The Power Line

Strengthening Academic-Community Partnerships for Change

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[1] https://transform.ucsc.edu/past-event-all-in-conference/

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This report has taken longer to see the light of day than we originally hoped. Perhaps, like some good wines, the ideas have improved with age, developing deeper and more complex flavors. We hope, at least, it is worth the wait.

Executive Summary

This report examines the role of academic-community partnerships in strengthening and sustaining community power-building efforts. The study builds on the *Lead Local* initiative, supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), which explored how community power catalyzes and sustains conditions for healthy communities.[2] A key recommendation that emerged from this initiative was to strengthen networks of scholars capable of partnering with and bolstering the work of community power-building organizations. This report is designed to help inform such efforts.

Community power-building organizations are a distinct type of community based organization, in that they focus on organizing grassroots leadership and engaging in advocacy to hold decision-makers accountable, not just providing services or running programs. Collaborations between academic scholars and community power building organizations present unique challenges, requiring scholars to navigate complex ethical, political, and institutional dynamics. This report analyzes promising practices for creating mutually beneficial partnerships that integrate academic research with community power-building efforts, and provides recommendations for Universities and Foundations that can help support those efforts.

Background

The *Lead Local* initiative brought together over 40 organizations across 16 U.S. locations to examine the intersection of health equity and community power-building. One of the ten key recommendations from this initiative was to build networks of scholars with the skills and

[2] https://www.lead-local.org/

capacity to partner with community power-building organizations. Some previous research has focused on the ways that academic research centers have been providing support for community engaged scholarship. There is little research, however, on the challenges that individual academic scholars face in building such partnerships or how they navigate the institutional barriers that remain, including inadequate funding, lack of recognition in tenure processes, and challenges in maintaining long-term partnerships.

This study sought to identify promising practices in academic-community collaborations where community power-building was a central goal. In addition to reviewing academic literature and public reports on these issues, we conducted 21 semi-structured interviews with academic scholars and their community power-building partners. Interviewees were identified from the *Lead Local* initiative, our own academic and community networks, and people identified from additional literature reviews. A snowball sampling approach was also used to identify additional scholars engaged in community power-building partnerships.

Key themes were analyzed using qualitative research methods, with coding structured around three areas: (1) academics' backgrounds, identities, and motivations for engaging in community power-building; (2) the process of building and sustaining partnerships; and (3) the role of university structures in facilitating or hindering these efforts.

Scholars rooted in movement and research

A key finding of this study is that the supposed binary between academia and community is actually quite fluid. Professors and researchers employed in academia often have roots in social movements before entering academia. Academic employees are also community members, and many remain deeply involved in activism, both within and outside their professional responsibilities. Their commitment to community power-building is often shaped by personal experiences and early involvement in grassroots organizing.

Why do people interested in community power-building and social movements enter academia? The motivations vary but typically include:

- Passion for research and education – These scholars see research as a tool for strengthening social movements.
- Institutional leverage – Academia provides access to funding, legitimacy, and networks that can support grassroots efforts.
- Job security – Some scholars pursued academic careers due to financial stability concerns within movement-based organizing.

How scholars and communities build together

Our informants points to several key elements of successful academic-community partnerships:

- Mutual respect and trust – Organizers value academic partnerships when scholars recognize community expertise and contribute to power-building efforts without assuming control.
- Recognition of community knowledge – Effective scholars acknowledge multiple epistemologies and understand that grassroots leaders are experts in their lived experiences.
- Multi-faceted engagement – Effective partnerships extend beyond research, incorporating other activities such as student involvement, legal support, educational initiative and training programs, and shared advocacy efforts.
- Strategic research support – Community organizations are able to leverage academic research to validate worker and community experiences, influence policy, and strengthen organizing strategies.

Challenges in partnerships include overcoming historical mistrust of academic institutions, ensuring that research benefits community-led initiatives, and avoiding exploitative relationships where academics extract knowledge without reciprocal contributions.

Making university structures work for partnership

Academic institutional dynamics play a significant role in shaping scholars' ability to engage in community partnerships. Key findings include:

- Growing institutional support but more needed – There is increased recognition within university administration of the value of engaged scholarship, as reflected in the rise of universities seeking the *Community-Engaged Carnegie Classification*. While this approach emphasizes reciprocal partnerships and institutional commitment to community engagement, it largely frames communities as partners in service, education, and research rather than as agents of power and self-determination; in contrast, a community power-building approach centers on shifting power dynamics, prioritizing grassroots leadership, and equipping communities with the tools and resources to drive systemic change on their own terms, which is still not widely supported.
- Barriers in tenure and promotion – Despite progress, many scholars face difficulties in gaining tenure due to a lack of recognition for community-based research. Some opt for non-tenure-track positions to maintain flexibility in engaged work.
- Emerging support structures – Some universities have developed funding mechanisms, centers for engaged research, and revised tenure guidelines to accommodate community-based scholarship, including some with a specific focus on community power-building.

It is important to note that perspectives on institutional support have significant generational differences. Scholars who entered academia in the 1970s and 1980s experienced greater resistance to engaged work, whereas newer generations encounter a more accepting environment but still face structural constraints.

Strengthening community power-building partnerships

This report underscores the importance of building strong academic-community partnerships to advance community power-building initiatives. Key recommendations include:

- Strengthening networks of engaged scholars – Universities should help foster formal networks that connect scholars with grassroots movements.
- Institutionalizing support for engaged scholarship – Universities should adapt tenure and funding structures to better support community-engaged research.
- Prioritizing community leadership in partnerships – Academics should ensure that research agendas align with community priorities and that partnerships benefit grassroots organizations.
- Expanding the role of universities beyond research – Universities can contribute space, resources, student involvement, and advocacy support to power-building efforts.

By implementing these strategies, universities can play a critical role in supporting transformative social change while ensuring that rigorous academic research is seen as an important part of an ecosystem of change.

Philanthropy can also play an important role in strengthening community power-building partnerships. One critical factor highlighted by our interviewees was the importance of prioritizing relationship-building alongside research itself. Interviewees highlighted the need for flexible, long-term funding to sustain academic-community partnerships, and the value of “power-literate” program officers who understand movement-building.

In a time of deepening inequality and crisis, universities have a chance to reclaim their public mission by supporting scholars in building reciprocal, power-building partnerships with grassroots movements. This can help not only support community power building, but also help strengthen Universities' role as vital engines of justice, democracy, and transformation.

