

The Heart of the Matter: Why Relationships Belong in Research

TEXAS Grand Challenges

By Lourdes Rodríguez, DrPH



Lourdes Rodríguez, director of the Community-Driven Initiatives team at Dell Medical School, is serious about seeking out good ideas to improve community health — no matter where those ideas originate. Building relationships with future community partners is central to her work as a member of the community engagement team on [Whole Communities—Whole Health](#), a research grand challenge at The University of Texas at Austin.

Relationship building. Sometimes this phrase seems trite, or as my mom would say: “¿con qué se come eso?” (“What do you eat that with?”) That was her shorthand for asking how something was useful or how it would solve a problem. Seldom do we talk about what drives creating, nurturing, and being in relationships, and — more important — how talking about this is useful to achieving shared goals.



Lourdes Rodríguez hosting a community engagement panel last May.

Of course, it gets more complicated when we talk about science and research. Research can seem like a solitary enterprise (my brain and my team) or as an elitist quest (leave it to the experts). But it need not be.

When I joined [Whole Communities—Whole Health](#), I was intrigued by the idea of putting science to work in service to society. In order to accomplish this grand challenge, we have to think beyond individual research goals and easy-to-fund pet projects. In order to do work that matters in the lives of real people, we have to develop and sustain relationships with those who are in the best position to put new information to work.

My colleague here at UT, Darla Castelli, professor of kinesiology and health education, puts it succinctly: “It’s important to me that our research doesn’t end up in a filing cabinet.” Because we (the research team) know we cannot be everything to everyone, that means we need to find partners that we can pass the knowledge baton to — partners who can take it and run with it all the way to problem solving, policy making, or program development. And Darla is clear about one thing: “When you put community engagement first, the process is anything but linear.”

One of our community partners, Dr. Charles Moody, founder and CEO of Community Coalition for Health, reminds us that “relationship-building takes time and investment. Relationships are the door to having research and information make a difference in real life. Community engagement is not ‘we did a focus group.’ Rather, we need to leverage existing relationships and find community watering holes. Don’t try to bring them into your world — go into theirs.”



Community partners discussing the joys and challenges of working together at an Opportunity Forum, hosted by Whole Communities—Whole Health. L-R: Helen Dunne Garcia, Charles Moody, Vanessa Castro, Kerry Kinney

For scientists, building relationships means getting out of our heads and into our hearts. It means bringing our full self to the way we go about our quest to understand the world.

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Kerry Kinney, an environmental engineering professor on our Whole Communities—Whole Health team, tells a story about when she learned that relatively easy changes could improve indoor air quality and health in schools with fewer resources: “Disparity makes me angry. I got into environmental engineering to help people, but I wanted to see a more direct connection between the research I do and people’s lives. But in my earlier work, I never asked communities what they thought.”

She says this opportunity to connect the dots between the latest scientific advances and their practical application is why she joined our grand challenge team. “As scientists, we have to get out of our comfort zone. We have to take our work home with us and start asking questions.”

Scientists are sometimes discouraged from community-engaged research. We’re told that we compromise the quality and rigor in our work if we do it. To that, I say, the burden of rigor is on the researchers, not on participants or community collaborators. In fact, we are not just doing this for that warm feeling in our belly. Making community engagement central to our work actually makes our research better. We gain better perspectives on what questions matter. We develop better strategies for collecting data. And we can better understand our findings and their implications for better solutions.

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“Have Science, Will Travel.” Community events provide opportunities for two-way learning, with Nain Yeppez.

Our community partners have important questions to answer, and they need them answered now, not later. Helen Dunne Garcia, a principal at an elementary school just outside Austin, puts it this way: “I firmly believe that our students are going to do well if they are healthy. I believe in going beyond academics to healthy eating, mental health, and family support.” She’s working with our Whole Communities—Whole Health grand challenge team and says that what drew her to building a relationship with us was “the ability to receive feedback in real time. I didn’t want to wait eight years just to find out that my students aren’t healthy. I already know they need support. I want to learn how to help and support them right now.”

Why do some children thrive in the face of adversity while others struggle and fall behind? [Whole Communities—Whole Health](#) is a grand challenge at The University of Texas at Austin. Our team is made up of people from nearly two dozen disciplines working over the next decade to rethink “research as usual.” We’re welcoming families as citizen scientists and partners to learn together what health concerns they have for their children and how we can share our resources, knowledge, and technology to get answers for them and with them — then connect families to the local organizations that can help turn that information into action. Follow us on [Twitter](#), visit our [website](#), and come back to our [blog](#) for updates.

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