

## **Creating and Sustaining Authentic Partnerships with Community in a Systemic Model**

Jessica V. Barnes, Emily L. Altimare, Patricia A. Farrell,  
Robert E. Brown, C. Richard Burnett III,  
LaDonna Gamble, James Davis

### **Abstract**

This article presents the unique approach to university-community partnerships developed and practiced at Michigan State University (MSU). We have established a model of campus-community partnerships that builds a wide-reaching system of networks connecting the university to communities. Our approach is *developmental*, *dynamic*, and *systemic*, characterized by an acute interest in the voices of community partners. This article also presents supporting documentation from interviews with community partners from two diverse urban school districts to illustrate some of the specific challenges faced in the development and maintenance of a partnership applying this approach.

### **Introduction**

Universities throughout the country participate in outreach and engagement activities, and ever-growing numbers of practitioners are involved in efforts to garner mutual benefit for university and community through partnership. Despite the development that has taken place in the collaborations between universities and communities, many challenges to creating meaningful and sustainable university-community partnerships remain. To overcome the challenges of engaging in university-community partnerships, we suggest an approach that moves beyond “singular models or universal best practices” (Ostrander 2004, 75).

MSU’s approach builds upon the work of Ostrander (2004), who argued that university engagement is most productively comprehended and exercised when built upon a developmental framework. Simply put, the *developmental* and *dynamic* framework of university-community partnership is sensitive to local community and university needs and ever-changing circumstances. Ostrander proposes that the key to developing and maintaining strong university engagement is the creation of an organizational structure conducive to such work. She suggests two critical structural features

that we include in our approach: a freestanding association joining community and university, and one or more university staff who serve as “critical bridge persons.” However, MSU’s approach takes Ostrander’s proposal a step further in the creation of an organizational structure to support sustainable engagement. Our approach strives to establish *systemic* relationships with communities. We assert that systemic relationships are marked by four primary characteristics: (1) they are grounded in meaningful and sustainable research partnerships, (2) they focus on community capacity building, (3) they involve long-term relationships with communities, and (4) they create collaborative networks in the community and the university. MSU’s framework emphasizes the need to institutionalize university-community partnerships as well as to maintain connections between universities and communities on multiple levels.

### **The History of University Outreach and Engagement**

Overall, there is substantial agreement regarding the history of university outreach and the desirable characteristics of partnership work (McNall et al. 2008; Boyle and Silver 2005; Ostrander 2004). As Boyle and Silver (2005, 233) explain, the 1980s were a period of transition during which “the war on poverty” shifted from the hands of government into the hands of academic institutions and organizations. One of the developments stemming from this shift was the establishment of university-community partnership offices (UCPs) during the 1990s. These UCPs shared an ideology grounded in community participation and empowerment. McNall et al. (2008, 3) summarize four qualities of effective partnerships that they purport have considerable endorsement in the engagement literature.

1. Cooperative goal setting and planning (Holland 2005; Sandy and Holland 2006; Schulz, Israel, and Lantz 2003)
2. Shared power, resources, and decision making (Holland 2005; Liederman et al. 2003; Sandy and Holland 2006; Schulz et al. 2003)
3. Group cohesion (Sandy and Holland 2006; Schulz et al. 2003)
4. Partnership management (Holland 2005; Liederman et al. 2003; Sandy and Holland 2006; Schulz et al. 2003)

These four qualities are often cited in the community-based participatory research (CBPR) literature as qualities of successful CBPR projects. The establishment of a strong partnership is at the core of both CBPR projects and UCP offices, and the result is expected to be a mutually beneficial relationship.

In order to achieve egalitarian results from university-community partnerships, it is necessary that universities use a systems-based approach. This is true because some of the most immediate positive results benefit the university and, typically, the community's enhancement is achieved only after a sustained relationship and a long-term commitment. Without a systemic approach to partnerships, the chances of long-term collaboration—the kind needed to produce positive results in the communities—are diminished. As Walsh (2006, 45) reports, the order and structure of universities and community groups are often dissimilar and may even be in conflict, and he goes on to elaborate on several best practices that aid in accomplishing effective partnerships. However, as we previously mentioned, our institutional thrust departs from previous notions of best practices and emphasizes a developmental, dynamic, and systems approach.

