

# Revealing the complexity of community-campus interactions

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## Abstract

In this paper, four qualitative case studies capture the complex interplay between the social and structural relations that shape community - academic partnerships. Collaborations begin as relationships among people. They are sustained by institutional structures that recognize and support these relationships. Productive collaborations centralize reciprocity, flexibility, and relationship building between individuals *and* institutions. Our findings also indicate a synergistic interaction between collaborative processes and outcomes: an equitable process supports the development of mutually beneficial outcomes, and the ability to sustain a collaborative process requires substantive progress towards shared change goals.

## Résumé

Cet article présente quatre études de cas de nature qualitative pour rendre compte des interactions complexes qui existent au sein des relations sociales et structurelles qui définissent les partenariats communauté-université. Les collaborations, qui débutent par des relations entre des personnes, sont maintenues grâce à la reconnaissance et au soutien offerts par les structures institutionnelles. La réciprocité, la flexibilité ainsi que la formation de relations entre les individus *et* les institutions sont au centre des collaborations

fructueuses. Nos résultats révèlent par ailleurs une interaction synergique entre les processus de collaboration et les résultats : un processus équitable encourage la production de résultats mutuellement avantageux, alors que la capacité de maintenir un processus collaboratif exige des progrès importants vers des objectifs de changement communs.

## Introduction

Inter-organizational collaborations encourage inter-professional learning and joint problem solving (Addicott, McGivern, & Ferlie, 2006). Our research investigates inter-organizational collaborations that include academic institutions within the partnership. In this paper, we examine collaborations between people who work in academic settings (e.g., universities and community colleges) and people who work in a diversity of other institutional environments (e.g., funding organizations, community coalitions, non-profit agencies, government and non-governmental organizations, media, and research institutes). We describe these as community - campus collaborations. They are also examples of engaged scholarship where academic scholarship has relevance and/or utility beyond the university.

Other academic researchers have identified social, political, and institutional factors that enable and constrain community - academic interactions (e.g., reciprocity, trust, communication, distributed leadership, and adequate funding) (Barnes et al., 2009; Israel, Schultz, Parker, & Becker, 1998). Less research has aimed to understand *how* collaborations engender trust or reciprocity, distribute leadership, or enable the equitable distribution of funds among partners. This paper uses qualitative research data from four community - academic interactions across Canada to contextualize the conceptual and structural features that have been identified in the literature as supporting or detracting from a collaborative enterprise. On their own, the case studies illuminate specific local contexts of community - academic collaboration. By situating these case studies against one another and against the literature on community-based research and engaged scholarship, the paper aims to capture the complexity of community - academic collaboration and suggest ways to improve the efficacy of these interactions.

Our research illuminates specific social and institutional conditions that enable equitable and productive collaborative activities, as well as the conditions that make it challenging for community and academic organizations to engage in joint efforts to stimulate positive social change. While our analytic foci are the “processes of interaction,” this study does not represent a process evaluation; rather, it views social impact as a process that is best understood by “staying close to the activities” (Spaapen & van Drooge, 2011) of community - campus interaction.

The paper begins with a description of our research activities and analytic framework. From here, we review the literature on engaged scholarship and community-based research. After the literature review, we articulate project findings. In this section, we point to several features that are characteristic of effective collaborations. Our analysis illuminates how these conditions actually play out as relations among collaborators. Our goal is to convey the interactivity between social, institutional, and infrastructural factors that shape collaborative processes and outcomes.

## **The Study**

Based on a scan of 88 community - academic collaborations across Canada (One World, 2011), four community - campus interactions were selected for ethnographic investigation. We selected these four out of the 88 because we wanted representation from French- and English-speaking groups and from organizations in eastern and western Canada. In addition, we chose these four collaborations because they reported some form of measurable change (e.g., a new policy, service, or initiative, etc.) during the initial scan.

We also conducted a comprehensive - although not exhaustive - review of the literature on community-based research and engaged scholarship. We situated a detailed investigation of the four community - academic collaborations against the literature review. Pairing qualitative case-study analysis with a review of the literature, we articulate some common features of community - academic collaborations that promote mutually beneficial project outcomes. We also point to features of collaborative relationships that detract from the collaborative process from the standpoint of community and academic stakeholders.

## **Literature Review**

The selection of sources for review reflects a scoping search methodology (Arskey & O'Malley, 2005). Articles on community-based research and community - academic research collaborations were sought at three different intervals - 2006, 2011, and 2012 - with the majority of the sources included in this review collected in 2012. Many of the documents were solicited through a network of community-based scholars, knowledge mobilizers, and directors of research services or community-engaged scholarship institutes. Specific journals that focused on relevant topics were also reviewed. Having done a wide-sweeping, but non-comprehensive review of the literature in 2006 and again in 2011, the third and final phase of this review was much more targeted - albeit less systematic - in its approach.

The term “engaged scholarship” encompasses any strategy or activity that fosters engagement or collaborative relations across academic and non-academic settings. Engaged scholarship “seeks the public good with the public” (Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009, p. 9). Community-informed, collaborative, and participatory research approaches are central to engaged scholarship, but engagement - in the broadest sense - is not limited to research-related activities. Service-learning opportunities, bridging organizations, resource and asset-sharing structures, community - academic colloquia and knowledge sharing ventures, capacity-building opportunities, shared advocacy initiatives, and public forums/debates represent other activities or structures that can contribute to engagement across institutional settings.

Even though engaged scholarship is not limited to research and educational activities, it is in the context of research and education that most community - academic partnerships are built. Academic institutions are responsible for contributing to knowledge production and dissemination through research, teaching, and service. As such, most of the community - academic connections, which are referenced in the literature, describe and/or assess knowledge production and exchange activities.

## The Theoretical Foundations of Community-Based and Participatory Research

The increase in community-informed methods across social, health, and other scientific disciplines reflects increased consideration of research ethics and the adoption of ecological or complexity models<sup>1</sup> in health research (Baler & Volkow, 2011; Emschoff et al., 2007; Huzzard, Ahlberg, & Ekman, 2010; Israel et al., 1998). Ecological, systems and complexity theories underpin much interdisciplinary and collaborative work. Complex problems—for example, health, social, and environmental problems - have complex, multidimensional, and interdependent causes requiring similarly complex solutions (Baler & Volkow, 2011; Emschoff et al., 2007; Henderson, MacKay, & Peterson-Badali, 2010; Huzzard et al., 2010; Lowe & Philipson, 2009).

