



# Setting an Agenda: The Role of Community-Engaged Scholarship and Practice in Liberal Arts Colleges

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## ABSTRACT

The Great Lakes Colleges Association ([www.glca.org](http://www.glca.org)) recently organized a convening of the Opening Doors of Dialogue Program, a Mellon Foundation funded initiative. The focus of that convening was on bringing together campus and community leaders across the GLCA engaged in and committed to community-engaged partnerships in their respective communities. Lessons learned, as well as associated opportunities and challenges, were shared. As scholar-practitioners, our role was to help identify common themes and trends across the partnerships and conversations, and to help set an agenda about the role of community-engaged partnerships in liberal arts colleges. The focus of this manuscript is on those trends and agenda setting considerations.

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## KEYWORDS:

Liberal arts colleges; consortial programming; community-engaged partnerships

## TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Baker, V. L., Apps, H., Terosky, A. L. & Parker, R. (2023). Setting an Agenda: The Role of Community-Engaged Scholarship and Practice in Liberal Arts Colleges. *Collaborations: A Journal of Community-Based Research and Practice*, 6(1): 7, pp. 1–8. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33596/coll.117>

*“The greatness of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate actions of its members.”*

– Coretta Scott King

The above quote by King highlights that while success can be measured in a variety of ways, the compassion engendered by all members of the community is its greatest strength. As a collective group of scholar practitioners, we have nearly 90 years of experience in education and community engagement. Although our professional trajectories have taken diverse paths, those paths have fueled a commonality among us: a passion for community-engaged partnerships. That passion afforded us an opportunity to serve as four scholar-practitioners attending the Great Lakes Colleges Association (GLCA) *Opening Doors of Dialogue Project* (ODDP) convening during summer 2022, funded by the Mellon Foundation. This convening provided a space for university and community partners from many of the 13 GLCA colleges/universities to reflect, share, and strategize on how to foster or revitalize their own community-university partnerships.

Guided by a simple, yet powerful aim—to develop strategies that address areas of need that both a campus and community experience—the ODDP convening sought to highlight the importance of enduring partnerships and the reciprocal benefits that can be realized when such partnerships are grounded in a common purpose. The convening conversations were rooted in the core tenets of a liberal arts college education including the importance of developing engaged democratic citizens and the inclusion of diverse partners.

The conversations and ideas that surfaced during the ODDP have the potential to provide knowledge to others currently engaged in or seeking to forge college-community partnerships. As such, we highlight the two main themes (e.g., creating greater cohesion between the community and college, critical considerations for sustainability) followed by a practical implications case study focused on capacity-building for the long-term. Our hope is that by sharing the knowledge gleaned from this convening, we contribute to advancing the field of community-engaged partnerships and provide a resource to those who seek to elevate community partnerships in their areas.

## THE GLCA AND OPENING DOORS OF DIALOGUE PROJECT

Guided by a mission to strengthen and preserve its 13 member institutions and serving as a leading force on behalf of education in the tradition of the liberal arts and sciences, the GLCA has advocated for and supported liberal arts colleges for 60 years. Member colleges represent four states (Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania) and diverse institutional missions.

Marquee programs include the GLCA Academic Leadership Institute (GALI), New Directions Initiative for mid-career faculty development, a Teagle Foundation funded GLCA Consortium for Teaching and Learning, as well as a partnership with the Global Liberal Arts Alliance (GLAA), a set of independent universities and colleges offering a liberal arts-style education around the world (see [www.glca.org](http://www.glca.org)). Their recent initiative, *Opening Doors of Dialogue Project* (ODDP), was the focus of the summer convening. Learn more at <https://www.glca.org/the-glca-opening-doors-of-dialogue-project/>.

According to GLCA member institutions, “vitality depends on their ability to work and thrive together” (Great Lakes Colleges Association, 2022, para. 2). The focus on investment in community partnerships is perhaps even more important to institutions and their local and regional communities because of the lessons learned during the pandemic. In partnership with their community colleagues, higher education is well-positioned to advance change as faculty, students, staff, and community leaders seek to co-create and co-disseminate knowledge to address social, community, and organizational needs (Baker, 2021).