---

*“Without a systemic approach to partnerships, the chances of long-term collaboration—the kind needed to produce positive results in the communities—are diminished.”*

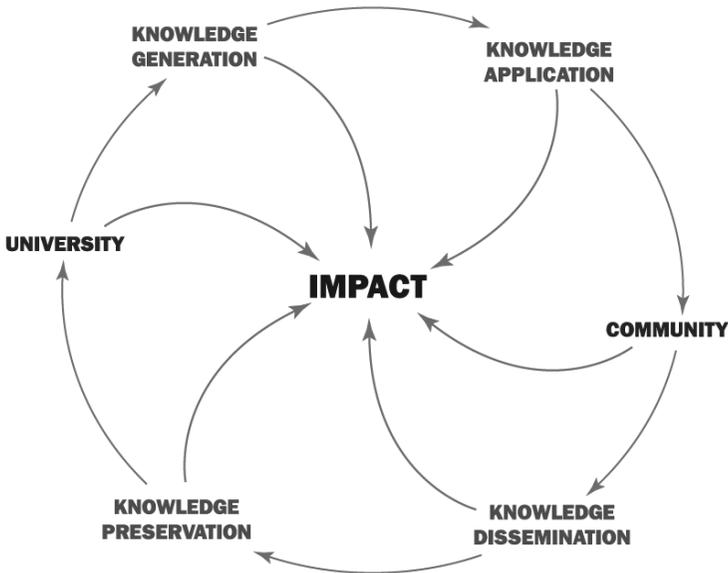
---

While the literature clearly identifies the characteristics of strong university-community partnerships and describes developmental and dynamic approaches, further elaboration is needed regarding the broader system in which these relationships between universities and communities exist as well as opportunities for enhanced sustainability. What structure is needed to support these partnerships? Described in this article is the *systemic structure* of university-community partnerships practiced at Michigan State University's office of University-Community Partnerships.

### **Michigan State University's Approach to Outreach and Engagement**

Michigan State University (MSU) is a land-grant, research-intensive institution, long committed to serving the public good. In 1993, MSU sought to strengthen its outreach efforts by undertaking an eighteen-month process of study and discussion involving a

Figure 1. Michigan State University model of university outreach and engagement



range of faculty, administrators, and community partners. Through those discussions, outreach was conceived of as study that values teaching, research, and service. The developed definition states, “It [outreach and engagement] involves generating, transmitting, applying and preserving knowledge for the direct benefit of external audiences in ways that are consistent with university and unit missions” (*Provost’s Committee on University Outreach 1993*).

Since that time, MSU’s approach to outreach has continued to evolve and engagement is now central to our model. Institutional identity and institutional commitment are the context for engagement. As displayed in figure 1, our mission statement articulates a striving to discover practical uses for theoretical knowledge and a commitment to contributing to the understanding and the solution of significant societal problems and to core values of inclusiveness, quality, and connectivity (*Fitzgerald and Bargerstock 2007*). University and community institutions are fully engaged partners in this model.

Primary responsibility for fulfilling MSU’s outreach and engagement mandate rests with the colleges and other units on campus. The Office of the Associate Provost for Outreach and Engagement’s (UOE) mission is to assist all units in their efforts and to take a leadership role in promoting engagement throughout the university.

