

# University-Community Engagement during a Pandemic: Moving Beyond “Helping” to Public Problem Solving

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a major disruption in higher education, challenging universities to engage with community partners in unprecedented ways. Among them was an accelerated challenge to ways of engaging with surrounding communities and the resulting importance this holds for social change. A common approach has been for the university to offer mutually beneficial help to communities through top-down directives and strategies. Another approach prioritizes democratic engagement, including co-constructed knowledge generation and political action where the university is part of a larger ecosystem engaged in public problem solving and deeply sustained ways of collaborating. Moments of economic and social crises put into stark view higher education’s intentions: are we playing at community involvement, or are we committed partners, leveraging our unique missions to join our communities in solving the problems facing us? This article discusses how a university’s response to the pandemic illustrates democratic community engagement, including how the university partnered with community organizations to alleviate the dire impacts of the pandemic on peoples’ basic needs and equity. Lessons learned for university-community engagement during normal times and times of crisis are shared, including ways to foster social change that addresses the inequities illuminated by the pandemic.

**Keywords:** Community engagement principles, problem solving, community partnerships, pandemic response, advocacy, social justice

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic challenged the ways many universities have come to be involved in their surrounding communities and the resulting importance this holds for social change. There has been a documented turn from the unidirectional, university-as-problem-solver model to collaborative knowledge generation and joint problem solving, often referred to as democratic engagement. (Saltmarsh, 2017). This turn provides avenues for higher education institutions to be informed by and enlisted as partners within community-led work for equity and justice (Eatman et al., 2018). Sgoutas-Emch and Guerreri (2020) argue that such a turn in an institution's relationship to its broader communities requires a broad network of campus-community partnerships through which the social change (particularly toward just ends) can be enacted. Moments of economic and social crises like the pandemic put into stark view higher education's intentions: are we playing at community involvement, or are we committed partners, leveraging a joint problem-solving approach with a network of community-campus partnerships to solve the problems facing us?

Our university's approach to community engagement is moving toward joint public problem solving and participatory and deeply sustained ways of collaborating. This is done through institutional transformation: internal structures (senior personnel, councils, and orientation for those seeking to do community engagement) and community-facing commitments (neighborhood engagement centers, re-examination of institutional practices, and involvement in civic processes) that anchor our way of being in and with our communities. Though not yet fully realized, these developments shape an environment where institutional-level campus-community partnerships are possible. We can convene collaborators from university schools/centers to agilely partner in public problem-solving efforts.

Our university's response to the pandemic illustrates how our foundation in democratic community engagement allowed us to respond to community partners agilely and nimbly through co-created solutions and advocacy. This article discusses how students, staff, and faculty were deployed to support community partners as part of an institutional response. We begin with a review of university-community engagement, including community engagement principles. Next, we discuss our university's overall approach to community engagement, followed by how this approach was integral to engaging in community problem solving around the needs exacerbated by the pandemic. Finally, we discuss lessons learned for higher education institutions during normal times and crises.

## Community Engagement Principles

Community-university engagement is guided by principles that allow for reciprocal relationships between the university and the community, using democratic and asset-based engagement aligned with community strengths and problem-solving agendas. This approach uses a variety of strategies, including community-based research, civic engagement, and service-learning (Martin & Pyles, 2013). In addition, to be successful, community-university engagement must be "highly reflective, hybridized, purpose-driven, and ethically principled" (Dostilio, 2017a, p. 9). As this work evolves, universities committed to these principles see that the institution's role is not to lead but to be a learner, supporter, and partner (Dostilio, 2017b).

An anchor institution takes these principles of university-community engagement and brings them to life through place-based partnerships in the neighborhoods surrounding the university (Hodges & Dubb, 2012). The shared location creates a strong motivation for the university to partner because they are invested in the neighborhood and can help to foster stable, sustainable communities (Dostilio, 2017b). The intent is to bring university resources together with the public and private sector to “enrich scholarship, research and creative activity, enhance curriculum, teaching and learning, prepare educated, engaged citizens, strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good” (“Community Engagement,” n.d.).