Powering up: Context and purpose of this study

The Lead Local project, supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), explored how community power catalyzes, creates, and sustains healthy communities. Bringing together over 40 local organizations and institutional partners across 16 sites in the U.S., the initiative examined how power-building efforts can help organizations dismantle systems that perpetuate health inequities and create policies that promote well-being (Pastor, Ito, and Wander 2020:6).

A key recommendation from this effort was to build a network of academic scholars with the skills and capacity to partner with—and strengthen the work of—community power-building organizations. Such partnerships can provide valuable research, legitimize community-based knowledge, and support training and education. However, as community-engaged scholarship literature shows, these collaborations require navigating complex ethical, political, and epistemic challenges (London et al. 2022).

Lead Local defined community power as *"the ability of communities most impacted by structural inequity to develop, sustain and grow an organized based of people who act together through democratic structures to set agendas, shift public discourse, influence who makes decisions, and cultivate ongoing relationships of mutual accountability with decision makers that change systems and advance health equity"* (Pastor et al. 2020:6). While power building strategies vary, all emphasize member or resident organizing, developing grassroots leadership and engaging in broad advocacy efforts to hold decision-makers accountable. Academics working with these organizations must understand not only the priorities of paid staff but also the power dynamics, culture and communication structures within broader organizing networks.

Despite growing support for community engaged scholarship, including recognition for community engagement by the Carnegie Classification (368 institutions as of 2024),[3] many scholars struggle with institutional barriers to community engaged work. Tenure and promotion policies often undervalue community-based work, prioritizing traditional publications over collaborative, publicly engaged research. Funding for such scholarship remains inadequate, making long-term partnerships difficult to sustain. University-based research centers focused on progressive, community-engaged work have emerged. However, institutionalizing these centers presents challenges—leaders must navigate funding, staffing, departmental relationships, and university bureaucracy–and substantial challenges for individual faculty remain (Sacha et al. 2013).

Figure 1: Types of organizations within the power-building ecosystem (Ito, Wander and Pastor 2019)

Scholars engaged in community powerbuilding efforts must develop a range of skills alongside their academic expertise, including fundraising, media relations, organizing, and public relations skills. They also benefit from understanding how they fit within broader power-building ecosystems of allied organizations (see figure 1) (Ito, Wander, and Pastor 2019). Academics contribute not just through research but also by shaping narratives, supporting leadership development, and informing policy. These ecosystems can be structured through formal coalitions or informal collaborations. Given their focus on systemic change, power-building efforts often involve conflict and resistance. Scholars working in these spaces must navigate these tensions while maintaining credibility both within academia and with community partners.

There is little research on what enables academic-based scholars to build successful partnerships with community power-building efforts. This study seeks to answer key questions:

- What types of people have gotten involved in such efforts and what motivates them to build such partnerships?
- What is their approach to social change efforts, and how has this shaped their approach to building collaborative projects?
- How has this work fit in with their career trajectory, and what factors or processes have helped them be successful in that trajectory?
- What lessons have they learned about building productive relationships with community partners, and what factors and processes make for successful partnerships?

[3] See https://carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Carnegie_LifetimeClassifiedCampuses.pdf for all institutions, and https://carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Carnegie_CurrentClassifiedInstitutions.pdf for currently classified Institutions.

By addressing these questions, this study aims to deepen understanding of how universities and philanthropy can contribute to academic-community power-building partnerships that are equitable, sustainable and impactful.

Methodology

Our goal was to identify promising practices in university-community partnerships where community power building is clearly a central goal of the partnership.

Our first step was to compile a list of scholars engaged in partnerships with community power-building organizations for potential interviews. We drew from academic networks at the Institute for Social Transformation at UC Santa Cruz and the Equity Research Institute at USC, which include experts across disciplines such as economic justice, health equity, racial justice, and social movements. We also identified researchers working in the 16 focus areas of the Lead Local initiative and supplemented this with a literature review. Finally, we used a snowball method, expanding our list through recommendations from initial interviewees.

For each academic we interviewed, we asked them for a leader from their community partnership to also interview. This helped ensure community perspectives on promising practices are incorporated into the analysis, even though our focus is on the academy itself and academic based scholars.

We interviewed a total of 21 people (see list at the end). These were semi-structured interviews, guided by an interview protocol but responsive to the particular inputs and insights of the interviewees. Our focus in each interview was to understand: the background and approach to the motivation for building a partnership; understanding the process of building the partnership; and the process of navigating academic contexts in working with community power-building organizations. Each interview lasted approximately an hour.

All interviews were transcribed and imported into the qualitative research analysis software Dedoose. Two researchers (Darío León and Susan Grasso) read all transcripts, coding for key concepts, and checking each other's coding ideas. These were also discussed with the lead author (Benner), and refined into 16 broad categories, with some sub-categories. These were then clustered into the three broad categories that structure our analysis: the background, identity and values of academics that led them to building partnership with community power-building organizations; the processes that were involved in building the partnerships, focusing on the initial relationship and project building process; and processes for navigating university structures and processes.

Finally, we held key discussions and focus groups on preliminary findings with a select group of academics and community partners who participated in *All-In: Co-Producing Knowledge for Justice*, a conference on community-engaged scholarship held at UC Santa Cruz in October of 2022.

Generating currents: Scholars rooted in movement and research

We divide our findings in this study into three different sections. First we look at the academic-based scholars themselves. This is followed by an examination of the process of building and maintaining effective mutually beneficial partnerships with community power-building efforts. Finally we analyze university structures and processes that supported or hindered the development of such partnerships and the career trajectories of the academics involved.

Blurring the lines

We began this research assuming a clear distinction between academics and community power-building organizations. However, our findings quickly revealed that these boundaries are fluid. Many academics engaged in power-building partnerships see themselves as part of social movements, not just as scholars. Some were deeply involved in organizing before entering academia, while others remain active even while in their academic roles. Many are not necessarily committed to a lifelong career in academia.

How do scholars develop this commitment to community organizing and social change? Several interviewees pointed to formative experiences in their upbringing. One tenured professor described growing up in a white, blue-collar family with strong union ties and parents active in racial justice organizing. Another faculty member of color recalled learning about the United Farm Workers grape boycott in school and bringing it up with their family, only to encounter opposition from relatives who were small grape farmers. This experience later shaped their

understanding of the intersection between environmental and racial justice when they became involved in the environmental justice movement.

