

## Opening the Black Box: Conceptualizing Community Engagement From 109 Community–Academic Partnership Programs

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### What Is the Purpose of This Study/Review?

- To identify key lessons learned in an effort to improve the science of community-engaged research (CEnR).
- The research focuses on 109 community–academic partnership projects funded by the Healthier Wisconsin Partnership Program, a component of the Advancing a Healthier Wisconsin endowment at the Medical College of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
- This “deep dive” analysis provides major themes that emerged from the reports along with insights learned, not only from community–academic partners collaborating on the project, but also on the writing of the final report.

### What Is the Problem?

- Although several studies have identified key challenges, successes, and opportunities in the CEnR approach to improve health, a current limitation of the extant research is the relatively limited focus and small scale of the studies involved, or a more narrow focus on the type of health or community interest included in the studies being analyzed.
- This study examines the conceptual frameworks of 109 community–academic partnership projects while covering a wide range of health focus areas, infrastructure focus areas, and diverse populations affected.

### What Are the Findings?

- Thirteen major themes emerged during data analysis.
- The study supports previous research which identified the importance of some of the themes we also identified.
- It also provided an in-depth view of common features and principles that are fundamental to successful community–academic partnership projects, and common outcomes that can be useful in considering, community–academic partnerships that may improve understanding of, planning for, and managing community–academic partnerships.
- The insights into these dynamics, as well as supporting evidence of the positive outcomes and impact of the community, can provide useful information to researchers, community partners, and other stakeholders as they consider further investments in CEnR and community–academic partnership projects.

### Who Should Care Most?

- Academics and community partners who are interested in community–academic partnerships, stakeholders considering the landscape, benefits and risks of community–academic partnership projects, and researchers interested in a large-scale analysis of community–academic partnership projects.

### Recommendations for Action for Those Practicing CEnR

- Partnerships need to foster communication between project partners and community. The ability to freely discuss and share thoughts and insights increases the likelihood of the success of a project.
- When available, partnerships should research best practices, and learn from these examples to optimize the impact of a project.
- Relationship building between the community and academic partners can be just as crucial as building a relationship with the community being served. Partnerships that build strong relationships can leverage their partnership to be an asset in current as well as future projects.
- Community–academic partnerships should anticipate clarifying experiences during a project, and anticipate these insights will require time, resources and communication to address.
- Involving the community early in the strategic planning process is important. Community partners should be involved in all phases of the project planning process.
- Community–academic partnerships need to give attention to the issue of sustainability. Although many factors are involved, partnerships that have an established history of being invested in the targeted community are more likely to be able find ways to sustain a project. Also, having more invested partners in a project may improve the ability to sustain a project.
- Administration of projects can be a hurdle for community–academic partnerships. Frequent meetings and communication should be included to minimize the impact of administrative issues when they occur.
- Awareness of risks that may require adjustments to project plans can help community–academic partnerships in strategic planning. Themes in this case analysis highlight common risks, and may show partnerships how some risks in the project plan can be minimized, to optimize the impact and success of a project.

### Recommendations for Those Evaluating the Value of CEnR

- This case analysis supports previous studies that find the community–academic partnership model for research is capable of improving health equity and achieving sustainable, positive benefits to the communities involved.
- There is an ubiquity of references to health accomplishments and a pervasive perception among the community–academic partnerships included in this study that they achieved greater success with the target community via community–academic partnership projects than would have been achieved by a more traditional research method.
- The benefit of CEnR in increasing capacity building is pervasive in community–academic partnership projects and should recommend the community–academic partnership model to researchers and funders who desire capacity building as an outcome to a project.