

# **The Charlotte Action Research Project: A Model for Direct and Mutually Beneficial Community–University Engagement**

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## **Abstract**

This article describes the evolution of the Charlotte Action Research Project (CHARP), a community–university partnership founded in 2008 at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and focuses particularly on the program’s unique organizational structure. Research findings of a project evaluation suggest that the CHARP model’s unique strength lies in its ability to allow for the exploration of “wicked” problems that have resulted from structural and sociospatial inequality in cities because tangible issues identified by community partners become action research priorities for the CHARP team. Additionally, CHARP allows for the transcendence of the practical, logistical barriers often associated with community–university partnerships by employing graduate students as staff. It is suggested that the CHARP model provides a starting point for a unique model of engagement infrastructure at universities that goes beyond service provision and volunteerism to include community-based participatory and action-based research within a critical theory paradigm.

## **Introduction**

The Kellogg Commission’s landmark 1999 report calling for increased engagement on the part of universities has catalyzed a variety of community–university partnerships at American universities. Ideally, such partnerships integrate teaching, service, and research in ways that address tangible problems experienced by community members living in geographic proximity to universities and, in so doing, break down problematic “town–gown” barriers that arise when universities are perceived to be out of touch with “real-world,” grounded issues facing non-university community stakeholders (Fasenfest & Grant, 2005). The Kellogg (1999) report identified a variety of potential areas for partnership, among which was listed “urban revitalization and community renewal” (p. 33). This recommendation presumably addresses a growing concern with what is perceived to be extensive urban

blight and decay in low-income, often minority-dominated neighborhoods in American cities. The role of the university in such neighborhoods has been conceptualized as an intermediary (Fehren, 2010) or intervening institution (Cohen, 2001). However, university faculty attempting to implement service-learning and other types of engagement initiatives in challenged communities often struggle with how to negotiate large, structural problems that are embedded in historical, geographic, political, and economic contexts and, because of this, require extensive research that goes beyond traditional technical assistance. Such situations often lead to projects in which community partners become the *objects of* rather than *partners in* study. Outcomes of such projects have no immediate benefit to residents, and worse, their neighborhoods may become a temporary “laboratory” for the academic exploration of causes of poverty and decline. Such “band-aid” or one-off projects are often featured as part of undergraduate service-learning models or even in long-term partnerships between university stakeholders and local agencies. Furthermore, even these small-scale projects based on “loosely coupled” (Gass, 2005; Hyde, Hopkins, & Meyer, 2012) relationships with community partners often lack the necessary institutional support from universities to ensure success (Curwood, Munger, Mitchell, Mackeigan, & Farrar, 2011; Fear et al., 2004; Franz, Childers, & Sanderlin, 2012; Ghannam, 2007; Jackson & Meyers, 2000; Sandmann & Kliever, 2012).

The Charlotte Action Research Project (CHARP), based in the University of North Carolina at Charlotte’s Department of Geography and Earth Sciences, addresses what the Kellogg (1999) report referred to as “urban revitalization and community renewal” (p. 33) in a manner that is unique among community–university partnerships. Not only is the project grounded and grassroots in its focus, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of structural inequality in cities as experienced in the individual “life-world” of community residents (Fasenfest & Grant, 2005; Fehren, 2010), it offers a unique solution to the problems and pitfalls often associated with community–university partnerships such as time commitment, lack of resources, and incompatibility with academic culture. Because the project employs graduate students as staff and partners directly with residents of challenged neighborhoods in Charlotte, North Carolina, its outcomes have become increasingly significant for both graduate students and community members.

The purpose of this article is to describe the history of the Charlotte Action Research Project as well as to provide an assessment of the project’s effectiveness in addressing the “wicked”

problems facing today's urban neighborhoods. We begin with a description of research design and methodology for the study. We then provide the reader with context by recounting the history of CHARP through three major eras: beginnings, benchmarks, and building. Next, we share the findings of our study regarding the impact CHARP has had, both on graduate student employees across a spectrum of research approaches and on residents, who also emphasized the benefits of CHARP's direct engagement model. We find that the CHARP model has proven effective with regard to four of the specific challenges that often hamper the effectiveness of community–university partnerships: the problem of time, resource availability and funding streams, incompatibility with academic culture, and lack of mutual respect and collaboration. Furthermore, it holds great promise as a mechanism by which to conduct research to address structural issues of socioeconomic inequality. We conclude with a reflection on the limitations and implications of our study for universities wishing to engage with the mandate set forth by the Kellogg report (1999)—to become more “sympathetically and productively” (p. 9) involved with their surrounding communities.

## **Research Design and Methodology**

This study was funded by the Chancellor's Diversity Challenge Fund at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNCC). The purpose of this fund is to “support faculty, staff, and student initiatives promoting the daily value of diversity in the intellectual life of the campus” (*CDCF, 2014, para. 1*). Evaluation of CHARP's community engagement initiative was within the bounds of the types of projects supported by the fund because of the partnerships that had been and had the potential to be established between campus and community representatives.

Funding from the grant covered a variety of project-related expenses including participant compensation for this study. Additionally, the funding was applied to conference travel to present study findings, hiring graduate students to transcribe interviews, and the organization of several community partner summits throughout the course of the funding period. (More information on these summits can be found in the section Building: Coalition Building and Research.)

