RESPECTFUL AND EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

RESULTS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH HILL DISTRICT STAKEHOLDERS

Pitt School of Social Work, Community-Based Participatory
Research Class Project
In collaboration with the Hill District Community
Engagement Center

Respectful and Effective Community Engagement: Results from Interviews with Hill District Stakeholders

Updated March 2019

The University of Pittsburgh strives to be a strong partner with community collaborators to
achieve long-term impact in communities while at the same time strengthening our core mission
of teaching and research. As part of our place-based engagement strategy, we leverage the
diversity of Pitt's community engagement assets and develop sustainable community-university
partnerships in a focused number of neighborhoods. The material contained in this
document helps us to advance, strengthen, and focus our place-based engagement efforts.

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Executive Summary

University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work Class Project

Introduction

During the Fall of 2018, a group of 18 students[1] in Dr. Mary Ohmer's Community Based Participatory Research class conducted a series of interviews with Hill District stakeholders on behalf of the University of Pittsburgh Community Engagement Center (CEC) in the Hill District.

The primary goal of this research project was to learn what Pitt stakeholders need to know and do (how they should behave) in order to respectfully and effectively engage members of the Hill District and the surrounding neighborhoods.

Project Design

In all, there were thirty-one participants including five University of Pittsburgh faculty and staff that have intimate knowledge of past and present community-university partnerships. All of those selected had strong ties to the Hill District community either through lived or work experience, and ranged from thirty to over eighty years of age. Working in eight groups of two to three students each, representing the eight communities that encompass the Greater Hill District, interviewees were assigned to groups based off of the area of the Hill District they originated from or most identified with.

Students conducted a neighborhood analysis to understand the history, characteristics and current issues in their respective area. These findings were presented and discussed with CEC staff. Using an interview guide developed by CBPR students and Dr. Ohmer in collaboration with CEC staff, interviews were conducted based on interviewee availability and included a student interviewer and note taker. Interviewees were asked to review and sign a consent form and for permission to audio record the interview.

Interviews ranged in length from forty-five to ninety-minutes, and were conducted in both public and private spaces, including the public library, YMCA and private residences. Two of the interviews took place during the CBPR class and engaged all of the students' groups. The majority of interviewees were residents of the Hill.

Themes

After the interviews, each group analyzed the data from their respective interviews and created reports summarizing the key themes and supporting quotes. These findings were discussed in a large group to analyze the results across all eight groups. This discussion resulted in eight sub-

themes and each student group selected one of these sub-themes analyze further. For their final assignment, students submitted a report summarizing and analyzing the sub-themes.

The students reports on the sub-themes were reviewed and discussed and then further by CEC staff, Kirk Holbrook and Lina Dostilio, and Tahirah Walker from the Center for Teaching and Learning. As a result, four overarching themes were developed:

- o Cultural humility and awareness
- o Transparency and honesty
- o Mutual benefit, exploitation and power and privilege
- o Community engagement strategies and recommendations

Theme 1: Cultural humility and awareness
Throughout the interviews, references to the importance of culture were repeatedly heard, including awareness, sensitivity, and humility.

Cultural humility and awareness involves recognizing that the community has its own identity, and that each member of the community is unique (Branom, 2012; Hacker, 2013). Often this involves examining one's own background, biases, and values before working in new communities (Sue, 1981). This was reinforced by a Hill District Resident and a Pitt stakeholder, "Naturally everyone is going to go through some exercise in terms of understanding cultural and diversity dynamics. But I guess I would call it a humbleness. Even though you're students going into the community, recognizing you're going into someone else's community that most of the students probably won't be from."

Cultural awareness and humility were expressed by the interviewees in several ways, including: cultural awareness about the history of the Hill District and its many cultural assets and contributions; cultural strengths and resiliency; cultural biases and stereotypes and understanding your own culture and privilege.

Cultural Awareness about the History of the Hill District: Interviewees discussed the importance of Pitt people understanding the history of the black migration and other key historical events that have greatly impacted the Hill District. Interviewees also felt that Pitt stakeholders need to be aware that the Hill District is more than a painful history of loss, it is also a history of valuable contributions.

Cultural Strengths and Resiliency: Interviewees also described the strengths and resiliency of the community. The Hill District community is strengthened and united by their sense of cultural pride.

