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Resourcing Community Partnerships Through Academic Libraries

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Abstract

Institutional missions of colleges and universities are increasingly focused on community partnerships: embracing a commitment to conducting research with, rather than simply about, communities. As researchers who have partnered with communities know well, these relationships depend upon both material and informational resources that are not always easy to marshal. In this article, we draw on our recent experience in a "research sprint" to argue that academic libraries and librarians are demonstrably primed to lead universities toward a fuller inclusion of community partners in academic research. We find that academic libraries are uniquely well suited to become a productive force for researcher–community partnership given their expertise in teaching research inquiry skills, facilitating collaborative work throughout the research process, providing space and other material resources for research, and curating the too-often-hidden intellectual resource of research support staff.

Keywords: community partnership, academic libraries, librarians, academic research

Institutions of higher education are under enormous pressure to demonstrate their relevance as politicians look to limit public funding for colleges and universities and roll back agencies that fund government-subsidized research. To communicate their value to legislatures, public colleges and universities have historically highlighted their contributions to workforce development or partnerships with government agencies and corporations. But if our institution—the University of Minnesota—is indicative of broader trends, higher education is increasingly finding value in and providing material support for community partnerships.

In its latest round of funding aimed at advancing the research goals of the campus strategic plan, Minnesota pledged three million dollars for projects under the aegis of the Grand Challenges Research Initiative. This initiative seeks to address critical societal challenges, or "grand challenges," with integrative research that includes a substantial community-engagement dimension. These projects ranged in topic from addressing disparities in criminal justice systems to the sustainable management of wild rice. All projects were committed to conducting research with, rather than solely about, communities. Moreover, these partnerships included the priorities of communities that have not historically been represented in university-based research processes.

Doing research with communities raises significant challenges for tenured and tenure-track faculty members balancing increasing workloads (to say nothing of the challenges that precarious and adjunct faculty face doing this work; Wallerstein & Duran, 2010). As federal research dollars dwindle, competition for these funds intensifies. Faculty are encouraged to "do more with less," a formulation that strains even the most traditional research. Community-

engaged research requires different kinds of resources that may not be easy to come by through mainstream funding sources (Israel et al., 2001).

Effective collaborations require careful attention and time from faculty to develop shared understanding of urgent problems and to develop research that is both relevant to the community and feasible for the faculty member. Rebuilding trust with communities, understandably skeptical of university-based researchers who have studied and pathologized them, requires a welcoming and accessible space for collaboration. Yet lack of access to the internet, printing, and other seemingly mundane issues can make it difficult to participate in campus-based collaborations. More substantively, for community members—whose needs and interests might go beyond what individual faculty can provide—the expertise and knowledge housed in the university can be opaque.

In a time when universities must show increasing relevance to broader publics, how can institutions of higher education foster and support new research-driven collaborations with communities that have not had access to shaping university priorities? Our experience suggests that an organization well positioned for connecting and sustaining community research partnerships already exists within every academic institution: the library.

Libraries act as the foundational link between the public and academic research (American Library Association, 2015). Traditionally that relationship has simply been centered on access—libraries offering the public access to academic research, government documents, and a range of other information (Harris & Weller, 2012). That access mission, however, was only necessarily fundamental to public libraries (Taylor et al., 2019). Academic libraries, on the other hand, have had both explicit barriers (e.g., affiliation requirements for database searching) and implicit barriers (e.g., guarded entrances in buildings set deep inside sprawling campuses). Moreover, sociologist Nicholas Rowland and librarian Jeffery Knapp (Rowland & Knapp, 2015) have drawn attention to the dispiriting fact that the field of engaged scholarship has rarely considered the role academic librarians have or could play in partnering with faculty to meaningfully engage communities. In that research, Rowland and Knapp argue that the engaged scholarship field tends to envision academic librarians passively as collectors or curators of the products of engaged scholarship (e.g., books and journal articles) rather than as peer colleagues who are scholars in their own right and who are as engaged with their communities as they are with their own research and research support. However, even as academic librarians have long been practicing community engagement, they have not necessarily articulated those pursuits in their own scholarship. But as librarian Pamela Louderback has argued, colleges and universities have increasingly begun to affirm their commitment to community partnership in their mission statements, and "if academic libraries are to help their parent institutions fulfill this mission, our profession must evolve and make adjustments in how we operate" (Louderback, 2013, p. 20). In this reflective essay, we—a faculty member, an academic librarian, and a community partner—reflect on our recent partnership to argue that academic libraries are demonstrably primed to make that shift and lead universities toward a fuller inclusion of community partners in academic research.