Study participants agreed to take part in a one-on-one semistructured interview of approximately 1 hour regarding their experiences with the Charlotte Action Research Project. Participants

included 20 community partners, four graduate student staff, and 10 employees with the City of Charlotte's Neighborhood and Business Services division (CHARP's partnership with this group is described in the Benchmarks section). Sampling for the study was both purposive, in that we wished to interview individuals who had worked extensively with the program, and exhaustive, as we invited all of our partners to participate. Our response rate was high—the only participants we were unable to recruit for an interview were five graduate students who had formerly worked on the program but had since relocated and were therefore unavailable to participate. Participant recruitment occurred via e-mail and phone and followed a loose script explaining the purpose of the study and the participant's desired role in the research. Community partners were compensated with a \$30 gift card for completing the interview. Graduate students and city staff were not compensated for their time.

The interview questionnaires varied depending on the participant. Separate questionnaires, which were all approved by the Institutional Review Board at University of North Carolina at Charlotte, were constructed for graduate students, city staff, and community partners and varied in length from 10 to 70 questions. Interviews were semistructured in that the questionnaires served as a loose guide to ensure that participants addressed particular themes regarding the efficacy and impact of CHARP. The three authors of this article conducted interviews either individually or in pairs during the summers of 2012 and 2013. Two authors were also interviewed for the project due to their roles as graduate student staff, as described in the Study Limitations and Conclusions section. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed by either the authors or one of four UNCC students hired with grant funding to transcribe.

Each of the three study authors participated in the organization, coding, and analysis of the interview data for the study. Our coding strategy included the use of NVivo qualitative software to identify the existence of the following themes, all of which are discussed in our findings: project development, the "problem of time," resource availability and funding streams, (in)compatibility with academic culture, and existence of mutual respect and collaborative behaviors. With the exception of "project development," these themes were identified during the literature review portion of this research project as the major challenges that hamper the effectiveness of many community–university partnerships. Each of these thematic categories was entered as a "node" in NVivo,

and text from interview transcriptions was manually coded into these nodes. During the coding process, we followed the strategy outlined by Wiles, Rosenberg, and Kearns (2005)—rather than narrowly code by specific utterances, we instead chose to code in context by considering the “embedded meaning” of statements and how they informed the research project’s goals. Chenail (2012) described this process as coding by qualitative unit rather than strictly line by line. Once coded, interview data were analyzed and used to inform study findings.

It is important to situate this evaluation within the larger framework of an action research project. Action research is conceptualized as cyclical with a starting point of establishing a research question that addresses a pressing need affecting the lived experiences of participants. This is followed by a planning and exploratory phase that leads to implementing a solution. During this action phase, which is often described as *learning by doing* or *learning in action*, participants reflect on what works and what must be improved, both in terms of the action itself and the process of implementation. This reflection leads to a new cycle, beginning with refining the research question to reflect the solutions the original action produced and the remaining questions to be addressed (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Maguire, 1987; Sorensen & Lawson, 2011). The research presented in this article fits into the action research cycle at the point of participants reflecting on project outcomes so that CHARP team members might refine the model in order to become even better campus partners for local communities.

## **Context: The CHARP Story**

### **Beginnings: Learning the Lay of the Land (2008–2009)**

When Dr. Janni Sorensen was hired as an assistant professor in the Department of Geography and Earth Sciences at UNCC in 2008, she immediately began to work toward implementing a model of direct engagement with communities for research and teaching. This model was based on the work she had completed at the University of Illinois as part of the East St. Louis Action Research Project (ESLARP), which engaged low-income neighborhoods in East St. Louis in organizational capacity-building as part of a participatory research agenda (Reardon, 2006; Sorensen & Lawson, 2011). Her attendance at a variety of community meetings in various neighborhoods in Charlotte provided her with opportunities to

partner with local community members through service-learning. Dr. Sorensen adhered to the recommendation of Stoecker (1999) in his assertion that academics must take on flexible roles in working in a participatory fashion with communities. Although she lacked any reliable funding source, Dr. Sorensen started CHARP in 2008 with the following mission statement:

CHARP consistently and proactively seeks to integrate teaching, research, and action to work towards a larger agenda of social justice, enable neighborhoods to advocate for themselves, and create sustainable neighborhood coalitions to implement structural change. (Internal CHARP memo)

With the creation of CHARP as a model of direct engagement for universities in partnership with challenged local neighborhoods, Dr. Sorensen identified a graduate student, Elizabeth Morrell, to work with her as a teaching assistant (TA). Morrell would work in a double capacity as a TA—in addition to assistance with classroom management tasks, she would work as a community liaison to forge and strengthen partnerships with Charlotte-area communities interested in partnering with the university. Dr. Sorensen's involvement of paid graduate liaisons in the project was strategic and based in literature about barriers to community-university partnerships, as students are often hesitant to become involved in service-learning, participatory research, or other types of engaged research activities due to the perception that this type of work might involve unrealistic time commitments and might not prove to be professionally beneficial in the end (*Ghannam, 2007; Sherman & MacDonald, 2009; Wallace, 2000*). Dr. Sorensen addressed this issue early on by involving graduate students who were both paid for their time and given the opportunity to conduct grounded research projects in collaboration with local residents. The nature of the work involved with the project was also compatible with the graduate student lifestyle, as recounted here:

With grad students, most of us are young and have a lot of energy and a lot of passion to work with people and improve society. And we work non-traditional hours so it's easier for us to go out and just hang out with residents if we want to.