Others cited experiences before graduate school that shaped their appreciation for power-building. Some worked as community or labor organizers, while others were exposed to organizing as adults in ways that transformed their perspective. One scholar from a rural Midwestern community, for example, described seeing organizing in urban areas for the first time and realizing how essential it was for systemic change.

For some, graduate school itself was the turning point. One faculty of color enrolled in a public health master's program to study community health but soon recognized that deeper structural barriers to democratic decision-making were at play. This realization led them to pursue a Ph.D. with a stronger focus on public engagement.

International experiences also played a key role for at least six of our informants. A white scholar who studied abroad in Cape Verde later worked for a women's microlending organization, deepening their understanding of colonial legacies and race dynamics. A scholar of color with a law degree described being inspired by activist lawyers in Cuba, which challenged their perceptions of the legal profession. Others pointed to their involvement in Central American solidarity movements as pivotal in their political development.

Regardless of their path, all our academic informants identified not just as scholars but also as activists or organizers. Many pursued Ph.D.s after recognizing gaps in community-engaged work, such as research credibility, funding access, and university resources. Whether shaped by early movement involvement or exposure later in life, their activist commitments continue to inform their scholarship and power-building efforts today.

> *"What I aspire to is seeing research as a collective endeavor. It's not, I'm trying to sort of contest some of these binaries of activist and academic or university based and community based. I try to approach this as sort of dispelling some of those, those binaries"*–pre-tenure tenure track professor
>
> *"I see my work and my role as a scholar, as a member of these social justice movements…and so my research is directed at how do I help strengthen and support movements for social justice and engage with a range of other stakeholders"* –tenured professor

> *"Right to me, the work that I do is supposed to be transformative. And if that is the case, then I am by definition an activist scholar, because I have chosen to actually just say out loud that I have a political agenda and [what] that political agenda is."* –pre-tenure tenure-track professor
>
> *"why I came to academia…it's really about…kind of inspiring students to be social change agents…. I want them to be activists wherever they are inside the private sector or the public sector, whatever. But knowing that you just can't be passive, you have to just change. "* –tenured professor

It is important to note that several academics felt more comfortable as a social change actor in their non-academic role, feeling it was inappropriate or inaccurate to view social movement contributions as coming from scholarly work.

> *"I feel like my work as a teacher and academic rarely feels like it directly contributes to supporting the social movements that I study. I feel constantly humbled by how far ahead the social movements are than the scholarship. And I feel like almost always, all that I can try to do is document in real time what I'm observing as honestly and effectively as possible. Because I rarely feel like I have a lot to contribute analytically to the movements themselves. As someone who has been focused primarily on undergraduate education for most of my career…what I've tried to do is bring social movements into the classroom and engage and provide students access to opportunities to develop themselves."* –tenured professor

Stepping into the academy

Given their strong commitment to social change, why do activist scholars enter academia at all? We identified three broad motivations.

First, many were drawn to academia because they saw research as both personally fulfilling and valuable for social movements. Gaining research skills and institutional credibility allowed them to better define and address critical social issues. Some viewed academia as a natural extension of their organizing or advocacy work—one community partner even described organizing itself as a form of research.

> *"It's been my experience and I guess kind of my training and kind of the tradition of black organization that I came out of kind of linked to Ella Baker and others, that research [is] a part of the transformative process; almost kind of being able to tell the story of what is….and for me as an organizer, again, in my tradition, Huey P. Newton talks about power is the ability to define phenomenon and to make it act accordingly. "* –community leader
>
> *"I feel like given my skills and my positionality documenting people's stories in the scholarly realm is really important. It affirms people's knowledge. It elevates people's campaigns. It can help them fundraise".* –tenured professor

Beyond research, many were also drawn to teaching as a means of advancing social change. Faculty of color, in particular, emphasized their role as a resource for marginalized students, creating spaces where students could feel safe and supported in institutions that may not fully embrace them. For these scholars, the intersection of research, teaching, and service was central to their academic and activist commitments.

> *"I have a natural presence and responsibility to students of color, to queer students who see me and identify with me and then bring their issues to me. That's service work, that's teaching, it also forms the basis of the kind of work that I pursue, academically….If you put an intersectional lens on any of these questions, it collapses these identities, right. ….what happens when all those identities collapse? Does it make me a better teacher? Does it make me a better scholar? Does it make me a better activist that all these things are happening to me at once? I would argue, yes."* –pre-tenure tenure track professor

A second key motivation for pursuing academic careers was the opportunity to leverage university resources and credibility in support of social movements. Beyond the prestige of academic research, scholars saw value in using their platform to amplify movement work through newsletters, books, and media, reaching broader audiences than community organizations alone. Teaching courses on social change also helped connect students to activism. Perhaps most importantly, academia provided access to collaborative funding opportunities, allowing scholars to channel resources toward community-engaged research and power-building efforts.

> *"I form alliances with these groups to conduct research because I believe that through these alliances, that research will be more relevant to supporting and strengthening these movements. And then I helped use that research to translate into initiatives stronger organizing strategies, as well as…community-driven policy solutions in the educational justice space."*–tenured professor
>
> *"We were able to create some projects…with power building organizations earlier on through early stage faculty grants….[W]e had done a ton of advocacy and relationship-building with [the funders'] committees, their decision-making committees, to try to get them to understand the importance of this."*
> –non-tenure track academic researcher

Finally, many people pursued careers in academia for personal reasons, related to the employment security that is present in (at least some) positions in higher education institutions. Organizing work is not well-paid in this country, and it is a reality that the potential personal material benefits of an academic career can be an important motivator.

> *"I come from a family that had a lot of financial struggles and I was a little afraid of trusting my future to the movement. I was worried about jobs and economic security.… I was married to an organizer and there was a little bit of like, I don't know how we're both going to do this. So it's meant that I have really good benefits and a decent salary and a pension and all that. And [my partner] could kinda do [their] stuff anyway."* –tenured professor

Connecting the grid: How scholars and communities build together

There is a long and painful history of exploitative relationships between universities and marginalized communities. The Tuskegee Syphilis Study, where Black men were deceived and denied treatment in the name of research, is just the most infamous example of studies conducted on rather than with marginalized communities (Brandt 1978; Reverby 2012; Tobin 2022). Many communities have experienced either neglect or being studied without meaningful benefit. Histories of dispossession, displacement, and gentrification (and studentification!) further reinforce distrust toward university researchers (Nash 2019; Revington et al. 2023).

