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# Choice, power and perspective: The neglected question of who initiates engaged campus-community partnerships

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# **Choice, Power and Perspective**

**The neglected question of who initiates engaged campus-community partnerships**

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Contemporary communities are confronted with difficult economic, political, social, environmental and health-related challenges. Institutions of higher education are uniquely poised to help address them, as they harbour significant human, intellectual and organisational resources. In addition, as Smerek et al. (2005, p. 7) note, ‘... these institutions are physically rooted in their communities’, and therefore, ‘... investing in the betterment of their immediate environments is good for both the community and the institution’. As a result, the past few decades have witnessed a growing movement within higher education to tackle such issues through direct collaboration with community partners. These settings hold the promise of fostering relationships where university researchers, students and community partners can collaboratively address research questions of immediate relevance and localised importance. In this sense, community-university partnerships can potentially reshape how we think about the mission of the modern university.

However, this move towards partnerships has provoked controversy and criticism, with many seeing such efforts as misguided or overly idealistic, doing little to further knowledge creation and advance core endeavours of colleges and universities. This misunderstanding of engagement and service-learning by the ‘Stanley Fishes’ of academia (reflected in monographs with polemical titles such as Fish’s *Save the world on your own time*, 2008) is symptomatic of the broader failure of many to see how community-campus efforts are tied to the core intellectual mission of higher education (Holland 2006; Nyden 2006). Despite Boyer’s (1990) seminal analysis of the scholarship of engagement, this work of engagement is often seen as parochial and as failing to bring universities any closer to answering fundamental knowledge questions (Maurrasse 2001; Nyden et al. 1998; Strand et al. 2003).

As more higher education institutions begin to entrust their engagement efforts to partnerships, how to make these partnerships successful takes on a new urgency. In their rush to offer advice, and put the critiques above to rest, numerous authorities on partnerships have focused on providing ‘how’ type

recommendations (Pokorny et al. 2006; Ravid & Handler 2001; Roker 2007; Suarez-Balcazar et al. 2006). ‘How’ type questions focus on the mechanics of partnerships but do not require us to think about the ways that partnerships advance the core mission of creating and applying new knowledge. This article argues that this focus is premature and misses the deeper and more critical ‘who’ questions that are urgently in need of analysis and explication.

‘Who’ questions, by contrast, lead in surprisingly direct ways into an examination of the extent to which campus-community partnerships provide distinctive opportunities to further the knowledge mission of academia. Indeed, the question ‘who gets to start a partnership’ links what have too often been taken to be independent and separate issues. These issues include (Silka 1999, 2006):

- whether the partnership will be problem focused (with the community making this decision) or disciplinarily framed (with the campus making this decision)
- whether the partnership will aim to identify root causes (that is, emphasising the study of the causes of the problem) or to arrive at solutions (that is, emphasising the application of knowledge to pressing community problems)
- whether the partnership will be dominated by a single discipline or will advance interdisciplinarity
- whether the partnership will be seen as a way for junior faculty to develop their professional expertise or whether partnership involvement is regarded as a problematic distraction best avoided by those yet to establish their scholarly reputation and achieve tenure.

In a broader sense, the seemingly simple, straightforward question of who initiates the partnership leads to the complex problems of choice, power and perspective that bedevil campus-community partnerships (Soska & Butterfield 2004). Failure to devote attention to the question of who starts the partnership ignores important relational dynamics that may actually *undermine* the stated goals of mutuality, equality and reciprocity in relationships between universities and communities. Until these problems are more adequately addressed, the partnership approach is unlikely to become a central means by which engagement can achieve prominence in academia (O’Meara & Rice 2005). The move from outreach to engagement, from merely reaching out to reshaping academia’s intellectual core, will remain at best an unrealised promise.