The important work that was going on during this time was, more than anything, relationship- and trust-building with local

neighborhood residents. Spending time with people and listening to their experiences was critical in order for CHARP to challenge popular perceptions that “universities never stick around.” Dr. Sorensen was able to establish relationships with four local neighborhoods during these early years of the project and, in so doing, began to establish a research agenda for working in partnership with residents.

At its outset, the project intentionally lacked a formalized structure to avoid imposing a research and teaching agenda on the community partners without critical reflection on and understanding of the community priorities for a partnership. This open and flexible model had benefits in that it allowed for experimentation on the part of both students and residents; however, it was not without its challenges, particularly for students accustomed to working within the constraints of a traditional academic institutional structure. One graduate student who initially worked on the project in an unpaid capacity and later was brought on as staff remarked on her experiences at the beginning:

I remember we were just constantly saying, “What are we supposed to do? What are we doing?” Because at that point there wasn’t any real guidance. Which I kind of think, the CHARP model is so contextual and [Dr. Sorensen] is just so open to whatever. Whatever you do, it’s not gonna be wrong, you just have to get in there and figure it out and go with the flow to some extent.

In response to this perceived lack of structure, graduate students involved with CHARP at its beginning often focused on small-scale relationship- and trust-building projects in communities, rather than on tackling the “wicked” problems that were also present, such as residential segregation and disparities in quality of life between CHARP partner communities and other, more affluent, Charlotte neighborhoods:

[At the beginning] we had an emphasis on doing clean-ups and beautification projects. Those are tangible and those are pretty easy to accomplish. It was something that the neighborhood could work with the liaison on and produce a really visible outcome.

Because of her involvement with ESLARP at the University of Illinois, Dr. Sorensen intended CHARP to be, conceptually and the-

oretically, very similar to ESLARP. Both programs were grounded in the idea that neighborhood residents must engage on a level playing field with university representatives and that action-based research projects should be undertaken as mutually beneficial endeavors for both “town” and “gown” (Reardon, 2006; Sorensen & Lawson, 2011). Ken Reardon (2000), the project director for ESLARP for a decade starting in 1990, remarked that from an organizational standpoint, that particular project was reinvented and reframed on several occasions due to “critical incidents” involving staffing and funding that necessitated its reconceptualization. Similarly, since its inception, CHARP has undergone two episodes of reorganization in response to external factors, both of which were concerned with funding. The first of these occurred in 2009, when Dr. Sorensen partnered with the City of Charlotte’s Neighborhood and Business Services Division to hire additional graduate student liaisons to work in several specific neighborhoods.

### **Benchmarks: Partnership with the City of Charlotte (2009–2012)**

In 2009, the City of Charlotte’s Neighborhood and Business Services Division (NBS) received funding as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act’s Neighborhood Stabilization Program to address issues with crime, blight, and deterioration in neighborhoods that had suffered under the recent foreclosure crisis. Part of this funding was allocated to CHARP with the condition that graduate student liaisons be assigned to work in specific neighborhoods that had been impacted by the foreclosure crisis of 2007–2008. With this, a tripartite community–university partnership was born between the university, the city, and the neighborhoods in question. NBS began by assigning CHARP to work in two challenged neighborhoods during the 2009–2010 academic school year and each year expanded the scope of the project, eventually shifting the focus beyond neighborhoods that had been challenged due to excessive foreclosure to a variety of neighborhoods across the Charlotte metropolitan area. At its maximum size, five graduate student liaisons were employed in five different “challenged” Charlotte neighborhoods, as defined by the 2010 City of Charlotte Quality of Life Study (*Metropolitan Studies Group, 2010*).

At this point, working as part of the partnership proved challenging for graduate students because it required them to work for both neighborhood residents and the city simultaneously, while still maintaining their identity as university employees. Students found that residents were primarily interested in undertaking ini-



tiatives that would immediately improve tangible quality of life in their communities. In one neighborhood, a suburbanized community of homes constructed in 2003 and occupied mostly by renters, the homeowner's association was identified by residents as the most pressing problem around which they would like to partner with the CHARP liaison. According to that liaison's written account of her first experiences in this community,

At this point, the NUMBER ONE concern [resident] expressed to me was that the homeowner's association is very elusive. . . . From what I gathered speaking with the residents, the majority of the issues at [community] have trickled down from the HOA. . . . These include foreclosed homes that are now vacant, major structural problems with drainage . . . some homes are in desperate need of resodding . . . a recreation area for kids is a big need.

City priorities, however, often differed from those of residents, as city staff were focused on and wished for liaisons to assist in the establishment of organized neighborhood associations, an activity which some, but not all, residents were interested in pursuing. City staff's rationale for working to establish community-based organizations is demonstrated by this quote:

Generally speaking, to really be able to take advantage of the services the city has available, a neighborhood has to have an organized neighborhood-based organization. It will be really difficult if not impossible or they would be ineligible to access many of the city's resources if they're not well organized.

