

# **The Art of Convening: How Community Engagement Professionals Build Place-Based Community–University Partnerships for Systemic Change**

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## **Abstract**

Over the past 50 years, colleges and universities have taken on increasingly important roles as anchor institutions in U.S. cities, partnering with local communities to promote development and well-being. Such community–campus partnerships rely on the work of community engagement professionals (CEPs), staff tasked with administering, coordinating, supporting, and leading engagement efforts at institutions of higher education. The preliminary competency model for community engagement professionals (*Dostilio et al., 2016*) lays out the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and commitments needed to perform this work. However, place-based approaches to engagement have been underrepresented in the emerging literature. The authors contribute to this conversation with a case study of partnership management work at University Neighborhood Partners at the University of Utah. Through this case, we highlight key competencies for engaging in place-based community development, suggest additional competency areas for the model, and explore how an understanding of CEP competencies is enriched and complicated by staff positionality.

*Keywords:* community engagement, partnerships, community engaged scholarship, community engagement professionals, higher education

## **Introduction**

**I**n 2001, the University of Utah launched the West Side Initiative, a project that aimed to address barriers to higher education and build more equitable relationships with the city's west side neighborhoods. The initiative began with 9 months of individual and group interviews that engaged over 250 west side residents, organizational leaders, and other stakeholders, addressing their priorities, concerns, and visions for the neighborhoods. Using an asset-based community development approach (*Mathie & Cunningham, 2003*), this research led to the design and launch of University Neighborhood Partners (UNP), a university

department with a mission to “bring together university and west side resources in reciprocal learning, action, and benefit—a community coming together.” In response to resident demands, UNP located its offices off campus in a house within one of the west side neighborhoods. Over the next 15 years, UNP would play a key role in local community development efforts by convening resident leaders, university partners, and local organizations and institutions to address shared goals related to education, resident leadership, and community capacity and well-being.

By founding UNP, the University of Utah was responding to the stark inequities of its specific local context. It was also taking part in a growing movement to reinvigorate the public mission of higher education and to take responsibility for the vital role that colleges and universities can play as “anchor institutions” (*Hodges & Dubb, 2012*). Responding to a number of different trends over the past half century—deindustrialization, globalization, neoliberalism, devolution of federal control—institutions of higher education have taken on increasingly important roles in U.S. cities as economic, cultural, and social forces. In many cases, institutions have sought to combine educational and research missions, economic priorities, and social goals by investing in local geographic areas and partnering with communities to promote community development (*Birch, Perry, & Taylor, 2013; Hodges & Dubb, 2012; Taylor & Luter, 2013*).

Community engagement can involve a wide array of university actors. However, it usually relies on a backbone of university staff who are tasked with administering, coordinating, supporting, and leading engagement efforts, often as a part of a center or network of centers focused on community engagement (*Welch, 2016; Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013*). In recent years, such staff have come to be known as *community engagement professionals* (CEPs). Within the large and growing literature on community engagement in higher education, relatively little focus has been given to this growing professional community, though in recent years there have been some efforts to better document the roles played by CEPs, as well as the skills, knowledge, and dispositions the work requires (*Bartha, Carney, Gale, Goodhue, & Howard, 2014; Jacoby & Mutascio, 2010; McReynolds & Shields, 2015*). Most recently, Campus Compact’s Project on the Community Engagement Professional published their preliminary competency model for community engagement professionals, an important step forward in solidifying our understanding of the profession (*Dostilio, 2017; Dostilio et al., 2016*).

The competency model is a work in progress. As it stands, the competency model does not fully reflect the work of place-based CEPs or the hybrid roles they play in bridging community and university spaces. In this article, we—a group of active CEPs and researchers—contribute to addressing this gap through a case study of University Neighborhood Partners in Salt Lake City. In doing so, we explore some of the competencies UNP staff members utilize to engage in place-based community engagement; suggest additional competency areas that might allow the model to better encompass place-based efforts; and begin to examine how the positionalities of staff members complicate and enrich our understanding about what it takes to perform this work.