### **THE GROWTH OF COMMUNITY-UNIVERSITY RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS**

Community-university research partnerships are proliferating, with examples throughout the United States and internationally. The innovative research partnership of the University of Michigan’s Detroit Center for Urban Studies has been highlighted in many publications (Israel et al. 2001). Loyola University’s

widely respected Center for Urban Research and Learning works with Chicago neighbourhoods on community-based research problems and has become a model many others are seeking to replicate (Nyden 2006). Portland State University (Portland State 2008), Tufts University (Brugge & Hynes 2005), University of Pennsylvania ([www.upenn.edu/ccp/index.php](http://www.upenn.edu/ccp/index.php)) and the University of Texas El Paso (Staudt & Cardoza 2005) are all major exemplars. Many of these research partnerships have been centred in urban areas (Shepard et al. 2002), whereas others have taken place in rural areas and remote locations where the challenges to partnership are different (Israel et al. 1998). From partnerships with tobacco workers to those with African American family farmers impacted by adjacent industrial hog confinement farms, these rural research partnerships attempt to create research partnerships that will directly address community needs (Grant & Wing 2004; Wing 2002). Some of these partnerships have taken place in large communities whereas others emphasise the work of mid-sized communities and mid-sized universities (Silka et al. 2008). Tribal nations have been important innovators in the creation of these new forms of community-university research partnerships (Santiago-Rivera et al. 1998; Ten Fingers 2005).

Various funders and international organisations have spearheaded this work. The National Institute of Environmental Sciences has been a leader in promoting community-based participatory research (O'Fallon & Dearry 2002; Srinivasan & Collman 2005) as has been the U.S. Housing and Urban Development's Office of University Partnerships (Democracy Collaborative 2007; Silka 2006). The Community Campus Partnerships for Health continues to be an important innovator in the development of community-university research partnerships (Shore et al. 2008; [www.ccph.info](http://www.ccph.info)).

Internationally, there is growing work in community-university partnership research, seen in countries as varied as Australia ([AUCEA.com.au](http://AUCEA.com.au); Jacklin & Kinoshameg 2008), Brazil (Monteiro, Siqueira & Filho 2011), Canada (SSHRC 2008), France (Foray 2004), Great Britain (Hart, Maddison & Wolff 2007), South Africa (Brown-Luthango 2013; Favish, McMillan & Ngcelwane 2012; McMillan 2011); South Korea (Kim, Jeon & Yim 2011) and the Sudan (Abdelrahman & Al Fadil 2011). This 'internationalization' of community engagement provides a rich set of cases to analyse community engagement, often across varied social, economic, political and cultural contexts. In addition, Bawa and Munck (2012) note that this geographic diversity in community-university partnerships can provide a corrective to dominant visions and definitions emanating from the 'Global North'. Awareness and study of such partnerships makes us increasingly aware that there is no 'one size fits all' approach to community-university partnerships. A number of recent volumes and articles surveying the global reach of engagement demonstrate the importance of attending to the specificity of

place in crafting sustainable partnerships (Brown-Luthango 2013; Favish, McMillan & Ngcelwane 2012; McLraith, Lyons & Munck 2012; Watson et al. 2011).

Many academic disciplines and interdisciplinary efforts have now begun to tackle research questions through science shops and related forms of community-university research partnerships (Sclove, Scammell & Holland 1998). A variety of fundamental research questions have been pursued within these partnerships on topics as diverse as child development, climate change, economic development, environmental justice, health disparities, and nanotechnology. Many journals now include this focus (for example, *Environmental Health Perspectives*, *Gateways: International Journal of Community Research and Engagement*, *Journal of Community Practice*, *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*, *Metropolitan Universities Journal*, *New Solutions*, and *Race, Poverty and Environment*). Many monographs have been written or are now in development that focus on research partnerships (Jason et al. 2006; Maurrasse 2001; Minkler & Wallerstein 2002; Strand et al. 2003).

Unsurprisingly, as campus-community partnerships proliferate, academic leaders are increasingly calling for recognition of the fact that engagement contributes to the core values of academia and strengthens science (Foray 2004; Gibbons et al. 1994; Kellogg Commission 1999; O'Meara & Rice 2005). Major research institutions in the United States as well as internationally are promoting engagement. The Association of Commonwealth Universities, through one of its task forces, asserted in 2001 that engagement is now a core value for higher education. The Midwestern research universities of the Big 10 Conference, through a task force (Committee on Institutional Cooperation 2005), have emphasised strategies for strengthening and benchmarking engagement. The Association of Commonwealth Universities, through the book, *The idea of engagement: Universities in societies* (Bjarnason & Coldstream 2003), has laid out a comprehensive analysis that makes engagement central to the knowledge mission of higher education. Work has even begun on developing new indicators of research quality that will be linked to engagement (Holland 2006; Ramaley 2005). And the relatively new Carnegie Engagement Designation (Carnegie Foundation 2008) is a culminating statement on the importance of engagement to the goals of higher education.