Therefore, CHARP liaisons from the outset were responsible for recording the amount of time spent and resources leveraged in helping neighborhood residents reach this goal—of creating a neighborhood association able to access city resources, which include neighborhood matching grants and leadership training opportunities. According to a liaison's reflection after meeting with NBS representatives for the first time:

A few key things I took away from this meeting—1) Accountability will be necessary in the form of a weekly status update or conference call, 2) I need to develop a few instruments to measure success at [community].

In addition to these disparate priorities held by city and neighborhood representatives, university priorities were also often misaligned. Echoing the sentiments expressed by Wiewel, Gaffikin, and Morrissey (2000) about the need for transformative rather than growth-machine-oriented (Molotch, 1976) public-private partnerships and by Fasenfest and Grant (2005) regarding the need for community-university partnerships to address structural issues of sociospatial inequality, Dr. Sorensen and the graduate students at times saw their goals for the partnership diverge from those of the staff at NBS. CHARP's approach to partnership with neighborhoods was to engage residents in action research as well as community organizing, which is often a time-consuming process. The city's model, on the other hand, was for CHARP students to work for a duration of 1 to 2 years in a particular neighborhood and then "graduate" that neighborhood. The city's time-sensitive approach to neighborhood partnership is understandable and can be ascribed to funding and other practical limitations. However, research demonstrates that partnerships with communities should be long-term, rather than "loosely coupled" (Hyde et al., 2012), incidental, or short-lived.

The time limit for working with communities that city funding imposed was frustrating for CHARP student employees:

I hate to say it, but it comes down to money and up until now the city has really been able to set that agenda because they're ones funding the thing.... In this type of society we live in, money talks, and money sets the agenda. So I think when you're doing a project it's just really important to keep in mind who's paying and where it's coming from, and what does that mean.... Being funded by the city had a huge impact on the project, more than I think anyone ever anticipated to start with.

Another student immediately pinpointed the city funding structure when asked to reflect on weaknesses of the CHARP project:

I think there were some [weaknesses] early on. I think a lot of that's changed with funding, city imperative, things like that. That's the issue, you kind of had to do what they were asking you to do, and that can be complicated.

Receiving funding from the city nonetheless allowed CHARP liaisons entry into a variety of neighborhoods and provided an informal training mechanism for student liaisons about the workings of local government and community partnerships. However, city funding for CHARP was cut in the summer of 2012. The project evaluation suggests that a combination of budget restructuring and a lack of communicated expectations were primarily to blame, and this is consistent with literature about the need for transparency and communication between all stakeholders in a community–university partnership (*Gass, 2008; Polanyi and Cockburn, 2003*). During our evaluation, several city employees expressed their confusion regarding the purpose and expected process of the partnership:

I think part of the problem could have been maybe how the city and Dr. Sorensen set this up—this is what the city staff will do, and this is what students will do, and this is how we can integrate. That really wasn't discussed clearly, cause I know that some of the neighborhood specialists felt that the CHARP students were doing their job or interfering with what they regularly do.

The first half of the year we weren't really sure how to use the CHARP student and we weren't sure how the reporting worked out. Does that person report to the UNCC program, or they're looking to the city for directives? Do they need to check in with us or are we supposed to have a work plan for them? It was a little unclear to me, to be honest.

Ultimately, it appears that the goal of the partnership to work in a two-way, iterative, and transformative process as recommended for community–university partnerships (*Brown et al., 2006; Weerts, 2005*) was not fulfilled:

One of the goals I had expressed initially of learning between the University and us, I don't think we ever really had that occur. I don't know what I would do exactly to change it . . . but I don't think there was a lot of transferral of information.

Divergent expectations and misalignment of goals for all three parties in the partnership at this stage led to what Baum (2000) described as “fantasy” in partnership: “Fantasy brings the risk that

partners agree on purposes that cannot be accomplished under any conditions” (p. 242). This fantasy and the resulting ineffectiveness of partnership is, according to Baum, a key reason why community–university partnerships often fail. The city staff appeared to have expectations that CHARP students would assist in more effective delivery of city services to the neighborhoods, whereas CHARP leadership saw community residents as its core partners who should set the agenda for partnership activities to include action research and pushing for justice-focused work, leaving students caught in the middle to negotiate these competing priorities. In this sense, the severance of funding from the City of Charlotte was not entirely problematic, as it allowed CHARP students and neighborhood residents to pursue an independent agenda for community organizing and action research.

