



University of Pittsburgh
School of Social Work

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**RESPECTFUL AND EFFECTIVE
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**
RESULTS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH HOMEWOOD STAKEHOLDERS

Respectful and Effective Community Engagement: Results from Interviews with Homewood Stakeholders

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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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Respectful and Effective Community Engagement: Results from Interviews with Homewood Stakeholders

Executive Summary

University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work Class Project ¹

Introduction

During the Fall of 2017, a group of nine students in Dr. Mary Ohmer's Community Based Participatory Research class conducted a series of interviews with Homewood stakeholders on behalf of the University of Pittsburgh Community Engagement Center (CEC) in Homewood.

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 Homewood and the surrounding neighborhoods. The results of this research will be used to develop preparation programs and materials Pitt faculty/staff/students so that they are prepared to respectfully and effectively engage Homewood stakeholders through the CEC. A total of 14 interviews were completed by student groups. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes to 2 hours. The students' findings are presented below in this report.

Research Methods

The Homewood community has participated in or conducted many community assessments. When outside groups, such as universities and non-profit organizations, have conducted research and evaluations in Homewood, there has been a history of community members feeling that data were extracted, but the community did not benefit from participating in the data collection. Students' sampling methods are in line with the community-based participatory research model, utilizing a framework developed from best practices, to maintain respect for the community and its members.

Sampling: Students utilized the convenience sampling method. The CEC provided a list of 18 interview participants; all interviewees had ties to Homewood in at least 1 dimension of their life.

Methods of Engagement: Students used methods of engagement which emphasized trust building, identifying community assets and skills, effective communication, conflict resolution, and being a continuous learner (Brown, 2013). Student groups reached out to individuals via e-mail to schedule interviews. The CEC provided assistance for those whom were difficult to contact.

Interviews: Interview guides were drafted by the students and designed to utilize a community strengths-based approach. The guides were approved by Dr. Ohmer and the CEC. A mock interview to further solidify questions was conducted with Pitt Social Work alum Ms. Gabrielle

¹ Fall 2017, SWCOSA 2047: Community Based Participatory Research; Faculty: Mary Ohmer, PhD, Associate Professor, School of Social Work Students: Shunnechia Baker, Brooks Carroll, Kyle Cosoleto-Miller, Claire Hortens, Jamie Piotrowski, Devlin Pippert, Tyler Wheeler, Olivia Xu, Roy Wotring

DeMarchi, who works with Operation Better Block. After the first week of interviews were completed, the class met again to modify interview questions. All interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the interviewee for time and location. Participants were read a consent form for permission to record and cite their responses in the final publications; all participants received a copy of this form.

Themes

Interview notes and recordings were analyzed by student groups to find common themes present in most, if not all, interviews. The themes highlighted among interviews are (1) ways to approach and effectively engage the community, (2) factors impacting engagement, and (3) mutual benefits and sustainability. Each theme is defined and outlined below along with example quotes from the interviewees.

Theme 1: Ways to Approach and Effectively Engage the Community

Trends emerged in how interviewees described the behaviors and attributes which constitute effective engagement between Pitt stakeholders and community members. Interviewees reflected on past experiences to provide insight on appropriate ways of engagement and recommend that Pitt faculty, researchers, staff, and students adopt these behaviors as they seek to engage the community:

- Transparency
- Cultural humility
- Collaboration
- Active listening
- Offering mutual benefits
- Intergenerational Inclusion
- Utilizing existing community assets
- Sustainable planning
- Non-judgmental

Participants noted past positive experiences of engagement with people from Pitt hinged on acceptance and diverse participation. “From my experience,” said one Homewood stakeholder, “they [Pitt students] were really into it. They did a lot of the leg work. The compassion was there. They were nonjudgmental. And it seemed like they genuinely had an interest.”

Interviewees also stressed the importance of acknowledging the expertise of both partners by suggesting that Pitt people engage with community members to identify what they perceive their needs to be rather than asserting their own agenda. One way to do this is to attend existing community meetings or otherwise engage in the community before beginning any projects in the community.

One of the strongest themes through the interviews with people who had the closest ties to Homewood was that of humility. Not only should stakeholders be culturally humble, they should ensure that they are not coming off as pitying. The following is a list of qualities that stakeholders identified as highly desirable in university approaches to engage the Homewood community.