So how were the promising partnerships in our study built? What relationship-building processes and mutually beneficial activities made them successful? Even when academic researchers are committed to community power-building, challenges remain. While partnerships vary by location, organization type, and whether the academic or community group initiates them, trust is the key indicator of success. Connections often form through social networks or academics' own organizing work, but the strongest partnerships deepen through shared values and mutual respect.

Respecting community knowledge

One prerequisite for building beneficial partnerships is that the academic partners have a deep respect for community knowledge and perspectives, recognizing the value of multiple epistemologies. In academia, community knowledge and perspectives are typically undervalued and underappreciated, but community engaged faculty have been major advocates for recognizing such knowledge. They themselves have learned from community expertise, both

personally and professionally, and appreciate the importance of being able to utilize multiple epistemologies in research. This requires humility–the understanding that academics have at least as much to learn from community power-building organizations as they have to offer.

> *"I think there's two things. One is love, right? You know, deep love and respect for organizers. Because it's the best job in the world. And it's the hardest job in the world. And everybody genuflects to organizers in our movement and also doesn't treat them well. So I have a ton of respect and I think that I always sort of start with that.* –tenured professor
>
> *"I just think what is really more important is for people like us who are scholars to really live a deep respect and partnership with people. Like you have to feel it. And I'm not saying I'm perfect at all. I don't want to say that, but I think partners say they feel something from me and, and not just me, there are other people who do this work and also do it this way."* –tenured professor
>
> *"They're not objects of study, but they're subjects of social analysis.... people are...the proper analysts of their own experience. [P]art of what you do as an ethnographer is you document systematically carefully with respect and you...are in fact co-producing knowledge with your ethnographic subjects."* –tenured professor

Building academic alliances

A partnership requires a connection from both sides, so why do organizers seek relationships with academics? Many see value in gaining access to those in power, legitimizing their work, and using research to strengthen their campaigns. Research helps identify allies and opponents, understand relevant laws, and navigate systems. Academics provide critical support by equipping organizations with useful information, enabling them to educate and mobilize communities. Solid research reinforces workers' experiences, showing them their struggles are not isolated but part of broader, well-documented issues.

> *"I don't feel confident trying to build anything if I don't have sound research to move on, you know what I mean? So it's like when you are going out and you're talking to workers, the organizing conversation includes the introduction, getting their story and then educating them on what the possibilities are. If you don't have solid research, it's very difficult to educate people on the issue and how we're going to resolve the issue.* --community leader

Translating what an organizer or community group feels by instinct is the problem into an actual quantifiable issue is an important task for academic researchers.

> *"Oftentimes we're moving on options and what feels right are good instincts, but you really can't make a solid case if you can't quantify what it is you think....We know that these jobs are not valuing us as workers. We know that we're underpaid.. We know that's wrong, but it has become the norm and we've accepted it. So it's like, now there's a space where we need to start explaining how dire this situation really is...And you think about a union organizer, when we're going door to door, talking to people, what we're doing, we're data building, we're building our database with information. And so there was a big gap for academia to really put a stake in the conversation around the worker experience."* –community partner

Some organizers actively seek out academics who share their values and might have a background in studying a particular theme, such as labor history, or unions.

> *"The model that came to us was you go, you find these academics to teach modules [in our leadership development program]. So you've gotta find people that are fellow travelers, so to speak that are like-minded, they've got to care about the economy working for more people in the same way that your organization does. And then you want people that teach about the local economy or teach about issues of race or teach about issues of class."* –community partner
>
> *"Organizing is so much about relationships. And so, what is the value of the relationship that will be generated between researchers and community organizers feels invaluable...I think there is a way we understand the impact of research on people, particularly the development of leaders and also being able to help them get a sense of themselves... Research should be looked at as, not as a finite process, but this kind of ongoing field that is evolving, that should be in relationship. It should be influenced by each other."* —community partner

Not surprisingly, organizations feel that the relationship is most successful when community knowledge is respected and community priorities are emphasized. Academics who recognize the depth of experience, the granular level of detail at which the organizers operate, seem better able to strengthen the work of the organization.

> *"We're experts in a lot of areas out here in the community. We use our expertise to be able to help them get to their goals. So being clear on what the goals of the project are, being in regular communication and then being able to support them in achieving those goals is really how community could support a university."* —community partner
>
> *"A lot of times in research [institutions], it's like, ooh, "community engaged research, you talk to some people". That's not the same as [partnering with] a power building entity on a trajectory.... .[Academics should] identify credible partners and like, it's not that hard to do–they have a track record of success. And then you resource them. The community partner should be the driver and the holder of the money. So it's basically like the community has a vision and the research should support that vision, not the other way around."* —community partner

From the perspective of the academic researcher, involvement with the community is often the result of their own identity, experience and values, but there are certain traits or characteristics that usually make the relationship more successful.

The academics with strong relationships to community organizations frequently come from a social justice background themselves and consciously emphasize the community's needs and experience. They are then able to highlight data from their research that helps hone the community organization's work, both to the organizations themselves and to other stakeholders. Being able to provide data that is objective and removed from the political pressures of the organization can be beneficial in bringing community and labor perspectives to policymakers, increasing the credibility of community perspectives.

"And, as time went on, unions got to see that [me being independent] worked, because when the right would attack me, when I was sued…when I'd go before Congress and they would question me, the fact that I could say that nothing was proprietary, that they had no say, it helped. –non-tenure track academic researcher

"That was a big line that we wanted to make just to increase the credibility because the accusation is, every time I talk to somebody, oh, you're union, you're doing a union survey….And so anything that we can do to kind of try to make very explicit that no, we have union partners…and people that are interested, but this is an independent project, you know, I as PI was making all the final decisions about what made the cut or what didn't. But [my community partners], myself and others, we were coming at this from a similar perspective. If that makes sense. I shared in their vision and their goals. But then tried to also then become the academic that was independent." —pre-tenure tenure track professor

Deepening partnerships beyond research

One of the most important lessons from these partnerships is that academic collaboration with community power-building organizations extends far beyond research. While rigorous research can be a valuable resource, universities and faculty also provide critical support in other ways—offering formal and informal training, facilitating leadership development, and helping organizations navigate legal and policy landscapes. Faculty have played key roles in developing educational toolkits, shaping public policy, testifying before legislative bodies, and co-authoring materials with community leaders. Universities can also provide neutral spaces for convenings, facilitate difficult conversations between community organizations and policymakers, and even serve as sites for embedding staff from community groups.