### **Building: Coalition Building and Research (2012–present)**

UNCC’s Metropolitan Studies program, housed in its Urban Institute, provided additional funding for CHARP beginning in the summer of 2012 after city funding was cut, demonstrating UNCC’s commitment to supporting faculty and student community engagement. The associate provost for Metropolitan Studies and Extended Academic Programs at UNCC describes the university’s attitude toward community engagement as having evolved over time, beginning in 1969 with the establishment of the Urban Institute as an on-the-ground, engaged version of the traditional university extension model. The Metropolitan Studies division of the institute was formed in 2001 as a way for campus groups interested in community engagement to coordinate activities. Throughout the following decade, the university’s commitment to engagement was strengthened by the arrival in 2003 of the current provost, Dr. Joan Lorden, who has displayed a strong commitment to engagement by supporting CHARP and similar programs (*O. Furuseth, personal communication, April 29, 2014*). The provost has taken unprecedented steps to rework the faculty tenure and promotion process to acknowledge community-engaged research and professional service (*Basu, 2012*). The provision of funding for CHARP in 2012 reflected UNCC’s identity as “North Carolina’s urban research university” and a Carnegie-classified “engaged” institution and was an indication to the CHARP team that they had the institutional support and “readiness” necessary to implement an effective community–university partnership (*Buys & Bursnall, 2007; Curwood et al., 2011*).

Since receiving funding from the university, CHARP staff have worked with residents to build a sustainable coalition of engaged resident partners from a variety of neighborhoods across the Charlotte metropolitan area. Coalition building took place beginning in the summer of 2012 with a project evaluation and into 2013 with a series of community forums, two of which were exclusively for residents and CHARP students and faculty and one of which was open to all UNCC faculty. The latter forum was intended to offer faculty with expertise in a diversity of disciplinary backgrounds opportunities for partnerships with residents who had already built trust with university representatives through CHARP. Coalition building has continued and has evolved into action research projects in several neighborhoods (see Figure 1).

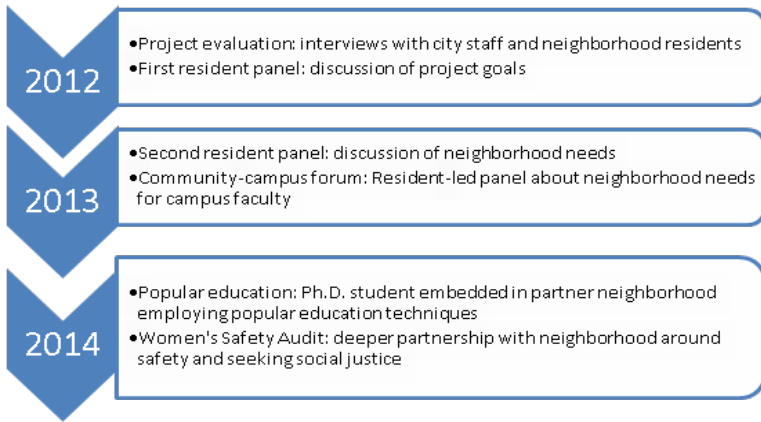


Figure 1. CHARP coalition-building timeline.

CHARP student staff have indicated that they are satisfied with the program as it currently stands for its sustainability and ability to remain in partnerships with neighborhoods for extended periods of time, rather than the one-off, “loosely coupled” (Hyde *et al.*, 2012) projects that often accompany traditional community–university partnerships:

The impact of CHARP is really good because we're always there in some type of capacity. Some groups go in for three weeks and they're done. Knowing that we're there indefinitely—I think that's a bigger piece that builds more trustworthiness.

I think that a traditional challenge with trust building is that people aren't there for long. So, since we've had this longer contact period with these people and we've demonstrated that we're not going away? I think that's probably the biggest thing right there.

Furthermore, students are satisfied with the impact of CHARP from a structural perspective—they believe it has the potential to enact change and that this is unique among institutions of higher education:

From an academic perspective, I'm able to turn a small, tangible resident concern into a bigger issue—why is there crime? Why are these houses abandoned? We can look deeper into these issues . . . as far as the department and the university as a whole, I think there are very few programs that do what we do as far as working with people at the neighborhood level in a number of ways.

### **Findings: Impact on Graduate Students and Community Partners**

The results of our evaluative study indicate that both resident partners and graduate students appreciated the impact of CHARP with respect to its ability to address “wicked” problems and issues of structural inequality as well as several of the common pitfalls associated with community–university partnerships. These include issues of time, resources and funding, academic culture and expectations, and mutual respect and collaboration.

#### **“Wicked” Problems**

“Wicked” problems in planning and other social science and policy-based arenas are defined as those issues that lack a precise and easily identifiable solution. Examples of such problems include poverty, affordable housing and homelessness, and crime. Academics find wicked problems perplexing because positivist methods are often insufficient to create solutions (*Rittel & Webber, 1973*). The CHARP model offers an alternative to traditional research methods for wicked problems in the social sciences in that graduate student liaisons and community members work together to identify contributing factors to these problems in their neighborhoods and to propose potential solutions, as expressed by this resident:

I do know that more than just me wants change. If other people in the area want change and some else like [community liaison] want change—and he may see something that we don't see.

Furthermore, the CHARP model's prioritization of direct engagement for students and resident-partners has proven to be transformative for both parties, as the iterative nature of idea sharing and research is mutually inspirational (*Brown et al., 2006; Fear et al., 2004*). One resident who lived in a neighborhood of increasingly internationalized demographics shared the following:

There are some Russians in this community, and one day I got home from work, and I was getting out of my car and I saw an elderly man out here sitting on the picnic tables. . . . And he has broken English, and he explains to me that he comes down here to write poems in Russian. So, [community liaison] kinda helped me not feel bad because a person is different. She showed me her way.

