

# **Generating Social Change Through Community–Campus Collaboration**

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## **Abstract**

In this article, a qualitative case study approach was used to explore the changes that community–campus collaborations stimulate. The authors document the “processes of interaction” (Spaapen & van Drooge, 2011) through which collaborations seek to contribute to positive social change, highlighting the outputs, outcomes, and innovations that have resulted from these collaborative endeavors. This article focuses on improving efforts to track the changes or innovations that are influenced by community–campus interactions. Findings suggest that researchers should focus on the broad field of activity through which collaborations contribute to change. Specifically, there is utility in tracking the “processes of interaction” that extend beyond the initial site of collaboration into the communities where a partnership seeks to make change.

## **Introduction**

There is a growing interest in community–campus collaborations as a means to enhance the impact of social science research. Although impact is difficult to measure and assess, our research has identified a range of outcomes associated with collaborative work including increased knowledge exchange among stakeholders, the production of usable research content, and the creation of sustained research-to-action networks. Other studies suggest that interdisciplinary and interinstitutional collaborations represent an effective way to address complex problems while maximizing resources, reducing interinstitutional fragmentation and service duplication, creating conceptual and organizational synergies, building community capacity, and engaging people in research (Baler & Volkow, 2011; Emschoff et al., 2007; Henderson, MacKay, & Peterson-Badali, 2010; Huzzard, Ahlberg, & Ekman, 2010; Lowe & Philipson, 2009). This article examines the processes of interaction through which community–campus research collaborations seek to make change and inspire innovation. With a better understanding of the ways that such collaborations contribute to social change, collaborators can enhance the effects of their interactions.

Data were collected as part of a larger national initiative to create and sustain links between Canada's community and postsecondary education sectors. In this article, we offer a point-in-time description of four community-campus collaborations across Canada: (1) the Pension Plan project; (2) the Alternative Community Investment Strategy; (3) Employment Uncertainty, Poverty, and Well-Being; and (4) the Policy Mobilization project. We point to specific changes these collaborations have stimulated and describe our efforts to understand how community-campus collaborations contribute to the public good. The case studies represent collaborations at different stages of the collaborative enterprise, but all of the collaborations are ongoing. Because the case studies reflect a single period of data collection, we have insufficient evidence to assess the degree to which the collaborations stimulate sustained social impact. Instead, we used qualitative research methods to document and analyze the activities of collaboration. Our goal is to contribute to the development of reflexive strategies for studying the impacts of community-campus collaborations.

Our study illuminates specific institutional conditions, methodological strategies, and conceptual frames that enable systematic tracking and accounting for the changes that community-campus collaborations effect. Our research suggests that tracking routes of interactivity beyond the original collaboration may be the most effective way to document and account for collaborative impacts. Because *people* experience social impact, tracking forward through the networks of collaborators is one way to illuminate changes (i.e., impacts or innovations) that register downstream from the original collaboration.

We begin this article with a discussion of social science research impact and the significance of the Community Campus Collaborations project. We describe the project's research activities and conceptual framework and move from here into an exploration of our findings. In the Findings section, people's experiences of collaboration ground an analysis of the relationship between collaborative process and outcomes. Our findings allowed us to investigate the web of interactions through which collaborative activities contribute to social change and/or innovation. Drawing on case study data, we explored how different strategic interactions (e.g., networking, media engagement, granting relations, and capacity building) stimulate policy and practice innovation.

## Tracking the Impacts of Community–Academic Interactions

A review of the literature on assessing and supporting university–community engagement reveals a number of studies that describe evaluations of community–academic partnership activities and collaborative processes (e.g., *Carlton, Whiting, Bradford, Hyjer Dyk, & Vail, 2009; Eckerle Curwood, Munger, Mitchell, MacKeigan, & Farrar, 2011; Hart & Northmore, 2012; Lantz, Viruell-Fuentes, Israel, Softley, & Guzman, 2001; Wright et al., 2011*). Although process evaluations are common, Hart and Northmore (2012) noted that there are few standardized assessment tools or outcomes–focused evaluation strategies for assessing the impacts of engaged scholarship. Where university benchmarks and performance indicators exist, these have not been linked to a systematic evaluation of community engagement strategies/activities, and they do not adequately capture community perspectives on partnership activities (*Hart & Northmore, 2012*).

Assessing impact is even more challenging than measuring outcomes because the concept of impact is variously defined and used in a diversity of contexts (*Brewer, 2011*). Brewer suggested that impact is conditional, serendipitous, and varies over time; impact measures must acknowledge that impact is “displayed in as broad a space as possible, so that no domain is privileged above another” (p. 256). Any attempt to capture and assess impact must attend to the multiple processes through which change is continuously being made. From a research perspective, the challenge is providing an impact “snapshot” that is sufficiently comprehensive *and* attentive to the emergent or evolving properties of the change-making process.

The case studies in this article represent interorganizational collaborations between people who work in postsecondary educational institutions and those who work in community-based organizations, government, nonprofit organizations, and charitable foundations. In this article, we sought insight into the processes through which these multi-institutional collaborations influence change. We describe interactions between people in the context of various and evolving social and institutional conditions in an attempt to understand the effects of this interactivity (*Spaapen & van Drooge, 2011*). With a better understanding of how and where community–campus collaborations contribute to positive social change, collaborators can maximize the effects of their interactions.