Intersystemic, interinstitutional, and interdisciplinary collaborations are a means for addressing such complex problems, while also maximizing resources, reducing interinstitutional fragmentation and service duplication, creating conceptual and organizational synergies, building community capacity, and engaging people in research (Emschoff et al., 2007). Community - university research collaborations represent one way to leverage interdisciplinary and interinstitutional skills and knowledge for the public good.

### Enablers of Collaboration

An equitable collaborative *process* will ultimately become the foundation of a sustainable collaborative relationship (Phipps & Zanotti, 2011); however, there are foundational elements that the literature indicates are needed to establish these processes. Trust and mutual respect are central to positive community - academic collaborations (Carlton, Whiting, Bradford, Hyjer Dyk & Vail, 2009; Israel et al., 1998; Koné et al., 2000; Lantz, Viruell-Fuentes, Israel, Softley, and Guzman, 2001; London, Zagofsky, Huang, & Saklar, 2011; Vazquez Jacobus, Baskett, & Bechstein, 2011; Wright et al., 2011). In an environment of trust and mutual respect, one can develop reciprocity and inclusivity. These are enablers of sustainable community - academic partnerships (Carlton et al., 2009; Campbell & Lassiter, 2010; Eckerle Curwood, Munger, Mitchell, MacKeigan, & Farrar, 2011; Flicker & Savan, 2006; Israel, et al., 1998; Jacobus, et al., 2011; Pearce et al., 2007). We conclude that trust among partners is needed to build respect, which enables reciprocity and inclusivity. Only then can an equitable process for collaboration be established.

A number of mechanisms that support reciprocal, inclusive, and trusting interinstitutional relationships are identified in the literature. Co-developed collaborative principles, a memorandum of understanding, co-developed operating norms, and/or a statement of ethics are important facilitators of positive communication, conflict resolution, and co-learning (Campbell & Lassiter, 2010; Carlton et al., 2009; Israel et al., 1998; Lantz et al., 2001; Pearlman & Biladeau, 1999; Wright et al., 2011). Regular, face-to-face and technologically mediated communication are important (Northmore & Hart, 2011; Koné et al., 2000), as are shared terms of reference that ensure that everyone who participates in a project can understand and contribute to its design and implementation (Carlton et al., 2009; Koné et al., 2000). Sufficient, equitably dispersed funding is also critical to collaborative work (Austin, 2003; Cherry & Shefner, 2004; Flicker & Savan, 2006; Israel et al., 1998; Lantz et al., 2001). None of these mechanisms will adequately support collaborations that are not founded on a position of mutual trust.

## **Barriers to Collaboration**

The literature appears to be primarily focused on identifying enablers of collaboration, but there is some literature that also identifies some factors that make collaboration challenging. Differences in disciplinary culture, paradigm, or institutional values can make collaborative work more difficult (Chibucos & Lerner, 1999; Henderson et al., 2010). Other research points out that structural or organizational barriers to collaboration exist (e.g., Bowen & Martens, 2005; Flicker & Savan, 2006; Lantz et al., 2001), but few offer concrete examples of the specific structural and institutional conditions that inhibit positive community - academic knowledge exchange and/or other forms of collaboration (see Eckerle Curwood et al., 2011; Nichols, Gaetz, & Dyck, forthcoming; Flicker et al., 2007 for exception).

## **Knowledge Gaps in the Literature**

While a number of other studies have identified facilitating factors and barriers to community-based research, these pay little attention to the material circumstances—the things that people actually do—that engender reciprocity or mutual trust. Our aim is for this article to provide concrete examples of circumstances or activities that create these facilitating and hindering conditions. Our study unpacks these abstractions, using the experiential knowledge of people who are doing the work of community - academic collaboration.

## **Fieldwork**

In order to complete the case studies, interviews were sought with academic (e.g., students, faculty, and research staff) and non-academic (e.g., community-based researchers, community practitioners, foundation chief executive officers), project partners, and project stakeholders for four community - academic collaborations (see Appendix A for the interview guide). A central community organization from each partnership was hired to recruit interviewees. A total of 25 people participated in a formal interview. We categorized 9 participants as academic partners because they work in an academic setting as a graduate student researcher (three), a knowledge mobilizer (two), a research/administrative staff (two), or a faculty member (two). We categorized 12 participants as community partners because they work in community settings as researchers (three), organizational leaders (six), organizational staff (two), or municipal government employees (one). We categorized three participants as stakeholders because they were recipients of pilot funding, which is the direct result of a community - academic partnership. These individuals were not involved in the partnership activities, themselves.

The primary field researcher and two research assistants conducted all of the interviews. All interviewers used a standard set of interview prompts to ensure that data were commensurable across projects. To retain a conversational tone, the interviewers were advised to use the interview questions as a guide, rather than a script. The primary field researcher reviewed all of the transcripts, as they were produced, to ensure fidelity to the standard set of interview prompts.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face (n=22) or when that could not be arranged, via telephone (n=3). Most of the interviews took place in community organization facilities or on university campuses. Interviews (conducted in French and English) ranged in

length from 35 to 80 minutes, and all were recorded using a digital recorder. The audio files were transcribed, verbatim, and in the case of interviews conducted in French, the recordings were translated into English.

The field researchers also had an opportunity to attend a project meeting, to meet and informally converse with project participants who were not interviewed, and to visit many of the spaces where collaborative activities took place. Researchers requested copies of project documents during interviews or site visits when project participants referenced particular texts. Field notes were recorded and the field researchers engaged in ongoing discussions and reflection on research data as these were generated.

Prior to beginning fieldwork, the research underwent an ethics review process.<sup>2</sup> People participated in this study with the knowledge that their identities would remain confidential. The description of the four cases under investigation reflects our commitment to protecting the identities of research subjects. Pseudonyms are used to refer to project titles and the names of participants.

