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## Supporting and Empowering Communities Through Research Collaboration: Community Partners' Perspectives on Community-Engaged Research

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### Executive Summary

*Don't come with a mentality of like I'm the savior, you know, and I'm going to create something...The community is already there so you just have to find ways to plug in. You have to find ways to support what's already happening.*

-Community Partner

Between 2011 and 2015, the University of California Center for Collaborative Research for an Equitable California ([CCREC](#)) housed at UC Santa Cruz provided seed funding to support problem-based collaborative and community-engaged research aimed at addressing the state's interrelated crises in the economy, education, employment, environment, health, housing, and nutrition. This study explored 15 of these partnerships and, using in-depth interviews with community partners, examined how the community side of community-engaged research experienced the process.<sup>1</sup> We highlight three key findings:

1. Community partners worked with research partners because they viewed the research as necessary to help them move forward an action agenda.
2. Community partners' long-term interests included reshaping assumptions about whose knowledge counts and about the processes of knowledge production.
3. Community partners highlighted how differences in the pace, timeline, and processes between the university and the community created challenges.

Our findings shed light on ethical and political considerations for the field of community-engaged research. We suggest that close attention to the possibilities and limits of equity-oriented collaborative research is essential for the field to achieve its mission of elevating local knowledge as a means to redressing social injustices.

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<sup>1</sup> This brief is based on the article, "We are about life changing research': Community partner perspectives on community-engaged research collaborations" forthcoming in the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*.

This research was conducted through two research centers: the [University of California Center for Collaborative Research for an Equitable California](#) and [Campus+Community](#), both housed at UC Santa Cruz.

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### What is Community-Engaged Research?

In the 1990s and early 2000s, activist scholars, policy makers, community leaders, and students posed critiques of the insular nature of higher education and called for the formation of an approach that more deeply embedded community knowledge and experience into the research process and findings. What is today known as community-engaged research aims to produce research that advances long-term, sustainable, community-based and community-driven change. Because these studies are grounded in the lived experiences of community members, the research is poised to be both more relevant to the issues at-hand and more rigorously interrogated, investigated, and analyzed by people who have the most at stake in the study outcomes. The research is therefore poised to fuel action in policy and practice on the ground.

### About the Study

This study is based on in-depth interviews with community partners in 15 different projects that received seed funding between 2011 and 2015 by the University of California Center for Collaborative Research for an Equitable California ([CCREC](#)) housed at UC Santa Cruz. Projects evolved from the complex,

entangled situations confronting communities and policy-makers and were aimed at investigating the crises harming local communities with an eye toward possible solutions. CCREC's approach intentionally foregrounded ethics by positioning an equity-orientation as the driver of the research collaboration.

### Finding 1: Community partners worked with research partners because they viewed the research as necessary to help them move their organizing agendas

*So, we are about life changing research; that's the kind of research projects we're interested in.*

Three key factors motivated community partners to engage in research collaborations. First was a desire for better data, or for analysis of existing data, in order to inform their organization's ongoing practices and broader vision of community-based change. Second, was an interest to know better and more systematically what was already known among the leadership as an important component of developing policy strategies and/or bolstering existing policy campaigns. Third, research provided opportunities to learn skills, build capacity, and/or engage their given

community in an educational process that linked knowledge production to knowledge mobilization through workshops, data mapping, and public fora. Traditional notions of research were regarded with some suspicion; community partners expressed frustration in relation to prior projects in which researchers had not shared their findings back with community members who had been central to the research.

**Finding 2: Community partners' long-term interests included reshaping assumptions about whose knowledge counts and about the processes of producing knowledge**

*It's not fair, but it's the reality... [university research] gives our work legitimacy in the eyes of people who otherwise wouldn't think our work is legitimate, or that our work is fluffy.*

Community partners repeatedly expressed frustrations with local, state or federal agencies and funders that assumed community-based research was biased or illegitimate. Those in positions of power interpreted the findings presented by the community as lacking sophistication and objectivity rather than valuing the in-depth lived experiential knowledge that being part of an aggrieved community provides. In response, community partners strategically leveraged their collaborative research with university-based partners to garner recognition at varying scales: from local audiences, which included other community-based organizations and local businesses; regional or state-wide audiences, including regulatory agencies;

and others including funders and the media.

**Finding 3: Community partners expressed frustrations with engrained university processes, such as the slow pace or academic timeline for co-producing knowledge**

*I love working with students. I think there's lots of advantages for everybody...but they leave, either for the summer or they graduate. Sometimes projects don't end on the*

University researchers have recognized how time-consuming community-engaged research is, yet their community partners' impacted timelines are often made invisible in the academic context of the research. Community partners mentioned challenges such as turnaround time for products, the impact of the academic calendar on timing and productivity, and unforeseen challenges like waiting for human subjects approval. Participatory research is often much more difficult and time consuming for community partners than the more traditional model where researchers come in, collect data, and then go off to do the analysis and writing. Yet, community partners also recognized that ultimately, that form of research could not generate the quality they sought in terms of the depth of knowledge needed for action- and equity-oriented responses.

## Conclusion: Being Responsible for Justice in Research

This study raises critical questions about the ethics and politics of university-community partnerships that warrant response from the research community. We conclude that community-engaged research partnerships must center equity in noting and valuing the kinds of knowledge each partner brings to the project. By attending to the complex intersections among ethics, politics and knowledge production – the stakes of which are amplified in collaborative modes of research with aggrieved communities – these partnerships have the potential for deeper transformations of the knowledge production enterprise, beyond elevating the voices of aggrieved communities to better warrant understanding of those communities. Universities and university-based researchers need to openly acknowledge their relatively privileged positions in these intersections, and create processes for ensuring ethical responsibility and accountability for how the knowledge they produce and warrant circulates within and moves the public sphere. Collaborative research projects must also become more responsive to community partners' expressed near-term and long-term material needs, desires, and aspirations for specific research and research products, as well as timelines for product development and dissemination. True equity-oriented research requires building partnerships established on trust and mutual interests, and on becoming committed for the long haul that transformative research for justice requires.

## For Further Reading

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