## **Understanding Impact from a Community Perspective**

Organizations that participate in collaborative work, particularly those in the charitable or nonprofit sectors, are concerned with understanding whether and how these collaborative ventures make a difference. Ben, one of the study participants, is a director of strategic priorities for a regional United Way, one of over 100 United Way/Centraide nonprofit organizations across Canada. He explains that he has to regularly

justify and rationalise why it's important for us to be in partnership with [a university research institute]...because it's not an investment in direct service delivery...the role that [my colleague] and I will play is to be part of this [partnership] and monitor it and be able to convey back what I expect to be positive and significant change from year to year.

People who work in the charitable and nonprofit sectors are under pressure to convey the impacts of their work to donors, boards of directors, and the general public. Juxtaposed with the imperative to demonstrate that their work makes a tangible difference, there is increasing recognition that social change is difficult to attribute to a specific set of collaborative activities. Consequently, it is challenging to “convey positive and significant change from year to year.”

## **Understanding Impact From an Academic Perspective**

The institutional pressure to demonstrate change is not experienced in the same way in academic settings, where performance evaluation processes traditionally privilege the use of research findings to produce peer-reviewed publication, develop future proposals, and secure ongoing funding. Historically, there have been few incentives for academic researchers to track broad social impacts of their research, particularly when these impacts cannot be unequivocally attributed to the researcher's work. The attribution of research impact is one of the key challenges facing those who hope to understand the effects of research and research use (Bell, Shaw, & Boaz, 2011; Boaz, Fitzpatrick, & Shaw, 2009; Molas-Gallart & Tang, 2011; Spaapen & van Drooge, 2011).

Even though institutions of higher education are increasingly interested in understanding the role that research plays in stimu-

lating change, the field of research evaluation has seen few attempts to systematically address the diffusion of impact across temporal and geographic locales (Davies, Nutley, & Walter, 2005; Nutley, Walter, & Davis, 2007). Spaapen and van Drooge (2011) identified temporality (i.e., the time between research activities and the use of findings) as a key factor that makes it challenging to link a particular social impact to a specific research endeavor. They proposed looking at social impact as a process rather than an outcome. In order to understand how particular activities contribute to potential or actual impact, Spaapen and van Drooge studied processes of interaction (between researchers and research users) so as to capture interactivity between knowledge domains. This interactivity is a prerequisite for generating academic and community impact.

## Creating Impact Through Collaboration

Some scholars suggest that the use of research knowledge increases when research “users” are involved in research activities. For example, Bell, Shaw, and Boaz (2011) noted that research is more likely to influence policy when it is conducted with the input of policymakers. By the same logic, the involvement of community professionals in the development of research creation, dissemination, and use strategies has the potential to increase research use by people who work in the community or charitable sectors.

Our research is guided by a *systems model* for assessing research impact, in which knowledge translation is viewed as occurring in the interconnected and iterative activities of knowledge exchange, adaptation, and use, which are in turn shaped by social, political, cultural, and institutional relations (Best & Holmes, 2010). Like Spaapen and van Drooge (2011), we see social impact as arising through processes of interaction “in which knowledge and expertise circulates [*sic*] to achieve certain goals that are deemed relevant for the development of society” (p. 212).

## Methods

From a scan of 88 community-campus collaborations across Canada (One World, 2011), four collaborations were selected for ethnographic investigation. These four “cases” were selected by the project’s advisory committee, which was composed of leaders in nonprofit, research funding, and academic settings. These four collaborations were chosen because they represent French- and English-speaking participants in eastern and western Canada. Additionally, all four collaborations reported some form of measur-

able change (e.g., a new policy, service, or initiative) during the initial scan. Before fieldwork began, the research design was approved by York University's Human Participants Review Committee. The description of the four cases under investigation reflects a commitment to protecting the identities of research subjects. Pseudonyms are used to refer to project titles and the names of participants.

The project utilized a qualitative case study approach (*Patton, 2002*). The objective was to capture the processes of interaction that shape relations between collaborators and influence the effects of their partnership activities. In order to complete the case studies, interviews were sought with academic (e.g., students, faculty, and research staff) and nonacademic (e.g., community-based researchers, community practitioners, foundation chief executive officers) project partners and project stakeholders for the four selected collaborations. In addition, we examined project documents (e.g., reports, toolkits, communication updates, and governance documents), visited project sites, observed partnership meetings, and engaged in ongoing informal conversations with a number of project partners. Researchers requested copies of project documents during interviews or site visits when project participants referenced particular texts. Field notes were recorded, and the field researchers engaged in ongoing discussions and reflection on research data as these were generated.

A central community organization from each partnership was asked to recruit interviewees. Instead of compensating individual participants, we compensated each project for recruitment efforts. The selection of key informants was thus determined by the respective projects. Although we recognize the limitations of this approach (e.g., researchers may be less likely to hear about a project's struggles or challenges), we were cognizant that people might be wary of the involvement of key research and nonprofit funders on our advisory committee. We invited the projects to handle recruitment so that they had a degree of control over the development of the case studies. Prior to submitting the report to the advisory committee, participants reviewed the case studies and provided comments and points of clarification.