The guiding aims of ODDP are to:

- Learn what is happening in the space of community-engaged partnerships across the GLCA.
- Facilitate conversations among institutional leaders and community partners around critical issues salient to their communities.
- Re-envision the next evolution of a more “deliberately focused, integrated program” of community-engaged partnerships in the context of a liberal arts college education (GLCA, 2022).
- Explore future related projects and initiatives that could be envisioned at the institutional and/or consortium levels.

30 participants from 10 member institutions were present at the capstone meeting. Campus representatives (e.g., faculty and administrators) spanned disciplinary areas including biology, arts, English, communications, political science, environment and sustainability, and diverse leadership roles such as campus chaplains, center directors (e.g., of sustainability) and campus directors (e.g., of community partnerships). Community attendees represented leadership from city council, 4-H, economic and community development centers, community foundations, city planners and city managers, and members from social service and community cultural organizations. As a collective, attendees represented diverse lived experiences, organizational missions and needs, and a commitment to enhancing community-university partnerships in their areas while acknowledging the very real challenges that permeate community-engaged practice.

As a group of scholar-practitioners, we are three white women faculty members and administrators representing the fields of business, economics, and educational leadership from Michigan and Pennsylvania, and one Black man who is a community school coordinator in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Our community-engaged efforts have focused on urban and rural areas; we have partnered and supported k-12 educational organizations, small businesses, organizations focused on economic (re)development, and local governmental agencies. We have facilitated community-engaged efforts through our classrooms, institutions, and professional associations. Our shared personal values drive our professional endeavors in the space of community-engaged scholarship and practice.

## **THE BUILDING OF COLLECTIVE KNOWLEDGE: CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR COMMUNITY-ENGAGED PARTNERSHIPS**

During the ODDP convening, GLCA leaders and four invited scholar-practitioner experts of community engagement guided participants through a series of conversational prompts and reflective exercises. The dialogue prompts focused on deeply analyzing the following aspects of their community-university partnerships: context, mission/goals, opportunities, challenges, and assessment of outcomes of the partnership. The prompts and exercises included a three-pronged approach: (a) introducing the contexts of the participants' settings and partnerships, (b) sharing of participants' partnership cases (addressing the aspects listed above), and (c) analysis and guided reflection about common themes across cases, led by the scholar-practitioner experts. Throughout the entire convening, the four experts recorded copious notes on what they were hearing and seeing, and then collectively developed themes represented by the cases presented. Beyond analysis and its presentation, the experts and GLCA leadership guided participants into actionable steps to take back to their campuses and communities. We next share some key thoughts on the themes established during the convening.

### **THE COLLEGE AND COMMUNITY: REACHING TOWARD GREATER COHESION**

Today's post-pandemic political, economic, and social realities are such that colleges must engage with their surrounding communities as the pandemic highlighted already existing underlying stresses (Strier, 2014; Fernandez and Shaw, 2020). Community-college partnerships are not only vital to institutional survival and growth, but offer developmental opportunities to students; consequently, there is a strong case for an investment in such connections. Kalamazoo College's Mary Jane Underwood Stryker Center for Civic Engagement states the case well in its mission statement: "By forging

a link between service and learning, the CCE works to strengthen the community, invigorate the educational experience, and promote students' informed and ethical engagement to build a more just, equitable and sustainable world" (Kalamazoo College, 2023, para 1).

But if community-college partnerships are to actualize a more just, equitable, and sustainable world, these partnerships need to address significant challenges in how they build and sustain trusting and mutually beneficial relationships (Gregory, 2020). Colleges need to see themselves as part of the community even though in many cases, the community and college look and feel separate. In some cases, the college is physically separated from the broader community by topology reinforced by roads or bridges. In many cases, the community is Blacker, browner, and/or poorer than the college. Issues of racism and privilege drive the divides. In other cases, the college is Blacker, browner, more international, or more diverse with respect to gender identity than the surrounding community. Political and economic issues drive the divides in these cases. Additionally, disparities in socioeconomic status, college reach into local communities, increasing poverty, aging populations, and job loss are real and pervasive; these realities impact the presence of community partnerships, how stakeholders engage in those partnerships, and the associated outcomes that result. So, what are the common threads that we heard among the university and community participants at the ODDP?