Other resident-partners stated that CHARP liaisons had helped them address issues related to community cohesion:

What CHARP has with all the resources you brought? It has actually opened our eyes to even more than just the youth. Just moving our focus to adults and community. We aren't just one race or body of people here; it's everyone. What the [community liaison] brought, it was honestly priceless helping us bring the community together.

Another wicked problem that residents reflected on was fear of gentrification and neighborhood change:

Well, I would describe our relationship with the City before CHARP came, that it was really, to be honest, a kind of scary thing because we live close to downtown and this is prime property. . . . I think now it's eased a little bit because people see [community liaison] as wanting to help us rather than hurt us.

And finally, CHARP's involvement can bring attention to inequities of resource distribution, as shown in one resident's reflections

on a student project that documented police service distribution across the city neighborhoods:

[Community liaison]'s research was awesome. I wanted to cry because I'm like, "Wow, if all the people could really see the research . . . they have a huge area over here and not enough [police] officers to cover it." I think [community liaison] pegged it out—I don't see racial [sic] and I don't try to put things that way, but then I saw the research and started to wonder if that's the case.

Inherent in the CHARP model is the tenet that student liaisons will approach issues in communities from both an action- and research-oriented standpoint. Although not every student who has worked on the CHARP project has fully engaged with the tripartite model of participatory action research, popular education, and direct action organizing as defined by Reardon (2000), each of the students interviewed for this project stated that their work with CHARP influenced and, in some cases, completely transformed their research approach with regard to wicked problems:

You actually get to see in [community] a homeowner's association that doesn't work. Dealing with abandoned properties, vandalism, break-ins, things like that. That happens in [community] and [community] all the time. In forming my research interests, I know that it's out there, not just something I invented—that rhetoric around renters is something I hear just about every time I talk to a resident. The rhetoric around homeownership. CHARP has been integral and pretty much totally responsible for those types of ideas.

Interviewer: Would your research agenda look different if you hadn't been involved with CHARP?

Student: Gosh, I think it would look completely different.... It had an early influence in my research, that the human elements actually start to come out as subjects, and not objects, of research.

More traditional community–university partnerships that are based solely on technical assistance or beautification initiatives



limit the ability of either party to critically reflect upon or address the types of wicked problems mentioned above. Because CHARP liaisons are embedded in communities in partnership with residents and because the issues that they coidentify become the topics of research initiatives, CHARP overcomes the tendency of community–university partnerships to ignore or even contribute to issues of structural inequality in low-income communities (*Fasenfest & Grant, 2005*).

## The “Problem of Time”

Wallace (2000) identified temporal incompatibility as one of the biggest barriers to successful community–university partnerships. Academic calendars at most universities are structured around events such as graduation and academic terms, and partnerships with communities often suffer when students or faculty end or reduce the extent to which they work with community agencies in response to such events (*Sandmann & Kliewer, 2012*). The CHARP model overcomes this “problem of time” by forming long-term and sustainable partnerships with resident-partners that are able to withstand the potentially negative effects of student liaison graduation or the end of a course that had been engaged with a community in a service-learning capacity.

An example of this long-term commitment to individual neighborhoods is CHARP’s relationship with a historically African American community on the city’s near west side. Students in a community planning workshop (taught by the second author) first became involved with this neighborhood in the fall of 2009 by working with residents to coconstruct a neighborhood plan. The minimal resident participation on this particular project was likely attributable to CHARP’s having worked with residents there for only a matter of months. This is an insufficient period of time for building the level of trust between parties required for a successful partnership (*Gass, 2005, 2008*). However, over the past several years, three different CHARP liaisons and approximately 30 students from two graduate-level workshops and three undergraduate-level service-learning courses have worked with community members to implement a variety of projects—from tangible clean-up events and the construction of a new playground to research projects about the neighborhood’s history. Additionally, three graduate students have completed master’s thesis research in collaboration with community residents, and one student is currently working on her action research-based doctoral dissertation in partnership with the neighborhood. This long-term investment in the commu-

nity is beginning to pay off, as evidenced by residents' increasing willingness to engage in participatory research and direct action organizing. In response to this sustained commitment from the university and the resultant increase in resident participation, one community leader stated:

Don't give up. Stick with us. We know that we don't always have a lot of people that wanna get involved, but without you guys I don't think nothing would be done.

This sustained commitment is in contrast to "loosely coupled" collaborations with neighborhood organizations that are limited in time, impact, and scope (*Gass, 2005; Hyde et al., 2012*). CHARP's resident-partners are both familiar with and disdainful of this one-off approach to community–university partnerships, as expressed here:

I told [community liaison] right off—I said, "Guess what. More than likely, you're gonna be here a minute and then something gonna happen and you're gonna stop."

In [community], we have had several groups or organizations say, "We are here to come help," all this kind of stuff... we have been burned by that. But [CHARP]—I saw that it was a win-win on both sides, I could see that.

Despite the CHARP model's emphasis on sustained commitment in order to avoid the issues mentioned above, student and resident schedules are still occasionally incompatible:

The only thing that I wish was that, well, there's certain meetings [community liaison] can't come to. And I know he has a schedule, but recently I was telling him that maybe the Board needs to change its meeting time, because he needs to be there.