"There is a "need to be conscious of that history and that pain and be empathetic toward it […] to be sensitive to frustration and pain from the past, the need to be heard, the need to be heard about what's going on now and what's gone on in the past, and the need to listen to the solutions that are coming out in the community"

"The researchers should understand the cultural contributions that the Hill District has made…. Many of which can be captured by the photographs by Teenie Harris. That should be studied, it contains tremendous information. Go see the original material, don't let people just talk to you about it" (Hill District resident).

"[…] the people who still occupy the Hill District are the toughest of the tough. There is a reason why we haven't moved to Duquesne or McKeesport. The university needs to appreciate who we are. And what our relationship can be."

"It's resiliency more than anything else. It has always been mischaracterized with negative connotations without its resiliency, its people, its institutions, its churches especially, so there is a certain part of our story that shows the strength of the community, in spite of all the challenges we face."

> "Generalizations about the community should not supersede peoples' lived experiences. When you go into the community you should have a foundation of knowledge about that community, but being able to recognize each person's experience, in and of itself, is crucial to engaging with the community …be careful about the assumptions you make"

> "We are trained to be so Eurocentric. Happens to everyone. If they don't fit the mold then they are 'othered.' We are always looking for people to assimilate because it's more comfortable. Being white is viewed as normal and everything and everyone else is abnormal … I've had to unlearn and undo things in my own conditioning so I can see myself as a whole human being."

Cultural Biases and Stereotypes: Stereotypes can lead to racial biases and can have devastating consequences, including creating stigma that can last for decades (Mikolon, Kreiner & Wieseke, 2016).

Understanding your own culture and privilege: Intentional self-reflection is necessary to connect with the community; not critically reflecting on our interactions is an injustice to the community and to ourselves as well (Muhammad et. al, 2014). Hill District residents and stakeholders often noted that it seemed like outsiders who came to the Hill District did not seem to have a sense of their own culture or own history. Many outsiders acted as if their culture was "normal" and the Hill District residents were an unusual culture.

Theme 2: Transparency and Honesty

Transparency and honesty were themes that were brought up by many interviewees. Transparency was related to Pitt people being open and clear about what their intentions were when coming into the Hill District community. Interviewees also felt that Pitt people needed to be honest about what they can and cannot do for the community. Interviewees felt that it was important to not to make promises that cannot be fulfilled. Interviewees mentioned the importance of being upfront with the community and cited times when this was not the case and the negative effects this can have on the community and the university's relationship. These themes are intricately tied to having respect for the community, which several interviewees brought up.

> "I think because we are clear about what we can contribute and what we can't, that allows for a very positive relationship between a community like that and the University…I think being very clear about why we are here helps us to build and maintain a strong relationship."

> "You have to be a guest, you have to be respectful, you have to be transparent, [and] you have to share what you are doing as broadly as possible before you do it."

> "You have to be respectful when you come to this community. It shouldn't be for self-serving purposes."

Transparency: Related to Pitt people being open and clear about what their intentions were when coming into the Hill District community

Honesty: Interviewees also felt that Pitt people needed to be honest about what they can and cannot do for the community. Interviewees felt that it was important to not to make promises that cannot be fulfilled.

Respect: Being transparent and honest demonstrates that you respect the community you are engaging with.

Theme 3: Mutual Benefit, Exploitation and Power and Privilege

One of the key themes from the interviews was about authentic engagement with the community. Interviewees felt that respect would grow if engagement moves from the interest of the outsider to mutual exchange and benefit for the community and Pitt. When residents and community members feel exploited and promises are broken, positive relationships and partnerships are difficult to develop. Interviewees felt that power and privilege influenced interactions between Pitt and the community in ways that could either foster mutual benefit and partnerships or lead to exploitation.

Mutual Benefit: Hill District residents believe that mutual benefit and partnerships start with asking community members what they want out of their involvement with researchers and universities.

Exploitation and Broken Promises: The opposite of partnerships based on mutual benefits is exploitation, which can result from broken promises or not delivering the results in ways that benefit the community. Broken promises occur when something is promised to the community and it never happens. These types of interactions can jeopardize current and future relationships.

Privilege and Power: Power refers to societal privileges derived from chance membership in majority groups pertaining to one's gender, class, or race (Chavez, Duran, Baker, Avila & Wallerstein, 2008, p. 93). Privilege is the unearned advantages of belonging to a dominant group, and power is the social currency that comes from that unearned privilege (Chavez et al., 2008).