### **Data Analysis and Conceptual Frame**

Analytic codes emerged from the interview, observational, and text-based data gathered during fieldwork. Because each interviewer used a standard set of interview prompts, interview data correspond with the general areas of inquiry outlined in the project design. Data were broadly categorized into four areas, which warranted further analysis: social and historical factors that influence community - academic collaboration, institutional and infrastructural factors that influence community - academic collaboration, collaborative factors for effecting change,, and community-based research. Data in each of these broad thematic categories were further coded to enable analysis. The two English-speaking field researchers coded and analyzed data, in consultation with the larger research team.

Conceptually, the focus of analysis was on the material conditions that shape and are shaped by community - academic collaboration. Conceptually and methodologically, the research was informed by the sociological approach: institutional ethnography (Smith, 1999; 2005). Institutional ethnography is an alternative sociological approach that seeks to make institutional and/or structural relations visible and navigable. Typically, an institutional ethnography offers a comprehensive ethnographic account, coupled with a highly theorized analysis of how people's everyday experiences are coordinated through textually organized institutional practices. While research begins on the ground, analysis actually aims to understand large-scale forms of social coordination: complexes of institutional action that are mediated by policy, discourse, legislation, the professions, and so on. Like a grounded-theory approach, codes emerged from the data themselves; unlike grounded theory, our aim was not to produce a theoretical account of engaged scholarship or community - academic collaboration. Our goal was to reveal the specific activities that theoretical generalizations (e.g., reciprocity or engagement) tend to obscure. We wanted to understand *how* community - academic collaborations actually unfold and how they result in change. The analytic focus was on revealing and understanding the social organization (Smith, 1999; 2005) of community - academic collaboration.

## Brief Description of Four Case Studies

In this section, we briefly describe each of the four case study partnerships. We list the types of institutions involved in the partnership, the aims of the partnership, and point to some of their partnership activities and accomplishments to date. The partnerships were between institutions, but the actual projects involved only a few individuals from each partner organization. These four cases were not ad hoc community campus collaborations. Each arose out of longer standing relationships between the university (either a university faculty member or an institutional structure such as a research unit or a research office) and organizations in the community in which it is located. As these projects were emergent and are ongoing, the cases do not have discrete start and end dates. We provide a fuller explanation of partnership activities in the findings section.

**Policy Mobilization Project (Ontario).** [L3] This is a partnership between a research institute at a large, public research university and three large community organizations: United Way, a municipal foundation, and Young Woman's Christian Association (YWCA). The partnership team is composed of one or two people from each of these organizations, all of which are located in a large urban centre. The partnership team also works with a network of smaller grassroots and community-level agencies across the western part of the province where it is located.

The Policy Mobilization Project aims to increase government, policy-maker, practitioner, and public engagement with early childhood development research. Partnering organizations share a desire to stimulate public dialogue and policy change to support early childhood and family well-being. Initially, the partnership developed in response to a provincial business council request for research about the economic implications of early childhood vulnerability, and prior relationships between the partnering organizations facilitated the production of a report for the provincial business council about this. A number of changes in the delivery of local programs and services can also be linked back to the partnership's efforts to support the communities' use of research evidence in their planning and program implementation. Finally, the partnership has shaped the media's interest in issues of family and early childhood well-being. Online blogging and weekly columns in a major newspaper have generated considerable public debate.

**Pension plan project (Quebec).** [L3] This project has been spearheaded by two institutes dedicated to supporting collaboration between community and academic organizations: 1) an independent feminist non-profit connector organization that supports joint work between women's community groups and university researchers, and 2) a community services unit in a comprehensive public French-language university. Both of these organizations are located in a large urban city. The pension plan represents one of a number of collaborations between this non-profit organization and the university community services unit.

The non-profit connector organization is composed of 90 local, regional, and provincial membership organizations. The pension plan, itself, has a province-wide focus. People who work in community-based organizations often retire into poverty, the pension planning project aims to support economic stability among people who work in the province's community and non-profit sectors.

Simon, an individual in the university community services unit approached Agathe, a colleague in the women's group/research connector organization, about creating a pension plan for people who work in community-based organizations. Simon and Agathe have remained central collaborators throughout this project. Collaborators aimed to create a pension plan that would support the specific needs of this professional community. Simon provided the research and pension planning expertise, and the community practitioners collectively determined the pension-planning strategy and tools, as well as their training and recruitment approach. The creation and conception of the plan by representatives of the community sector *for* the community sector distinguishes this pension plan from others that exist. It is only once the plan was designed that the university partner created a risk-management framework that would ensure the safety and durability of the plan.

Since its inception in 2008, the pension plan has grown from zero to ten million dollars. It has a growing membership of 2,700 employees from 365 different community and women's groups, and it has won awards for innovation from Benefits Canada and the Committee of Labour and Social Economy Community Action. People who work in organizations offering employee access to the pension plan cite the plan as an important factor, shaping their decisions to continue working in the non-profit sector.

**Alternative community investment strategy (Ontario).**[L3] This initiative arose out of a series of discussions between Jonathan, the director of a university knowledge mobilization unit, and Francesco, the chief executive officer (CEO) of a United Way. This large public research university is located in the north-west quadrant of a large urban centre, and the United Way represents a region north of the urban centre, which is composed of small rural towns, cities, and fast-growing suburban developments, linking the smaller municipalities to one another and the larger urban centre south of the region.

Jonathan and Francesco's discussions focused on the United Way's desire to increase its impact by facilitating the use of local resources to support place-based community development. The university and the United Way jointly funded three graduate student research interns to develop a strengths-based community toolkit, carry out a literature review, and conduct preliminary social assets mapping.

These resources were used to create an evidence-based report. The report shaped the United Way board of directors' approval of a pilot-funding strategy to support locally driven community-development initiatives. Two years after the internship, this funding program continues to exist and the United Way has awarded \$300,000 in funding to 11 strengths-based community development initiatives.

**Employment uncertainty, poverty, and well-being: A community - academic research partnership (British Columbia).** [L3] This large-scale research project is exploring employment patterns that relate to poverty and well-being among Canadians. The project partners include regional United Way organizations, multiple labour, community health, social planning, and community-research organizations, as well as a number of universities across Canada and internationally. The project is producing multiple case studies to investigate relations between employment precariousness and individual, family, and community well-being. Many of the current partners collaborated on earlier research, aimed at understanding the localization of poverty in specific regions of a large urban area.