> *"We were very focused on a labor leadership certificate program for union members, any workers out there. So, you know, union staff members, elected leadership, but also workers center, our leaders, or even just community members who want to know more. That's focused very nuts and bolts on like, um, organizing arbitration, bargaining skills, labor history"* –non-tenure track academic researcher
>
> *"We co-convene this thing…[with] about 30 organizers from around the country…from many different networks who come together to talk about using policy to build local labor market power. And the way it works is that every month, some other organizer presents what they're doing and presents, not just the what, but the why and the how and the lessons, like what are the lessons?"* —tenured professor

Students are another major resource. Many academic programs are designed to train future scholar-activists, integrating community-based learning as a central part of their education. However, partnerships only succeed when student engagement is structured in ways that genuinely support community needs rather than creating additional burdens. Short-term, observational projects often do little to benefit organizations, and volunteer commitments tied to the academic calendar may not align with organizational priorities. The most effective programs ensure that students contribute meaningfully—whether through sustained internships, targeted research that supports campaigns, or providing assistance in critical areas like legal advocacy, outreach, and policy development.

> *"Our department was set up to be a place where students could learn, but also be in the field and work with organizers. We have language about how we want our students to be practical idealists…. our students [are] required to take an organizing class…In their junior year, they spend the whole semester working 15 hours a week. We have a summer housing internship where students work full-time with our community partners."*--tenured professor
>
> *"We have worked with the [university] social work graduate school and they have yearlong internships and they've been some of our best…people. And also with our program [with our partner] we had like five different interns who were perfectly bilingual [and] had a connection themselves to Latino migrant workers families…those were some of our best experiences…We had [another] professor who came to us. He's like, okay, [the students] have to volunteer two hours a week for 10 weeks and there's 20 of them. And we were like, oh my God, no thank you."* –community partner

Legal expertise is another area where academics provide key support. In many countries, legal professionals are expected to be active agents of social transformation, but in the U.S., lawyers who take on activist roles can face professional risks. Nevertheless, faculty have used their expertise to help organizations navigate legal challenges, provide testimony, and support policy efforts that advance workers' rights, immigrant protections, and other critical issues.

Beyond individual faculty contributions, universities themselves offer unique institutional resources that community organizations often lack. Access to research infrastructure, funding networks, and public space can be invaluable, helping organizations amplify their impact. Some faculty members have helped community groups secure funding, while others have used university platforms to disseminate research findings, increase public awareness, and support movement-building efforts.

Technology has also become an increasingly important tool for collaboration. Faculty and students have worked with community organizations to develop digital storytelling projects, training workshops, and participatory research initiatives that empower local leaders to document and analyze their own experiences.

> *"We actually had a really cool partnership where a professor at the [university] in communications and one an anthropologist from [another university] did a project together on…the use of technology amongst day laborers. And so that was a really cool partnership because they also offered a training seminar for the workers themselves and they self documented–did videos. It was really cool. And they got a stipend for participating. So that was a neat kind of short term research partnership"* —community partner

In rare cases, Universities actually can become the institutional home for community-led efforts. The Moving Forward Network[4], for example, grew out of other work on children's environmental health and became housed at the Urban and Environmental Policy Institute at Occidental College. This comes with some advantages, such as the security of having staff be Occidental employees, with access to university benefits and protections. But there are also disadvantages, including dealing with a more risk-averse and bureaucratic institution when dealing with contracts and potential funders.

Overall, our research shows that academic engagement in community power-building partnerships is often not just about research or studying social change, but often include actively supporting community power-building in a wide range of ways.

Navigating shared struggles

One of the factors that emerged in our research that seemed to help in building trusted partnerships is when there are struggles on campus that are similar to, or have intersections with, the struggles taking place outside the university. Issues of gender, racial and economic justice clearly cut across both university and community contexts, but being directly involved in specific organizations or campaigns, not just studying intersectional issues, can help build relationships and trust. For example, several of the academics we talked to were involved in unionization efforts of university staff, both academic and non-academic. This helped provide connections to the broader labor movement, including through central labor councils and connections with unions who have members in other institutions beside the university. In another case, there was a strong citizenship rights program developed on campus that was designed to help support anyone affiliated with the university in applying for green cards or citizenship, that had important direct intersections with immigrant rights organizing going on in the local community. Even if the professors themselves are not directing their efforts to effect change at the university, frequently the students in their classes are.

[4] https://www.movingforwardnetwork.com/

Cultivating trust and crafting agreements

One key question that often emerges in community-university partnerships is whether people should have a formal written memorandum of understanding (MOU). Many people we interviewed did mention written agreements, often specifying who has access to research data and who would be involved in writing and publishing from that data. But all our respondents emphasized that successful partnerships were built more on trust than formal written agreements. MOUs were seen by some as useful for defining roles, responsibilities, and expectations, but many power-building partnerships thrive without them, relying instead on mutual accountability, long-term engagement, and alignment of values.

Trust in these relationships is not automatic; it is cultivated over time through consistent communication, demonstrated commitment, and a genuine respect from academics for community expertise. Academics who are most effective in these partnerships do not approach the community as "objects" of research but as equal partners in the co-creation of knowledge and strategy. This means being present beyond a single research project, showing up for the struggles of their community partners, and ensuring that the work they produce is useful to those on the frontlines of organizing.

Several key factors emerged in our research as having helped make these trust-based partnerships work. First, successful academic partners enter the relationship with humility, recognizing that community organizations are already experts in their own struggles and do not need outsiders to define their problems or solutions. Second, long-term presence and consistency matter—communities have seen researchers come and go, so sustained engagement, beyond the life of a single grant or study, signals a real commitment. Third, academics who contribute beyond research—whether by offering space, legal expertise, policy advocacy, or student engagement—often build trust by showing they are invested in the success of the broader movement, not just in extracting data. Trust is also reinforced when community organizations have real power in shaping the research agenda, methodology, and outcomes, ensuring that the work is directly relevant and actionable.

These elements—humility, longevity, reciprocity, and shared decision-making—seem to form key foundations for trust-based, movement-aligned partnerships that go beyond paperwork to build real power.