## Background

### University Neighborhood Partners

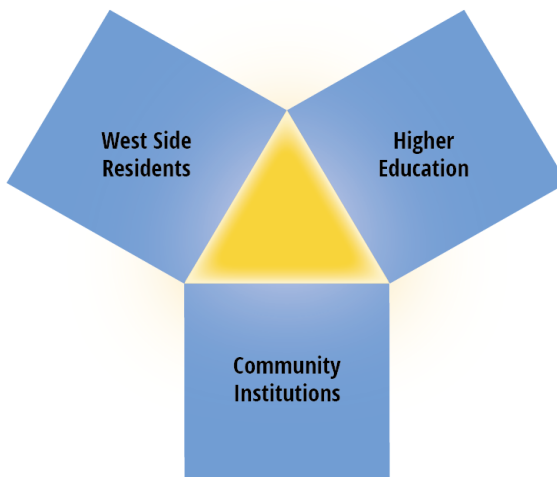
This article looks at the work of staff at University Neighborhood Partners (UNP), a department of the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. Through UNP, the University of Utah has adopted a place-based strategy with explicit goals to promote capacity building and community well-being on the west side of the city, while simultaneously advancing its research and teaching missions through engaged scholarship (Fitzgerald, Burack, & Seifer, 2010; Hodges & Dubb, 2012). West side Salt Lake City neighborhoods are some of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse in Utah, with growing communities of immigrant and refugee background and over 80 languages spoken. According to 2010 Census data, 74.5% of Salt Lake City's Latinx residents live on the west side, and although people of Color make up a quarter of the city's population, they make up 63% of the population in west side neighborhoods (Downen, Perlich, Wood, & Munro, 2012). At the same time, these neighborhoods are some of the most historically marginalized and disenfranchised, facing an array of social, cultural, political, and economic barriers to well-being. There is a long history of division and inaccessibility between the west side and the university, which many people view as an "ivory tower" sitting up in the foothills on the east side of the city.

UNP serves in what Hodges and Dubb (2012) called the "university as convener" role in anchor-based community development. UNP's approach is participatory and collaborative, seeking to bring neighborhood residents, community organizations/institutions, and higher education actors together in equitable, reciprocal,

long-term partnerships addressing shared goals. Over its 15-year history, UNP has supported partnerships addressing a range of resident-identified priorities, including educational access, employment, housing, citizenship, health, leadership development, and organizational capacity-building, among other areas.

**Organizational structure and partnership model.** UNP reports to the university president and works closely with the senior vice president for academic affairs. Initially opened with a three-person staff, UNP now has 13 full-time and two part-time staff members and a budget of around \$1.5 million. UNP staff now support over 70 different partnerships that engage 77 organizational/institutional partners, five higher education institutions, 34 university units, and over 4,000 neighborhood residents a year.

UNP's partnership model positions the university as an equal partner with community residents, in a departure from models that put the university in the lead (*Hodges & Dubb, 2012*). This approach is based on an understanding that multiple forms of knowledge and life experience are required to advance change in complex systems, including, critically, the knowledge and experiences of those most negatively impacted by the systems as they are. This model, in its idealized form, is represented in UNP's Partnership Triangle (see Figure 1, Image 1).