> "Take the time to get to see what it is that might help. And then, with that, try and do a partnership or a commitment…I think we should look past all that [differences in background] and focus on what is beneficial for the people... [It] would be great for the Hill."
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> "I do hear a lot of frustration...almost verbatim 'we're tired of being researched'."
>
> "...in academia there is a tendency to come in with the questions in hand...that does not really work for me."
>
> "And these days, just in terms of your sense of intersectional identity and kind of acknowledging that, acknowledging privilege is the way that I hear a related conversation happening as much as anything."

Interviewee Recommendations:
- o In collaboration with Hill stakeholders, a plan for disseminating research findings should be in place that allows Hill residents to use the information to benefit themselves as they see fit.
- o Pitt has to take an affirmative stand to support Black folks. Sometimes institutions like Pitt hide behind diversity and it's a slight of hand instead of really fighting for what is right and to repair damage that has been done by institutions like the University of Pittsburgh and other institutions.

Theme 4: Community Engagement Strategies and Recommendations
Community engagement strategies are mechanisms by which Pitt can meaningfully collaborate with diverse stakeholders of the Hill District in a way in which they feel valued, respected, and thus willing to come to the table. Interviewees emphasized that all community engagement must be done through the framework of a strengths-based approach, recognizing that communities, and the people within, have resources, richness, and resilience rather than approaching with a savior complex. In addition to the themes included earlier in this report that explore how to behave while engaging, the interviewees also identified specific strategies or methods to use when initiating a new program or entering the community. These include: Sponsored entry vs. door knocking; Broad participation vs. narrow involvement; and Create opportunities for orientation and preparation.

Sponsored entry vs. door knocking: a community organizing approach in which people go door-to-door to raise residents' awareness about a community concern or enlist their support or action. It is also a strategy used in sales to sell a product.

Broad Participation vs. Narrow Involvement: Interviewees indicated that respect will grow when engagement moves from interest to more involvement in the community. Suggestions included attending community events and meetings rather than restrict Pitt presence to only those times when faculty, staff, or students are working on a project. Learning about the community and understanding its agendas, concerns, who is working on the issues that are also important to you, and the ways in which people have already organized themselves and the resources available to them is key to having context for how you might positively contribute.

> "You want to have people almost like grant you access to the community".
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> "We acknowledge the elders who have an older history of what has taken place in the Hill District and really value that… we have invited those people who are regarded as elders to teach us, you know, help… those types of people are seen as gatekeepers in communities"
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> "…it's not a community you can start knocking on doors [when] nobody knows what's coming"
>
> "…when you're crossing these boundaries people genuinely respect if you've given an effort and say, 'look, I'm going to come, and maybe be awkward even, but try out what you're doing alongside you"

Orientation and Introduction: Many Hill District residents, who are seeing students moving in to the neighborhood, recommended that Pitt provide an orientation about how to "be a good neighbor".

Interviewee Recommendations:
- o While some make reference to 'community gatekeepers', some do not support this idea, suggesting that there are times that people who consider themselves gatekeepers unfairly limit access or are chosen by outside entities and are not legitimate community leaders. The spirit of the recommendation, however, is still valuable: It may be difficult to make connections and propose ideas if you are unknown to neighbors.
- o It is important to be introduced by someone trusted rather than "door knocking," whether in a literal or metaphorical sense.
- o Some residents expanded on the idea of orientation to suggest that as a prerequisite to entering the Black community, any Pitt stakeholder needs to study that history and Black culture.
- o Residents suggested books to read to help learn and understand the history of the Black community and the Hill District specifically, such as *Smoketown; Essays on Race*; *Root Shock* and *Why are They Angry with us?*

Summary

This report reflects the careful thought and intentionality behind the University of Pittsburgh's engagement within the Hill District community through the Community Engagement Center. Its findings reflect the shared history between the University and community and acknowledges challenges that have persisted for many years and, in many instances, exist to this day. However, the information in the report also helps chart a course forward for Pitt faculty, researchers, staff and students to re-evaluate and re-imagine what it truly means to enter into a mutually beneficial community-university partnership. The thoughtful

involvement of so many residents and stakeholders, and the push to evoke real feedback and input, lays a critical foundation moving forward for engagement that authentically values the community as an equal partner. While this report is just the beginning of developing best practices for the university's engagement within the community, it is a shining example of how both parties can work together to learn lessons from the past and move into the future with compassion and understanding.

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