Receiving five years of Community - University Research Alliances (CURA) funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) is a significant accomplishment of this multistakeholder community - academic partnership to date. The CURA-funded project is producing multiple case studies, all involving collaboration between academic and community-based organizations. The partnership aims to mobilize research findings to influence policy debate.

## Findings

### What Constitutes an Effective Collaboration?

In this section, we describe the “processes of interaction” (Spaapen & van Drooge, 2011) through which community - academic collaborations unfold. We highlight the negotiation of collaborative objectives and the evolution of roles as a collaboration evolves. We describe how collaborations distribute leadership, foster reciprocity, and engage in ongoing relationship-building throughout the life time of a project.

**A shared vision that evolves with the partnership.** [L3] All of the participants in this study describe the importance of common goals around which to organize partnership activities. Shared goals bring people to the table, but they are not enough to keep people engaged in the collaborative enterprise. A productive collaboration will ultimately require the joint articulation of a process through which people’s distinct contributions can be maximized and collaborative products or outcomes mobilized.

Ben, Brad, and Stephanie are leaders in the non-profit sector and key players in the Policy Mobilization Project. Their involvement with the project has been influenced by considerable professional history. Existing relationships between the United Way and the municipal foundation enabled them to produce a timely response to the provincial business bureau’s request for research on the economic impacts of early childhood investments. The YWCA joined this existing collaboration because of a shared interest in family well-being. Early partnership activities led to the research study on early years investments and the province’s economic health; since then, the partnership has evolved into a knowledge mobilization initiative aimed explicitly at changing public discourse to influence public policy. The strategic and “provocative” nature of this work has pushed the partnership into new ground.

Although people came to the table with a shared vision, over time the collaboration’s work and aims have shifted. In an attempt to stimulate public dialogue, the partnership “remessed” the findings from the original report on family well-being, which was produced for the business bureau. As the message changed, the terms of the partnership also required revision: “The [research results] communication process has pushed the collaborative into a more provocative stance; it’s just meant that each of us as partners has then had to look more closely at every step we take” (Ben, United Way).

The United Way, the YWCA, and the municipal foundation are large charitable organizations with significant public visibility. The organizations themselves, and the smaller institutional bodies they support, rely on donations. The relationships fostered between these organizations and their networks of donors and donees need to be carefully protected. While a university research institute can communicate research findings that cause a public stir, there are significant social and material ramifications if a non-profit organi-

zation, a United Way, or municipal foundation ostracizes any of its constituents: “Matt can be out there. He is a tenured professor. He can say whatever he wants and there are no organizational consequences. However, if I was to come out with all guns blazing ... I might lose some key donors” (Stephanie, YWCA).

Collaborations that catalyze shared social change goals require a framework through which people can meaningfully participate in the change-making process, particularly as project objectives and the terms of the partnership shift and change. Projects are only able to evolve in relation to changing conditions when mechanisms (e.g., work plans or partnership agreements) that support communication and an equitable process are already in place (Vazquez Jacobus et al., 2011).

To maintain a productive partnership process, university partners need to balance their typically autonomous positions as independent researchers and public intellectuals with the needs of the partnership. In many disciplines, university faculty have trained as independent researchers and been awarded for their individual achievements. Academic researchers must also balance their dedication to academically rigorous work with the desire for research outputs that have symbolic and/or political value, but where the robustness of methodology may be less of a concern (Culhane, 2008). Working in partnership necessitates ongoing communication, compromise, and shared decision making.

**Shared leadership and commitment to innovation.** [L3] The Alternative Community Investment Strategy began as a casual professional conversation between the Francesco, CEO of a regional United Way, and Jonathan, a university director of research and knowledge exchange. During the conversation, Francesco expressed a desire to increase the impact of the United Way’s involvement with the community. Like the Policy Mobilization Project, the university and the United Way have a history of interinstitutional involvement. The alternative investment strategy was not “a one-off between the United Way and the university ... we’ve really been collaborating for about four or five years on all sorts of things. So Francesco was able to talk to me in an unguarded, trusting way” (Jonathan, university director of Research and Knowledge Exchange).

The existing institutional relationship between the university and the United Way allowed Jonathan and Francesco to transform a trusting professional relationship into an interinstitutional exercise in social innovation. The university and the United Way jointly resourced a three-pronged research initiative to support the development of a new community investment strategy for the United Way. Three graduate student research interns conducted the research; their positions were co-funded by the two organizations.

While the idea to collaborate around the development of an Alternative Community Investment Strategy arose between Jonathan and Francesco, three graduate student research interns (Stacey, Mayeda, and Berta) and a United Way leader (Julie) actually carried out the partnership activities. The research interns conducted preliminary research on place- and strengths-based community development, with Julie overseeing the process. Rather than coming together around shared goals, this collaboration unfolded around a set of questions.

The emergent nature of the project required considerable negotiation and flexibility among collaborators. When shared goals are absent or still emerging, the partnership framework (i.e., the roles and contributions of each partner) is more challenging to articulate: “There was some frustration at the beginning on both sides ... [The issue was] finding a common language” (Julie, United Way).

Further shaping this particular collaboration was an absence of academic leadership. The role of the university Knowledge Mobilization Unit is to facilitate a productive resource “match” between the university and the community. Once this “upstream” connection is made, the knowledge mobilizer “steps away” so that the partnership can evolve relative to the expertise of collaborators. Without sufficient leadership and decision-making capacity, however, it is difficult to mobilize this expertise. Julie suggested that ongoing support from a supervising faculty member would have strengthened the partnership. In this instance, institutional timelines did not line up to effectively leverage shared leadership. The summer academic session is a good time to hire graduate students who may be taking a break from course work. On the other hand, many faculty members coordinate their summer schedules to focus on research, writing, and conference travel, and many community agencies are understaffed at that time to accommodate holidays.

Service learning, co-op, or internship opportunities require significant institutional support from academic institutions so that the community does not disproportionately carry the responsibility for training and supervision (Eckerle Curwood, 2011; Vazquez Jacobus, et al., 2011). The development of the Alternative Community Investment Strategy relied on a legacy of trust between institutions and individuals to ensure that the project resulted in mutually beneficial outcomes. Notwithstanding the United Way’s concerns about a lack of academic supervision for the graduate student interns, Julie, Mayeda, Stacey, and Berta’s work informed an innovative funding strategy, through which \$300,000 in grant monies (provided in two rounds of funding in 2011 and 2012) has supported eleven innovative community-development projects.