**Figure 1: Image 1 UNP's Partnership Triangle**

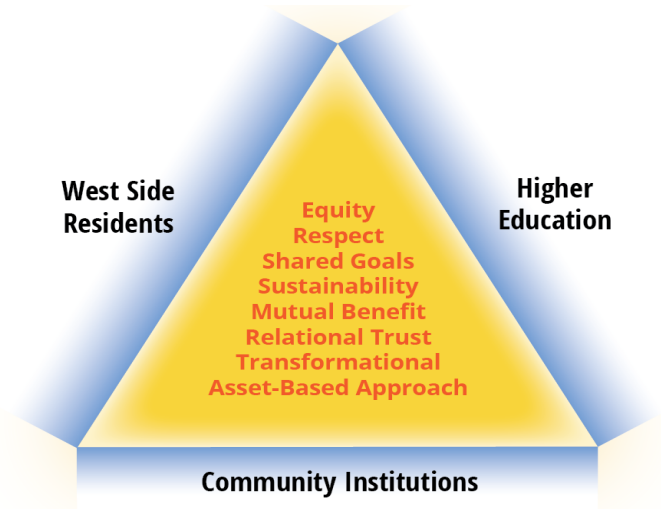


Figure 1: Image 2 UNP's Partnership Qualities

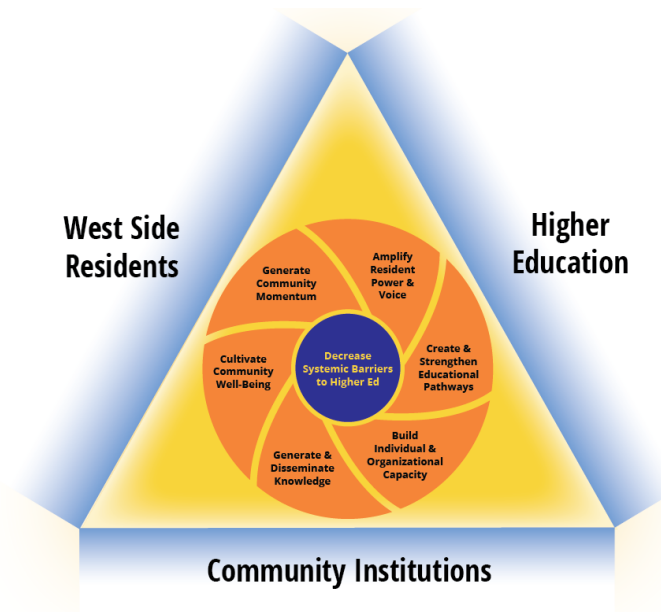


Figure 1: Image 3 UNP's Impact Areas

Partnerships are fully realized when they bring together members of UNP's three stakeholder groups: west side residents, higher education actors, and community organizations or institutions. UNP staff members are tasked with supporting the growth and development of partnerships, with a focus on increasing key qualities of an effective partnership such as equity, mutual benefit, relational trust, and an asset-based approach (see Figure 1, Image 2). Staff also support partnerships in creating, advancing, and evaluating progress toward shared goals that fall broadly into six impact areas (see Figure 1, Image 3). Of course, as we explore later in this article, the reality of partnership work is far messier and more complex than the model suggests.

**Impact.** Data on the impact of UNP and its partners is difficult to parse out because UNP is part of a web of individuals, organizations, and institutions working to improve quality of life in west Salt Lake City. However, there is promising evidence of long-term impact. For example, from UNP's founding through 2016, enrollment at the University of Utah from the zip codes where UNP works has increased by about 240%, and the number of graduates has increased by about 260%. The percentage changes for the local community college system from UNP's zip codes are 97% and 90% respectively. During this same period, UNP has supported leadership and organizational development for over 600 resident leaders and 10 new nonprofit organizations and has aided dozens of local residents in taking on leadership roles in local government, school decision-making bodies, and other institutions. UNP's website features a growing bibliography of scholarship that has been produced from its partnerships, including traditional journal articles and books as well as creative and practice-oriented products.

There is also evidence that the direct work of UNP staff, as explored in this article, has been effective in cultivating strong partnerships capable of meeting shared goals and objectives, though UNP has only recently begun to document this systematically. As part of UNP's annual 2017–2018 evaluation, Kara Byrne conducted a survey of 20 partners from six partnerships, adapting tools developed by Schulz et al. (2003) and McNall, Reed, Brown, and Allen (2009). The survey measured participant opinions regarding whether key characteristics of successful partnerships were strongly present in their partnership. Each characteristic was operationalized by a scale composed of up to six positively phrased questions, and participants were asked to score each from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The following percentages of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that their partnership had these posi-

tive characteristics: group cohesion (85%), partnership management (75%), perceived effectiveness (90%), shared power (90%), and cocreation of knowledge (55%). Of the remaining percentages, many were scored “neutral,” with 10% disagreeing with cocreation of knowledge and 5% disagreeing with partnership management.