The impacts for researchers are significant. Funders of research are seeing the partnership approach as increasingly important to achieving knowledge-generation goals. Federal funders of research in the United States such as Centers for Disease Control, Department of Education, National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation have all begun to call for research partnerships as a part of their requirements for funding in some areas. Additional criteria have been adopted by the National Science Foundation, for example that encourage partnership research and require attention to the importance of application of research findings and the analysis of broader social

and policy impacts of research (Holland 2006; Ramaley 2005). In short, engagement and the creation of community-university partnerships continue to generate ever-increasing interest.

### **RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS: HOW ARE THEY LINKED TO CORE KNOWLEDGE FUNCTIONS?**

Despite the growing reliance on partnership approaches in research, categorical rejection of the notion that this work advances higher education's core knowledge mission persists (Holland 2006). Such work is still seen by some as contributing little to the generation of knowledge. Through the words of one colleague, Sandy and Arguelles (2006, p. 22) concretely capture this view: 'All this emphasis on talking to people outside of our discipline and in the community is a distraction from our obligations, which are principally to publish and teach ...' From this perspective, community engagement obstructs the 'real' intellectual work to which academics should devote their energies.

Others critics call forth workload arguments. Rather than seeing engagement as an avenue by which disparate intellectual activities can be brought together, they regard engagement as simply the addition of irrelevant work. Bringing an international perspective to this topic, Holland (2006, p. 3) has commented that American scholars tend to see engaged scholarship as '... an attempt to pile more responsibilities and expectations onto an already overburdened faculty' and as merely a way to legitimise service and outreach. What is overlooked by such critics, she argues, is the enormous potential of engaged scholarship to integrate competing intellectual tasks into a more coherent whole, one better adapted to society's emerging needs. Engagement as carried out through community-university research partnerships shows every possibility of sustaining and strengthening higher education's role in knowledge creation.

Leaders also promote engaged scholarship as an antidote to current problems with how academia pursues its mission of generating knowledge. The president of the Social Science Research Council, Professor Craig Calhoun (2004, p. 13), for example, stresses the need for work that transcends the deficiencies in traditional academic approaches to achieve core knowledge aims: 'Many academic projects are driven by neither deep intellectual curiosity nor pressing public agendas but simply by the internal arguments of academic subfields or theoretically aimless attempts to cumulative knowledge that most accumulates lines on CVs. To justify these by an ideology of pure science is disingenuous.'

What we need to do, Nyden (2006, pp. 12–13) argues, is understand more fully the key features at the heart of higher education's culture of questioning and then look at how this approach can be advanced in community-university research partnerships. 'The *culture of questioning* is at the core of academic teaching and research', he points out. 'In the classroom, teachers and academic researchers pose challenging questions to students to make sure they understand course materials and develop the

critical thinking skills needed to understand, shape, and change the world in which they live and work.' He then expands on this point: '... researchers need to look behind the familiar facades of everyday life. We cannot be satisfied with *common sense* explanation of family life, community institutions, and other social practices.'

Community-university research partnerships offer an important means of extending and enriching this culture of questioning (Nyden 2006). Research partnerships have reinvigorated our culture of questioning in the past, such as through the investigations of Jane Addams and her Chicago colleagues at Hull House in the early 20th century, which documented immigrant poverty in Chicago (Deagan 1988; Harkavy & Puckett 1994). In our contemporary setting, the creation of partnerships brings this culture of questioning to novel targets and previously overlooked contexts, and helps us confront new societal challenges. The research practices themselves become targets within this culture of questioning. And assumptions about whether emphasis should be placed on root causes or on solutions become targets of critical inquiry. In short, partnerships enlarge the culture of questioning and, moreover, they bring the culture of questioning back to roots that included communities and universities working together on research. However, while the partnership approach holds much promise, the crucial question of who initiates the partnership has not received adequate attention. We take up this question in the following section.

### **WHO STARTS THE PARTNERSHIP – A NEGLECTED QUESTION**

The seemingly straightforward issue of who initiates a research partnership raises complex problems of choice, power and perspective, and raises questions about how higher education pursues its goal of knowledge generation. Examining this process has the potential to infuse new life into longstanding debates on higher education's culture of inquiry. In this section, we summarise these opportunities, point out their links to key issues, and offer recommendations for how universities can position themselves to use these opportunities for reflection.