Within the UOE unit, University-Community Partnerships (UCP) advocates and enacts the MSU model of outreach and engagement that involves application of scholarship directly for the public good and reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationships between community and university partners. UCP is composed of three full-time staff members as well as two half-time graduate assistants. The staff's main focus is on creating and sustaining community-university partnerships. The three full-time employees and their roles resemble what Ostrander (2004) referred to as "critical bridge persons." Each is responsible for maintaining their own research partnership with a community partner, engaging in collaborative decision making with partners to identify community-driven research interests, identifying faculty to participate in community research projects, and facilitating the growth of the partnerships. The two community partners discussed later in this article, Lansing School District and Flint Community Schools, serve as examples of partnerships that, at their most basic level, are shared between a UCP staff person and a community contact, yet in their elaborated form are systematized and incorporated into an institutional effort to partner and collaborate.

The hallmarks of the MSU-UCP approach are:

- *Becoming embedded in communities*: working in long-standing partnerships that are embedded in communities to identify the needs of families, businesses, neighborhoods, and community organizations
- *Stressing asset-based solutions*: focusing on asset-based solutions that build on the strengths and advantages of those we serve
- *Building community capacity*: building capacity within families, businesses, and communities to address the challenges and build on the opportunities they face
- *Creating collaborative networks*: building networks among communities and organizations that lead to sustainable regional collaborations and innovations
- *Assessing and benchmarking engagement efforts*: understanding the influence that the partnerships have on communities and universities

To mobilize the resources and power of the community and the university, MSU's UCP utilizes a set of engagement norms developed with key community partners to build university-community

collaboration. These engagement norms incorporate standards regarding what we do in UCP as well as how we are to conduct our work.

*What we do* is defined by five primary tasks. First, we aim to identify and pursue work with cross-cutting impact and of mutual interest and value to multiple academic disciplines and multiple community sectors. Second, we work to identify the best ways to attract faculty, staff, and community members to become involved in engagement. Third, we develop individual and systems relationships in communities and in the university. Fourth, we apply participatory research principles and generate data of immediate relevance to both university and community stakeholders. And finally, our ultimate goal is to contribute to the scientific and community knowledge base.

The principles below regarding *how we conduct our work* are imperative to carry out a true collaboration with community members:

- Engage in open, honest, and frequent communication
- Ensure transparency and visibility to all community and university stakeholders
- Cultivate an environment conducive to fully shared decision making
- Creatively address challenges or barriers as a group
- Conduct ongoing evaluation of progress
- Institutionalize best practices from collaborative efforts

Initially, UCP's collaborations were primarily with individuals within agencies, organizations, or institutions. These partnerships focused on individual research projects and rightfully adopted a perspective focusing on specific issues and people. However, over time it became apparent to both UCP and community partners that the challenge of ascertaining tangible improvement to whole communities demanded a level of community-university collaboration focused on the entire community, which could be achieved only through institutional relationships. Here, the basis of acting moved from a developmental but project-centric or singular approach to a developmental and systemic approach. Table 1 displays the progression from singular and nondevelopmental to systemic and developmental-based partnerships.

Systemic and developmental partnerships are characterized by striving to understand the supportive factors for healthy develop-

**Table 1. Movement across approaches**

<b>Singular, Nondevelopmental Approach</b>	<b>Singular but Developmental Approach</b>	<b>Systemic and Developmental Approach</b>
Focus on single individual representative from the community agency in the partnership	Involve multiple individuals from a single level of influence (all managers or all case workers) in the partnership	Involve multiple individuals from multiple levels of influence in the partnership
Focus on single community agency	Focus on single community agency while involving in periphery other community agency	Focus on multiple community agencies as equal partners
Focus on single community sector/university department	Focus on single community sector/university department while involving in periphery influencing sectors/departments	Focus on multiple community sectors/university departments as primary in partnership
Focus on primary outcome only	Focus on primary outcome while including other variables in model as “extraneous”	Focus on primary and other variables to more fully understand the complexity of promoting the primary outcome

ment and the risk factors that hinder healthy development across all dimensions or systems. In looking for the key levers of influence across the whole system/community, there is a conscious avoidance of shifting problems to other parts of the system (*National Literacy Trust 2009*). To successfully develop and maintain this focus on the whole system, it is imperative to look for interrelationships across systems and examine how each sector or organization’s actions or influence changes the rest of the system. These partnerships are geared toward the long term and seek to identify the slow, subtle, and often hard-to-detect changes that over time can have powerful implications.

