over decisions.
2. **Therapy:** In this rung, citizens are treated as subjects needing help, often without their input or involvement. The focus is on changing their behavior rather than engaging them in the decision-making process.
3. **Informing:** At this level, citizens are informed about decisions that have already been made. While they receive information, there is no opportunity for feedback or dialogue.
4. **Consultation:** Citizens are consulted for their opinions, but the power dynamics remain largely unchanged. Their input may be gathered, but it does not guarantee any influence on the final decisions.
5. **Placation:** Here, citizens are given some degree of influence, but it is limited. They may be allowed to advise or provide input, yet the ultimate decision-making power remains with those in authority.
6. **Partnership:** This rung signifies a more collaborative approach where community members/organizations work together in decision-making. Power is shared, and there is a mutual commitment to the process.
7. **Delegated Power:** At this level, community members/organizations have significant control over resources and decision-making processes. They can make decisions independently, although some oversight may still exist.
8. **Citizen Control:** This is the highest level of citizen participation, where citizens have full authority and control over decision-making processes. They are the primary actors, and their voices dictate the outcomes.

Public Housing Association of Residents: Residents for Respectful Research (R3)

According to the Public Housing Association of Residents (PHAR) website, “The purpose of Residents for Respectful Research (R3) is to ensure that low-wealth residents understand, have input on, and benefit from research conducted on/with members of their community”(n.d.). PHAR runs a resident review committee, called Residents for Respectful Research (R3), in order to address resident concern about how much research data are gathered in their communities, how the research is used, and how their lives are ultimately represented.

The preview questionnaire below, can be used to think about how one should structure community engaged research from the start.

R3 Pre-review Questionnaire: Researchers

1. Please provide a one-paragraph description of your project in lay terms. The paragraph should be written at a 3rd grade reading level, to be accessible to a broad population.
2. Is this a topic that was originally identified by the community you intend to work with and/or PHAR?
3. What existing relationship does the research team have with the community it intends to work with and/or PHAR?
4. What input on this research protocol have you received from the community you intend to work with and/or PHAR to date?
 - a. What was the process for engaging the community for this purpose?
5. What immediate or long-term benefits to the community you intend to work with and/or PHAR may be reasonably expected to result from your project?
 - a. Do you agree to submit status reports on the benefits detailed above to R3?
() yes () no
6. What role do residents of the community you intend to work with and/or PHAR members play on the research team?
 - a. What honoraria, salary support, or other forms of compensation will be provided to these individuals?
 - b. How do you plan on conducting outreach and connecting with the community?
 - c. Are any of these individuals being considered for co-authorship of your findings?
7. How do you intend to share the data generated from your research activities with the community you intend to work with and/or PHAR?
8. How do you intend to share the conclusions drawn from your research with the community you intend to work with and/or PHAR?
9. Do you agree to provide a summary of your research findings in a format accessible to the community you intend to work with and/or PHAR? () yes () no
10. Do you agree to share data that is relevant to other research projects (e.g. demographic data) with other researchers seeking approval from R3? () yes () no
11. Should there be financial benefit associated with this research, would you be willing to negotiate benefit sharing with the community you intend to serve and/or PHAR?
() yes () no
12. Do you agree to engage in ongoing dialogue with R3 about follow-up research projects?
() yes () no

[Memorandum of Understanding \(MOU\) Template](#)

Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) establish a framework for a partnership between a community partner organization and a research team or department at the University of Virginia. Designed to uphold community-centered values, the MOU template defines the partnership's purpose, scope, and principles, ensuring that the work prioritizes the community's goals for well-being and sustainable growth. By

fostering authentic relationships and recognizing the expertise of all involved, the MOU outlines a respectful, collaborative approach to research and resource sharing that benefits both the community and the university.

The guiding principles outlined in the MOU template are authentic partnership, humility, and mutual benefit. They work together to create a foundation of respect and shared commitment. These principles guide each partner's roles and responsibilities, ensuring the UVA research team is responsive to the community's defined needs and goals, while the community partner provides insights into local experiences and helps shape the direction of the work.

Conclusion

Thank You:

We know that working to engage the community in respectful ways is the right thing to do, and that many people choose another route. Thank you for taking the time to read, skim, or otherwise engage with this toolkit. At The Center for Community Partnerships we underscore the necessity of genuine collaboration in community-engaged scholarship, emphasizing humility, mutual benefit, and authentic partnerships. By framing engagement through historical awareness, community-defined goals, and open knowledge sharing, this resource empowers researchers and community members to address complex social issues. This toolkit supports sustainable, impactful partnerships that bridge academia and community, honoring the expertise of both and reinforcing The Center's commitment to justice-driven scholarship.

Acknowledgments:

This toolkit was created by individual staff members at The Center for Community Partnerships (The Center). The views expressed are those of the authors and while the aligned with the vision, mission and values, the words herein should not be attributed to The Center for Community Partnerships, The University of Virginia, its trustees, or others.

We would like to acknowledge and thank: Michele Claibourn, Zymir Faulkner, Joy Johnson, Beth Mitchell, Samantha Toet, and Karen Waters for the time they spent reviewing and providing input on this toolkit.

Copyright © 2024 By the Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia.



References

Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35 (4), 216–224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225>

Cameron, B. (2021, March 15). UVA and the history of race: Property and power. UVA Today. <https://news.virginia.edu/content/uva-and-history-race-property-and-power>

Mitchell, T. (2024, March 12). Decades of destruction. Virginia Humanities. <https://virginiahumanities.org/2023/11/decades-of-destruction/>

Shakespre, J., Mizota, M., Martinez, R., Daly, H., Falkenburger, E., & Urban Institute. (2021). Fostering partnerships for community engagement. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/104935/fostering-partnerships-for-community-engagement_0.pdf

Tangney, J. P. (2000). Humility: Theoretical perspectives, empirical findings, and directions for future research. *Journal of Social & Clinical Psychology*, 19(1), 70–82.

Urban Institute. (2021). Fostering partnerships for community engagement: A toolkit for practitioners. Urban Institute. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/104935/fostering-partnerships-for-community-engagement_0.pdf