The question of who starts these community-university research partnerships crucially informs much of what they stand to contribute in new knowledge. But these collaborations have often been the sites of struggle around the question of who starts the partnership. As Nyden (2006, p. 10) notes, collaborative research 'is not a matter of a professor thinking up a research idea and then asking a community partner if it wants to join the research process'. Collaboration, he reminds us, is about defining goals together. It is about the give and take between university and community partners that leads to integration of perspectives and knowledge.

When the researcher frames a research project without community participation, he or she exercises subtle, but important, forms of power that potentially marginalise community

perspectives. Long ago, political sociologists Bachrach and Baratz (1962, p. 948) wrote that, ‘... power is exercised when A participates in the making of decisions that affect B. But power is also exercised when A devotes his energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope of the political process to public consideration of only those issues which are comparatively innocuous to A ...’ As regards community-university partnerships, we might say that, even if the subsequent interaction is characterised by inclusive and transparent mutual decision-making, the researcher who dismisses community voices at the inception of a project has already undercut goals of mutuality and reciprocity so essential to effective collaboration. The horizon of possibilities for such partnerships is shaped in significant ways by the researcher’s initial framing of the issue and their initial thoughts about how the research problem can be effectively studied. When community partners are eventually brought into the conversation, its scope has already been limited in numerous ways that can have significant negative impacts at subsequent steps in the partnership.

Among scholars and researchers sensitive to the need for ongoing reciprocity and collaboration, the question of ‘entry’ into a partnership does arise. Ochocka, Moorlag and Janzen (2010) stress that entry is a ‘... vital and integral component of the research process, and thus the entry strategies or techniques used must be carefully considered and respectfully executed’. Significant attention must be paid to earning the trust and respect of community partners, ensuring inclusion and empowerment in the research process, as these initial moments set in motion attitudes and social dynamics which characterise subsequent interaction. Yet, paradoxically, by the moment of entry, important decisions about the research process have already been made. In certain key senses, the agenda for the partnership has already been set. If we focus on the dynamics that ought to characterise *our* entry into *their* community, we neglect the prior question of who initiates contact.

Beyond the agenda-setting stage, obstacles frequently arise. Such collaboration is neither straightforward nor easy, and conflicts often stymie these partnerships (Sullivan et al. 2001). Communities have been described as frustrated by the ways that research universities work with them, increasingly arguing that they are taken advantage of by researchers who arrive at the community’s door already knowing what they hope to extract (Silka et al. 2008; Stoecker 2005). Academic researchers have been described as exploiting poor communities to advance their own personal research agendas (Ball 2005; Stoecker 2005). The relationships, despite their promise for mutuality, are seen as superficial, failing in their promise to achieve shared knowledge exchange or, worse, constituting outright exploitation.

Beyond concerns about transparency and mutuality, lack of community input in the initial stages of the project can lead to substandard research design. Any number of examples reflect



the incompleteness of models and theories that can result when investigators start the research without the community. Consider Quigley's (2001) example of problems analysing the health consequences of above-ground nuclear testing. Her work points out that researchers assessing above-ground nuclear testing in Nevada simply assumed that Paiutes living on their tribal land could not have had sufficient exposure for contamination to carry health consequences. The problem, according to Quigley, was that this conclusion was based on an impoverished model of the vectors of exposure. Key features of the Paiute lifestyle were omitted such as the fact that they were largely eating off the land rather than consuming store-bought food. The flesh of small mammals, a significant dietary component, concentrated the toxic chemicals found in local grains and soils. The changed vector analysis opened up new questions about possible exposures and probabilities of health consequences. Within a partnership, the community and university partners were able to work together to broaden the model and enrich the research questions.

Just as models can be impoverished and problematic in the absence of community input, the overall focus of the project can be askew when academics initiate the pursuit of knowledge. As community leaders have had researchers come to them with their preconceived agendas, many community members have begun to point out that the focus of the planned research is often not on the problems that were of greatest urgency in the community (Sandy & Arguelles 2006; Van der Eb et al. 2006). Communities often become involved because they see an urgent need for solutions. Yet, academic training puts a premium on thoroughness of research, on scrupulous avoidance of any incompleteness in the analysis that would provide peer reviewers with cause to reject the work. As a result, academics' energies are consumed by the search for root causes that should ultimately shed light on a solution, but as community partners note, university researchers rarely reach this solution stage. Somehow there is never enough data to eliminate all alternative explanations. The fact that research within partnerships is not a source of solutions frustrates communities.