Furthermore, adherence to notions of CBPR helps create an environment that is conducive to systemic partnerships. CBPR, as practiced in our unit, refers to research and collaboration between the university and the community in which the community is integrally involved in the project and, most important, included in decision making. *Our CBPR projects are driven by the community and facilitated by faculty.* In this way, community capacity is developed, as is dialogue that proves helpful in understanding community needs. Also important to this orientation is the sharing between the university and community in terms of research, goals, inquiry, and the building of trust and mutual agreement between both parties (*Outreach and Engagement Michigan State University 2007*).

In combination, these models and practices form the foundation upon which developmental and systemic relationships are built at Michigan State University.

### ***Responding to Challenges in Creating Systemic and Developmental Partnerships***

Denner et al. (1999) note five primary challenges to the creation of successful partnerships: unclear boundaries, problems of organization and management, disparate goals, different priorities, and resistance and suspicion. Unclear boundaries occur when a researcher's multiple roles with a community may blur the line between research and participation. Efforts must be made to avoid participation in activities that take resources away from primary project goals. Problems of organization or management arise because programs and universities are dynamic and complex organizations. As such, they are constantly involved in a process of change, one characterized by differing opinions and even contradictory goals that can lead to disagreement and miscommunication. A challenge of disparate goals is present when, owing to differences stemming from unique work practices and objectives, goals and expectations of universities differ from those of programs. A related but separate challenge is differing priorities between the concerns of each group. The final challenge that Denner and colleagues laid out is one of resistance and suspicion. Through partnership, each group is vulnerable to outsider observation and evaluation. Therefore, concerns regarding results as well as each group's legitimacy are common.

Table 2 shows how we have categorized each challenge type as primarily structural or personal and indicates how our approach proposes to overcome each challenge. This classification is based upon our own experiences with these challenges. While all challenges are ultimately a combination of both structural and personal, there is generally a primary root cause. Personal challenges are predominantly based on personality conflicts or opposing personal agendas. Structural challenges are created or avoided by the structure or organization of the partnership. Both types of challenges are referenced by Maurrasse (2002) when he describes the differing interests that arise in partnerships between universities and communities, and the need to be conscientious of each individual's and group's authority and resources. In particular, he mentions the more powerful and resource-rich universities often unwittingly wielding more sway and directing the agenda during a partnership (Maurrasse 2002, 134).

**Table 2. Challenges to university-community partnerships**

Challenge	Challenge Type	MSU Approach
Unclear Boundaries	Structural	UCP staff act as “critical bridge persons” that maintain their own partnership with a community partner around research and engage in collaborative decision making
Problems of Organization and Management	Structural	By creating collaborative networks, with embedded partnerships, UCP staff are able to recognize and address organizational and management problems, both within communities and within the university
Disparate Goals	Personal	By stressing asset-based solutions and collaborative networks, university faculty keep the goals and expectations of community partners in mind at all stages
Different Priorities	Personal	Frequent assessment and benchmarking of engagement efforts can mitigate differences by giving a means to identify and address challenges as they arise
Resistance and Suspicion	Personal	Stressing the need for collaborative networks and having embedded bridge persons minimizes concerns underlying suspicion and resistance

Traditional models of engagement may struggle to deal with one or another of the primary challenges, especially if proposed solutions do not take into account the challenge *type* (personal or structural). To effectively counter these challenges, it is necessary to initiate new approaches in community-university partnerships that go beyond conventional methods of engagement and include a developmental, dynamic, and systemic approach.