Resisting short circuits: Making university structures work for partnership

In these cases of promising practices in university partnerships around community power building efforts, what role did the institution of the university play in supporting these individual faculty and researchers in their work?

Shifting institutional currents

One encouraging sign is that there appears to be a positive evolution in how community engaged research is being viewed on many campuses. This is evident in a variety of different ways, including the growth in numbers of institutions seeking the Community-Engaged Carnegie Classification, in the number of institutions establishing offices or divisions of community engagements, in the visibility that scholars doing this kind of research are increasingly getting from their Universities, and in the ways Universities are trying to adjust their promotion and tenure processes to recognize and reward community engaged scholarship more systematically (Welch and Saltmarsh 2013).

People we interviewed talked about very real generational differences in the experiences of community engaged scholarship, with older scholars reflecting on an increasing acceptance of community power-building engaged scholarship at their institutions overtime. Community engaged work by university students, both undergraduate and graduate students, has been more accepting throughout the years. There is a hunger from students that want to apply what they have learned in academia to real world situations and framework. This hunger is sometimes seen as a breath of fresh air to faculty who have been out of direct community grassroots organizing. However, more senior faculty also talked about the serious fights they

had to engage in for their work to be taken seriously, and in some cases having their career suffer as a result of their commitment to community power-building scholarship. This can contribute to a hesitancy and nervousness from the recent PhD graduates to engage certain topics or directly question government or private entities, which has been seen due to the possible repercussions or fallout that could happen to them personally or their career. They have witnessed the outcomes of certain researchers and academics and do not want to have the same fate.

> *"...that doesn't fly, though....[i]f you're a faculty member trying to get tenure and in a department that may not really accept [community-engaged work]. In some ways things have changed more than I ever thought they would. And in other ways, you know, it's like, we're hearing ...it's ground hog day. It's the same, the same reactions.....For example at [my university] there are no campus wide standards for promotion tenure [related to community engaged work]., none. Right there."* –tenured-professor

Breaking ground in applied fields

One of the themes that emerged in our research was the greater acceptance of community engaged scholarship in certain applied disciplines, than in more traditional academic disciplines. Social work, public health, urban planning, labor studies and education are all fields in which there are strong expectations that faculty and students are working closely with community partners in some capacity. However, not all of this work is focused on power-building. Much of it is focused on service activities. Even within labor education, much of the community partnerships that have been institutionalized have been focused on supporting shop stewards or union staff in their activities to support existing members, rather than in new organizing.

> *"In many academic disciplines doing community-engaged scholarship is frowned upon. Like it's not objective. You know, somehow biased, but in many applied fields, like urban planning, social welfare, you know, others, there's sort of an expectation you're doing applied work. I mean, there's so much, with planning it's expected that you're doing something applied. And so there's less of a fight there."* –non-tenure track academic researcher

However, having that context and culture of support for community engaged work can help create a fertile ground for partnerships around more active power-building efforts. Faculty in those disciplines described more acceptance of their work, and few needed to justify the

partnerships they had developed to their colleagues and peers.

Navigating the tenure maze

Our academic respondents almost universally talked about the challenges in the tenure process of doing work engaged with community power-building efforts. In some cases, people said there was little support for their work in formal channels. Some chose to pursue non-tenure track positions specifically because they didn't want to go through the hurdles of what would be required at their institution to get tenure, or a concern that they would not get tenure.

> *"There's only so much your department and your school can do when the decision-making on tenure goes to higher levels of an academic institution where people might not have that value system…My department and my school, I…hope and trust that they would argue for me, also are arguing against a very, very rigid, and I would say, non-inclusive, systemically problematic system of tenure that…takes hold of academic institutes."*
> –pre-tenure tenure-track professor

In other cases, people talked about complex internal institutional political dynamics, with some people within the institution supporting this kind of work, and others being much more critical. In most cases, people seemed to feel that departmental colleagues were more supportive of community power building work than higher level divisional or central administrators. But this wasn't universally true. In one case, the faculty member felt that the university administration liked their work, since it got lots of publicity, but that their colleagues felt jealous of that visibility.

> *"The department was fairly supportive. I had peers that were very supportive; they got it. They liked what …we were doing….I had great peer support. The chair gave kind of lip service to supporting the idea but when then there was pressure coming from on high, that support didn't feel quite as strong…..[the] Dean didn't really have experience with this type of community engaged research….And that got pretty uncomfortable….The institution's very hierarchical. So if it comes from above, there's not a whole lot of wiggle room there."* –pre-tenure tenure-track professor

Elevating non-tenure-track scholars

Non-tenure track researchers and faculty at universities play a critical yet often undervalued role, particularly in fostering community partnerships and supporting social change work. These academic scholars frequently do invaluable work in supporting community partnership but have to navigate institutional structures that often fail to recognize or adequately support their

contributions. Because their positions are frequently grant-funded or contingent on short-term contracts, they lack the job security that allows for long-term, sustained engagement with community organizations. Yet, many continue to do this work because of their commitment to bridging academia and activism.

Some universities have attempted to professionalize non-tenure track roles by creating structured career pathways with benefits and protections. For example, one institution created a "tenure track for non-tenure faculty," ensuring that these scholars received full benefits, competitive salaries, and even the ability to take sabbaticals. In this model, faculty who were not on the traditional tenure track still had institutional stability and a recognized place within academic governance. However, even within such frameworks, disparities remain. While non-tenure track faculty often take on extensive teaching loads, their work in community engagement, public scholarship, and applied research is not always counted equitably in promotion and evaluation processes.

> *"[our university] created a tenure track for non-tenured faculty…The salaries are good. They have full benefits and now they also have a ladder. They get a sabbatical. Some of them are published and esteemed and fantastic. They're not expected to do the same amount of publishing…We have some [of them] pretty lefty, you know, some major…figures who are now at every faculty meeting who have nothing to lose…and who have just completely gone to town pushing the school. I never felt like I could in order to get tenure."* –tenured professor

The reliance on external funding further exacerbates the precariousness of these roles. In some cases, non-tenure track faculty must secure their own funding to sustain their positions, with contracts that can be canceled if funding runs dry or if their research is deemed no longer relevant. One non-tenured researcher described how their position, despite an impressive track record of research and engagement, remained contingent on securing grants and demonstrating ongoing "interest" from the university administration. This financial insecurity creates significant barriers to developing long-term, trust-based relationships with community partners, as scholars must constantly seek external resources rather than focusing on the work itself.