In addition, the question of who starts the partnership becomes important because of differences in geographical and temporal horizons. That is to say, partnerships highlight questions about perspective and what people know about the problems at hand. Faculty rarely have the means at their disposal for understanding the local environment. Sandy and Arguelles (2006, p. 21) note that academic training teaches and rewards the skill of abstracting up and generalising. They use a horizon analysis to capture the distancing consequences of this training: 'We are oriented mostly toward horizons that are often far removed from where we are physically located. We tend to be oblivious to events occurring in our neighborhoods or in the communities that surround the universities or agencies where we work or study.' As a result, faculty lack the habits of mind to carry out their

knowledge inquiries in ways that engage with the deep nature of local problems, and not infrequently their academic training has taught them to view local problems as insignificant and not worthy of study. Community-university research partnerships offer the promise of keeping attention focused on the need for knowledge inquiries that link horizons and create intellectual connections between generalised knowledge and specific localised conditions.

The question of who starts the partnership also confronts the fact that integrating community-based and university-based knowledge and perspectives, while important, rarely occurs. Academics infrequently include the community in their formulation of research. As Sandy and Arguelles (2006, p. 21) point out: 'In the quest to gather knowledge and consider different perspectives, academic researchers have locked out many members of the very communities that we purport to study ... we rarely invite the kind of direct input from community members that would inform our research designs or data analyses.' Problems of this sort are not rare (Silka et al. 2008). They are common and sufficiently serious that they have become the focus of efforts to forestall them, such as development of templates for partnership contracts (Stoecker 2005).

Partnerships potentially raise important issues, yet if the focus is on 'how to', these issues remain opaque. Rather, they emerge when our focus is on the question, 'who gets to start the partnership'. Paradoxically, if the 'who' consists only of university researchers, questions linked to core intellectual issues, which might expose limitations, bias and subtle power differentials in such partnerships, never surface. Not infrequently, university researchers have initiated community-campus research partnerships because of their knowledge that funding is available for such partnerships (Seifer & Calleson 2004). As a result, campuses rather than communities often start the partnership, and it is only after key decisions have been made that universities seek out the community which will be studied (Seifer & Calleson 2004). Under such arrangements, all of the usual academic goals (for example, publishing in peer-reviewed journals) can be pursued without scrutiny. And, because the focus is on research, such partnerships can be seen as consistent with higher education's mission of advancing knowledge, without ever calling such problematic initial assumptions into question. What are some of those assumptions and how might partnerships help us think about them?

### **THE BROADER IMPLICATIONS OF 'WHO GETS TO START THE PARTNERSHIP' FOR RESEARCH DESIGN**

As we have seen, an apparently practical question (that is, who gets to start the partnership?) is, in fact, much more. The partnership's beginning is where the framing takes place and it is where choices about knowledge generation are made (for example: Will the focus be on basic research? Applied research?

On solutions? On root causes?). This early stage is where choices occur about what will be included and what will be omitted from the research, and once the framing has occurred, a different direction becomes increasingly unlikely. Furthermore, such one-sided framing and agenda-setting effectively undermines goals of mutuality, transparency and reciprocity before the partnership has even begun.

Academics, when they initiate a partnership, might start with theoretical questions. Community leaders are more likely to begin by drawing attention to a pressing community problem: an upsurge in childhood asthma, a rapid increase in gang violence, community residents losing their homes to foreclosure, youth dropping out of school, jobs disappearing and economic development at a standstill. The start for the community is not with a theory nor is it with a literature-driven hypothesis. The starting focus likely concerns a problem, with communities seeking robust, cost-effective and easily implemented solutions to address it.

In addition, community partners likely bring to the partnership firm views about when the knowledge generation has progressed sufficiently that it is now time to act. Community partners also are likely to bring understanding that the focus on action has to be tempered by what is possible. If the knowledge produced is to be helpful, it has to be more than merely hypothetical; it has to map onto the tools that community groups have at their disposal. Cash, Borck and Patt (2006) remind us of this in their loading dock analysis of the problems of ensuring that research is actually used. In their view, researchers too often simply take as a given that research will be useful and will be used. They liken this to generating more and more new products under the assumption that interested buyers exist. Researchers keep generating more and more studies under the assumption that the results will be useful to someone, but findings stack up on 'the loading dock' waiting for those who may find uses for them. Because users were not involved from the outset in the research partnership, what is generated may have limited usefulness.