Cultural Humility: the ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other- oriented (or open to the other) in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the person (Hook,

2013).

Transparency: as used in the humanities and in other social contexts, implies openness, communication, and accountability. Transparency is operating in such a way that it is easy for others to see what actions are performed (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016).

“Be transparent and be yourself, because you do have something to offer. We don’t have all the answers.... We want to blend ideas.”

"Effective engagement is bi-directional. [There is] mutual benefit. It's reciprocal in terms of knowledge sharing, collaboration, and respect."

“Successful engagement is not pushy, not pitying, and [it is] humble”

"Seek to learn first... be a learner before anything else”

“Instead of making the community fit into the culture of the university, I would say, have the university engage and try to fit into the culture of what is already there, because that is something that has been there for generations and generations.”

Collaboration: a relational system in which two or more stakeholders pool together resources in order to meet objectives that neither could meet individually (Graham & Barter, 1999, p. 7).

Active Listening: Listening is not something that just happens (that is hearing), listening is an active process in which a conscious decision is made to listen to and understand the messages of the speaker. Reflecting, clarifying and summarizing, are ways to actively listen (Skills You Need, 2017).

Interviewee Recommendations:

- Be involved on the community level before undertaking projects.
- Engage with residents and everyday people in addition to interacting with organization staff
- Provide opportunities for collaboration between the University and Community.

Theme 2: Factors Impacting Engagement

Universities in the Pittsburgh area have been involved in Homewood through research, internship placements, University events, and volunteering, at times at the expense of community members. Interviewees mentioned themes of distrust of non-profits and Universities (i.e., outsiders) due to fear and misunderstandings. Results from the interviews show that when a university interacts with residents in a way that is not effective or information is shared in a way they don’t understand, residents begin to doubt the stated intentions of the university. Within the interviews, a number of factors emerged that have the potential to impact the potential success of engagement efforts. These are listed below.

Language: Language plays a key role in how University intentions come across to the community. Changing the language (and the actions that go along with this language) from 'doing to' or 'on' to 'doing with' the community makes the community an equal partner in collaborative efforts.

Academic experience vs. Life experience: Homewood has a rich history that anyone can research but there is more value in understanding history from the point of view of someone who is living it. The researcher must: acknowledge personal and institutional histories, understand the historical context of the research, be present in the community and listen to community members,

acknowledge the expertise of all partners, and be upfront about expectations and intentions (Christopher et al., 2008).

Fatigue: Residents expressed that they have repeatedly been subject to interviews, social programs that don't fit their needs, and have other concerns in their lives than what students may be trying to accomplish.

“You can't shy away from things like race and class because there are certain of these factors that play a role in things as well.”

“So what are you hiding that you can't bring it down to laymen's terms? That you're so caught up in your professionalism that you can't make it transparent? That's where the distrust comes in”

"Be mindful of what can be a lack of trust between community residents and [the] University, especially researchers in particular."

“We know that there's been a lot of studies [and] research done and nothing's happened, so it's like okay, I mean, we've been through this before, so I'm not answering any more questions. Or, [people] are just suspicious. 'you're getting this information so that you can be more effective in gentrification.' so there's that suspicion. And that's normal when you're looking at an institution as huge as Pitt...”

“[The attitude seems to be] 'if you're an 'other' than I automatically have to distrust you, because you're here to take something from me...”

Fear: Gentrification has plagued surrounding neighborhoods and residents fear generations of families could be priced out of their neighborhood in the near future if Pitt and other Universities have a presence in the Community.

Failed Projects and lack of benefits: Homewood has become the way it is today as a result of many years of changes, failed development projects, and forced migration, which has made Homewood residents 'products of their environment'.

Racial, age, and educational differences: Race plays a role in how certain factors impact engagement. Race influences and shapes how one meaningfully and authentically involves particular groups and communities. Some participants mentioned that race is not as vital when trust is established. When asked how race plays a role one stakeholder said that, “It can, it will, it's going to.” Additionally, many participants agreed that in addition to race, age and especially education level do have great potential to impact engagement between university and neighborhood stakeholders—particularly if university stakeholders are unprepared to work with people who may be of a different race, age, or educational level than themselves.