> *"...particularly for tenure line faculty it's always a struggle to like, do you do super community engaged work that moves slowly? Or do you do sort of the quicker stuff, that's going to be easier and quicker to publish. So, yeah. I mean, there's the same sort of metrics I think particularly for tenure line faculty. So it's part of the reason why I chose not to pursue the tenure line because I want to make more slowly with the relationship development. And I want to be able to produce different outputs besides academic scholarship."* –non-tenure track professor

Despite these challenges, non-tenure track scholars continue to be instrumental in advancing community-engaged scholarship. Their flexibility and often extensive professional networks allow them to act as bridges between the university and grassroots organizations. They play a vital role in training students, facilitating public-facing research, and ensuring that academic institutions fulfill their commitments to social justice. However, without institutional reforms that provide more security and recognition for these scholars, the sustainability of their contributions remains at risk.

Tracing generational shifts and persistent tensions

The generational differences among academics engaged in community power-building work was striking in our research. Faculty who entered academia in the 1970s and 1980s talked about often facing significant institutional barriers when attempting to integrate community-engaged scholarship into their academic careers. Many had to justify their work in traditional terms—publishing in high-ranking academic journals rather than prioritizing publicly accessible reports, policy briefs, or other community-centered outputs. These faculty members often had to navigate resistance within their departments and institutions, persuading colleagues and administrators that their work was legitimate and valuable.

> *I think one of the tensions right now is that those of us that were held to those really tight standards and have continued to be held to it in terms of what the expectation was. Now I'm a full professor and ... I think there's a sense of relaxing them now in a way that they weren't before and kind of like amnesia about what we all got tortured with....I was told, a book, and two top journal articles a year [for tenure]. They're not doing that now.* –tenured professor

"I have been here 30 years. I..don't have tenure, I'm in a temporary job. I have to fund stuff myself..... I applied for tenure tracks....they would not let, they would not read my application....I could have sued them, tried to sue them, but I didn't, I, it would've been such a fight....there was gender discrimination....[t]here was other things, but the real reason was that they did not want someone who was that controversial [in my research] in terms of them getting funding and because the school is 90, you know, the student body is 99% going into corporate positions." –non-tenure track researcher

"When I first came to [my university] I struggled a lot because under the previous provost...they're afraid that community engaged scholarship is looked down upon in the larger mainstream academia....I do think that has improved over the years" –tenured professor

In contrast, faculty who entered academia in the 2000s and 2010s have benefited from incremental institutional shifts, with some universities beginning to recognize and even reward engaged scholarship (Bertram and Bullock 2023; Sdvizhkov et al. 2022). More faculty now enter the profession with the reasonable expectation that their work will involve meaningful partnerships with community organizations. Some institutions have revised their tenure and promotion policies to account for engaged research, and faculty networks supporting this kind of work have become more established. In some cases, the opinions of community partners are considered in tenure decisions. However, despite these improvements, many faculty still encounter structural barriers, particularly as higher education institutions tighten definitions of scholarly productivity. Junior faculty today are often warned that while engaged scholarship is valued, it still needs to be framed in ways that align with traditional metrics of success. The pressure to publish in top-tier academic journals remains strong, and some scholars worry that newer faculty are becoming more risk-averse, prioritizing tenure-track security over the deeply collaborative work that engaged scholarship requires.

"There's no way I would've gotten tenure at Stanford or Harvard. You know, obviously I got tenure at [my current university] based on my scholarship....but also I was given credit, you know, service credit for being on [my city's] immigrant rights commission. I got letters from those immigrant organizations...in support of my tenure and promotion. And I submitted them.... And there was like a clear, clear 'if you don't tenure this person...'...as much as we criticize [my institution] for falling short, in the area of tenure and promotion is in fact supportive of the work" –tenured professor

The evolution of faculty experiences reflects broader shifts in academia's openness to public engagement, but disparities remain. While some universities have embraced engaged research, others continue to privilege traditional scholarship, limiting the ability of newer faculty to fully commit to community-centered work. As a result, while institutional support for community-engaged scholarship has grown, generational tensions persist, with more senior faculty who fought for legitimacy watching as younger faculty navigate both new opportunities and enduring challenges.

Charging the future: Strengthening community power-building partnerships

The findings from this study highlight both the opportunities and challenges in building strong, mutually beneficial partnerships between universities and community power-building organizations. Strengthening this work depends on creating institutional structures and funding models that support not just individual collaborations, but broader ecosystems of engaged scholars and grassroots movements. The following recommendations outline key areas for improvement: best practices for building and sustaining partnerships, institutional changes that can better support engaged scholarship, and strategies for philanthropy to invest in long-term power-building efforts. Taken together, these recommendations offer guidance for reinforcing the infrastructure necessary for sustained, impactful collaborations between academics and communities working for systemic change.

Partnerships: Supporting ecosystems

To more effectively support community power-building efforts, universities and funders can go beyond supporting individual partnerships or scholars and instead invest in robust ecosystems of community-engaged scholarship and grassroots movements. This includes developing institutional infrastructures that connect engaged scholars across disciplines, regions, and universities, while also facilitating deeper collaborations with grassroots organizations working on power-building initiatives. Universities can play a key role by investing in research centers,

cross-disciplinary networks, and community engagement offices that provide long-term institutional homes for power-building partnerships. These entities serve as conveners, offering training, mentorship, and funding opportunities for scholars committed to engaged research.

Rather than focusing solely on projects led by individual academics, funding models could place greater emphasis on multi-institutional collaborations that amplify the impact of engaged research while ensuring sustained relationships with grassroots organizations. Effective structures provide not only material resources but also spaces for intellectual and strategic exchange, helping ensure that scholarship aligns with the priorities of power-building organizations.

At the grassroots level, investments must be made in community-based research infrastructure that allows organizations to co-produce knowledge and maintain lasting relationships with academic institutions. This means prioritizing funding for community organizations to lead research initiatives, rather than positioning them as secondary partners in university-led projects. Philanthropic and institutional funders should create pooled funding mechanisms that directly support research within grassroots networks, rather than relying solely on academic institutions to distribute resources. Additionally, stronger linkages must be developed between engaged scholars and movement-building infrastructure, including labor networks, racial and environmental justice coalitions, and regional power-building hubs. Universities can contribute by hosting collaborative spaces, supporting leadership pipelines for scholar-activists, and ensuring that engaged scholarship is not merely an individual career path but a collective, institutionally-supported practice. By shifting the focus from individual partnerships to building and sustaining ecosystems of engaged scholarship, universities and funders can play a transformative role in strengthening long-term movement capacity and advancing systemic social change.