### **Create Mutual Understanding**

First, these community partnerships are essential to the continued health and prosperity of all. This belief was shared by all in attendance. As scholar-practitioners, we felt relieved to hear that others in the room shared these same sentiments, allowing us all to reflect on and propose actions that would further enhance and facilitate such partnerships. To create mutual understanding, both partners need to appreciate each other's contexts. For instance, community members rarely get paid for their time and expertise in the project, while faculty usually do not get credit in tenure and promotion decisions for their community-based work. During the ODDP convening, many community leaders and faculty members had not fully considered the lack of compensation the other faced. When they learned that colleges may not value community partnership work in tenure and promotion decisions or when they reiterated that community leaders' time and knowledge is viewed through a pro-bono lens, some community and college representatives saw this as an indication of a lack of value being placed on the partnership. One of the benefits of the convening, and responsibility we shared as scholar-practitioners, was to facilitate opportunities for participants to break through some of the silos by sharing individual and institutional perspectives. We learned the sharing of information was

the “easy” part; finding acceptable, actionable solutions was more of a challenge as we acknowledged the very real issues related to needed resources as essential to moving beyond mere information sharing.

To create mutual understanding, both partners need to put practice behind theory. What is the project? Will it be ongoing? Is funding sustainable? Is it supported by the college’s or community organization’s administration? In some contexts, community partners ask whether they belong on campus. They do not understand why the college may value partnerships in theory but do not always illustrate that value through practice or sustained relationship building. Some colleges, faced with enrollment declines and stagnant endowments, are turning from partnerships with nonprofits to alliances with manufacturing and industry. When this occurs, it is difficult for community members to see the college as reacting to economic challenges. Instead, they see change as broken promises.

To create mutual understanding, both partners must be transparent with the pros and cons of participating in the partnership. We urge all stakeholders to engage in conversations focused on facilitating a shared understanding of the benefits and costs of engaging in community partnerships. One of the critical outcomes of the ODDP itself was giving the participants a glimpse of the constraints under which each operated, facilitating opportunities to collectively identify solutions.

### Building College & Community Bridges

A second critical consideration relates to the college’s role within the broader community. Although campus/community divides need to be bridged, these bridges will be different for each community. For example, in one community represented at ODDP, a big issue is the college absorbing the surrounding neighborhood as it physically grows. In others, students feel unsafe when venturing into nearby streets or community members feel unwelcome on a campus.

Although often falsely framed as a benefit given to a community, community engagement significantly benefits the work of liberal arts colleges in educating students (Lai & Hui, 2021). Students engage in service and experiential learning, a high-impact practice employed across the academy but deeply aligned with a liberal arts college mission (Kuh, 2008). This type of learning cannot happen in isolation and partnerships are more likely to thrive when universities and communities honor the assets provided by the other. In initiative after initiative, students were the main resources put forth by the college. In some cases, they volunteer; in others, they are paid or earn academic credit. Students are learning—deep learning—in these partnerships and colleges need to recognize and appreciate that (Soska et al., 2010). The president, administration, and community leaders must publicly and continually support the community partnerships taking place.

### SUSTAINABILITY: GROUNDING COMMUNITY-ENGAGED PARTNERSHIPS

Facilitating constructive political discourse, fostering belonging, advancing an anti-racist praxis, and building a “City of Learning” are just a few of the areas in which GLCA member institutions are advancing the field of community-engaged partnerships. These efforts require a deep commitment to and clear, visible engagement among faculty, staff, students, and community partners who seek to work together to address social, community, and organizational challenges. These efforts are vitally important to the communities in which they are situated. Yet, a dominant theme that emerged throughout the ODDP was on the issue of sustainability, a critical consideration that has been well-documented (Cunningham, 2020; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2005; Youn et al., 2019). Conversations among attendees, however, highlighted the need for a more nuanced, multi-pronged approach to support long-term sustainability centered on the resources needed: financial, human, intellectual, and physical.

### Recognizing Key Stakeholder Value

The notion of value grounded much of our discussion during the convening—the value we, as institutional leaders and community engaged advocates and practitioners, ascribe to such community-engaged partnerships and the outcomes that result. That value could, and should, take many forms. For example, how is such engagement formally recognized for faculty as they advance in their careers? The amount of effort and time required to both foster such relationships and ensure learning is occurring is no small feat. Despite the recognition that community engagement is a high-impact practice that benefits all stakeholders (Kuh, 2008), few institutions explicitly include mention of this practice in faculty rewards and recognition, or as part of evaluation criteria. Further, there is often little to no additional compensation or funds to support such efforts. Actions are not aligned with espoused values.