## Our Research

In this article, we present a qualitative case study of partnership management work at UNP. Looking deep into a single case allows us to analyze the “how” of community engagement work as it is practiced within its particular context over time (*Yin, 2009*). We are using the term *case study* in Stake’s (2005) broad, methodologically flexible sense: a holistic inquiry into a bounded system. It is, in fact, a synthesis of insights from multiple sources, both research- and practice-based. In the last few years, UNP has enlisted the support of two external researchers to develop a more rigorous understanding of the work and impact of UNP and its partners. In response to the call for this special issue, we first looked to these two projects for insights. These projects were covered under UNP’s blanket IRB for self-study and evaluation.

Project 1 was conducted by Kimberly Schmit, a former UNP staff member and current partner, in an independent researcher capacity. The study looked retrospectively at the work and impact of UNP and its partners over the department’s 15-year history. Far more than a traditional evaluation, this study sought to uncover the underlying processes and tensions of partnership work at UNP as it has evolved over the years. The research was designed around UNP’s approach to partnerships—a process of asking questions, listening, building relationships, and cocreating knowledge. It blended ethnographic and narrative methods (*Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; O’Reilly, 2012*) with a community-engaged research approach that included collaborative research design and the creation of practice-oriented products (newsletter articles, videos) to advance UNP’s mission (*Strand, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Marullo, 2003*).

Schmit conducted 38 semistructured interviews with current and former UNP partners and staff, including questions related to the skills and processes that UNP staff implement to support partnerships. She drew on her own experiences and relationships as a longtime staff member who had been immersed in the work of UNP in order to facilitate in-depth discussions—a form of insider research (*Brannick & Coghlan, 2007*). Schmit conducted participant observation at about a dozen events; analyzed all available reports,



newsletters, strategic plans, media, and other documents; and studied longitudinal data on the local context. Schmit worked to combine the diverse narratives from these sources into a collective narrative of UNP and its partners. In addition, she drew out a set of emergent themes related to UNP's history, approach, impact, and possible futures. Concepts from leadership theory, organizational theory, and critical race theory undergirded this analysis (*Ladson-Billings, 2004; Wheatley, 2011*).

Project 2 was a participatory design process aimed at co-developing a theory of change to guide UNP's work (*Taplin & Rasic, 2012*). It was conducted by Kara Byrne, a research faculty member with the Social Research Institute at the College of Social Work at the University of Utah. This design process, while not a traditional academic research project, included in-depth qualitative analysis and uncovered valuable insights about the organization. Byrne conducted semistructured qualitative interviews with the eight members of UNP's staff most directly involved in partnership work. This was followed by a series of five larger design meetings with UNP staff, the UNP Advisory Board, and a committee of resident leaders. These meetings involved a process of identifying long-term goals and then backward mapping to identify underlying assumptions, necessary actions, and potential indicators (*Taplin & Rasic, 2012*). All interviews and meetings were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Byrne carried out a process of grounded coding (*Charmaz, 2006*) that identified 28 inductive themes, each representing an aspect of the organization's change process. In iterative dialogue with UNP staff and partners, these aspects were synthesized into a complete theory of change that included the six key impact areas mentioned above.

Although both of these projects offered findings relevant to the question of CEP competencies, neither was specifically designed to ask about this topic. In order to supplement these findings, Paul Kuttner—a partnership manager at UNP as well as a researcher—conducted semistructured qualitative interviews with the other four partnership managers. Staff were asked to read and respond to the preliminary competency model for CEPs (*Dostilio et al., 2016*) and then share their own perspectives and stories related to the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and commitments required to be a successful partnership manager. Kuttner conducted a thematic, phenomenological analysis of this data looking for preexisting themes from the competency model and the above-described studies, as well as unexpected and emergent themes (*Saldaña, 2015*). Kuttner then took the lead in collecting themes and insights from



the three sources and synthesizing them into five overarching topic areas, which make up the sections of this article. This synthesis was used as a springboard for individual dialogues with the other authors, drawing on their insights rooted in both research and practice. We forefronted findings that could be triangulated across two or three of the sources and shared the article with UNP staff for input in order to strengthen the trustworthiness and authenticity of our findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

This bricolage-style approach, based on diverse methods and using studies not focused directly on the question at hand, gives our analysis significant limitations. We do not claim to offer the final word on partnership management at UNP, let alone an analysis that can be generalized beyond this single case. At the same time, this approach has allowed us to bring multiple perspectives and forms of knowledge to bear on a question of great importance to the field. It has ignited important new conversations among UNP staff members. We offer this exploratory analysis as an initial step in illuminating an understudied area, and as a way to point toward valuable questions, themes, and topics that will benefit from future research.

