What Communities Expect from Researchers: A Community Partner Panel

On December 1, 2020, the Office for Public Engagement and Scholarship invited four community partners representing a variety of Michigan communities to share their expectations for partnerships with MSU researchers, offer advice for researchers who have not worked in their communities before, identify issues that are important to address in this present moment, and discuss their expectations for the benefits of research to communities. In this report, we summarize the major themes that emerged in response to each of the four questions posed to the members of our community partner panel. We hope this information serves to promote equitable and impactful partnerships between communities and MSU researchers.

Panelists:

* Madiha Tariq, Deputy Director, ACCESS Community Health and Research Center
* Renee V. Wallace, Executive Director, FoodPLUS Detroit; CEO, Doers Consulting Alliance
* Evelyn Esparza-Gonzalez, Executive Director, Hispanic Center of Western Michigan
* Lisa Martin, Tribal Home Visiting Director, Intertribal Council of Michigan

Discussant:

* Monica Villarreal, Pastor, Community Organizer, and Faculty in Social Work at MSU

# What are your expectations for what a partnership between your community and MSU researchers should look like?

## Build trusting relationships

When panelists were asked about their expectations for partnerships between their communities and MSU researchers, one of the most prominent themes to emerge from their responses was the importance of taking the time to build relationships and trust:

You mentioned something I felt was key. That is trust. Making sure the partnership is built on an authentic relationship. (Evelyn Esparza-Gonzalez)

Relationships [and] trust. Those are all terms that…are very important to us… [For] the tribal communities we work with, relationship really is a first. It is a first in everything we do and understanding that relationship building can take a lot of time. (Lisa Martin)

Relationships and trust grow as community partners and researchers work together, especially when that work is driven by communities rather than researchers.

Working together absolutely is a great opportunity to build trust and relationships. (Renee V. Wallace)

There is a lot of trust to be built. The way to do this is to actually build the research relationship giving equal power to the people in the community. In fact, even I would say work towards shifting the power, shifting the dynamic so it is led by the community members. (Madiha Tariq)

Strong relationships develop when partners lead with their humanity rather than their professional roles:

[Leading with our humanity] helps us to operate from a place of regard for each other as fellow human beings and not necessarily always talking about our roles or vocations. We are people first. I think that it is very, very important that we connect to each other from that place. (Renee V. Wallace)

## Show respect and appreciation for each partner’s contributions

Strong relationships develop when partners have an appreciation for what each contributes to the work. An important aspect of recognizing and valuing the contribution of all partners to the research process is acknowledging the importance of community knowledge:

When you develop a relationship with a community partner, and they bring additional people … to the table from the community, they might not have an advanced degree from the community, but they have advanced knowledge from that community and something valuable to offer to that project. (Lisa Martin)

## Listen carefully

Careful listening is an important way for researchers to show that they value the knowledge and experience of community partners:

…to listen to the community is a skill that takes time, but it is really important. (Lisa Martin)

## Get to know the community

Respectful and culturally sensitive interactions with communities are more likely when researchers take the time to get to know communities:

Making sure the people leading the research have the knowledge of the community they are interacting with. Every community has its own barriers and challenges and making people aware of that will probably facilitate the process and make sure you get the information that you need by focusing on just the Latino community. (Evelyn Esparza-Gonzalez)

## Let community priorities and agendas drive the research

Another frequently expressed expectation for research partnerships was that the research be driven by community priorities and questions:

We have been talking about community-engaged research and I think now we need to start talking about *community-empowered research*. (Madiha Tariq)

## Involve community members throughout the research process

A key expectation of community partners was that community members be involved in all phases of research projects, from conceptualization to the dissemination and use of findings:

[I]nclude…the community in the planning process and the entire research process from relationship building to planning and developing your evaluation or study question to the study design and then the analysis of your data... (Lisa Martin)

Spending time for citizens to be fully engaged in the research in all phases of the research, you know, identifying the kinds of roles people can play. The kinds of actual research activity that people can be involved in. (Renee V. Wallace)

One way of ensuring that the data gathered are interpreted correctly and within their cultural context is to involve community members in the collection and interpretation of data.