**Reciprocity between people and institutions.** [L3] To foster a sustainable partnership process, reciprocal relations between people are reinforced by reciprocity at the institutional level. Partnerships that fail to actualize reciprocity as a central pillar of collaboration are not sustained. Across the four cases we investigated for this study, people emphasized that their partners’ contributions strengthened the collaboration’s ability to generate positive outcomes.

The pension planning project illustrates how reciprocity is enacted between people and institutions. The university Community Services Unit, and one individual, in particular (Simon, a Community Services Unit coordinator), provided

the expertise with pension plans ... [and] the knowledge of submissions for actuaries ... For our part, [the community provided] the knowledge of the field that the pension plan targets, our capacity to rally people working in this field, our capacity to seek financial resources. (Agathe, director of a feminist non-profit organization)

In this case, a layering of institutionalized commitments reinforced a reciprocal inter-institutional relationship. The university pays Simon’s salary. His professional mandate is to work with community organizations and he is “familiar with both the [partnership’s] problematic and partnership principles” (Simon). The non-profit organization sought further funding, which was “not available for the university” (Agathe) for two pension plan staff through the provincial secretariat for Independent Community Action and Social Initiatives.

The synergistic conditions or “core chemistry” (Simon) between the two organizations are sustained by a relationship that benefits from and supports all partners. While the

partnership arose as “an answer to a collective problem” (Simon)—the lack of financial support during retirement for people who had worked in the non-profit sector—it was supported by infrastructural conditions between the two central partnering organizations: the university Community Services Unit and the non-profit connector organization.

**Partnership agreements.** [L3] One way to institutionally support reciprocal relations between community-based organizations and universities is to establish memoranda of understanding (MOUs). In the policy mobilization partnership, the United Way, the municipal foundation, and the university have developed an agreement about university research accounting fees. The United Way and the municipal foundation have

gone through the process of trying to negotiate with the university not to have any overhead taken off the grant [they assign to a university researcher] ... that was a big barrier in the past. United Way definitely didn't want to see 25% taken off. That would be very, very hard for them to justify in their own financial records when auditors are looking at how efficiently they use fundraising dollars. (Matt, university research institute)

To eliminate the university research accounting costs, the deputy director of the partnering research institute leveraged a longstanding interinstitutional relationship between the university and the United Way. Senior university administration openly supported United Way activities, creating “fertile” conditions for the development of a mutually beneficial MOU between the two organizations.

The alternative investment strategy and the pension planning projects were also supported by formal interinstitutional agreements. The director of the connector organization involved in the pension planning project, Agathe, explained that establishing a partnership agreement with the university Community Services Unit was one of the organization's first tasks. Similarly, the alternative investment strategy, developed by the United Way with support from a university knowledge mobilization unit also arose in relation to an MOU that had been established between the university and the United Way. The collegial relationship between Jonathan and Francesco was supported by this MOU, which articulates an institutional relationship between the two organizations. The MOU used in the alternative investment strategy project is appended (Appendix B) as an example of a MOU used in this successful collaboration. As the partners in this collaboration anticipated future projects, the MOU is structured as a template MOU allowing the partners to attach appendices outlining the partners' roles and responsibilities for each new project.

**Bridging organizations.**[L3] In the pension planning, alternative investment strategy, and policy mobilization projects, partnerships emerged between university-based knowledge mobilization and/or engagement units and community-based organizations. In all three projects, the community organizations had long-time affiliations with their university knowledge mobilization /engagement unit partners. University institutes, community engagement, or knowledge mobilization units maximize connections between community and academic stakeholders. Geographically and bureaucratically, universities are difficult for “outsiders” to navigate. A highly visible and accessible point of contact, such as a community engagement unit, makes it easier for people to access the resources that a university has to offer.

Three of the four partnerships highlighted in this study had a university-based institute dedicated to collaboration with community organizations. Study respondents suggest that collaborations are enabled by institutional mandates to support partnership activities, combined with the infrastructural conditions (e.g., MOUs and bridging structures) to sustain them. While project “chemistry”—the social synergies that occur between people who share a vision—is important, mutually beneficial institutional relationships enable a full merging of collaborative resources.

**Relationship building.** [L3] Demonstrations of reciprocity reinforce trust in the collaborative process and between individual partners. Martha, the deputy director of the academic research institute involved in the Policy Mobilization Project suggests that investing time in relationship-building is a partnership priority: “there can’t be a shortcut ... a partnership gets into trouble when time isn’t put in [to establishing relationships] upfront.” A community - academic partnership, Martha explains, is an “interactive process.” Indeed, many of the respondents in this study stress the importance of clear lines of communication and opportunities for mutual learning and engagement throughout the life time of a project.

Collaborations evolve. Goals may need to be rearticulated, partnership roles re-constructed, and lines of communication reinvigorated. Relationship building is an ongoing process. But the pressure to coordinate multi-institutional research projects that respond to funders’ timelines and deliverables can interfere with the time and energy people need to invest in *ongoing* relationship building.

Sylvia, a former executive director of a community-based organization suggests that even in the SSHRC-funded CURAs, there is a tendency towards researchers “coming in, getting this knowledge from the interviews, and then splitting.” In her experience as an executive director, invitations to sit on a research steering committees or “sign on” as a community partner in a CURA grant application were not supported by additional relationship-building efforts and rarely amounted to meaningful involvement of community organizations.

An academic researcher’s failure to prioritize relationship-building is mediated by university reward structures, which are in turn linked closely to fund distribution and accountability requirements of Canada’s national research funding bodies: Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), and SSHRC. Gabriel, a tenured university professor involved in two CURA projects, explains that at his university they have “suddenly moved to a model where you can no longer [use research grant monies to] just buy yourself out of the teaching obligations and spend more time on research because SSHRC doesn’t provide resources for [course release] anymore.”

As a tenured faculty member, the workload implications associated with a lack of infrastructural support for community-engaged scholarship are significant. While research is, indeed, part of a university faculty member’s three-pronged professional portfolio (i.e., teaching, research, and service), community - academic research alliances, like all interinstitutional research collaborations, require extensive project coordination and relationship building. For an untenured faculty member, an inability to effectively juggle the extra time required for relationship building and project coordination can have material ramifications, such as failure to secure tenure and/or job loss.