A total of 25 people participated in formal interviews. Ten participants are described as academic partners because they work in academic settings as graduate student researchers ( $n = 3$ ), knowledge mobilizers ( $n = 2$ ), research/administrative staff ( $n = 2$ ), or faculty members ( $n = 3$ ). Twelve participants are described as community partners because they work in community settings as researchers ( $n = 3$ ), organizational leaders ( $n = 6$ ),

organizational staff ( $n = 2$ ), or municipal government employees ( $n = 1$ ). Three participants are described as stakeholders because they were recipients of pilot funding that was the direct result of a community-campus collaboration. These stakeholders were not directly involved in partnership activities.

All interviewers used a standard set of interview prompts to ensure that data were commensurable across projects. To retain a conversational tone, interviewers were advised to use the interview questions as a guide rather than a script. The first author of this article reviewed all of the transcripts as they were produced to ensure fidelity to the standard set of interview topics. Interviews were conducted face-to-face ( $n = 23$ ) or via telephone ( $n = 3$ ) when a face-to-face interview could not be arranged. Most of the interviews took place in community organizations or on university campuses. Interviews were conducted in French or English. They ranged in length between 35 and 80 minutes. All interviews were recorded using a digital recorder. The audio files were transcribed verbatim and in the case of interviews conducted in French, the recordings were translated into English.

## Data Analysis

Analytic codes emerged from the interview, observational, and text-based data that were gathered during fieldwork. Because each interviewer used a standard set of interview prompts, interview data corresponded with the general areas of inquiry outlined in the project design. Data were broadly categorized into four areas that warranted further analysis: social and historical factors that influence community-campus collaboration, institutional and infrastructural factors that influence community-campus collaboration, making change through collaboration, and community-based research. Data in each of these broad thematic categories were further coded to enable analysis.

The foci of analysis were the processes of interaction (*Molas-Gallart & Tang, 2011; Spaapen & van Drooge, 2011*) through which collaborations made, or sought to make, change. We wanted to not only capture the impacts of community-campus collaboration but to understand *how* collaborative activities create shifts in understanding or dialogue, influence policy, result in program changes, or produce innovations. In this article, we have focused our analysis on the activities that people link to their collective ability to influence positive social change. The result is a less critical piece of work than other articles we have produced from this study

(e.g., *Nichols, Phipps, Gaetz, Fisher, & Tanguay, 2014*). The goal for the present article is to offer an improved understanding of the processes through which collaborations contribute to the public good. In doing so, we also hope to improve researchers' efforts to track collaborative impacts.

## **Brief Description of Four Case Studies**

In this section, the community–campus collaborations that informed the case study analyses are briefly described. The description highlights the types of institutions involved in each collaboration, identifies collaborative objectives, and points to some collaborative outcomes to date. A fuller explication of each collaboration's strategic activities is provided in the Findings section.

**Pension Plan project.** This project was spearheaded by two institutes that are dedicated to supporting collaboration between community and academic organizations: (1) an independent feminist nonprofit connector organization (composed of 90 local, regional, and provincial membership organizations) that supports joint work between women's community groups and university researchers and (2) a community services unit in a comprehensive public French-language university. Both of these organizations are located in a large city. The pension plan represents one of a number of collaborations between this nonprofit organization and the university community services unit.

The Pension Plan itself has a provincewide focus. People who work in community-based organizations often retire into poverty. The Pension Plan project aims to support economic stability among people who work in the province's community and not-for-profit sectors. An individual in the university community services unit (Simon) provided the research and pension planning expertise, and the community practitioners, led by a woman named Agathe, collectively determined the pension planning strategy and tools, as well as their training and recruitment approach. The creation and conception of the plan by representatives of the community sector for the community sector distinguishes this pension plan from others that exist. Since its inception, the plan has grown to 10 million dollars and 2,700 employees and has won awards for innovation. In addition, it contributes to labor consistencies in the nonprofit sector: people who work in organizations that offer employee access to the Pension Plan cite the plan as an important factor shaping their decisions to continue working in the nonprofit sector.

**Alternative Community Investment Strategy.** This initiative arose out of a series of discussions between the director of a university knowledge mobilization unit (Jonathan) and the chief executive officer (CEO) of a United Way (Francesco). The large public research university where Jonathan is employed is located in the northwest quadrant of a large urban center. The United Way represents a region north of the urban center composed of small rural towns, cities, and fast-growing suburban developments, linking the smaller municipalities to each other and the larger urban center where the university is located.

Jonathan and Francesco's discussions focused on the United Way's desire to increase its impact by facilitating the use of local resources to support place-based community development. The university and the United Way jointly funded three graduate student research interns to develop a strengths-based community toolkit, carry out a literature review, and conduct preliminary social assets mapping. These resources were used to create an evidence-based report. The report shaped the United Way board of directors' approval of a pilot funding strategy to support locally driven community development initiatives. Two years after the internship, this funding program continues, and the United Way has awarded \$300,000 in funding to 11 strengths-based community development initiatives.

**Employment Uncertainty, Poverty, and Well-Being: A Community-Academic Research Partnership.** This large-scale research project is exploring employment patterns that relate to poverty and well-being among Canadians. The project partners include regional United Way organizations; multiple labor, community health, social planning, and community research organizations; and a number of universities across Canada and internationally. The project is producing multiple case studies to investigate relations between employment precariousness and individual, family, and community well-being. Although many of the current partners collaborated on earlier research that aimed to understand the localization of poverty in specific regions of a large urban area, this particular project is early in its life cycle.