Part of it is for the community to take a look at it and provide context to the finding that come out through the numbers and through the analysis of what has been collected. (Lisa Martin)

## Remove barriers to participation

Involving community members in all phases of the research requires removing their barriers to participation, including language barriers:

If you want to make sure you have the participation you want, you need to make sure you provide them with specific things they need to make sure they dedicate the time. Most of our communities spent a lot of time working outside of home and don't have time to interact a lot in community-focused events or things that are organized for them. That's really sad. We need to accommodate and make the specific accommodations to make sure we guarantee the participation including language too. (Evelyn Esparza-Gonzalez)

## Examine your assumptions and definitions

Finally, assumptions researchers hold or how they define places, people and problems can have the unintended effect of reinforcing negative stereotypes. Being mindful of assumptions and definitions is an important way of counteracting such biases:

Also being mindful about how we define things. How we define places. How we define people. The words that we use are often imposed. People don't choose those words. Work with people to define according to words that matter to them and are reflective. (Renee V. Wallace)

# 2. What advice would you offer to faculty and students who are motivated to address social inequities but have never worked in your communities before?

## Look inside first

Before engaging with communities, researchers should begin by exploring their assumptions and attitudes toward the community and community members they hope to engage and their motivations for doing so:

I think it is important that researchers, when they are coming into communities that they haven't had relationships with before and don't know about, is they start with themselves. Spend some time being introspective. Ask yourselves some questions. Why do you want to do this work? Why do you want to do this work in this particular community? What is your motivation for it? There is nothing wrong with winning and benefitting but understand why for yourself. Also, in doing an introspection, ask yourself about your perspectives about the people in that community. They are going to come through. You know, some being able to look in the mirror and say to yourself, how you feel about a certain people, what biases might you have, and how that will affect your relationship with the people in that community? So, it is important to look at yourself first and ask yourself some questions that will prepare you. There may be things you need to work on before you go to work in that community. I would advise taking a look inside first. (Renee V. Wallace)

## Get to know communities

The next step in engaging with communities is to take the time to get to know people in the community, become comfortable in your relationship with them, and understand their contexts and perspectives:

Absolutely spend some time, hang around, look and observe, look and see what you see. Get to know some of the leaders in the community. Informal or formal leaders. Spend a day in the life of somebody. Just helping out. It is amazing how much you can learn and how comfortable you will become and how comfortable other people will become with you. And as you get to know the leaders and the folks in the community, understanding the context. We all have different perspectives. Depending on what seat you sit in and where you live, all of those impact your perspectives about things...[W]hen you understand people's context, [when] you understand what is important to their day-to-day life and how they benefit from their work and what their challenges are and what their barriers and conditions are you have a more realistic expectation to operate inside that relationship. (Renee V. Wallace)

## Create safe spaces for community members to share their perspectives and listen

Understanding the context and perspectives of community members is aided by creating safe spaces for them to express their views and then listening carefully:

…creating the safe spaces that our community needs to be able to speak up freely is key for any research project that you guys engaged in. (Evelyn Esparza-Gonzalez)

So, when you are doing the research, make sure that you are listening without biases. Our community has been eager to speak. So, we need to make sure that we pay attention to everything they say. (Evelyn Esparza-Gonzalez)

## Incentivize participation fairly

One way of demonstrating respect for research participants’ time and knowledge is to compensate them fairly:

[The] IRB [Institutional Review Board] will always tell you…Oh, we didn’t include compensation for the participants because we don't want this to be for money. Excuse me? Are you doing your work for free? Like, you need to give money to people that are spending -- that are single mothers that have three jobs that are spending their time while homeschooling their children and working their job and filling out your survey. You have to compensate their time. If anything, they should be paid double. (Madiha Tariq)

If we are going to be requesting them to be taking two hours from their families to provide information from their communities, of course that is more than fair. (Evelyn Esparza-Gonzalez)

## Shift the power dynamics

A particularly powerful way of addressing social inequities is for researchers to seize opportunities for shifting the power in community-university relations toward communities:

…researchers and students…play a really big role in helping dismantle the systems that have defined the way research is conducted in this day. I will give you an example, when we got the new grant, you know, it was a unique situation because normally ACCESS is a subcontractor to MSU. This time the dynamic shifted: MSU is the subcontractor to ACCESS…So, the shift in power dynamics is possible. (Madiha Tariq)

## Recognize that communities have their own solutions

This shift in power relations must include a recognition that researchers do not have a monopoly on solutions to community-identify problems:

…many of the answers to the challenges in tribal communities are within the communities themselves. We know that our way of life and our language and culture contribute greatly to our health. We know that…some of the initiatives that we have are effective [and] are working well for your communities and are not represented in the research. (Lisa Martin)

## Help communities build capacity

Research can empower communities when community capacity building (Chaskin, 2001) is an explicit aim of research:

I think the outcomes and the understanding of what the data are saying for the community obviously can benefit the community. To think about what you are doing as increasing capacity for that community to continue this work with other projects or continue the work with what you are finding out is also of benefit to the community. And in a true relationship, that capacity building would extend beyond whatever research project you are working on with the community. (Lisa Martin)