### **Systemic Partnerships in Progress**

To actually create such a partnership, it is imperative to follow the guideline set forth by Ostrander (2004) that one or more critical bridge persons be employed by the university to carry out the work. These individuals connect within communities and work collaboratively with community members to develop the system. The foundation of the work rests on the trust developed within the partnership. At MSU, UCP academic staff members have been working in two communities to develop systemic and developmental partnerships. These two communities are smaller urban communities in mid-Michigan that have struggled to develop a thriving economic base. UCP staff members have been engaged in partnership with the communities for an average of fifteen years, initially working on individual projects. Over the past five years, UCP staff members broadened these individual partnerships to apply the systemic

approach. Within UCP, we possessed our own understanding of the relationships. However, as partners, we desired a deeper understanding of our collaborators' viewpoint.

To begin to understand our progress in this endeavor, we conducted ethnographic interviews with one person from each of our long-standing partnerships. These one-on-one interviews were done via phone and lasted an average of thirty minutes. As is characteristic of ethnographic interviewing, open-ended versus close-ended questions were used. We were interested in descriptive accounts that included details, explanations, opinions, and the participant's judgments. Thus, the questions centered on how the partner viewed the relationship their community group (school district) shared with Michigan State University as a partner. The information gathered expressed the "voices of the community" and helped us reflect on both the challenging and the positive aspects of systemic university-community partnerships. The feedback from these interviews serves as preliminary support for the developmental approach.

### ***The Voices of Our Community Members***

After a brief discussion of the current socioeconomic state of Michigan, each community partner was asked to describe both the challenging and the positive aspects of university-community partnerships. The conversation with Partner 1 centered on two themes. First, in terms of challenges, Partner 1 articulated the difficulty of navigating the bureaucracy of two large educational systems to bring together decision makers, resources, and sustainable outcomes. Second, in relation to benefits, he explained that two educational institutions collaborating to meet the unifying goal of educating their student populations through concrete, authentic, and mutually beneficial experiences is the greatest benefit of university-community partnerships. These responses touch upon both the value added through partnership and the unique challenges that arise when distinct institutions attempt to overcome differences in terms of goals, work process, and cultures for the enhancement of each.

Partner 2 offered responses similar to those of Partner 1. Partner 2 observed that both organizations are large, which sometimes makes it difficult to obtain timely actions or information from other departments. In addition, she pointed out that staff turnover in the community can present problems if staff familiar with the processes and partnership leave and new people who require

an orientation to the work replace them. In terms of the benefits mentioned, Partner 2 said that her community has benefited from this partnership for several years and through several variations of program initiatives. She explained, “What makes this long-term relationship possible is open and frequent communication from all parties.” In this manner, Partner 2 vocalized and validated a key tenet of Michigan State’s approach.

In order to summarize all the information shared during these interviews, we transcribed the interviews. Through a process of coding the responses for themes, we were able to extract the characteristics that our partners explained as contributing to or detracting from university-community partnerships. For simplicity’s sake, we refer to these as the *red lights* and *green lights* of partnership. The *red lights* of university-community partnerships are the challenges cited by our community partners. These challenges can be categorized into the following subgroups: human factors, bureaucracy, cultural differences, and a project or individualistic mindset. To elaborate, the term *human factors* refers to the needs and priorities of the individuals that participate in partnerships. This could be as simple as a need for transportation of schoolchildren to an afterschool program. Such needs represent challenges to partnerships when they are not factored into the planning of a project. Bureaucracy as a challenge to partnerships was a resounding theme incorporating the difficulty faced in acquiring access to decision makers, working with multiple groups, and the sheer size of institutions like Michigan State University. Misunderstanding due to cultural differences was another important challenge mentioned. This included differences in priorities, terminology, and the nature of how work is accomplished by each organization. Last, what was referred to as a “project mindset” was discussed. This challenge stems from not valuing the dynamic and changing nature of partnerships on a large scale. It is important to note that these red lights overlap with Denner’s five challenges to community partnership mentioned above.