Receiving 5 years of Community Academic Research Alliance (CURA) funding from Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) is a significant accomplishment of this multistakeholder community-academic partnership. Ultimately the partnership aims to mobilize research findings to influence policy debate.

**Table 1. Community–Campus Collaboration Case Studies at a Glance**

Community-Campus Collaboration	Partners	Desired Change	Partnership Activities	Key Progress to Date
<b>Pension Plan Project</b>	1. Feminist nonprofit connector organization (composed of 90 local, regional, and provincial membership organizations) 2. University community services unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve economic stability during retirement for people who work in community-based organizations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research, knowledge exchange, and planning activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developed and implemented a \$10 million pension plan with a membership of 2,300 individuals and 365 organizations</li> </ul>
<b>Alternative Community Investment Strategy</b>	1. United Way 2. University knowledge mobilization unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve use of United Way funds to support community capacity-building and collective action</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducted a literature review and social assets mapping exercise</li> <li>• Coproduced strengths-based community toolkit and an evidence-based report</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developed, piloted, and implemented a funding strategy to support locally driven community development initiatives</li> <li>• Supported 11 strengths-based community development initiatives</li> </ul>
<b>Employment Uncertainty, Poverty, and Well-Being</b>	A number of: 1. United Way organizations 2. Labor organizations 3. Community based organizations 4. Health organizations 5. Social planning and research councils 6. Universities across Canada and internationally	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generate new knowledge on the relationship between employment precarity, health, and well-being</li> <li>• Mobilize this knowledge in support of policy debate and change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design, implementation, and discussion of survey and case study research to investigate relations between employment precarity and individual, family, and community well-being</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secured 5 years of federal research funds</li> <li>• Survey research complete</li> <li>• Case study research ongoing</li> </ul>
<b>Policy Mobilization Project</b>	1. United Way 2. Municipal Foundation 3. Young Woman's Christian Association (YWCA) 4. University Research Institute	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase public engagement in issues related to early childhood well-being</li> <li>• Increase evidence-based provincial policy decision-making</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic analysis of childhood vulnerability and production of report for board of trade</li> <li>• Use of blogging and print media</li> <li>• Creation and implementation of knowledge mobilization and learning opportunities</li> <li>• Market research with target populations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developed and implemented evidence-based funding priorities and service delivery targets</li> <li>• Learning and service delivery changes among service delivery organizations</li> <li>• Increased media engagement with issue</li> </ul>

**Policy Mobilization project.** This is a partnership between an institute for research and knowledge mobilization at a large public research university and three large community organizations: a United Way, a municipal foundation, and a Young Woman's Christian Association (YWCA). The partnership team is composed of one or two people from each of these organizations, all of which are located in a large urban center. The partnership team also works with a network of smaller grassroots and community-sector agencies across the province where it is located.

The Policy Mobilization project aims to increase government, policymaker, practitioner, and public engagement with early childhood development research. Partnering organizations share a desire to stimulate public dialogue and policy change to support early childhood and family well-being. Research participants link a number of changes in the delivery of local programs and services to the partnership's efforts to support communities' use of research evidence in their planning and program implementation. They note that online blogging and weekly columns in a major newspaper have generated considerable interest in, and public debate about, issues of family and early childhood well-being.

The participants, goals, activities, and progress of the four collaborations studied are summarized in Table 1.

## Findings

Interview participants from all four case studies clearly link the outcomes of their collective work to the distinctive contributions offered by differently positioned project partners. Broad social changes cannot be attributed to a single interaction or a single activity on the part of academic or community partners; rather, change results from processes of interaction that directly and indirectly connect people across time and space. Collaborations undertake a diversity of activities to engage people in research and knowledge exchange processes as a way to stimulate change in policy and practice. Each of the partners participates in social networks that extend beyond the collaborations we studied. These extended and interconnected networks have the potential to significantly extend the reach of collaborative activities. By focusing attention on the processes through which these collaborations nurture interorganizational learning and engagement, our research reveals the complex social interactions through which the partnerships influence change.

Adequately accounting for the impacts of community–academic collaboration requires a study design that enables the tracking of smaller-scale collaborative outcomes over time and across geographic locales. Institutional interest in understanding the relationship between collaboration and impact must be accompanied by sufficient infrastructural and human resource supports to enable the assessment of collaborative impacts longitudinally. Otherwise, the broad social changes that collaborations stimulate are likely to remain unacknowledged.

## **The Process–Outcome Relation**

Study participants highlighted the importance of network building through collaboration; however, they also emphasized that partnerships must be able to produce instrumental or tangible returns. The process–outcomes relation operates like a feedback loop: A productive collaborative process leads to and is sustained by the generation of collaborative outcomes. The Pension Plan project exemplifies this process–outcome relation. The processes of interaction between the university community services unit and the feminist nonprofit connector organization were characterized by considerable reciprocity and knowledge exchange. Ongoing interactions have led to the creation of an award-winning pension plan, which provides the impetus for continued collaboration between the university and this collective of community organizations.