Interviewee Recommendations:

- Engage inter-generationally: understand that all members of the community have wisdom and insight to offer.
- Be honest and open in communication, avoiding jargon and acronyms; be accountable.
- Stay involved in the community after a project has completed; avoid the "one and done" approach.

Theme 3: Mutual Benefits and Sustainability

Some community members and stakeholders have felt that they and their neighborhood are being taken advantage of and receiving little of the benefits. Interviewees had suggestions to help facilitate an understanding between the community and University and ensure both the community

and University get what they need.

Clear goals: Several interviewees mentioned the importance of writing clear goals before beginning a project in the community. One interviewee, explained that this helps set expectations and lets the community know in advance what University stakeholders can and cannot accomplish given time and monetary restraints.

Inclusive planning: Community members should be present in University engagement initiatives to provide guidance and insight on what is best for the community. Planning should be focused on what will make the community more stable and utilize preexisting assets.

Continuous investment: Homewood is an asset rich community. Investment includes providing unique services for the community without repeating existing services provided by community organizations.

Sustainability: Many interviewees felt that sustainable projects would lead to more effective and respectful engagement with residents by satisfying a long-term need and giving the community some ownership over the project.

Mutual benefits: Pitt gains invaluable information from conducting research in Homewood and has an obligation to give something in return in order to build trust. Many of the participants felt that since people from the University have something to gain from conducting projects in the neighborhood, they had an obligation to give something in return.

Person-to-person interactions: strong relationships are the most effective way to ensure both sides obtain intended benefits. Relationships should be built between people, not organizations. Interviewees felt that these interactions can happen organically when Pitt stakeholders attend events, watch high school football games, and patronize local businesses.

Interviewee Recommendations:

- Attend Homewood Concerned Citizen Council and Operation Better Block meetings and community events.
- Hold public meetings or focus groups to learn what residents expect of the University.
- Understand that residents can offer more than any textbook.
- Allow community members to have access to information on any CEC efforts within the community.
- Make sure any advisory boards contain a diversity of community members, i.e., elderly residents, teenagers, parents, professionals, women, etc.

"...Offer them something that's a benefit to them. The benefit they get is worth as much or more than what it costs them to work with you."

"Go to some of those meeting: The Homewood Concerned Citizens meeting, Operation Better Block Meetings, things like that. Meet the people who are moving and shaking in the community but also the ones who already have programs and things in place, and also the mothers of the community."

"Homewood which is like many neighborhoods has different assets: libraries, schools, churches, mom and pop stores, barber shops, a lot of business."

"Be present in the community not just when you're doing something [academic]... but engaging people in more informal spaces."

Overall Recommendations

Our recommendations are divided into two categories: Recommendations for the CEC and recommendations for Pitt stakeholders to use in engaging Homewood residents effectively and respectfully.

Recommendations for the Homewood CEC:

1. Ensure transparency regarding meetings, publications, and research done by or for the CEC
2. Make Pitt's current contributions to the neighborhood more visible to build trust among community members
3. Provide connections to Pitt stakeholders for residents, in addition to connections to Homewood residents for Pitt stakeholders.
4. Ensure that any proposed projects have clear goals with mutual benefits to Pitt and Homewood.

Recommendations for Pitt Stakeholders:

1. Stakeholders working in Homewood should have clear goals with mutual benefits
2. Engage using an inter-generational approach; engaging both younger and older residents
3. The CEC is building a toolkit for stakeholders, it is recommended that stakeholders utilize the toolkit for more successful engagement
4. Understand the history of the neighborhood; recognize residents provide information text books cannot.

Summary

Homewood's rich history makes it a fertile ground for community-university engagement but it is imperative that Pitt faculty, researchers, staff, and students prepare themselves before engaging within the community. The relationship between CEC stakeholders and the community stakeholders can only be successful if there is a committed investment in the growth of the neighborhood's current assets and community members. Both parties must work together to ensure a prosperous relationship. The recommendations and themes within this report are only a piece of the puzzle for how to effectively engage with the Homewood community. It is important for the CEC and its members to be diligent, continually assess best practices, and strengthen their connections to the neighborhood as it grows and changes.

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