These loading dock problems can be circumvented through research partnerships. A community housing study brought this message home to us (Center for Family, Work, and Community 2002; Hall & Silka 2007). In one of our partnership projects we carried out research on the rapid rise in housing costs in our community, seeking to understand the problem and identify possible solutions. It was widely assumed in the community that there were groups (for example, community development corporations – CDCs) with resources to solve this housing problem. The partnership organised the research, not merely to understand the extent of the problem, but also to identify the tools (for example, tax credits that would underwrite the cost that CDCs would incur to build large numbers of affordable units) each community 'actor' had that could be used for the solution. Through the research we discovered that groups often lacked precisely those tools others expected them to use (that is, the tax credits

that CDCs were expected to use were much too small to cover the difference between what people could pay and what affordable housing units would cost to build). Solutions had to be found that could integrate the patchwork of resources in new ways. By working within a partnership, we learned to gather data in ways which shed light on viable solutions given the structure of the community and which did not presume solutions that were impossible, given the structural limitations. Our research partnerships created new knowledge but in a form that was helpful and realistic for the community partner, given the conditions.

The issue of 'Who gets to start the partnership' also speaks to whether the messiness of the problem on the ground will be considered in the development of the research approach. If, as academics, we begin selection of the framing questions by having discussions only among ourselves (or worse, those within our individual disciplines or subdisciplines), this generally means being guided by a scholarly literature that has already organised information in line with existing theoretical assumptions. But community problems are messy problems. When, as academics, we limit our discussion partners just to other academics, we are less likely to rub up against this messiness and the attendant complications. For example, if our interest is in studying the health impacts of air pollution in a community neighborhood, we might forget that community partners are struggling not only with the medium of interest to us but with co-occurring urban environmental risks (for example, a person who is exposed to poor air quality in their neighborhood may live in a lead-contaminated house, may grow vegetables in a garden with arsenic-contaminated soil, and may consume fish caught in polluted waters and having high levels of mercury concentrated in the flesh of the fish). Exposure to just one pollutant is rare. In research partnerships, community partners help expose the complex problems in the locality in which they occur, and we are forced to move beyond disciplinary ways of organising knowledge. A change in the culture of inquiry and the knowledge generation may result.

### **THE BROADER IMPLICATIONS OF 'WHO GETS TO START THE PARTNERSHIP' FOR THE CORE BASIC VS. APPLIED RESEARCH DISTINCTION**

Attempts are continually being made to confine community-university research partnerships to the applied research box. Through these organisational lenses, partnerships are regarded as beneficial largely because they are an efficient means for applying research (that is, they move the research off the loading dock). Such a view suggests that little will be lost by waiting to start a partnership until after the basic research has been completed. But, as indicated here, this tendency to see research partnerships as essentially about application is myopic. Their benefit to the culture of inquiry is unlikely to be fully realised when the framing of research topics is first carried out by scientists, research is then carried out in isolation, and only then are findings turned over

to community-university partnerships for application. This linear conception of the research process fails to reflect the iterative nature of knowledge creation. Furthermore, it risks smuggling in researchers' biases, constructing subtle and overt power disparities between university and community. These undercut larger goals of mutuality and transparency, of conceiving of the community partner not merely as a research subject but as an equal partner in the process of inquiry and knowledge creation. Clearly, attending to the question of who starts the partnership is a reminder of the need to take up these issues and honestly confront them as early in the research process as possible.

In addition, drawing a sharp distinction between applied and basic research leads researchers to assume the importance of independently pursuing research that is basic and research that is applied. Instead, the more significant challenge is to understand how problems can be investigated in ways leading directly to findings with clear applicability. The collapse of this basic/applied distinction is cropping up in many surprising places in academia, for example, in the case of nanotechnology research partnerships. Nanotechnology is one of the most rapidly growing research areas in the United States and internationally. Nanotechnology researchers have been concerned with what they deem a chronic loading dock problem. Basic nanotechnology discoveries that hold great potential for application (in medical devices, in drugs, in new materials) have emerged from the laboratory, but attempts at application have generally foundered. What has been termed the 'valley of death' intervenes between scientific discoveries in the laboratory and full-scale manufacturing aimed at bringing those discoveries to market. Discoveries simply do not make it across that valley and instead 'die' at the bench stage. As a result, nanotechnology researchers have become interested in finding new ways that research can be carried out in partnership so that applications have a greater probability of success. As a result, the ubiquitous basic/applied distinction is increasingly viewed as unhelpful, indeed even detrimental, as researchers move toward new ways of working with partners.