The university community services unit and one individual in particular (Simon, a community services unit coordinator) provided “the expertise with pension plans...[and] the knowledge of submissions for actuaries,” and the collective of feminist nonprofit organizations provided “the knowledge of the field that the pension plan targets, our capacity to rally people working in this field, [and] our capacity to seek financial resources” (Agathe, nonprofit connector organization). The Pension Plan project combined Simon’s pension planning expertise with the community professionals’ tacit knowledge of the sector and ability to engage people in dialogue. The university and the community were also able to access and contribute different financial resources. The community had access to grants that the university was not eligible for, and the university contributed Simon’s expertise as an in-kind donation to the effort.

Simon explained that his contribution to the project

was more about preparing materials to explain the different options that exist...make sure that through the discussion, the participants take [the planning process]

over, but moreover answer the question “What fits best the constraints and needs of their community group?”

The process of devising a community pension plan was characterized by interactivity and deliberation. Simon offered the group some foundational knowledge in the field of pension planning, but the group had full rein to determine an approach that best fit the constraints and needs of their diverse professional network.

According to Simon, this iterative process took place over “a series of meetings during which we came closer and closer to what the plan would look like.” These face-to-face meetings were a chance to recall the group’s progress to date (its process and its outcomes) and consider steps for moving forward. Simon explained that these meetings centralized debate, as community professionals

literally “drew the camel” (*déssiné le chameau*)...they traced a plan that would fit their needs and through this all, I was giving them options. They would put some options aside, saying “this is not going to work because—”...it is the participants’ knowledge of the community sector that brought them to design a plan, which is very unique.

Here it is possible to see how a process was created that enabled recognition and combination of people’s tacit and explicit knowledge. As people’s experiential knowledge about working in the community sector was brought into conversation with an explicit body of knowledge about economics and pensions, the group produced a pension-planning innovation.

By creating conditions for interactivity and mutual learning, the Pension Plan project produced a viable and original pension plan for people who work in community-based organizations. People remain committed to the collaborative process because it led to the development of an award-winning plan to supplement the retirement income of an entire sector. Since its inception in 2008, the plan has grown from zero to 10 million dollars. It now has 2,300 members from 365 different community and women’s groups. In addition, it has received two prestigious awards for innovation—one from Benefits Canada and another from the Committee of Labour and Social Economy Community Action.

With each new indication of success, the plan is growing in membership and economic support. The plan is also gaining considerable attention among people with pension-planning expertise

and those who are part of other labor collectives. The provincial Fédération des Travailleurs et Travailleuses (FTQ) “modeled the design of its [own] pension plan after the same regulations as ours; they essentially copied our model” (Simon, university community services unit).

Perhaps most significantly, the existence of the plan has improved the sector’s ability to recruit and retain talented professionals. Riley, who works for the FTQ, explained that the development of the pension plan itself represents a “major change,” but he added that changes within the workforce as a result of the plan are equally significant. Riley observed increased dialogue about the importance of pension options. He also observed people who are leaving their current positions to be part of organizations that offer membership in the plan. The creation of the pension plan has enabled the workforce to drive changes in labor conditions.

The Pension Plan case illustrates how an interactive and reciprocal process creates conditions for knowledge exchange, innovation, and ultimately impact. A productive relationship between a university community services unit and a community connector organization led to the production of an innovative pension plan that has subsequently been adapted by a provincial labor organization. Study participants clearly indicated that they continue to be involved in this project because it has created tangible benefits (or outcomes) for the community—namely, an award-winning pension plan that continues to grow in membership and economic strength. Participants also clearly indicated that the existence of the pension plan has led to increased economic stability among members and changes in labor relations across the province. These changes in labor relations are the type of broad effects that this article describes as impacts. Although many factors influence changes in provincial labor relations, the existence of viable pension plans where none had existed before is a key precipitating factor.

### **Attribution and Temporality**

In some interactions—particularly those that span considerable lengths of time—a series of small shifts may set the stage for considerable impact downstream from the site of the original collaboration. Research or engagement impacts may register at a considerable physical and temporal distance from particular community–campus collaborations. The Alternative Community Investment Strategy exemplifies this pattern. The first point of contact between the university and the United Way—a relation-

ship between Jonathan, a director of knowledge mobilization and research, and Francesco, the United Way CEO—was not the site of most significant change. The university and the United Way jointly resourced a three-pronged research initiative to support the development of a new community investment strategy for the United Way.

Because it supports a number of community agencies through its considerable fundraising, distribution, and management practices, the United Way was interested in amplifying its impact on complex, systemic social issues such as poverty. Three graduate student research interns (cofunded by the university and the United Way) conducted a series of studies that were used to stimulate a new way of thinking about investing in community activities among the United Way's board of directors. The change in perspective among the board of directors led to the creation of a community-development strategy that aims to “harness civic muscle” (Julie, United Way) for place-based community development. The Alternative Community Investment Strategy has since distributed 2 years of funding (totaling \$300,000) for local community-driven projects. The United Way's development and implementation of the new investment strategy was significant, but the most dramatic changes have occurred in the community settings where these funds have been invested.