Matt, a recently tenured professor, describes how the process of securing tenure conflicts with the intangibility of partnership-building work. When he was asked what he would do differently in subsequent collaborative projects, he replied that he “would try not to feel so stressed by the fact that building relationships takes time and, for better or for worse, there’re going to be some moments where you just can’t gauge them or quantify them [for tenure and promotion review committees].”

Many of the community professionals who participated in this study acknowledge that more traditional forms of research are “more likely to result in publications” (Uttar, community-based research organization) and recognize that “the academic gets in a squeeze ... torn between the academy’s needs and the community’s” (Brad, municipal foundation). But they are also clear that end of the day, “relationships are everything” (Julie, United Way) and when academic professionals and, more importantly, when universities and research granting bodies fail to recognize this, the collaboration cannot be optimized.

### **Institutional Factors that Shape the Collaborative Process**

**An institutional mandate to engage in collaborative activities.** [L3] The goals of a collaboration need to resonate with an organizations’ institutional mandate. Uttar, a senior researcher at a community-based research organization explains that his organization was able to participate in the Employment Uncertainty, Poverty, and Well-being CURA project because the project aims were a match with one of the organization’s “primary research agendas.” Matt, a professor at the university research institute involved in the Policy Mobilization Project explained that his work is made easier because the university “has community engagement as one of it’s three pillars.” In the alternative funding strategy project, the university’s strategic “commitment to outreach and engagement” in the region north of the university helped Jonathan access matching funds for the three graduate students who became the regional United Way’s summer interns. An institutional mandate to engage in collaborative work empowers people to organize their work interinstitutionally and intersystemically.

**Balancing institutional demands.** [L3] People who work interinstitutionally navigate multiple institutional processes and expectations. Don, a tenured professor and the co-principal investigator of the Employment Uncertainty, Poverty, and Well-being CURA project explains that community - academic research alliances come with “a large amount of self-exploitation. You have to satisfy both masters.” Don is referring to the need to produce the academic outcomes (e.g., peer-reviewed publications) that a university and research funders require, while also sustaining a process that generates outcomes that a community organization requires.

The community partners who participated in this study are accountable to their funders, boards of directors, donors, donees, and the general public. The academic partners have to demonstrate accountability to their colleagues, the university, their research funders, and their students, as well as fidelity to their academic disciplines. As a consequence, community - academic collaborations must demonstrate accountability to these various stakeholders and the performance evaluation frameworks, mission and vision statements, and governance and oversight processes that each individual is required to navigate as part of his or her institutionalized accountability work.

The participants in this study do not begrudge the extra accountability work associated with community - academic collaboration. They are, however, concerned when this work is not institutionally acknowledged and/or when conflicting institutional demands undermine the partnership process.

**Institutional accounting and accountability processes.** [L3] Navigating organizational and management systems across a partnership is difficult and important work (Amey, Brown, & Sandmann, 2002). In our study, interinstitutional accounting processes were cited as common inhibitors of collaborative work. Research funding needs to “flow through” the receiving institution. In most cases, this institution is the university. When the university is not the recipient of the funding, it becomes difficult—if not impossible—for university faculty members who are part of the collaboration to “count” the grant received towards the tenure and promotion process. Their status as principal investigators is undermined when the university is not the funding recipient.

On the other hand, when the university receives the funds it is difficult to coordinate accounting processes across institutions. Uttar describes how the university research accounting process adds “hassle, delay, confusion, and complications for both parties,” even when the “academic partners have been really collaborative and supportive of just hosting the funds when we are taking the lead—just channelling the funds to us” (Uttar, community-based research organization).

Uttar explains that his experience with the Employment Uncertainty, Poverty, and Well-being project has been relatively positive, compared to other community - academic collaborations he and his organization have participated in. Still, it took months of deliberation between the organization, the university principal investigator (Don), the university’s research accounting office, and SSHRC to figure out an appropriate mechanism for flowing the funds to the community-based research organization. Eventually, it was determined that the organization could “just request a bulk amount installment” (Uttar).

In order to facilitate this accounting maneuver, however, Don explains that he had to create a “workaround” because SSHRC research funds could not be transferred directly to the organization: “you can’t make a direct transfer to [the community-based research organization] the way that I can to [another university] because they don’t have the same mechanisms and whatnot that are SSHRC-approved for accepting money” (Don, university professor). At first, Don identifies the problem as SSHRC’s. When the interviewer asks him how the university was eventually able to divert the money into the organization, his response reveals a secondary level of institutional organization that further complicates the process.

The first “workaround” that the university devised was to procure the services of the community-based research organization. In this framework, the organization is contracted to provide a service for the university. But the university is bound by provincial procurement policies that require that all service contracts for more than \$100,000 go to tender. Don tried to explain to research accounting that “[the community-based research organization] is a partner. They’re not going to bid on [the contract]. They were part of the original proposal ... they’re partners.” It took months for the university’s research accounting office to figure out how to effectively transfer the funds to the partner organization through bulk instalments. In this instance, the university was navigating accounting and accountability processes at SSHRC, with the provincial government and at the community level, none of which lined up effectively.

While the problem of coordinating the distribution of funds is a technical problem, the effects of the problem experienced by people involved can undermine the process-related work that has gone into developing the collaborative framework. University and research grant accounting processes transform the relationship between partners, unbalancing carefully established partnership roles, particularly when the accountability and reporting processes create extra work for an already over-taxed community organization.

Uttar explains that the invoicing process, which is typically used to flow funds to community agencies, is fraught with challenges for their organization: “It’s the cost breakdown as well. It tends to be different. [The university] has different [budget] line items than us.” Even though a grant is sought in partnership, the community-based organization often has to incur the cost of participating in the partnership and then invoice the university for the costs that they have incurred.

The invoices are often returned to the organization because the budget lines and service cost standards (e.g., for language translation services) that the organization uses do not match up with those used in the university. In and of itself, this process is extra work that community organizations are expected to do. But this is only part of the issue. Instead of experiencing an equal partnership, people who work in community-based organizations see their roles transformed, institutionally, into service providers or consultants. The failure to effectively line up institutional accounting processes can undermine the pillars of partnership around which collaborations are established.