Relatedly, there was also acknowledgement that the value ascribed to community-engaged partnerships must extend beyond the institution to recognize the vital role community partners play. Without community partners and their willingness to serve as co-creators and co-disseminators of knowledge and coaches and mentors of students, faculty, and staff alike, community-engaged partnerships would cease to exist. Community members’ time and intellectual capital must be codified and compensated. In brief, the intellectual and human contributions required to ground and advance community-engaged partnerships must be supported and recognized appropriately. This theme aligns with past research (Sasson, 2019), while highlighting the need for creative solutions about how to fund such partnerships, where the intellectual capital resides, and how the intellectual capital is to be used moving forward. As scholar-practitioners,

we grappled with this in our own small team discussions, working to think creatively about approaches we could share and reflect on with the larger group.

### **Mission-Level Commitment (and Action)**

As we delved into the critical considerations related to the intellectual and physical resources needed to sustain such efforts, there was a recognition that community-engaged partnerships require “top-down support” coupled with “bottom-up engagement,” which necessitates new management and leadership models to advance related study and practice across the academy. However, as a team of scholar-practitioners, we had to acknowledge that perhaps the leadership and management models and skills needed to propel community-engaged partnerships forward are still lacking in the academy broadly (a topic that requires action of its own). Community-engaged partnerships have the potential to languish without a very clear and firm mission-level commitment to the value of such partnerships. Mission-level commitment must be accounted for in tangible ways (e.g., operating budgets). We argue that such a focus is foundational to the mission of a liberal arts college education: developing the next generation of engaged democratic citizens.

In addition to a strong mission-driven focus that undergirds community-engaged partnerships is the need for intellectual and physical infrastructure to serve as the framework from which partnerships can thrive. Lessons learned, cognitive frameworks, learning outcomes, and formative and summative assessments abound across the GLCA and were at the center of our sustainability discussions. We learned from our engagement at this meeting that there is amazing work happening at the institutional and consortial levels in the GLCA; their community-engaged programs are well-conceived, -led, and -managed.

### **The Role of Leaders**

Finally, we would be remiss if we did not discuss the issue of leadership turnover as a critical consideration of sustainability. During the convening, we heard stories of such programs resting on the commitment of a few or single individuals who value the ways in which community-engaged partnerships enhance the lives and experiences of community members. Real concerns were expressed that if/when the focal individual leaves, there is no clear idea of how, if at all, the commitment to community-engaged partnerships will continue. This issue is exacerbated because of the pandemic and subsequent “great resignation” that has occurred in higher education (Gewin, 2022). Such realizations raised the proverbial red flag about the need to ensure such efforts are rooted in institutional mission and grounded by strong infrastructures to minimize disruptions caused by leadership turnover.

## **CAPACITY BUILDING FOR THE LONG RUN: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

How might community-higher education partnerships address these concerns from the ODDP? How do we learn and grow beyond the following scenario, in which a group of dedicated members of a college/university is engaged in an initiative with a local community entity? The project starts off strong, builds positive interactions between the community, creates good press, and then.....it just ends. There are many reasons why this partnership can end: lack of human or financial resources, miscommunication around the project's priorities, inequitable decision-making power, mistrust between the university and community partners, and so on. As scholars and practitioners of community-engaged partnerships, we have certainly seen all these scenarios play out, with failed partnerships lying in its wake. “How do we avoid this scenario from playing out?” asked many of the ODDP attendees.

In theory, the simple answer is building capacity for the long run. Yet in practice, it is anything but simple. In hopes of providing a tangible example of practice, we shared a model at the ODDP as well as here. This model highlights the four guiding principles in an award-winning, decades-old partnership between Samuel Gompers K-8 School, a public school in Philadelphia, and Saint Joseph's University (SJU), a comprehensive university with a strong liberal arts core located adjacent to Gompers. The Gompers-SJU partnership principles include (a) high-level liaisons and on-the-ground coordinators, (b) guiding priorities grounded in robust needs assessments, (c) consistent opportunities to build relationships, and (d) ongoing education and development.