Predetermined, funder-driven targets make a lot of sense for the transparent distribution of funds and the management of resources, but they stifle organizational learning, adaptation, and innovation. Sue, a professional who works for a large mental health agency, has had a long history of receiving program funds through the United Way to support community development work. In the past, the funds have come tied to specific funder-driven project outcomes. Development work has had to be brought in line with these predefined objectives, rather than responding to the evolving needs of the community. In contrast, the Alternative Community Investment funding model has allowed the project to actualize development as a cyclical and reflexive process: As one participant expressed, “you can go in with a framework, but your outcomes—you have no idea of what things could look like—there is flexibility built in.”

The grant allowed the mental health agency to hire a community development worker (Nancy) who helped the community mobilize local and external resources in support of collective development goals. The funding supports development in a local cooperative housing project. The cooperative housing project is

highly stigmatized within the larger community, and cooperative members were concerned about the effects of this stigma on youth residents.

A woman named Krista, who sits on the housing cooperative's board of directors, linked improved communication and self-esteem among the "the Co-op's" youth to the development activities that were enabled by Alternative Community Investment funding. Krista shared a story that exemplifies the changes she observed:

We have a swing, a solo swing, and everybody fights over it. At one point the little kids no longer played at the playground because the older kids always took over. Well, now these children can voice, "I've been waiting, and I would like a turn." And the older kids are respectful and they are actually starting to shift and say, "Okay, you know what, yes, you were standing there for a while. Come and have a turn." So that's huge.

A previously stigmatized housing cooperative with no youth or adult programming and few opportunities for cooperative members to interact now offers an activity for neighborhood children and/or their families most days of the week. Parents like Krista have become certified leaders of youth engagement programs. The housing cooperative's central offices host regular after-school homework and recreational activities that parents facilitate. Remarkably, other youth in the region now come to this housing cooperative to engage in its youth programs. Sue explained that the community has been able to identify its

assets, identify where they want to grow, and actually go about filling that gap...connecting with Big Brothers, Big Sisters, or Girls Inc., or the Women's Support Network...it's making linkages between the community and those other agencies so that they can... be connected beyond the [major intersection where the housing co-op is located].

In the Alternative Community Investment case study, one sees the role that funders like the United Way can play in shaping the landscape of community development. It is also possible to see that the impacts of an interaction between a community organization and an academic institution may actually register quite a distance from the original collaboration. Sue, Krista, and Nancy are not

likely to meet Jonathan or the graduate students who worked on the Alternative Community Investment Strategy project, but their work has clearly been shaped by this prior interaction between the university and the United Way.

## **Favorable Outlook for Impact**

In the first two case studies, we linked specific changes and innovations to particular collaborative activities without much difficulty. In the remaining two case studies, our point-in-time methodology does not allow us to sufficiently convey historical outcomes or capture the downstream impacts of collaborative research and knowledge exchange activities. Because a leading organization in each of the four community-campus collaborations was invited to identify interview participants, researchers did not seek out interviews with downstream beneficiaries—that is, people who use or interact with particular collaborative outcomes for each project but were not directly involved in the collaboration itself. Our inability to link the projects to specific and significant changes in these cases may thus reveal more about the limitations of our methodological approach than a particular collaboration’s ability to influence change.

At the time of this study, the Employment Uncertainty, Poverty, and Well-Being project had yet to stimulate the changes it hopes to make long-term. While researchers were in the field, collaborators were creating research case studies and deliberating how to best use these to stimulate equitable changes to provincial labor relations. Collaborators’ current project builds on a history of research among many members of the collaboration’s steering committee. Their prior research revealed considerable economic disparity across one of Canada’s largest urban centers. This research was used to shape the United Way’s designation of “priority neighbourhoods” across the city. The priority designation makes neighborhood programs and services eligible to apply for additional funding. The United Way’s equity-based funding strategy has shaped the redistribution of resources across its catchment area. This earlier research led to considerable media attention as well as changes in fund distribution and employment opportunities (e.g., the creation of a number of youth outreach positions). Collectively, these outcomes have stimulated broader changes in community services and public discourse. Although the collaboration’s current project has yet to stimulate impact, collaborators have a track record of using research findings to influence broad social change. Researchers’ inability to find evidence of impact at this stage in the current collaboration’s

life cycle is not an indication that the project will not lead to impact in the long term.

It is similarly plausible that the Policy Mobilization project has already reduced early childhood vulnerability in particular regions, despite researchers' inability to find evidence of this broad social trend. Given that researchers were able to trace social impacts back to the Alternative Community Investment Strategy project (where downstream research beneficiaries were identified for researchers) and the outcomes the Policy Mobilization project *has* generated, it is expected that evidence of impact is likely to be found in the communities where changes to services and programs have been initiated. In the sections that follow, the Policy Mobilization project's processes of interaction and the outcomes these have produced are described.

## **Networking, Capacity Building, and Knowledge Exchange**

Drawing on the United Way's extensive funding relationships, the Policy Mobilization project tapped into a network of early childhood coalitions, organized regionally across the province. The coalitions include "people from local government, service providers, parks and recreation departments, libraries, people from school districts, all who come together and they actually develop plans around setting priorities for early childhood in their community" (Ben, United Way). The university research institute staff reached out to these coalitions, providing seminars and offering community toolkits to support the coalitions' use of early childhood research in local practice and policy settings. In this way, several of the Policy Mobilization recommendations have been taken up by regional coalitions and applied in practice settings.