## **The Roles and Competencies of Partnership Managers**

This article was written in conversation with the preliminary competency model for community engagement professionals published by Campus Compact (Dostilio et al., 2106). The competency model attempts to lay out the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and critical commitments that community engagement professionals (CEPs) utilize in their work. Through an iterative process involving a literature review, online surveys, and focus groups, Dostilio and her colleagues identified six overarching “functional areas” of work, each with its own set of competencies: leading change in higher education, institutionalizing community engagement on campus, facilitating students’ civic learning and development, administering community engagement programs, facilitating faculty development and support, and cultivating high quality partnerships.

In the following sections, we explore the ways that UNP’s approach resonates with and differs from the functional areas in the competency model and offer an analysis of the unique competencies necessary to do this kind of place-based partnership work at UNP. As the authors of the framework have noted (L. D. Dostilio, *personal communication, February 22, 2018*), place-based initiatives

were underrepresented in the initial research. This article does not contradict the competency model, but rather suggests additions to the model, shifting the emphases to encompass place-based engagement. In particular, because UNP's model decenters the university and engages community residents as partners, its work places a greater emphasis on community-facing competencies and the complexities of cultivating partnerships amid unequal power relationships. UNP staff must combine the skills and aptitudes of higher education professionals with those of grassroots community organizers, supporting residents in building power and leadership capacity and having a voice in how their community changes.

### **The Multiple Roles of Partnership Managers**

UNP staff members whose work is most directly focused on building community–university partnerships (usually) carry the title of partnership manager. Partnership managers are tasked with connecting partners around resident-identified priorities; supporting partnerships in developing shared goals, mutual trust, equity, and reciprocity; promoting equitable flow of resources among partners; and guiding and cultivating partnerships over time. Activities vary greatly across partnership type and stage of development, and can include meeting planning and facilitation, relationship building, seed funding, strategic planning, evaluation, and other forms of support.

Partnership managers must have the capacity for significant flexibility, adaptability, and creativity and cannot stick to a narrow conceptualization of their role. As one staff member put it, partnership managers must be ready to identify and “fill in the gaps” where each partnership needs support. This entails navigating across multiple systems, institutions, and cultures, each with its own languages, norms, and internal logic. Partnership managers often find themselves jumping between an array of roles that include the following and more:

- translator across communities and institutions;
- advocate for voices missing in the discussion;
- facilitator of critical action-reflection processes;
- student, listening to and learning from partners;
- teacher, supporting learning and development;
- connector of people, organizations, information, ideas, and resources;

- mediator, attending to emotions, conflict, and power relationships;
- catalyst for building momentum toward change; and
- mentor and friend.

In the following section we outline four key areas of practice that are critical to partnership management and the many roles it entails. These areas of practice, and the competencies they require, are—from the perspective of UNP—underemphasized or absent in the current iteration of the competency model.

## **The Competencies of Partnership Management**

The competency model reflects a heavy focus on university-facing work: how to support student learning and faculty development, how to coordinate and institutionalize community engagement at the college or university, and how to lead change in higher education (*Dostilio, 2017*). UNP staff is involved in all of these functional areas. Student learning is an important goal of UNP and is carried out through partnerships that include community-engaged learning courses, research projects, and student internships. For example, UNP supports a community walk-in center staffed by social work students doing their practicum placements. Faculty development and support is also key; partnership managers recruit and work closely with faculty to integrate community engagement into their teaching and research.