Mutual benefit is a key success marker of community-university engagement (Bushouse, 2005; Farber & Armaline, 1998; MacKinnon-Lewis & Frabutt, 2010; Mattessich, Murray-Close, & Monsey, 2001). In relationship-oriented engagement, we seek mutuality that is “collaborative, reciprocal, honest, and involve[s] good will” (Bringle & Hatcher, 2020; Shafer et al., 2003, p. 162). Collaboration and reciprocity are essential, along with a democratic orientation that leads to mutual transformation, not just mutual benefit (Jameson et al., 2011; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). Communities are informing the academy, and the academy is informing communities, leading to the “fundamental reshape of institutions of higher education and the role they play in society” (Cox, 2000, p. 17). Such a reshaping of roles moves the institution from helping to meet a need to participating in social problem-solving. The institution has a vested interest and degree of social responsibility to contribute to society beyond preparation and socialization of students for employment in the local economy, occupancy in the community, or even the collection of data for research, publication, and faculty promotion (Wade & Demb, 2009; Barkin et al., 2013; Chile & Black, 2015). Relationship-oriented engagement opens doors for marginalized communities to experience empowerment, universities to discover, test, and translate more effective interventions, and community institutions to develop a greater capacity to develop and implement data-informed interventions to improve community outcomes.

The institution’s reshaping is reminiscent of a return to the roots of land-grant colleges and universities’ charge to participate in the solving of social problems through direct engagement, all the while “provid[ing] knowledge for the public good” (Soska, 2015, cited in Grolar & McCall, 2018, p. 8). The International Association for Public Participation (IAPP) captures this “bidirectional flow” in its Spectrum of Community Engagement model, which emphasizes how the integration of engagement, communication, and community involvement facilitates shifts in civic participation from outreach, consultation, and involvement to collaboration and shared leadership (Clinical and Translational Science Awards Consortium, 2011; Barnes & Schmitz, 2016).

## Commitment to Community Engagement during “Normal” Times

Our university has created a culture and structure for community-engaged service, teaching, and research through its office of Engagement and Community Affairs (ECA) and Carnegie Foundation Community Engagement Classification. ECA brings together internal and external stakeholders to develop collaborative partnerships and relationships. A significant component includes neighborhood commitments to three communities, the university's neighborhood, and

two additional neighborhoods, with place-based Community Engagement Centers. Moreover, “these commitments are grounded in mutually beneficial relationships that support the neighborhood’s agenda while strengthening the university’s mission of teaching, research, and service” (University of Pittsburgh, CGR, n.d.). Resources are provided to improve access to the university and support relationships between the campus and the community. Moreover, the university received the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement, the country’s highest honor that higher education institutions can achieve for embedding community engagement in their peer functions.

The university made a minimum 15-year commitment of investment, infrastructure, programming, and dedicated staff in two CEC neighborhoods (University of Pittsburgh, n.d.). To ensure this commitment to engagement is shared across the university, all sixteen schools provide dean-appointed representatives to sit on an Internal Advisory Council, which is coordinated by the Office of Engagement and Community Affairs and plays a key role in connecting schools/units to opportunities to engage with the community in a mutually beneficial way. In addition, each community has a Neighborhood Advisory Council, facilitated by the leadership of the Community Engagement Center in that neighborhood, that informs the ongoing collaboration with the university. This helps to shape the benefits to local partners and the larger community, including reviewing proposed programs, recommending site locations, referring job candidates, and working together to ensure a responsive and non-duplicative mixture of programs (University of Pittsburgh, n.d., p. 2).

## Pivoting Community Engagement During the Pandemic

The university worked closely with its community-campus partners to pivot its community-engaged work in response to the pandemic. The Pandemic Service Initiative was created, with ECA leading and coordinating this effort through a COVID-19 Community Response Task Force, an interdisciplinary team of faculty and staff that met weekly during the height of the pandemic to respond to the needs of our community partners during this crisis. Several faculty members participating in this task force were also members of the Internal Advisory Council. In addition, many of the community partners engaged through this initiative were also participating in the work of the Community Engagement Centers, including the Neighborhood Advisory Councils. However, other faculty and staff participated in the task force, and partners from other communities outside the CEC neighborhoods were also engaged and assisted. The initiative focused on expanding university service, contributing to drives and collections organized by community organizations, and forging innovative, problem-solving partnerships (University of Pittsburgh, n.d.). The library system prepared a list of community resources, including information on COVID-19 prevention, testing locations, basic needs assistance, and access to online resources for children and families. Resources translated into multiple languages ensured support reached immigrant and refugee communities which continue to be disproportionately impacted by the virus (Lee & Miller, 2020). The university also supported school children struggling to learn online. Through a partnership with our local United Way, the university trained and deployed tutors, mostly university students, to support children participating in learning hubs. In each instance, the work undertaken was jointly shaped by community and campus partners, who brought to the task force what needs and approaches they felt needed to be pursued.