The dissemination of research-use toolkits to early childhood coalitions represents an important collaborative output. The coalitions' use of research findings to inform changes in local policy and practice serves as an outcome. On their own, neither is indicative of the broader social shifts one associates with impact but taken together, these smaller shifts in knowledge use and practice illuminate the processes of interaction (in this case, strategic networking and knowledge mobilization activities) that lead to the broader changes—or impacts—that collaborations seek to make.

The process of mobilizing research knowledge through the coalitions supports the community's engagement with research knowledge. These interactions also influence the university

research institute's engagement with coalition members' experiential and practice-based expertise. On an ongoing basis, these interactions shape the institute's evolving approach to knowledge mobilization. Rebecca, an employee of the research institute, explained that she and her colleagues regularly give presentations to a group of coalition leaders: "[We] get their feedback and then we revise the presentation based on that. And from there... [the community professionals] were also comfortable in taking the presentation and using it at work."

Coalition members are given opportunities to interact with and critique the research institute's presentation. Later, they bring the revised presentation into their own professional circles and share the knowledge there. Through the process of knowledge exchange, the community professionals take ownership of the presentation and the knowledge it conveys and adapt it for dissemination in their own professional networks.

In order to increase research engagement and promote evidence-based policy change, the Policy Mobilization project tapped into the extensive networks of the project partners, targeted knowledge-sharing techniques to the needs and interests of particular groups, and engaged in discussion with stakeholders about the information they were sharing as well as the strategies the project used to share the research. Most importantly, the team invited research users to share the research findings in their own professional and advocacy networks, opening the research to adaptation, contestation, and implementation in multiple contexts.

The Policy Mobilization case study illuminates how studying instances of knowledge exchange can provide insight into small-scale changes (e.g., learning, increased engagement with research, changes in perspective) within the collaboration and their broader networks. The collaboration has yet to see evidence of reduced early childhood vulnerability, which is the collaboration's desired impact. Nevertheless, analysis of the processes of interaction shaping this particular collaboration provides a deepened understanding of the routes of interactivity through which collaborations stimulate change. Ultimately, the Policy Mobilization project aims to influence policy in order to improve early childhood well-being. The project's current goal is to engage a diversity of stakeholders in research findings in order to create the "groundswell" necessary to influence policy.

## Policy Interactions

Because community–academic research collaborations privilege relationship building and interactivity throughout research creation and dissemination processes, these partnerships represent a viable opportunity for creating research–policy links when policy decision makers are part of the collaboration. For example, the Policy Mobilization project’s multipronged knowledge mobilization strategy reflects a focus on learning, knowledge exchange, and public dialogue. The project works at a number of levels—using research instrumentally to shift policy (e.g., the creation and dissemination of a report on the economic impacts of early childhood vulnerability) and also engaging in more strategic efforts to market the research in ways that generate public debate. An example is the team’s more recent foray into market research, part of its efforts to rebrand the issue of early childhood well-being so that people engage differently with research findings.

The Policy Mobilization team recognizes that robust evidence is unlikely to affect policy decisions without a strategic effort to engage practitioners, decision makers, and the general public in the issue of early childhood well-being. Although their efforts to engage local communities are leading to changes, they struggle to engage provincial decision makers in evidence-based conversations about early childhood health and development: “Despite the mountain of evidence that we’ve got... [data] hasn’t actually moved the needle on policy change very far” (Brad, municipal foundation). Collaborators have seen considerable uptake of research at the local level, but they remain concerned that their influence at a provincial level is less tangible:

[One region] has taken this information and their coalition has really strong relationships with the school district, with the local municipality, and with their Board of Trade. And so they’ve actually—they’ve established these local leaders or local champions and they’ve actually held two events now to engage the Board of Trade on things like these policy recommendations... they’ve actually translated this new knowledge into getting people more engaged. They’ve pushed the decision makers there at the table to at least make changes at that level for kids in that community... I would say that the barrier so far has been at a provincial level, and that’s been a real struggle for us. (Ben, United Way)

In the region where the United Way is active, the Policy Mobilization project has directly engaged the Board of Trade and other local decision makers, who have then made evidence-based policy changes in support of early childhood well-being. In this particular region, the uptake of research findings by local decision makers depended on considerable networking and community organizing. It was also supported by the United Way's influence in the region as a funder of charitable and nonprofit organizations.

By working collaboratively with academic researchers, government, and community groups (e.g., professional and/or citizen coalitions, agencies, and other organizations), United Way organizations and other funding bodies are actively shifting public dialogue in the hope of nudging public policy in new and more equitable directions. Charitable foundations and nonprofit funders play a significant role in stimulating systems-level change. Their funding frameworks and strategies shape how nonprofit and charitable agencies describe, conduct, and report on their work (*Nichols, 2008*).

A United Way representative involved in the Policy Mobilization project described how his organization is working to trigger large-scale systemic change by aligning funding priorities and policy recommendations:

We have an opportunity to start to mold funding streams to support policy recommendations...within the zero to six [years of age] priority, which is a whole section in here [the 3-year Community Impact Plan], there are three new granting streams... one is specifically around ECD [early childhood development], which will support local [early years] coalitions to do their work. The second one is around ECD public policy... and the third area, it's called ECD Place and Promise, which means that we will be devoting intense resources into specific neighbourhoods... all three of those funding streams have to demonstrate how they contribute to policy recommendations [around family health and well-being].