The Sprint

In January 2019, the authors experimented with what a community member–faculty member–librarian partnership would produce. Over the course of 3 days, the University of Minnesota Libraries hosted a "research sprint" for six of the aforementioned Grand Challenges Research Initiative teams, including the team led by Kate Derickson (Author 2) and Glenda Simmons Jenkins (Author 3). Developed by the University of Kansas Libraries, research sprints are events in which a research team works directly with a team of librarians in a group space for 3 days of intensive, collaborative research (McBurney et al., 2020; Wiggins et al., 2019). Benjamin Wiggins (Author 1) coorganized the research sprint of Derickson and Simmons Jenkins, which set out to kick off a broad project called the CREATE Initiative. This initiative supports applied research with urban communities traditionally excluded from an active role in the academic research process and is focused on the intersection of environmental and social justice. Through our partnerships with community-based organizations, our work flips the traditional academic model by centering the research priorities of groups

that have not traditionally shaped academic agendas or benefited from the expertise of university researchers.

Although the research sprint we describe here acted as a sort of inauguration of the funded CREATE project, this faculty–community collaboration took years to develop. Derickson has worked with the Gullah/Geechee community—the descendants of Africans who were enslaved along the east coast of the United States—for the last 8 years. Since 2012, Simmons Jenkins has served as a member of the Gullah/Geechee Sustainability Think Tank, itself an innovative approach to community–researcher partnerships designed to mobilize academic research to support the sustainability priorities of the Gullah/Geechee people.

After emancipation, many Gullah/Geechees bought and farmed land on the Sea Islands off the Southeastern mainland United States and maintained a blend of their unique language and culture. In 2006, the U.S. Congress passed legislation designating the Gullah/Geechee National Heritage Corridor from Jacksonville, North Carolina, to Jacksonville, Florida, to recognize and preserve the degree to which Gullah culture was an important part of the coast. In this fast-growing region of the country, environmental degradation and change represent threats to Gullah/Geechee livelihoods, health, and well-being. The Gullah/Geechee Sustainability Think Tank was founded by Queen Quet, the chieftess and head of state of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, as a way to coordinate academic research that would support Gullah/Geechees in their efforts to promote cultural and environmental sustainability. Recently, Simmons Jenkins, Derickson, and undergraduate students from the University of Minnesota have begun to collaborate on a project to discern how infrastructure planning and development is impacting Gullah/Geechees in North Florida. Through that collaboration, Derickson and Simmons Jenkins identified stormwater retention ponds as a form of infrastructure development that appeared to be increasing land takings through eminent domain and creating potential problems for Gullah/Geechees in adjacent communities.

Derickson and her students traveled to the Gullah/Geechee Nation in 2018 to conduct interviews, engage with residents, and see the changing landscape for themselves. Upon returning to campus, much work remained to translate the research and observations into a format that would be of value to community members and contribute to scholarly research. The Grand Challenges Research Initiative provided funding to advance this work (and more) and to formalize it as a core activity of the CREATE project. As part of that funding package, the University of Minnesota Libraries extended its research sprint opportunity.

Organized by Wiggins and two other librarian colleagues, the research sprint paired Derickson, Simmons Jenkins, and their collaborators (five undergraduates, another Gullah/Geechee community member, and a professor of public policy) with four librarians who possessed relevant subject expertise to work together on foundational aspects of the CREATE project. Although previous iterations of the Libraries' research sprints did not include community partners, in keeping with Derickson's commitment to the coproduction of knowledge, Simmons Jenkins and another community member were invited to join the sprint.

The research sprint provided an invaluable opportunity for sustained exploratory work. The presence of community partners improved aspects of the project's data organization, management, and analysis, sparking innovation in processes and approaches as well as further cementing the project's orientation toward collaborative research. For example, in interview data referred to during the sprint, residents often referred to numerous people and places by colloquial names that were unfamiliar to researchers. Having a community member present during the data analysis proved invaluable in addressing this issue, and allowed for a method of data generation and analysis that would not have otherwise been possible. After the interviews were transcribed, Simmons Jenkins and her fellow community member, who were more familiar with the local place names, used the county website to annotate the interviews with parcel ID numbers. This process substantially enhanced the value and accuracy of the data collected during the field visit.