Partnerships may help us rethink distinctions in knowledge of discovery and knowledge of application, basic research versus applied research, or in other organising frameworks that have been used to categorise research but which may not fully capture what goes on in research partnerships.

Before concluding, we will address one final practical consideration in the challenges of a community-initiated model of partnership. As the readers of this article are likely aware, universities can be complex bureaucracies, difficult to access and negotiate. At a recent university event, a thoughtful community partner who had worked with us on numerous occasions remarked, 'Universities are big, amorphous institutions. We do not have a problem accessing big institutions; we do it all the time. However, amorphous institutions are more challenging because one doesn't

know *where* to start.’ For community partners, the university is often an institution that lacks a ‘front door’. This is a challenge that must be confronted. In response to this, many institutions have created centralised points-of-access, often offices, whose explicit goal is facilitating campus-community connections (Beere, Votruba & Wells 2011, p. 197). In many ways, even the establishment of such entry points signals how far we have come in thinking about community engagement.

However, as we stated at the outset, successful community engagement is not ‘one size fits all’ and the mere establishment of a centralised point of contact cannot guarantee a culture in which community partners will reach out to the university. In some cases, centralisation may even have unintended side-effects which *negatively* impact community-university connection. First, such centres will thrive only if community engagement is simultaneously central to the academic mission of the college or university. If incentive structures for faculty and staff are not aligned with the goals of community engagement, staff of such centres may cultivate community relationships for which there is no corresponding research partner. This will actually harm rather than facilitate community-university partnerships. Second, if community engagement is not a campus-wide priority, such centres will be vulnerable, as universities face budget shortfalls or economic constraints (an all-too-frequent reality for many universities throughout the world). Third, and lastly, the establishment of a centre risks ‘siloing’ the activity of community partnership; the business of cultivating reciprocal community relationships and trust becomes someone else’s responsibility. Sustainable and successful community engagement works most effectively when it is diffused across the academic institution and within the community. The process of centralisation can, almost by definition, work at cross-purposes with that goal.

### **CONCLUSION: FROM ‘HOW?’ TO ‘WHO?’**

The many different questions that have been asked throughout this article all tie back to the overarching question of who starts the partnership and how this shapes the engagement between communities and universities: What would true engagement look like if the campus and the community started together from the very beginning to create a research agenda? What would engagement in community-campus partnerships look like if the power differences could be minimised? What would happen if the partnership were to be organised around a problem focus rather than a disciplinary analysis? What would need to change if the focus were to be equally on creating knowledge and ensuring its applicability? The question of who gets to start the partnership underlies all of these issues.

The issues of knowledge generation raised here are longstanding ones in academia that will not be resolved easily or quickly. Community-university research partnerships offer

opportunities for universities to reflect on their core knowledge function in new ways (for example, in their generation of new knowledge, should universities be concerned with local issues or should they only be trying to develop knowledge aimed at generalisations beyond a particular time and place? Should universities reconsider such questions as ‘Are peer-reviewed articles and books reasonable end goals for knowledge generation?’) Community-university research partnerships confront universities with these issues, prompting universities to be creative in finding new ways to advance those knowledge functions. Furthermore, true community-campus partnerships force thoughtful consideration of the power dynamics of these relationships, and jettison aspects of the research process which pay lip service to mutuality and equality, but subtly disregard it.

And, finally, as we have seen, the question of who gets to start the partnership is far from a question of mere mechanics. This issue is linked to fundamental knowledge-generation issues. Although some assume community-university partnerships are antithetical to academia’s core mission of knowledge generation, it may turn out that engagement through research partnerships opens up new and unexpected opportunities for advancing knowledge. Partnerships expose old questions to new scrutiny while raising new questions. Partnerships may well be the most complex of places for exploring these issues of framing questions, generating knowledge and using knowledge. Furthermore, community-campus partnerships may provide distinctive opportunities in the future for innovations in knowledge generation.

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