The issue of student succession due to graduation was also mentioned by several residents as a challenge:

There was a problem that I saw when [community liaison 1] handed off to [community liaison 2]. That was troublesome because the two of them work differently.

I wish that when they have this program, the students could go all the way through, but I realize sometimes they can't because they're graduating.

One problem I saw was when we switched from [community liaison 1] to [community liaison 2]. That was not a good move because it set us back. [Community liaison 2] had to come in and learn [community liaison 1]'s job and everything instead of building on those things that were in place. That was not a real good thing for momentum.

One way in which the CHARP team has adjusted its model in response to this feedback is to attempt to pair students with neighborhoods in a longer-term capacity, as in the case of the current liaison, who is completing her doctoral dissertation project in partnership with a neighborhood. Such strategies do not completely solve the "problem of time." However, this sustainability in conjunction with flexible student work hours has resulted in mostly positive outcomes with regard to time.

## **Resources and Funding**

Another way in which the CHARP model may overcome some of the traditional barriers to successful community–university partnerships is its funding structure. University funding has provided a solid foundation from which to engage with community partners, as recognized by a resident here:

Resident: I thought [the city] created you.

Interviewer: No. We're not really affiliated with them anymore.

Resident: OK, right. So will you stay around?

Interviewer: We're staying around. We're looking to get some funding from the university.

Resident: OK, that will help. I think if you're going to exist, you need some kind of foundation or base, something concrete.

As with the "problem of time," availability of resources is an ongoing challenge for CHARP. Recurring funding from the provost's office via Metropolitan Studies and Extended Academic Programs is currently provided on an annual basis for three graduate student liaisons to work 20 hours per week. The recurring funding is an expression of the university support that is so critical for engagement initiatives in higher education (*Buys & Bursnall, 2007; Franz et al., 2012; Jackson & Meyers, 2000; Weerts, 2005*). Additional graduate student staff is provided by the Department of Geography and Earth Sciences in the form of a teaching assistantship of 20 hours per week tied to the project director (the second author), who teaches all of her courses with a service-learning approach directly tied to CHARP's partner neighborhoods. This approach involves approximately 30 additional students each semester in CHARP's partner neighborhoods. Finally, several smaller foundation grants and internal university grants have been supporting the work, allowing for additional staff hires as well as community event funding.

Finding the right graduate students has been critical. Because CHARP is focused on neighborhood planning and community development, the skills of geography students have been well suited for work on the project. Passion for social justice work and previous experience working with low-income communities have numbered among selection criteria. Additionally, future graduate students have been identified among the most engaged undergraduates in the second author's service-learning classes. The approach of looking at not just the graduate students' academic records but their broader life experiences and their expressed passion for justice work has proven very effective in hiring students for the project. Several students have worked with CHARP from the start of their master's programs and well into their Ph.D. programs, illustrating the match between the students and the work they do in the neighborhoods.

## **Academic Culture**

Another common criticism of community-university partnerships is that they are incompatible with traditional academic culture that is dominated by a positivist perspective, which often calls for research to be value-neutral and removed from direct contact

with research subjects, with emphasis on tangible, peer-reviewed outcomes (*Curwood et al., 2011; Polanyi & Cockburn, 2003; Sorensen & Lawson, 2011*). As with the other barriers mentioned here, CHARP has been able to address this mismatch in culture between community engagement and tangible professional benefits to students and faculty by employing graduate students to work in partnership with neighborhoods as research assistants or teaching assistants. Graduate students' tenure as community liaisons provides them not only with a source of income, but also with valuable experience that, as they share below, has helped to prepare them for the job market:

It's skill building, constantly. And, yeah, I feel like I'm very marketable in the public or private arena.

CHARP has definitely prepared me from a project management standpoint, for sure. Working with neighborhoods, it's a production, so I mean that has given me so much experience.

I think CHARP was a big part of my growing as a graduate student, professionally. Cause [resident involvement] is an important piece within municipal planning that often gets overlooked.

Students also emphasized that employment with CHARP has helped to facilitate their personal research as a major logistical benefit. This connection between research and work is a foundation of the CHARP model:

I think it definitely makes it easier for students when they're involved with the project. The first year of graduate school, I could basically start my thesis, so that made things much easier as far as data collection and stuff.

I think one thing that has really helped me is that a lot of the work I do for school really dovetails with what I do for CHARP. My thesis, a lot of papers, projects, et cetera, a lot of experiences in the classroom go right along with work for CHARP and vice versa. As a TA, my work is

not divorced from my classwork. They're really symbiotic and there's a lot of overlap, so that helps.

## **Mutual Respect and Collaboration**

Well-intentioned as they may be, many community–university partnerships do not result in equally beneficial outcomes for each side (*Winkler, 2013*). If university stakeholders enter a community with a preset research agenda, residents may feel apathetic about or even exploited by the partnership (*Dorgan, 2008*). The CHARP model is based on both collaboration and respect, and residents reported that they felt respected by community liaisons:

Well, I think [community liaison] cares. You know, like one day he's in a big hurry and my neighbor had a squirrel in her backyard. She couldn't pick it up, she asked [community liaison], and so he ran over there and got the squirrel out of her backyard.