Integrating community members who lack significant firsthand experience with scholarly research into such a process is not straightforward, but the librarians on the team worked to address these challenges. Drawing on their experience serving unaffiliated patrons from the university's neighboring communities, librarians were able to anticipate and address issues the visiting

community members participating in the research sprint might face. Weeks before the sprint, librarians reached out to the campus Research Computing group to arrange for touchscreen monitors and computers loaded with ESRI's ArcGIS software to facilitate a process of collaboratively annotating street-level views of water infrastructure in the Gullah/Geechee community. Additionally, the librarians preemptively addressed more mundane technological needs such as wifi access, guest logins, and shared file storage. They were also able to curate resources of interest to community members, including access to experts on campus. In this case, utilizing their campus-spanning knowledge of faculty expertise, librarians connected the community members with a professor of bioproducts and biosystems engineering who possessed considerable expertise in stormwater management and stormwater retention ponds.

Perhaps equally valuable was the way the format of the sprint enhanced and cemented the ethos of collaborative research through the facilitation of community participation in the research process. Although the research sprint was a project of exceptional duration and intensity, the support that librarians provide to research teams in these sprints—building research inquiry skills, selecting effective models for research collaborations, offering access to space and research equipment, and connecting researchers and research support staff across the university—is no different from the sort of support they provide every day. For community participants, these direct interactions with librarians, faculty, and students allowed each to become a resource for the other, leading to a mutually beneficial information exchange that also became an incubator for generating ideas. Completing this collaborative exercise in real time and in person, as opposed to across email or social media, eliminated the delay that can come with distance.

This research sprint also provided a valuable reorientation of the research process for all three parties involved. With community members present, contributing to and driving the research process, there was a constant reminder for researchers and libraries that the data does not exist exclusive of the people it has affected. It illustrated how valuable community-based knowledge is to the scholarly research process and to the community collaborators themselves, an opportunity not often afforded to members of subject communities.

Why Libraries

Libraries are the hub of research activities on college and university campuses, so if researchers are increasingly partnering with communities, these partnerships will naturally intersect with libraries. Through our experience in the research sprint, we identified four features of academic libraries that make them uniquely well suited to become a center for community partnership in research: (1) their skill in teaching research inquiry and information literacy skills, (2) their facility with and knowledge of collaborative work throughout the research process, (3) their access to the university's physical space and other material resources for research, and (4) their extensive, cross-disciplinary knowledge of the university's research environment and research-support networks. Drawing on the literature from the fields of library science and community engagement, we explore these four sites in which academic libraries can strengthen community–faculty partnerships.

One of the core missions of academic libraries is to advance inquiry skills at all levels of research from training first-year students on the principles of information literacy to supporting the most complex reference questions from senior faculty (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2015). Such research inquiry skills were until recently part of the specialized training of postsecondary education, but with the abundance of information via the internet, "the boundary between university [researchers] and the general public is being blurred" (Hang Tat Leong, 2013, p. 220). And, as James Thull argues, some academic libraries such as those at tribal colleges have long been teaching information literacy and research inquiry skills to a diverse set of patrons, making little distinction between unaffiliated community members, students, and faculty—a recognition that all populations require the ability to critically and efficiently research and evaluate information (Thull, 2008). Now more than ever, both university affiliates and community members need access to up-to-date information literacy training in order to navigate knowledge systems and claims of expertise. Since academic librarians have long supported training all levels of researchers, libraries can help community partners of academic

researchers weigh the reliability of open information such as that available on the public internet as well as act as the initial access point for community partners' introduction into the limited- or closed-access research ecosystem of academic journals, scholarly monographs, and physical archives. In this latter space, librarians can provide community members with specific methods to access existing research about or with relevance to their community or project. And the broad information literacy curriculum that libraries already teach can offer community members tools to critically evaluate esoteric scholarship or opaque records. But training community members to navigate and evaluate research material is only a small portion of any research partnership. In fact, researchers should not try to mold community partners into academics themselves, but rather should respect the ways of knowing that community members bring to the research process. Since libraries must serve a population as diverse as the students, staff, and faculty of an entire academic institution, they already cannot espouse a uniform "right way" to research. They instead take a patron-focused approach and work to offer access that is sensitive to multifarious methods of inquiry across their broad user base. Some academic libraries (such as ours at Minnesota) actually provide access to the public and already take into account the needs and practices of community members in the design of the libraries' physical and virtual environments.

