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The Central Role of Governance in Community-Based Participatory Research

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At first glance, what could one possibly discern as a common thread between the diverse topics addressed in the four papers that comprise the Community-Campus Partnerships for Health (CCPH) theme section of this issue: a trauma study led by survivors of abuse and violence and their academic partners¹, a partnership between autism self-advocates and health professionals,² a toolkit for understanding readiness to engage in community-based participatory research (CBPR),³ and an online tool for peer-reviewed publication and dissemination of innovative products of community-engaged scholarship?⁴ As we considered each paper and reflected on our own experiences, a theme emerged: the seemingly rigid boundaries that have divided “the community” and “the academy” are beginning to become blurred as partnerships implement governance models of shared power, ownership and control.

Perhaps it has always been a false dichotomy to pit community and university against or in contrast with one another. In mature partnerships that have coalesced around a compelling, shared goal and have sought to truly understand the capacities, assets, needs, desires and concerns of each partner, it is often hard to tell “who is who” and “who invited who” to the table. One expects to see no less than these blurred boundaries if we are to achieve the real social or systemic change that is the promise for communities engaged in CBPR with universities. As the divide between who is the “community” and who is the “academy” begins to fade, the silos begin to fall down and a level playing field can, hopefully, be established. Developing an authentic, principled partnership is and should be, a parallel goal to conducting the research, because it is what holds this important, perhaps even imperative work to uncover the knowledge and wisdom we need to achieve a more humane and just world.^{5,6} The governance of the partnership is what guides the CBPR and helps to ultimately ensure that the research will be used to take action on societal issues stemming from economic, social and racial inequities.

“Taking action” can take many forms. It may occur through public policy change that is initiated through grassroots efforts. Or, in the case of two of the CCPH papers, it may involve redesigning an intervention by engaging as partners the very participants that conventional research approaches see only as the “clients” or the recipients of the results of the research.^{1,2} Both involve programs within what would typically be seen as the human service delivery silo and demonstrate how the participant’s equal participation in the partnership is what allows the research to explore new, deeper ways to build community health and wellness. In the papers about assessing CBPR readiness³ and disseminating CBPR products,⁴ it is clear that CBPR tools and products must be developed through an authentic and engaged partnership just as the research itself has been.

The “blurriness” of the boundary between the community and the university can bring its own set of challenges in trying to develop a functional governance model. In describing an academic-community partnership with autistic self-advocates, Nicolaidis et. al. help us understand how shared decision-making occurs within a group of autistic adults². This requires communication strategies that allow everyone involved in the project to be able to not only communicate with each other but to participate democratically in decision-making. Developing effective communication strategies among partners is inherent in CBPR if the project is being governed by the principles of shared power in all decision-making.

In “Survivor Voices,” Cortez and her colleagues help us understand that it is not only possible but imperative to take on the challenge of how to engage and involve those who are typically seen as “victims”.¹ They make a powerful case for why it is

essential that the governance of the project not only involve trauma survivors but to do so in a way that continues to promote their healing and recovery. Through a shared governance model in which the CBPR project is designed and implemented by trauma survivors, the partnership is able to level the playing field and promote healing by and between the participants rather than perpetuating victimization through a program that is delivered “to” the survivors.

In the paper on assessing CBPR readiness, Andrews leads a team of community and academic authors that describe the participatory development and evaluation of a toolkit that starts with an important premise of successful CBPR: that the partners need to be ready to fully engage.³ Although governance of the partnership is not explicitly referenced, the toolkit guides community and academic partners to consider mechanisms for ensuring transparent communication and structures, conflict resolution and equal power in the partnership. Establishing a shared governance model is critical to putting these mechanisms into place and ultimately ensuring the partnership’s accountability, productivity and sustainability.

CES4Health.info (CES4H) was conceived to encourage and disseminate applied products of CBPR and other forms of community-engaged scholarship that can meet academic standards of promotion and tenure and community standards of quality and usefulness. This requires a balanced review by community and academic experts who have equal weight in determining whether the product is accepted or not. Indeed, CES4H is helping to redefine “peer review” by acknowledging and embracing community experts as “peers” (this is also the case with PCHP, whose editorial team has been instrumental in supporting CES4H). Although community engagement is central to a product being accepted, CES4H recognizes that community-engaged scholarship is not dependent on having a community-academic partnership in place. Indeed, community activist-scholars are themselves blurring the boundary between “community” and “academic” by tapping into CES4H and submitting products that advance their work and ideas. Further, this online tool is truly accessible to all in its free and public access.

The blurred boundaries evident in these papers can also be seen in how CCPH itself is governed and operates. For example, there are deliberately no set slots on the CCPH board for “community” or “faculty” or “student.” Rather, members who may very well define themselves in one or more of those categories are at the table to share diverse perspectives that reflect the diverse partnerships that are transforming communities and academe. Indeed, the policy governance model adopted by CCPH compels the board to “speak with one voice.”⁷ CCPH strives to advance models of shared power in its work through the criteria used to determine which proposals to accept for presentation at its conference,⁸ which nominations to select for its annual award⁹ and which funding opportunities to pursue.¹⁰ Not including degrees on participant nametags at CCPH conferences reflects an organizational culture that embraces people purely for who they are and what they bring to the table. CCPH’s advocacy agenda centers on ensuring that the conditions are in place for authentic, principle-centered partnerships to thrive, including research infrastructure in communities,¹¹ community-based research ethics boards,^{12 13} and faculty promotion and tenure policies that recognize and reward community-engaged scholarship.^{14 15 16}

The CCPH papers in this issue demonstrate that the governance models that hold the CBPR work are as important as the projects themselves. Models of shared power with thoughtful, democratic, participatory governance become a parallel goal to conducting the CBPR project. Building models where the knowledge systems of the community are as respected and on equal footing with that of academe make it possible to share power and reap mutual benefits. There are benefits to communities and to institutions when they engage in CBPR. By openly outlining these benefits, accepting them as equally important, and working to attain them, these benefits become mutually held.¹⁷ Hopefully, the results of CBPR lead to the elimination of the inequities that are plaguing our world. By carefully constructing the governance models that hold these projects, we have every chance of deepening the impact of these results, helping the work to be sustainable and shaping profound transformation.

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