Our community partners also described the characteristics that strengthen partnerships and overcome the challenges inherent in this work. These qualities fall into the following categories: commitment, collaboration, mutual benefit, and trust. As *green lights*, these particular features help support and maintain fruitful partnerships. Commitment refers to a shared obligation to achieve project goals for the mutual benefit of both groups despite challenges. Collaboration encompasses the achievement of open and honest communication, understanding the needs of one’s partner,

and making decisions jointly. The concept of mutual benefit focuses on networking opportunities, the use of findings to plan community and project improvements, and the enhancement of institutional missions. Finally, our partners indicated that trust enabled participation and the accomplishment of goals.

### **Concluding Remarks and Summary**

In our focus on creating developmental, systemic campus-community partnerships, we propose the following tactical plan to implement a system of relationships among university and community members. This system should involve multiple interdisciplinary stakeholders in both the community and the university. The development of a partnership that incorporates members of the

---

*“[D]eveloping a network of faculty members across disciplines allows for the natural ebb and flow of university work.”*

---

community from multiple agencies and at multiple levels of power within these agencies will serve to protect the relationship from the frequent turnover experienced in community agencies. Likewise, developing a network of faculty members across disciplines allows for the natural ebb and flow of university work. For example, as one faculty member decreases involvement due to the winding down of a

project or a heavy teaching load, another will increase involvement to focus on a new development in the partnership.

A critical component in this system is the underlying foundation—the relationship established between the community and UCP staff. According to Boyle and Silver (2005, 242), “The emphasis is on collaboration *with*, rather than service to, and these partnerships ideally result in a ‘working relationship.’” Our emphasis is also on these “working relationships,” hence our interest in including the voices of our community partners in this article. We purport that the success of community-campus partnerships is highly dependent on the quality of the relationships built among its members. Creating partnerships in which community and university partners share in decision making is critical to the success of the relationship. The opinions voiced by our community partners reflected the importance of the strengths of the relationship, which allow the partnership to overcome its challenges. It is the mission of UCP staff to develop and maintain relationships with the community, identify faculty to participate in the community project, and facilitate

the growth of the partnership. In this way, UCP staff members serve as the “bridge” between the university and the community.

Our next step is to develop and conduct a series of research projects that will identify the critical elements and outcomes of developing systemic university-community partnerships. We are currently working with researchers across Michigan State University and from other universities to develop and implement research methods that will improve our understanding of the relationship between characteristics of systemic partnerships, systemic partnership activities, and the resulting outcomes. Our intention is to contribute to the existing partnership literature by basing our research on group dynamics theories. We will examine how scholars, communities, and conveners (the bridges between the scholars and communities) interact both as individuals and as groups as well as how they define partnership success. By examining how structure and group processes within the systemic partnerships relate to partnership outcomes, we hope to make explicit the components necessary for transforming university-community partnerships into relationships that lead to long-term community and university enrichment.

## References

- Boyle, Mary-Ellen, and Ira Silver. 2005. Poverty, partnerships, and privilege: Elite institutions and community empowerment. *City and Community* 4 (3): 233–53.
- Carnegie Foundation. 2008. Community engagement elective classification. <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/classifications/index.asp?key=1213> (accessed January 15, 2009).
- Denner, Jill, Catherine R. Cooper, Edward M. Lopez, and Nora Dunbar. 1999. Beyond “giving science away”: How university-community partnerships inform youth programs, research, and policy. *Social Policy Report* 13 (1): 1–20.
- Fitzgerald, Hiram E., and Burton A. Bargerstock. 2007. Scholarship focused outreach and engagement. [http://outreach.msu.edu/documents/UOE\\_HEFBB\\_FAU\\_072607.pdf](http://outreach.msu.edu/documents/UOE_HEFBB_FAU_072607.pdf) (accessed April 15, 2009).
- Holland, Barbara A. 2005. Reflections on community-campus partnerships: What has been learned? What are the next challenges? In *Higher education collaboratives for community engagement and improvement*, ed. P. A. Pasque, R. E. Smerek, B. Dwyer, N. Bowman, and B. L. Mallory, 10–17. Ann Arbor, MI: The national forum on higher education for the public good.
- Kennedy, Edward M. 1999. University-community partnerships: A mutually beneficial effort to aid community development and improve academic learning opportunities. *Applied Developmental Science* 3 (4): 197–98.
- Liederman, Sally, Andrew Furco, Jennifer Zapf, and Megan Goss. 2003. *Building partnerships with college campuses: Community perspectives*. Council of