Any meaningful partnership with community members transforms academic research from an individual or small-group effort into a collaborative one. Collaboration has long been a concern of engaged scholarship literature, with many in the field theorizing, modeling, and testing collaborative configurations and processes in order to refine and make more equitable dynamics between academic researchers and community partners (Fletcher et al., 2016; Messer & Kecskes, 2008; Williamson et al., 2016). Here too, libraries are poised to contribute. As librarians Janice Jaguszewski and Karen Williams have noted, the role of academic librarians is transforming, so that "establishing collaborative partnerships within and across institutions" is now a critical function of the job (Jaguszewski & Williams, 2013, p. 4). With collaboration comes complexity, and librarianship is adapting with a focus on project management and team dynamics. "Increasingly, librarians are embracing project management to guide their work," write Theresa Burress and Chelcie Juliet Rowell, and "project management skills are now essential for professional librarians" (Burress & Rowell, 2017, p. 301). Having embraced team-based structures and researched their effectiveness for decades now, librarians are equipped to offer guidance on how to coordinate complex projects of large, interdisciplinary, and/or community-partnered research teams (Association of Research Libraries, 1998; Baughman, 2008; Katopol, 2013). Furthermore, because they often hold faculty status themselves, academic librarians understand the pressure of the tenure-and-promotion clock as well as the unpredictable pace of research. Given this similarity, they are well positioned to introduce helpful structure into research projects without unnecessarily bureaucratic steps or an inflexible approach. That is important not only to academic researchers, but also to community partners whose partnership is usually uncompensated and often strained by the competing responsibilities of their other work and homelife, considerations that librarians can help to build into any project management or team dynamics structures they help craft.

Partnerships with community members cannot thrive on goodwill alone. They require material resources in order to function (MacKinnon & Derickson, 2012). As community education scholar Lyn Tett suggests, collaborations between communities and academics require "joint resourcing" from each partner and should even afford one partner the ability to draw on the material resources of the other equitably but directly, meaning that both "surrende[r] a degree of resource control" (Tett, 2005, p. 4). Among the administrative structures within colleges and universities, libraries act largely as a commons through which patrons can directly draw upon the resources of space, technology, and expertise. Libraries' physical environments provide researchers with open or freely reservable space to work. Increasingly, that space is now no longer individual and quiet, but rather is collaborative and encourages active conversation. These spaces are often rich in technology and commonly provide public access to computers with projectors or large monitors, as well as advanced hardware like virtual reality systems and software licenses for needs as diverse as graphic design or statistical analysis. Moreover, users of aca-

demic library resources are almost always able to draw upon the expertise of service-oriented library staff in order to learn how to best utilize such technologies and spaces. However, the material resources that libraries can provide—space, technology, and proximity to assistance from knowledgeable librarians—are seldom freely available to community members. Most of these resources are open only to community members already in partnership with an academic researcher, and this usually requires the institutionally affiliated partner to mediate access to these resources. Although academic libraries are well positioned to help jointly resource community partnerships with tangible assets, in order to unlock the potential of libraries' resources, parent institutions need to work to make campuses more accessible. For some communities, campuses are physical signifiers of histories of oppression. At large research institutions, the neoclassical architecture of campus malls may act as reminders of the days when an institution performed risky experiments on subjects drawn from communities of color, and the latest and greatest buildings on the campus periphery may be viewed as yet another wave of a university's gentrification of nearby neighborhoods. Smaller colleges may present different but even more challenging barriers, such as a lack of public transit to a bucolic but rural campus. And for a person of color like African American congressperson John Lewis—who was denied a library card as a child at his hometown library in Troy, Alabama—libraries can even bring back memories of Jim Crow segregation in which the "access" mission of libraries meant access for Whites only (Lewis, 1998). To overcome these barriers, universities and colleges need to prioritize physical and virtual library access in their broader community engagement plans and find ways to introduce libraries as a welcoming front door of the institution for community members.