Interviewer: Do you think the residents of [neighborhood] trust the city? Do they trust [community liaison]?

Resident: I think they probably trust [community liaison] more because he has more personal contact. With the police or code [sic], we only see those officers at the meeting, and it's hard to get them to come to that. We have [community liaison]'s cell phone number and we can call or email and he responds, so that's a good thing. I don't think the two are on the same level.

Additionally, residents indicated that projects initiated as an outcome of the partnership were collaborative, rather than one-sided, endeavors:

I think we grew together. We just talked about ideas. We said, "Yeah, let's try this," or "That will work."

It was a combination of things. Some were [community liaison]'s ideas. Some were our ideas. Some were the kids' ideas in the neighborhood.

I would say that most of the projects were collaborations. We would sit down, have a meeting, talk about, like for instance with back-to-school, what can we do for the kids? We would come up with creative ways to address the needs, and [community liaison] was very instrumental with suggestions, ideas. Very good collaboration, actually.

## **Study Limitations and Conclusions: Implications for Community–University Partnerships**

In this article, we have described the evolution of a 5-year-old community–university partnership and specifically detailed the way our funding stream influenced the effectiveness of the partnership. The shift from external funding to internal, university-sponsored funding has been critical in allowing CHARP team members to create long-term, sustainable, transformative, and mutually beneficial partnerships with residents of challenged Charlotte communities. Because CHARP is a community–university partnership intentionally developed around the principles of action research, with this article we have also contributed to defining the role of academics in action research and have pointed to the conditions needed to create partnerships that push for action to solve real problems in marginalized neighborhoods while at the same time contributing to research agendas that address policy about social justice and quality of life at the neighborhood scale.

In addition to the critical role of institutional support mentioned above, a key lesson learned about the practice of action research from within academia is the importance of negotiating projects that are meaningful on both sides of the partnership, allowing academics and community partners to work as coresearchers. Recognizing action research as a model for university–community partnership challenges researchers to find ways to meet the needs of all partners, both campus- and community-based. One effective way to achieve this has been to merge students' research thesis or dissertation requirements with their assistantship work. The time spent together while students work as organizers and support staff for neighborhood organizations creates a strong bond that is not typical between graduate students and the communities they research, thus facilitating the research process. Often neighborhood residents refer to CHARP students as neighborhood "insiders," seeing them as "one of us." This suggests that community–university partnerships can be a good setting for action

research when enough time is spent on relationship building. It also suggests that the action research ideal of doing “better research” might be achieved when partners have the opportunity to build the trust needed for sharing different kinds of knowledge.

CHARP continues to initiate action research projects that follow this model. We have recently initiated a women’s safety audit process (Whitzman, Shaw, Andrew, & Travers, 2009) with one neighborhood partner as well as a study of the impact of Habitat for Humanity building activity in several partner neighborhoods. It is our experience that community partners are increasingly becoming familiar with the process of engaging in research, in contrast to earlier stages of the partnership, where community members were better defined as service recipients. With the stability of internal funding and following the cyclical model of action research, CHARP works in a long-term capacity with the same set of neighborhood partners, thereby creating opportunities for developing strong action research partnerships.

Our study is limited by the fact that the project is only 5 years old; therefore, a follow-up study of its continued evolution is recommended and planned several years down the road. Another potential limitation of the study is researcher positionality. Because the authors include two graduate students who have worked extensively on the project as well as the project director, our study is an example of research in which insiders collaborate to perform a study. As reflective practitioners, we set twofold goals for our study. In addition to adding to the literature on best practices for effective community–university partnerships, we also used our findings to inform our professional development. Our positionalities as researchers, practitioners, and study participants were thus multiple and often intersecting. As Herr and Anderson (2005) point out, this is common when conducting action-based or participatory research. To decrease the likelihood of bias in our study, we included the perspectives of our resident and city partners as well.

The Kellogg Commission’s (1999) report on the need for engaged universities outlined three requirements for universities if they are to respond effectively to the call for better interaction with their surrounding communities. According to the commission, they must provide *practical opportunities* that include *tangible, grounded projects* that are both appealing and useful for *today’s student*. The CHARP model addresses each of these three axes. The practical opportunities it provides students include funding to support their graduate studies, exposure to potential data sources for research projects, and the opportunity to hone job skills. The projects are



also tangible and grounded in that they occur in local neighborhoods and often produce outcomes with immediate benefits for both neighborhood residents and students. Today's graduate student, bound by resource constraints and faced with a formidable job market, stands to benefit enormously by becoming involved with a program like the Charlotte Action Research Project. Resident-partners, as well, recognize the enormous benefits of direct engagement between "town" and "gown." We will close with two quotes, one from a student and one from a resident, each of which demonstrates the mutually beneficial potential of community–university partnerships based on the CHARP model.

In summary, overall it has been very personally transformative. I still don't know exactly what I'm going to do with my life, but it will be very similar to what I'm doing now.

[Community liaison], he bridging the gap, OK? Even when you have different students come out—you know, normally you don't see someone out in the neighborhood that's a Caucasian person . . . I met a student the other day and said, "You stay here?" And they was like, "No, I'm just from school," and whatnot. And I was like, "Wow, you're interested." You see what I'm saying?

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