The University Chancellor allowed full-time staff and faculty to dedicate eight hours of their paid time each week to volunteer with the initiative. In addition, students were also encouraged to volunteer (University of Pittsburgh, n.d.). Since the beginning of the pandemic, this initiative has brought together over 539 staff and faculty members and over 100 students to volunteer at 29 virtual and in-person events, including vaccination clinics (Ward, 2021). Below we describe one of the Pandemic Service Initiative programs in more detail.

### The Care and Connection Caller Program (CCC)

As part of the COVID-19 Community Response Task Force, the Care and Connection Caller program or CCC was developed in response to requests from community partners for assistance in reaching out, via telephone, to individuals and families they served who were isolated and most at risk during the pandemic. Community partners that were part of the CEC Neighborhood Advisory Councils approached ECA for assistance because of the overwhelming needs that quickly developed because of the pandemic. The CCC program was coordinated by an employee in ECA, under the leadership of the School of Social Work faculty. A committee was created for CCC that included faculty and community partners. Partners from other communities outside of the CEC neighborhoods also joined the CCC because they had similar needs for assistance and strong connections to the university. Needs were identified by community partners and brought to the CCC committee, who would then problem solve and discuss how Pitt could most effectively work alongside and support community partners. Needs also emerged and changed throughout the pandemic and were slightly different for each community partner. In response, we created online training for university volunteers to learn how to make the calls, as well as individualized scripts for each community partner, co-developed with partners, that addressed the specific needs of the people they served, including resources for housing, mental health, food, and later for COVID-19 testing and vaccines. For example, one agency served the elderly population, so connections needed to be made for food resources that could be delivered to this population. Another agency served the Latino community, so we worked with the agency to translate their scripts and resource guides into Spanish. The CCC helped our community partners expand their efforts to reach out to people who were isolated and provide them with the resources they desperately needed during the pandemic. During the first three months of the pandemic, over 100 volunteers were trained, making over 1,000 calls.

CCC partners served African American and Latinx populations, families, and senior citizens. A survey was sent to the CCC volunteers to get their feedback early on. Forty-four callers responded, and 79.5% started making calls at the time of the survey. Callers were asked about their experience on a scale from one, worst to five, best. Most callers had a good experience, with 64% indicating four or five; and 33% indicating three. Comments from the callers illustrated the reciprocity, sense of engagement, and purpose they felt while making the calls and the satisfaction in connecting with people and providing support. For example:

- “I think these calls provide healing in both directions. People who may feel alone in a highly stressful time are able to find companionship as well as meaningful, practical resources.”

- “I feel that the opportunity gave me purpose during this trying time. I feel [the university] and the service organization were very helpful and have the best interest of those they serve in mind.”

Throughout the pandemic, CCC adapted to meet the needs of community partners, including helping to register people to vote, sign up for rent relief, and participate in a summer youth workforce program. In addition, the CCC pulled in other University departments to leverage resources (including securing translation services to create a COVID-19 resource briefing for immigrant and refugee communities). We also adapted the University Library System’s LibGuide on COVID-19 into a one-pager that could be distributed by community partners, which was updated often on a weekly basis to reflect new information. Our most significant lift occurred when vaccinations became available for seniors in early 2021. The county health department asked the university to support two large-scale vaccination clinics in our partner communities. With less than a week to plan, the network of campus-community partnerships was tapped to lead the initiative, with the university providing additional capacity. CCC volunteers were brought in, and within 24-hours, they made calls and helped sign up 2,000 residents to receive their first vaccine 24-36 hours later. The CCC volunteers also reached out to everyone vaccinated at the clinics, sometimes multiple times. In addition, they set up a vaccination hotline to take some of the burden off our partners for callbacks. Our partnership resulted in 1,800 of the original 2,000 people receiving their second shot. CCC Partners continued to be involved in vaccination and other outreach, with the support of over 200 university volunteers making over 6,000 calls.

The CCC university and community partners were particularly attuned to the disparities facing the people being called. In most cases, these were individuals who had experienced poverty and racism, along with the adverse effects of COVID-19. Therefore, more than connections to resources were needed to address the longstanding issues exacerbated by the pandemic. The relationships needed to inform a larger response were in place and were activated in ways that marshaled collective decision-making and problem-solving. During weekly meetings, community partners raised issues consistently brought up in their calls with residents, particularly around food and housing. We discussed ways we could engage in advocacy around these issues and developed an analysis of local, state, and federal policies, including how local and national organizations were advocating to enhance/expand current policies. Speakers were brought in to provide information and feedback to community partners on potential advocacy pathways and to share data related to food, housing, health, and other inequities exacerbated by the pandemic, including comparing the impact of the pandemic on the mostly African American and low-income communities our partners worked in to more affluent and white communities. Relationships between university and community partners were built and strengthened through these Zoom meetings, resulting in genuine public problem-solving. The CCC partners continued to meet to discuss how to further advocate for policy change through the summer of 2021. The advocacy efforts of the CCC were recognized by The Pittsburgh Study (TPS, n.d.), which is a “community-partnered research initiative to find out what works to help children and youth thrive.” The lead social work faculty member on the CCC is also a co-lead of the TPS Policy and Place Committee, whose role is to examine the impact of policies on child thriving through community-partnered and equity-focused policy analysis and outreach, including policies related to similar issues around housing and food insecurity that the CCC was addressing during the