UNP is invested in long-term institutionalization and change at the University of Utah and within the field of higher education, often working in partnership with other community engagement offices and centers at the university. Recent efforts include participation in a task force to recommend changes to promotion and tenure policies in order to effectively evaluate community-engaged scholarship and taking part in the statewide Community Campus Compact effort to develop civic action plans for all colleges and universities. However, because these areas of work are addressed in the framework, we will not expand on them. Instead, we will examine four areas that focus more heavily on community-facing competencies as well as on the intricacies of managing partnerships for equity and systems change: (1) relationship building, (2) building community leadership and organizational capacity, (3) community and systems change, and (4) engaging power. As we explore in our conclusion, these areas expand on what the compe-

tency model calls “cultivating high quality partnerships” and suggesting additional functional areas.

**Relationship building.** The work of convening partnerships is, first and foremost, about relationships. The ability to cultivate and maintain trusting, reciprocal relationships with and among partners is absolutely necessary for partnership managers (*Martin & Crossland, 2017*). Past literature on campus–community partnerships emphasized the facilitation of relationships among higher education and community organization partners, within the context of a partnership, through inclusive and democratic processes, effective communication, interdependency, commitment to mutual benefit and shared goals, and honoring what each brings to the table (e.g., *Gass, 2010; Leiderman, Furco, Zapf, & Goss, 2002; Martin & Crossland, 2017*). Less attention has gone to the relational groundwork necessary to build effective partnerships, something that is especially important for convening new partnerships; creating space for authentic leadership from community residents; and rooting partnership work in communities’ priorities, assets, history, and local context. The field of community organizing, among others, has built a significant body of knowledge in this area (e.g., *Chambers, 2003; Christens, 2010; Minkler, 2012*).

At UNP, partnership managers are in a constant process of developing and maintaining relationships with individuals across stakeholder groups. This work is very time-intensive and takes place in a wide range of contexts. As one community leader put it, “You can’t do community work from behind a desk.” Although formal spaces are important, it is often more informal and “intimate” spaces that facilitate deeper forms of information exchange, idea sharing, and relationship building. Staff and partners speak to how small forms of day-to-day work and unplanned moments make up the foundation of trusting relationships: chatting in the parking lot after an event, helping a community member move, eating together, and so on. In addition, there are more structured practices that managers can learn in order to build and deepen relationships, such as one-on-one meetings, learning to tell one’s story of self, and active or empathic listening (*Chambers, 2003; Ganz, 2010; McNaughton, Hamlin, McCarthy, Head-Reeves, & Schreiner, 2008*). But whatever the approach, managers stress the importance of being “present” in both the physical and psychological sense. They describe this work as both intrinsically rewarding and, at times, exhausting, calling on individuals to dig deep into their own internal resources.

**Crossing boundaries.** Partnership managers must be consummate boundary crossers. A partnership manager might meet with a faculty member on campus in the morning to discuss their research interests, present to staff at a local agency in the afternoon about how to improve their community engagement strategies, and share a meal with community leaders at an evening event. In each situation the culture, expectations, norms, and languages might differ, calling on partnership managers to understand and adapt to these differences while at the same time staying true to the manager's authentic self.

One staff member explained some of the underlying dispositions and commitments you need to build relationships across these contexts:

You have to love people. You cannot just say, "I have to work this job." You have to have the drive to want to do this job not just nine-to-five but when people need you. . . . What I notice is that people can automatically tell whether you're sincere or not. If you are sincere—about the job, about the work, about the community—they will gravitate towards you and you can get a lot of work done. . . . You have to be aware of yourself, the situation, and the people that you are working with, and you have to have cultural humility, that you are working for people and you care about their lives deeply.