- Independent Colleges Consortium for the Advancement of Private Higher Education's Engaging Communities and Campuses Program. [http://www.cic.edu/caphe/grants/engaging\\_monograph.pdf](http://www.cic.edu/caphe/grants/engaging_monograph.pdf) (accessed July 28, 2008).
- Maurrasse, David J. 2002. Higher education–community partnerships: Assessing progress in the field. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 31 (1): 131–39.
- McNall, Miles, Celeste Sturdevant Reed, Robert Brown, and Angela Allen. 2008. Brokering community–university engagement. *Innovative Higher Education* 33:5.
- National Literacy Trust. 2009. Promoting a systems approach. <http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/about/systems.html> (accessed April 16, 2009).
- Ostrander, Susan A. 2004. Democracy, civic participation, and the university: A comparative study of civic engagement on five campuses. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 33 (1): 74–93.
- Outreach and Engagement Michigan State University. 2007. Community-based participatory research and service learning. [http://outreach.msu.edu/documents/JACKSON\\_HBCU\\_PRESENTATION\\_i.pdf](http://outreach.msu.edu/documents/JACKSON_HBCU_PRESENTATION_i.pdf) (accessed April 9, 2009).
- Provost's Committee on University Outreach. 1993. University outreach at Michigan State University: Extending knowledge to serve community. [http://outreach.msu.edu/documents/ProvostCommitteeReport\\_1993.pdf](http://outreach.msu.edu/documents/ProvostCommitteeReport_1993.pdf) (accessed January 15, 2009).
- Sandy, Marie, and Barbara A. Holland. 2006. Different worlds and common ground: Community partner perspectives on campus–community partnerships. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 13 (1): 30–43.
- Schulz, Amy J., Barbara A. Israel, and Paula Lantz. 2003. Instrument for evaluating dimensions of group dynamics within community-based participatory research partnerships. *Evaluation and Program Planning* 26 (3): 249–62.
- Walsh, David. 2006. Best practices in university–community partnerships: Lessons learned from a physical-activity-based program. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance* 77 (4): 45–56.

## **About the Authors**

- Jessica V. Barnes, PhD, is the associate director of University–Community Partnerships and an adjunct assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at Michigan State University (University–Community Partnerships, University Outreach and Engagement, Michigan State University, Kellogg Center, Garden Level, East Lansing, MI 48824-1022, USA [barnes33@msu.edu]). She conducts community research and has established and led the research for numerous prevention programs for families, children, and youth. Barnes holds a PhD in developmental psychology from Michigan State University.
- Emily L. Altimare is a PhD candidate in socio-cultural anthropology in the Department of Anthropology at Michigan State University. Her primary research interests include orga-

nizational culture, health care, American culture, and design anthropology.

- Patricia A. Farrell, PhD, is the assistant provost for university-community partnerships and codirector of the Families And Communities Together (FACT) Coalition. Farrell has extensive experience in school reform efforts, promotion of school health programs, and early childhood initiatives to improve children's school readiness.
- Robert E. Brown is the associate director at University-Community Partnerships. He works to support, nurture, and expand outreach and engagement at Michigan State University through structural, collaborative, and curricular initiatives.
- C. Richard Burnett III is a graduate student in the Department of Anthropology at Michigan State University. His primary area of study is socio-cultural anthropology.
- LaDonna Gamble is the interim project director for Flint Community Schools' Bridges to the Future program.
- James Davis is the deputy superintendent of Lansing School District.