Although making the physical structure of campuses more welcoming will take generations, libraries are already breaking down the invisible but pernicious bureaucracy that silos the intellectual resources of campus. Libraries are curatorial by nature. They collect, organize, distribute, and display information of all sorts. They are also central. And through the liaison system that underlies the structure of their organization, they maintain direct lines of access to each academic department at an institution. With their high degree of connectivity and a mission that centers on making information "discoverable," academic librarians have found themselves with an unrivaled understanding of their institutions while fulfilling the role of curator of the resources—both material and human—within them. This ability of librarians is critical to fostering community member–researcher partnerships since research support services are not the exclusive domain of libraries but are instead scattered throughout the institution and since faculty often lack exposure to (and the time to learn about) the full range of resources at their college or university. For partnerships with community members to flourish, faculty need to marshal the extensive but often hidden research support staff of institutions of higher learning to serve their needs. Just as academic projects without community engagement are dependent on technologists, administrative staff, grant writers, compliance officials, and others who form the personnel infrastructure of research activities on a campus, so too (and perhaps even more so) are projects that cocreate their work with communities. With their extensive connectivity across the institution, librarians are poised to open up access to any given higher education institution's network of research support expertise for both researchers and community members alike.

Given that academic libraries' central position and commitment to equitable support of all research endeavors position them well to welcome and advance the research needs of community partners, academic librarians and faculty should begin such endeavors with the needs of the community in mind. Based on our experience and other academic collaborations, Simmons Jenkins suggests a set of best practices and considerations that faculty, librarians, students, and other research staff can use as a framework before undertaking collaborative research and revisit as a project unfolds:

- Have a cultural sensitivity to the community they are partnering with, asking about and understanding what values and traditions are important or sacred and what rituals or cultural practices they may be asked to observe or participate in. In other words, learn how to show community partners respect and deference.

- Connect with community partners who have the ethics, integrity, aptitude, and skill to represent their communities and to contribute to academic processes. This requires community partners who do not simply align with the perspective of the researcher and who also understand the extent of the commitment being asked of them and their communities.
- Work with community partners to develop expectations about what sort of content will result from their collaboration and how any product that results from the partnership will be designed, edited, distributed, and owned. In this process, both an initial consensus on and regular reconsenting of this agreement are critical.
- Initially and regularly discuss and agree to the collaboration's deliverables and deadlines as well as how these parts of the whole work toward tangible and intangible, mutually beneficial outcomes.
- Understand to what extent the community partner is and is not equipped to act as a liaison with their community—identifying the topics, people, institutions, and other aspects of the community they are comfortable and qualified to engage with or not.
- Recognize the direct costs and opportunity costs of community partner participation and strive to directly cover expenses (rather than reimburse) and fairly compensate effort where possible. Academic research partners should not overlook the incidental expenses related to travel in particular, since some community partners may not have finances for even the smallest expenses incurred while traveling in aid of research.
- Remember that each partner in research claims some "ownership" or investment in its outcomes and should have equal input in how the process proceeds and how research products are delivered.

The Marathon

As our example is meant to illustrate, community-based participation in an explicitly collaborative research process can facilitate improved trust between communities and university-based researchers. Such partnerships can bring about innovations in research questions, methods, and approaches to analysis. They can even open up the resources of universities to broader publics in accordance with their stated missions.

Substantial barriers to developing and sustaining these relationships remain. Libraries, however, are well positioned to address both the development and sustainability of partnerships with communities. Although "research sprints" represent a novel, compressed approach to providing support for faculty–community partner teams, the activities of the sprints are unexceptional—that is, they represent the scholarly support academic libraries provide regularly. Libraries can act as centers for community partners that go beyond their relationship with individual researchers. They can teach research inquiry skills while respecting and learning from the inquiry practices of communities. They can facilitate collaboration by introducing and integrating community members into the research process and by sustaining that support throughout the project. They can provide other material resources for research. And, perhaps most significantly, libraries can provide imperative connections to the expertise networks of colleges and universities' research-support personnel, marshalling these intellectual resources for both researchers and community partners.

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