**Navigating the research grant application process.** [L3] Uttar explains that the research grant application processes mirror the interinstitutional accounting “cracks” that one sees once funds have been received. While the application processes have been opened up to community-based organizations, the adjudication committees take issue with the use of research funding to cover administrative costs: “it’s all mostly about our administration and budgeting, that [the reviewers] have concerns about. Our budgeting systems don’t fit the SSHRC, CIHR sort of requirements” (Uttar, community-based research organization).

While community-based organizations are invited to apply for research grants, they lack the infrastructural and human resource capacities that universities rely on to effectively navigate research grant processes (e.g., research accounting offices and research officers). If community-based organizations build a funding stream for accounting and administrative work into the grant application, this extra cost is questioned by research funding adjudicators. Although people who work in community-based organizations are skilled grant writers, they are less familiar with the characteristic language, expectations, and assessment protocols of academic grant seeking that reflect the professional culture and knowledge of academic institutions. Additionally, the online application process itself can be hostile to community-based applicants because it requires the use of SSHRC’s online curriculum vitae system. The standardized format requires people to describe their publication and conference presentation histories. People who work in community-based organizations have a wealth of professional experiences that the standardized application process does not acknowledge.

**Navigating research grant hiring priorities.** [L3] SSHRC funds are meant to sustain the research activities of academic faculty, while also supporting the development of graduate students and new researchers. The graduate students we interviewed for this

study describe how their research skills have been nurtured through opportunities to participate in community - academic collaborations as interns and research assistants. Unfortunately the mandate to hire student researchers makes it challenging to build community-research capacity through the recruitment of community researchers.

Gabriel, a university professor explains that hiring non-graduate student research assistants is challenging because there are limits to how much external assistants can be paid: “We wanted to hire community researchers do to the interviews, and we were limited substantially on how much we could pay them. We could pay our student researchers three times as much as we could have paid community researchers” (Gabriel, university professor). As Gabriel notes, this is partly a problem with the funder’s granting infrastructure; it also relates to labour issues that are organized more broadly. Graduate student researchers have labour rights that are articulated in and protected by collective agreements. Independent researchers do not. In Gabriel’s words, in order “to work with the study [the community researcher] has to be precariously employed, unfortunately.” Labour issues, influenced by interinstitutional accounting and accountability processes, also shape collaborative process and results.

### **Conclusion**

Building meaningful and effective collaborations between community and academic institutions requires significant inputs of time and human resources. Productive collaborations centralize reciprocity, flexibility, and relationship building between individuals and institutions. Collaborations require organizational commitment and supporting institutional infrastructure. Bridging structures/personnel maximize the success of collaborations by facilitating connections, increasing accessibility of university resources, formalizing interinstitutional partnerships, and supporting project coordination.

The distribution of leadership across partnering organizations supports reciprocity and mutual engagement in collaborative activities. A shared vision may bring people into partnership, but a productive collaboration requires a jointly determined process for achieving these goals. As the partnership evolves and goals change, the collaborative process and individual partners’ roles and contributions need to be reassessed. Sustaining a collaboration requires ongoing attention to and deliberation about collaborative processes *and* outcomes. It is clear that emphasizing collaborative process at the expense of outcomes, and vice versa, undermines collaborative efficacy and sustainability.

It is also clear that sustained community - academic interactivity produces conditions for the increased use of research findings in non-academic settings *and* the increased use of experiential, practice-based and policy knowledges to inform research (Nutley, Walter, & Davies, 2007). The relationship between research generation and use is an interactive and iterative one (Nutley, et al., 2007). Organizational support for the development and facilitation of complex interorganizational partnerships, which support interinstitutional engagement and the joint production of knowledge, shapes a productive research - practice relation.

### **Future Work**

A number of questions emerge from this study. We can learn much from community - academic collaborations that did not produce an impact for the community partner. We can also revisit those of the 88 initial scan that were in progress at the time of

analysis to determine if our observations about the complexity of these collaborations is substantiated by a wider sample. Furthermore, we may want to further explore whether university structures (e.g., tenure and promotion) may be a barrier to successful community - academic collaborations. Narrowly construed tenure and promotion policies not only provide a privileged position to the university partner but also serve as a barrier for untenured faculty members whose tenure and promotion files will be assessed based on traditional scholarly outputs (e.g., peer-reviewed publications and research grants) rather than outputs that have a usefulness to non-academic stakeholders (e.g., non-profit grants for community partners, grey literature, unpublished program evaluations, new programs or coalitions, and so forth). A collaboration among Canadian universities is exploring how institutional structures can enable or create barriers to community-engaged scholarship (<http://engagedscholarship.ca>). The work of this collaborative will be informative for this line of inquiry. 🍁

### Notes

1. In health research, ecological and complexity models acknowledge the multiple, inter-related factors (e.g. environmental, educational, social, institutional, physiological, psychological, and political) that shape health and well-being.
2. York University's Human Participants Review Committee approved this research on December 19, 2011. The approval number is 2011-355.

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

### Introduction

I'd like to begin this conversation by inviting you to tell me about your involvement with the \_\_\_\_\_ initiative and the other work that you do.

What do you do at \_\_\_\_\_ (organization/university)?

Has there been a history of involvement between yourself and any of the collaborators on this current project? If so, can you tell me about any other work you have done together?

What is your role on the current project?

### The “Nuts and Bolts” of Collaboration

Where does your work on the project fit within your larger professional portfolio—that is, what other things are you doing in your capacity as a \_\_\_\_\_, and how do you balance your work on the \_\_\_\_\_ initiative with the other professional responsibilities you have?

What were your goals when you entered into this partnership, and how have they changed as the collaborative relationship has evolved?

What aspects of the project have been most meaningful or useful to you or your organization? Can you tell me about an experience that you have had on this project that has been particularly useful?

What aspects of the project have been most challenging or frustrating for you or your organization? Can you tell me about an experience that you have had on this project that has been particularly difficult?

Sometimes, people are able to describe particular circumstances that have shaped their project's outcomes? Can you tell me about any of the specific conditions that enabled or supported your own collaborative project (e.g., funding, policies, ideas, relationships, practices, governance structures, political context)?