pandemic. Community partners from the CCC have been invited to join the TPS Policy and Place Committee to continue their advocacy work around the issues exacerbated by the pandemic. This level of engagement with community partners will continue to strengthen as we work together to address the larger social and systemic issues facing the most vulnerable groups during and after the pandemic.

## **University and Community Engagement During a Pandemic: Lessons Learned**

The COVID-19 pandemic challenged universities to be more vigilant in adhering to and practicing community engagement principles and engaging with partners in a public problem-solving approach. The university responded to the pandemic with a collaborative, community-driven approach. The Pandemic Service Initiative and the Care and Connection Caller program illustrate the community engagement principles of democratic engagement, reciprocity, mutual benefit, collaboration, and shared leadership. The university did not approach communities armed with lists of resources or services it was willing to donate from a distance at the height of the pandemic. Instead, the university paused and listened to its existing network of campus-community partnerships to jointly expand avenues of assistance and collaboration during an incredibly uncertain and unprecedented public health crisis. This was possible because of the university's existing relationships with partners through ongoing community engagement efforts that embrace a culture of genuine civic participation.

In many ways, the ability to quickly activate faculty and staff across schools and units represented an internal reliance and valuation of the abundant social capital and goodwill built over time, cultivating relationships with grassroots, organizational, and elected leaders across our community. This was due, in large part, to institutional resources being used to capture, catalog, and celebrate the engaged research, courses, projects, and programs that made the Carnegie classification attainable. While within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, our efforts were concentrated on place-based engagements with key partners, a university of our size and scope understands that community configuration extends to identity, ideology, ability, and other defining characteristics.

Mutual benefit and reciprocity were also illustrated throughout the PSI and CCC. The university benefitted because its people and resources were targeted in ways that built upon its strengths and expertise. The communities benefitted because the initiatives were built upon their strengths and knowledge and on-the-ground analysis of their communities' needs. The communities further benefited by selectively enlisting the resources of a large institution with considerable social and political capital to address the key issues they faced during the pandemic. Solutions were also developed collaboratively through honest and open dialogue about inequities and inequality (Collins and Guidry, 2018), resulting in shared leadership among university and community partners. One university staff person noted that new resources were also developed in response to community needs, such as providing laptops for kids who had to learn remotely, as well providing basic supplies such as cleaning and disinfecting products that were scarce during the pandemic.

The pandemic was also occurring as the country's longstanding structural racism became more visible due to protests following the murder of George Floyd (Blake, 2020; Dreyer et al., 2020).

These issues were front and center for our community partners who are and/or serve people of color, particularly within the African American community. We began to discuss these issues in our weekly calls with the CCC and other partners the university collaborated with on the Pandemic Service Initiative who were fighting health and racial injustice. Community engagement requires that even large institutions like universities alter their direction in response to community needs. Thus, the university and community partners reframed the initiative to develop a program to educate university volunteers and students about the importance of civic action around issues exacerbated during the pandemic. Civic Action Week was established during the pandemic but will continue each year in collaboration with community partners.

Our collaborative efforts during the pandemic also illustrate the importance of institutionalized versus individualized partnerships. Namely, the effective coordination of university assets and resources needed to meet community needs under such unique circumstances resulted in a significant impact because it was supported by individuals connected to a community/university partnership infrastructure. The Pandemic Service Initiative was able to link community partners to resources throughout the university, bringing different departments together to provide support. Partnerships were not occurring in silos, thus enabling collaborations best suited to community needs and social, economic, racial, and health issues. This also prevented duplicating efforts or overwhelming organizations with requests for partnerships. In a tough time, when silos could have built up due to isolation, partnerships between the university and community blossomed, growing stronger than before, laying the ground for mutually beneficial relationships now and in the future. Community engagement principles undergirded all this work and provided the foundation for genuine partnerships. These are not only lessons for transforming what we do during a pandemic but can serve as inspiration to ignite and orient more faculty to the possibility of community engagement principles to translate their research, passion, and a sense of community responsibility into solutions that improve community outcomes during “normal” times as well.



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