### **HIGH-LEVEL LIAISONS**

In terms of high-level liaisons and on-the-ground coordinators, Gompers hired a community coordinator whose key role is building and overseeing external partnerships, a responsibility that previously rested on the principal's shoulders (Terosky, 2014; West et al., 2010). SJU created a university-Gompers liaison position, a similar role that expands the involvement of SJU faculty/staff and departments at Gompers and oversees the larger picture of the partnership. In addition to the high-level coordinator/liaison positions, the partnership is leveraging graduate assistantships and grant-funded positions (e.g., AmeriCorps VISTAs) for on-site logistics and communication coordinators for the now more than 50 weekly and monthly projects of the partnership.

### **GUIDING PRIORITIES**

With the above structure in place, Gompers and SJU followed its second guiding principle: that of focusing their joint efforts around established, mutually beneficial priorities (Jarsky et al., 2009; Moran et al., 2009). Through



a robust initial needs assessment (e.g., survey to community, interviews, focus groups, data analysis, etc.), Gompers-SJU identified five priority areas that guide their work together. Whenever the partnership is asked to take on a new project, the first questions they ask are “Does it match our five priorities?” and “Is it mutually beneficial in ways that draw on the assets and needs of both partners?” Only projects that answer affirmatively are pursued.

### COMMITTED PARTNERS

A good structure or decision-making schema will still fall flat without a committed relationship between partners, which leads to the third guiding principle: that of developing trusting and authentic relationships that honor the dignity and contributions of all partners (Barrera, 2015; Terosky, 2018). The partners strive for enhancing their relationships through weekly meetings that not only complete tasks related to joint projects, but also establish rapport and a sense of community among individuals. Through these meetings, they know what is happening on both campuses and, often are treated as engaged decision-makers or advisors for each other’s initiatives and concerns. With time, both Gompers and SJU partners now regularly attend each other’s special events (e.g., graduations, classroom presentations, speakers on campus) and support each other through challenging times. This investment in weekly networking has strengthened trust because of the long-term commitment.

### ROBUST ONBOARDING & CONTINUOUS DEVELOPMENT

A final guiding principle is ongoing education around inclusive approaches for working together. This is particularly important for partnerships of diverse stakeholders, including diversity in racial, gender, age, and socioeconomic identities. In the case of the Gompers-SJU partnership, SJU stakeholders, predominantly white and middle-upper class, are committed to learning about Gompers’ history and community members. Additionally, SJU volunteers are expected to engage with the theory and practice of anti-racism, with the goal of countering deficit narratives about the Gompers community and overcoming white saviorism mentalities (Kendi, 2019). As such, SJU invests in a robust onboarding orientation and ongoing developmental training for all its community engaged volunteers. Similarly, Gompers stakeholders have also committed to their own ongoing learning about the traditional college-aged generation and the mission of a Jesuit Catholic institution.

These four guiding principles that undergird a long-lasting community-university partnership all speak to one precious resource: time. Time to determine a highly functioning governance model, time to assess needs and establish shared priorities, time to grow relationships into

trusting commitments, and time to educate stakeholders on the assets each stakeholder brings to the effort. And although there are no shortcuts for a long-lasting partnership, the outcome of a sustainable, purpose-driven, and joy-filled partnership are certainly worth the time! Moreover, this case example highlights a real-world model of best practices in community engagement per the extant literature.

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Known for innovative pedagogical approaches, LACs are attributed with incubating many of the high-impact practices we see today across the academy (Baker et al., 2012). Given their curricular and co-curricular advancements, LACs are particularly poised to advance the field of community-engaged partnerships and related scholarship and practice driven by institutional mission. The ODDP convening demonstrated this very fact: community and college/university leaders coming together to honestly assess their state of engagement and highlight intentional steps forward. Our collective takeaway as scholar-practitioners was one of hope and optimism for the future through increased investment in community-university partnerships. We also appreciate that we need our communities, and our communities need the institutions to be strong so we can all thrive. Shared sentiments reinforced some of our current efforts while also highlighting actions we can (and should) take as leaders in community-university partnerships on our respective campuses. Such realities are grounded in communities and higher education institutions impacted by a pandemic which requires more intentionality. No one in the room thinks the work of developing sustainable community-higher education partnerships is easy, but everyone in the room recognizes that our collective wellbeing relies on it!

### COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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**TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:**

Baker, V. L., Apps, H., Terosky, A. L. & Parker, R. (2023). ArticleTitle. *Collaborations: A Journal of Community-Based Research and Practice*, 6(1): 7, pp. 1–8. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33596/coll.117>

**Published:** 09 May 2023

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