## Explore the link between racism and well-being

Finally, one way of addressing social inequities is to conduct research that explores the link between community members’ experiences of racism and their health and well-being:

…identity and how we perceive ourselves and how we perceive discrimination has a very strong correlation with health outcomes. This is a place that is very untapped. We have heard these people around the country declare racism as a public health issue and there is no meat behind it. (Madiha Tariq)

# 3. What issues are important to address in your community right now?

## COVID-19

The impact of COVID-19 was a priority focus for some communities:

I would say our main issue or priority is COVID-19. (Evelyn Esparza-Gonzalez)

## Address systemic racism

One panelist described a “triple pandemic” of COVID-19, racial disparities, and racial violence, and called for addressing the underlying racialized systems and structures that drive it:

The racialization of systems and structures that are underneath all of this is where we need to work hard now. Those are the things that are underlying much of what has happened in the first place. If we can address those things, a number of other things will be in better condition. (Renee V. Wallace)

## Gather data that address our most pressing issues

Another panelist pointed to the role that research data plays both in understanding issues as well as helping communities tackle them in the short term:

I would love this time to be where we are filling in those data that describe the issues that we are facing…and how we are addressing that. I believe this is an opportunity for that…[W]hat I would like to see happen are data and research that is going to help our community in the short term. (Lisa Martin)

## Disaggregate data so that people can see themselves in the data

Because the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region or Arab/Chaldean ancestry designations are not consistently used when data are collected or reported, Arab and Chaldean Americans in Michigan face the challenge of not seeing themselves in the data and therefore not having an accurate picture of their overall well-being or status. Researchers can help by pushing for changes in demographic measures:

I think the number one thing we can do to help our community is to advocate for a real evidence-based and effective demographic collection tool that disaggregates data, there is Middle East category, but also disaggregates the data for other communities. (Madiha Tariq)

Breaking down research and creating facts that can really impact and shake people and let them understand the importance of conducting research so they can identify themselves. (Madiha Tariq)

These kinds of things can be advocated for so that accurate granular data is collected, and we know our true narrative and our true health status so we can react to it as a community. We don’t have that opportunity right now. (Madiha Tariq)

## See the opportunities in a crisis

Finally, one panelist pointed to the opportunities for change inherent in any crisis:

…any time there is turbulence and chaos, and chaotic situations is the perfect time to do change (Renee V. Wallace)

# 4. What are your expectations for the benefits of research to your communities?

## Create a deeper understanding of issues

First and foremost, research should contribute to a deeper understanding of the issues facing communities and how to address them:

[It should] lead to further understanding of the issue. (Lisa Martin)

I think that one of the other benefits is helping to create a better understanding about existing and contributing conditions. (Renee V. Wallace)

## Build community capacity

Second, research should increase the capacity of communities to resolve their collective problems:

[Research] should lead to capacity building. (Lisa Martin)

I would say the benefits will be to be able to build program that is would really meet the needs of our community and create that capacity building to make sure we meet those needs and include that information in strategic planning and for us as a community. (Evelyn Esparza-Gonzalez)

## Catalyze action

Third, research should catalyze action to resolve community-identified challenges:

It would give us the benefit to react as a community and take action not only just know these things are affecting our community but do nothing about it. If it is explained in a way that makes sense to us, we can be held responsible to make sure we come up with an action plan too. Having that data and having relied on that data will help us create change in our communities of color for sure. (Evelyn Esparza-Gonzalez)

If you look at the history of advocates that have made big changes, their work has been powered by research. Look at Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha. In Flint it was powered by research. So, research is such a unique tool to have somebody who is working in the entry-level see the forest and react to it. It has been such a great tool for social justice. As we all know, advocacy is comprised of stories and data. Without research we would not be able to make the system changes that we need to bridge disparities gap that exist in communities of color. It is important thing not only for universities but for community members that are impacted by these disparities.

The panel discussant, Monica Villarreal, offered the following insight into how research can help to catalyze *community-driven* change:

And what have I learned in my work is when the people begin to speak, and when the people begin to organize, those systems start to break down and shift begins to happen. And it is not because we, as researchers, came in, but it is about the empowerment we do together and the data that research provides to help lift up the voice, story, and agency of the people’s experience.

# Conclusion

Collectively, the guidance provided by the panelists offers sound advice to researchers on how to engage with communities in ways that are respectful, empowering, and transformative. We thank our community partners for taking the time to share their wisdom with us and encourage researchers to heed their guidance as they embark upon partnerships with new partners or reexamine partnerships with established partners.

References

Chaskin, R. J. (2001). Building Community Capacity: A Definitional Framework and Case Studies from a Comprehensive Community Initiative. *Urban Affairs Review*, *36*(3), 291–323. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10780870122184876>