Can you tell me about specific conditions that have detracted from the collaborative process?

### Making Change

The goal of most collaborative relationships is to engender a particular outcome or change. Will you please describe the changes you have seen result from this collaboration? (Prompt: These may be changes at the organization, community, or individual level. For example, changes in policy, practice, organizational structure, programming, human resources, funding, participant outcomes, research direction, and so forth.)

How, specifically, have these changes impacted stakeholders? (Prompt: What have you had to invest in this initiative, and how have you [and/or your stakeholders] benefited?)

Have there been any changes resulting from this collaboration that have not been positive (for you, your organization or any of the stakeholders involved on the project)?

Will you tell me about a change that you have been able to sustain? What conditions were required to support this change?

### Conclusion

Would you do anything differently when considering a collaboration or partnership in the future? In other words, what have you learned from this partnership that you could apply to future projects?

Is there anything else that you would like to tell me?

## **Appendix B: Sample Memorandum of Understanding**

This describes the basis for establishing an arrangement between \_\_\_\_\_ University and United Way (UW).

### **1) Preamble**

\_\_\_\_\_ University is a research university with a mission that includes the pursuit, preservation, and dissemination of knowledge. We promise excellence in research and teaching in pure, applied and professional fields. \_\_\_\_\_ University's Strategic Research Plan is supported in part by the university's Knowledge Mobilization Unit that brings together faculty and graduate students with decision makers in governments and community organizations so that research in the social sciences and humanities can inform decisions about public policy, professional practice, and social programs.

United Way (UW) builds strong partnerships with community leaders, business, labour, and government, allowing us to target critical social issues affecting quality of life in [municipality].

\_\_\_\_\_ University and UW wish to collaborate on a variety of activities that involve research, dissemination and knowledge mobilization to advance the application of research and research expertise for the benefit of Canadians.

### **2) Co-operative Activities**

Initial possible co-operative activities include the following but are not confined to

- a. Providing expert input as requested and as possible for one another's research and knowledge mobilization projects.
- b. Seeking to place \_\_\_\_\_ University graduate students or graduates on UW research and knowledge mobilization projects.
- c. Joint communications and press releases.
- d. Mention of each at public appearances.
- e. Sponsorship for future collaborative activities.
- f. Invent other ways in which both organizations may find ways to co-operate.
- g. Specific collaborative projects will be appended to this MOU and the parties shall agree on funding, deliverables, timelines, and other terms as required by each specific collaborative project.

### **3) Term and Termination**

The arrangement will be for three years and is renewable. The arrangement may be terminated upon 90 days notice from one party to the other.

### **4) Other**

- a. This arrangement may be modified upon mutual written consent of the parties.
- b. This arrangement does not create a legal relationship or partnership between the parties.
- c. Each party shall indemnify and hold harmless the other party, its officers, directors, employees, and agents from and against all liabilities, claims, losses, costs, damages, charges, and expenses whatsoever, including reasonable legal fees and disbursements, in any way caused by or arising directly or indirectly from a breach of a representation, warranty or covenant in this Memorandum of Understanding or as a consequence of any negligent act or omission in the execution of responsibilities; any inaccuracy or misrepresentation in any representation or warranty; or any breach of any covenant or agreement contained in this Memorandum of Understanding.

Executed on the date first written above.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Vice-President Research & Innovation

\_\_\_\_\_  
CEO

\_\_\_\_\_ University

\_\_\_\_\_ United Way

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Contact information

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Naomi Nichols has worked as an applied social scientist in the Learning Institute at the Hospital for Sick Children, a research associate and sessional instructor at York University, and an adjunct professor in the Queen's - Trent Concurrent Education Program. She is currently the post-doctoral fellow for the Canadian Homelessness Research Network and the Homeless Hub at York University, the principal investigator on a five-year SSHRC project on youth and community safety, and the co-lead for a knowledge-to-action project in family health equity at the Hospital for Sick Children. Her research interests span the areas of youth homelessness, human service provision for marginalized communities, educational processes and "youth at risk," health equity, community - academic research collaborations, knowledge mobilization, and research impact.

David Phipps is executive director, Research & Innovation Services at York University. In this capacity he leads York's award winning Knowledge Mobilization Unit that provides services to researchers, community organizations, and government agencies that wish to maximize the economic, social, and environmental impacts of university research. In 2011, Dr. Phipps was named the most influential knowledge mobilizer in Canada and in 2012, York's Knowledge Mobilization Unit was awarded a best practice award from the European-based Knowledge Economy Network. In 2012 he was awarded a Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal in recognition of his work in knowledge mobilization. He also leads ResearchImpact - Le Réseau Impact Recherche, Canada's knowledge mobilization network including 10 universities from across Canada.

Stephen Gaetz is an associate professor in the Faculty of Education, York University, Toronto. Gaetz's commitment is to a research agenda that foregrounds social justice and attempts to make research relevant to policy and program development. His research on homelessness has focused on their economic strategies, nutritional vulnerability, and education, legal, and justice issues, as well as solutions to these challenges. Dr. Gaetz is the director of the Canadian Homelessness Research Network and the Homeless Hub, projects dedicated to mobilizing homelessness research so that it has a greater impact on policy, planning, and service provision, thereby contributing to solutions to end homelessness in Canada.

Alison L. Fisher is doctoral candidate at the Faculty of Education, York University. She is currently on leave from her position as a secondary school teacher with the Toronto District School Board. Fisher's doctoral research consists of a critical review of Ontario's recently developed laws and policies on bullying and gender-based violence in schools and the impact these policies and laws have on students and staff in schools. Her research interests include critical feminist and queer theory, institutional ethnography, risk management and regulation, and the social organization of school violence.

Following a bachelor degree in biology and anthropology obtained at Université de Montréal (2004), Nancy Tanguay graduated from the master's program in the Institute for Environmental Sciences at Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) in 2010. Her thesis explored traditional ecological knowledge of the Atikamekw people and their response to contamination of traditional foods. Since then, she has worked as a research assistant at UQAM, focusing mainly on the possibility of integrating indigenous and scientific sources of knowledge for the development of culturally relevant tools to mitigate the risk of exposure to contaminants through consumption of traditional foods.