University research in the neighborhood: The perspective of community members

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The Ohio State University (OSU) Office of Outreach and Engagement is committed to community-based and participatory research. As part of this commitment, the office funded a study to inform OSU leadership and researchers about community and neighborhood leaders' perspectives on OSU research, specifically as participants in research, but more generally as community and neighborhood leaders. The intent of this study is not to be prescriptive about how the office or the university should move forward. Rather, the intent is to elevate community-member voices as a starting point to understand the position of the broader university and allow for a reflexive understanding of its role, and that of researchers, in community-based and participatory research.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND OBJECTIVES

How can a large, land grant research institution build meaningful community relationships while conducting research?

1. Identify ways community members want OSU to build and maintain relationships with them;

2. Describe community members' experiences with OSU research and engagement;

3. Document the language community members use when discussing community-university research relationships; and

4. Understand community members' perceptions of the institution and its role in the community.

RESEARCH DESIGN

We used a multi-site case study research design, with a focus on historically disenfranchised Columbus neighborhoods in which high levels of research activity are occurring. We collected qualitative data via interviews and focus groups with three different groups of informants:

Group 1: Community-wide leaders who have engaged with OSU and OSU research projects

Group 2: Neighborhood residents and leaders who have engaged with OSU and OSU research

Group 3: Neighborhood leaders and residents without experience with OSU research projects

We coded interview and focus group transcripts using two approaches to address our research objectives.

HIGHLIGHTS OF STUDY RESULTS

Multidimensional Community-University Engagement

Participants do not separate out their research experiences from outreach, teaching, and general activities of OSU personnel. Most had multiple interactions with the university, and the majority had some sort of past, formal relationship with the university (e.g., as a student or employee).

- Institutional history, and non-research related issues, get bundled together and become the lens through which OSU research is interpreted.

- When interviewees discussed specific projects, they made no distinction between program-based research (e.g., program evaluation), class-based research (i.e., student projects), and research that is not program or class-related.

Community Perspectives About Working with OSU

Narratives and perspectives about the university are mixed. The lens through which participants view OSU, OSU research, and the associated narratives, endure over time, often based on specific experiences from decades earlier. The following represent broader narratives expressed by interviewees:

- The university is an "elephant," "gorilla," and "beast" with outsized influence (for good or ill).
- The university has control tendencies.
- The university tends to contribute few dollars to projects.
- University members are "out of touch" and come from a White, elitist, and oppressive institution.
- The university is inaccessible and foreign to those living in nearby neighborhoods.
- Some neighborhood respondents, in particular, feel a sense of pride and accomplishment because of their association with the university.

Acknowledging and Addressing Historical Legacies of OSU

Narratives of a negative nature tended to be broad, while specific experiences tended to be positive. This was not true for Black interviewees, and this also varied by neighborhood.

- The ever-present physical legacy of the university area's development, demolition, and investment in nearby neighborhoods has had a long-lasting impact on community stakeholder perspectives.
- Black interviewees described similar broad negative perceptions of OSU that, almost without exception, are firmly rooted in specific historic reasons associated with the University's history of racism.
- Black interviewees emphasized the importance of representation (and lack of Black faculty, students, and researchers).
- Participants in communities with major real-estate investments (i.e., Weinland Park, Near East Side) questioned the motivations of OSU in neighborhoods with physical investment, given the financial stakes in the neighborhoods, as compared to those without similar investments (i.e., South Side, Franklinton, and Linden).

Importance of Relationship-Building

Neighborhood leaders and residents want to co-create, co-design, and co-conduct research with OSU.

Drawing upon previous positive experiences and insights into their idea future projects, interviewees noted the following processes for establishing and maintaining these relationships:

- Reciprocal processes with honest, open, respectful, and accessible communication
- Consistent and collaborative engagement
- Participant-centered processes in which researchers are culturally competent, aware of community context, and embedded long term in the community

Need for Conducting Impactful Community-Driven Research

Interviewees voiced a strong desire for OSU to be part of meaningful, transformative community change through impactful research, suggesting the following ideas which align with community-based participatory research (CBPR) frameworks:

- Conducting needed applied research to evaluate programs and policies in collaboration with community or guided by community leaders
- Conducting research that could contribute to direct program or policy change.
- Moving away from traditional research models that treat participants as subjects of a study, often disregarding their perspectives and leaves participants feeling used, exhausted, and distrustful
- Committing to mutuality in all aspects of research development and design
- Shifting away from research designs that are done in isolation by researchers without community participation

Experiences Engaging with Students

Interviewees cited negative and positive interactions with students:

- Negative experiences occurred when students suddenly appearing in the community and then abruptly left the community; caused harm by not setting expectations; communicated poorly when partnering did happen, and produced low-quality work.
- Positive student interactions occurred more when there was a long-term relationship and commitment of a faculty member to the community.
- Differences existed between neighborhoods, likely as a result of more student projects being conducted in select neighborhoods.