By actively supporting community agencies to articulate the impacts of their work in relation to the United Way's policy recommendations, the United Way hopes to "contribute to that groundswell that we need to influence the policymakers.... So that, to me is real, tangible change that this [project] is contributing to" (Ben, United Way).

In order to encourage public conversation and ultimately policy reform, research findings need to be communicated in a way that makes people feel compelled to act. On its own, research evidence is not persuasive enough to change public discourse or influence policy:

We've known about the high rate of child vulnerability for the last decade and public policy scholarship is starting to show that Canada has ranked very poorly by international standards... but knowing that has done relatively little to shift public policy priorities. (Matt, university research institute)

The Policy Mobilization team's efforts to "change public dialogue, in order to change public policy, in order to change outcomes" (Matt, university research institute) represent a strategic thinking-through of the research impact process.

## Conclusion

This article examined the processes of interaction through which community-academic research collaborations endeavor to make change. The four collaborations described in this article established or extended professional, advocacy, and practice-based networks; created and disseminated innovative products; generated and deployed new funding frameworks; created idea-generation laboratories (e.g., social change labs); engaged open-access media outlets; and created and shared usable content.

In order to deepen our understanding of the relationship between collaborative process and outcomes, we adapted elements of the research impact evaluation approach proposed by Spaapen and van Drooge (2011) and adopted by Molas-Gallart and Tang (2011). Spaapen and van Drooge proposed the Social Impact Assessment Method (SIAMPI) that is grounded in the study of productive interactions between science and society. Although we have not endeavored to employ SIAMPI, Spaapen and van Drooge's conceptual frame guided our work analytically. With SIAMPI, the unit of analysis is the interaction between academic researchers and nonacademic stakeholders, and the general area of inquiry is the impact of scientific research beyond academic settings. In contrast, our research explored the processes of interactivity between social science researchers and people who work in community organizations, nonprofit and charitable foundations, labor organizations, and government. It also described spin-off interactions that evolved

from an initial point of contact between university researchers and community professionals (e.g., interactions between nonprofit granting officers, community workers, and community volunteers). The adaptation of the SIAMPI model—the elaborated definition of productive interactions that attends to the principles of community academic partnership and the efforts to track through spin-off or related interactions—illustrates its potential usefulness as a model for assessing the impacts of community–campus collaborations.

Our research suggests that using an ethnographic framework to study processes of interaction allows researchers to capture the web of interactivity through which partnerships stimulate change. In some instances, it is easy to see how a community–campus collaboration resulted in a novel solution to a complex social problem (e.g., the Pension Plan project). In other instances, tracking the impacts of a collaboration required that researchers follow paths of interactivity a considerable distance from an initial interaction (e.g., the Alternative Community Investment Strategy project). Our research proposes that the impacts of collaborative work are revealed when researchers document interactions between collaborators, tracking these into the sites where collaborations seek to have, or have historically had, an impact. Future work will build an emergent, ethnographic “tracking forward” and “tracking backward” (Nutley *et al.*, 2007) approach directly into the research framework.

A key finding from this study is that assessing the broad effects of community–academic partnerships requires a research framework that enables researchers to follow pathways of interactivity emanating from the initial source of collaboration. Serendipitously, this is precisely what occurred in the Alternative Community Investment case study for this research. University–community bridging or engagement units can facilitate the identification of key stakeholders (i.e., participants in particular collaborations) who can support the initial stages of an investigation (Nichols *et al.*, 2014). In fact, connecting organizations or university engagement units may be well positioned to track the changes that result from community–campus interactions. A university researcher’s program of research is dependent on securing ongoing funding for future activities. Many academic researchers with expertise in community-based or engaged research are already balancing participation in collaborative projects with their teaching and service portfolios. On the other hand, people who work in university knowledge mobilization, engagement, or research offices have a stable funding base, which allows them to track collaborative out-

puts over the long term. Because they work with academic and community stakeholders, these individuals might be well positioned to capture the extensive webs of interactivity through which community–academic collaborations stimulate change.

Another key finding of this research is that a reciprocal relationship exists between a collaborative process and its effects (i.e., outcomes, outputs, or impacts). An interactive and reciprocal collaborative process creates conditions for knowledge exchange and ultimately mutually beneficial outcomes, innovations, and/or impact. In turn, these effects solidify people’s faith in and commitment to the collaborative process.

The following are key suggestions for capturing these positive social impacts:

- Work collaboratively with stakeholders to identify key informants to participate in interviews and ensure that interviews are sought with people who are indirectly connected to a particular project.
- Trace collaborative impacts as far away from the original point of collaboration (or productive interaction) as possible—that is, into community spaces where the products of collaboration are hoped to have an effect.
- Where possible, conduct a systems-level investigation—that is, an approach that conveys interactivity among social, institutional, political, and economic factors.
- Consider producing multiple “snapshots” of a particular case over time in order to capture broader systemic shifts and track the processes of collaboration that lead to impact.

With a better understanding of how and where community–campus collaborations contribute to social change, collaborators can maximize the effects of their interactions. This article suggests that social change is stimulated by processes of interaction that directly and indirectly connect people across time and space.

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