Universities: Revising promotion criteria

To effectively recognize and reward community-engaged research, universities should integrate explicit criteria into their promotion and tenure policies that acknowledge the unique characteristics and impacts of such scholarship. This involves defining community-engaged scholarship within institutional guidelines, ensuring it is evaluated with the same rigor as traditional research, and providing clear standards for assessment. For instance, the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC) has implemented tenure and promotion guidelines that support faculty engaged in community-based research and teaching, officially recognizing the value of this work in academic advancement.[5] Similarly, the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) has explored models from peer institutions to inform their approach, emphasizing the

[5] https://academicpersonnel.ucsc.edu/appointment-and-advancement/2023/08/campus-expectations-for-assessing-community-engaged-scholarship-in-academic-personnel-reviews/

importance of aligning evaluation processes with the distinctive nature of engaged scholarship (Staub and Maharramli 2021).

In addition to policy revisions, universities should foster a supportive culture for community-engaged scholarship by providing resources and infrastructure that encourage faculty participation. This includes offering professional development opportunities focused on engaged research methodologies, creating platforms for disseminating community-engaged work, and establishing reward systems that recognize collaborative efforts with community partners. By adopting these measures, institutions not only validate the significance of community-engaged scholarship but also promote its integration into the broader academic mission, thereby enhancing the university's public impact and commitment to social innovation (Hurd 2022).

Universities: Supporting non-tenure-track staff

Universities must recognize the critical contributions of non-tenure-track (NTT) faculty and staff in community-engaged scholarship and ensure that they receive equitable support, career advancement opportunities, and institutional recognition. These positions—often filled by scholars, practitioners, and community-engagement professionals—play a vital role in sustaining long-term partnerships with grassroots organizations, mentoring students in engaged research, and bringing applied knowledge into academic spaces. Yet, NTT faculty and staff frequently face job insecurity, lower salaries, and exclusion from institutional decision-making processes. To address these inequities, universities should establish career pathways for NTT faculty that include multi-year contracts, transparent promotion tracks, and access to professional development funding. Furthermore, universities should explicitly recognize community engagement, mentorship, and applied research as core contributions in performance evaluations and reappointment decisions, ensuring that NTT faculty and staff are not treated as second-tier academics.

In addition to structural reforms, universities should integrate NTT faculty and staff into governance structures and provide them with access to resources that support long-term engagement with communities. This means offering competitive salaries, research funding, and sabbatical opportunities for NTT faculty and staff engaged in public scholarship. Institutions should also ensure that NTT faculty and staff are included in decision-making bodies, faculty senates, and leadership roles to shape policies that affect their work. Additionally, universities should build cross-campus networks that connect NTT faculty, research center staff, and community partners, fostering collaborative ecosystems rather than isolating engaged scholars in precarious roles. By elevating the status and working conditions of NTT faculty and staff, universities can strengthen their commitment to sustained, meaningful, and impactful community partnerships, ensuring that community engagement is not an individual burden but an institutionally supported practice.

Philanthropy: Strengthening power-literate giving

Philanthropic organizations interested in supporting community power-building may find that strong, trust-based relationships between academics and grassroots organizations are just as crucial as research outputs themselves. Many interviewees highlighted that while funding is often allocated for project-based research, there is limited investment in the time, trust, and infrastructure needed to sustain meaningful partnerships. A more flexible approach to funding—one that includes opportunities for shared strategy sessions, leadership exchanges, and long-term capacity building—could help foster lasting academic-community collaborations. This perspective suggests that research alone does not drive change; rather, it is the relationships and networks that translate knowledge into action. By considering funding models that strengthen the relational fabric of power-building efforts, philanthropy can help ensure that academic knowledge is more deeply embedded in grassroots strategies rather than existing in isolation.

Additionally, some interviewees emphasized the value of philanthropic program officers who are "power-literate"—that is, those who have a nuanced understanding of movement-building, base-building, and long-term social change. They observed that traditional philanthropic approaches focused on short-term policy wins or service provision may not fully align with the realities of transformative change. A deeper familiarity with the political, racial, and economic dynamics shaping community power-building could help program officers engage in more iterative learning with grantees. This might involve shifting beyond conventional grantmaking metrics to assess factors such as the strength of networks, leadership development, and shifts in political discourse. Some interviewees suggested that program officers with backgrounds in organizing, labor movements, and community-engaged research may be particularly well-positioned to bridge the gap between funders, academics, and grassroots organizations.

Finally, there was a strong sentiment that philanthropy could consider moving from short-term, transactional funding cycles to more sustained, long-term investments in power-building. Many interviewees underscored that effective grassroots organizing does not happen within a single grant period but requires years of leadership development, coalition-building, and cultural shifts. Providing multi-year, general operating support may enable organizations and their academic partners to pursue long-term strategies without the constraints of short-term deliverables. Furthermore, some interviewees suggested that evaluating impact through a long-term lens—focusing on indicators such as organizational resilience, evolving policy landscapes, and expanded democratic participation—may provide a more holistic view of change than immediate, quantifiable policy outcomes. By committing to long-term funding strategies, philanthropy has the potential to play a crucial role in sustaining deep, transformative work and ensuring that research partnerships meaningfully contribute to lasting social change.

Creating a more just and engaged university

As universities grapple with their role in an era of deepening inequality, democratic backsliding, and urgent social and environmental crises, power-building, community-engaged partnerships offer a vision for their most vital future. These collaborations are not merely an extension of academic research or public service—they are essential to the university's relevance and legitimacy in a changing world. By forging deeper relationships with grassroots organizations, universities can become institutions that not only generate knowledge but actively contribute to justice and transformation. This requires moving beyond extractive models of scholarship toward partnerships that are reciprocal, sustained, and deeply embedded in movements for change. If universities embrace this vision—one in which knowledge is co-created with communities rather than simply produced for them—they can reclaim their public mission and serve as powerful engines of democracy, equity, and collective liberation.

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Interviewees

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