The concept of cultural humility is an important one, given that partnership managers are constantly crossing and blurring cultural borders. In contrast to the idea of cultural competency, which assumes there is a body of knowledge about a culture that an individual can master, cultural humility is a lifelong commitment to learn with others (*Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998*). Partnership managers practice cultural humility when they are self-reflective about their assumptions and biases, when they are open to learning new ways of seeing and being in the world, when they admit they do not know what they do not know, and when they commit to challenging systems that privilege one culture over another. This requires critical listening skills and a deep curiosity about people and the environment. It takes a willingness to move in spaces beyond your cultural comfort zone. One staff member, for example, described how she entered into this work by immersing herself in a new neighborhood:

As a new partnership manager, what I've been trying to do is get a lay of the land and make time to engage, because I think it would be easy to get bogged down with a lot of the maintenance of partnerships. . . . Sometimes it takes that extra effort of getting outside of your comfort zone. For example, I've been trying to take training or volunteer opportunities as a way just to get to know the community. Last Saturday I canvassed the area surrounding the park here as a volunteer for the 2020 Census. I felt like it would be a good reason to just walk the neighborhood. So simple, right? Taking the time to walk the neighborhood and see areas that have a lot of activity, folks are coming in and out, folks are just hanging out on their patios, and you wave, "Hi."

**Responsivity.** Partnership managers must have the inclination and ability to be flexible and responsive to partners: communicating in their preferred mode, focusing on their priorities, adapting to their schedules, and adjusting to different paces of work. They need to create multiple entry points for engagement and maintain an open invitation to collaborate throughout the ebbs and flows of people's lives. Staff members often refer to this as "meeting people where they are at." This requires managers to put aside their own agendas and focus on the priorities of partners. It also requires a strong belief in people—their assets, their intelligence, their leadership ability, their potential for growth—no matter the deficit narratives about their community, or the history of the institutions they represent.

In addition, partnership managers need to have a level of compassion and understanding of others' situations, and of the differing things that are at stake for different partners. As one staff member put it, "It's about being humane. You have to be very considerate, because you're not just dealing with 'issues' . . . you're dealing with issues that affect people's lives, things that can impact whole families and change their lives completely." For this staff member, who grew up in the neighborhoods and has faced many of the challenges and injustices common among residents, building relationships is also about "identifying yourself with other people in the community that are struggling." Seeing yourself in the community, and the community in yourself, may come more naturally for staff who are from the neighborhood. However, it is a goal that all UNP staff can strive for—a shift from "them" to "us."

**Collective relationships.** Managers need to be able to move beyond individual relationships toward building collective relationships, both within and across partnerships. In other words, partnership managers are building *community*. This means challenging dynamics of isolation, siloing, and fragmentation and instead fostering connection, interdependence, and belonging (Block, 2008). To do this, partnership managers need to have an orientation toward collaboration and collective action (as opposed to hyperindividualism). They also need an understanding of how webs of trusting, interdependent relationships increase social capital and the collective capacity communities need to create lasting change (Saegert, Thompson, & Warren, 2002).

Sometimes building community takes place within groups that have similar backgrounds, social positions, and life experiences—for example, building community among Latinx parents—while at other times it is about bridging between individuals in vastly different social and professional spaces. Either way, partnership managers must listen closely to the interests, perspectives, and goals of partners in order to see opportunities for connection and be able to facilitate processes and create spaces in which relationships can flourish. Controlled meeting environments do not always support this approach. Celebrations, for example, are a key community-building practice at UNP, so sometimes staff need to know how to throw a party.

**Building community leadership and organizational capacity.** The competency model includes two functional areas focused on learning and development among partners: facilitating students' civic learning and development and facilitating faculty development and support. For place-based efforts like UNP, equal attention must be paid to learning and development among community partners (Hodges & Dubb, 2012). Increased opportunities for community residents and organizations to build their capacities, take on leadership roles, and achieve their priorities is an end goal of UNP, as well as an integral part of the process of building equitable partnerships.

When UNP was founded, there were already established community leaders and community organizations on the west side. Many of these were included in the initial research and came to partner with UNP and serve on its advisory board. At the same time, UNP saw that there were many unrecognized and potential leaders in the community who were looking for opportunities to increase their leadership skills, take on larger roles, and establish new organizations. For this reason, UNP made “resident lead-



ership” one of its three initial partnership areas. Over the years, UNP established a number of partnerships focused explicitly on community leadership, such as the Westside Leadership Institute (a course on community organizing), the Community Advocate Network (a group of organized parents), and the Startup Incubator (a partnership supporting residents in establishing for-profit and nonprofit organizations). However, supporting leadership development and organizational capacity-building is not just the work of certain partnerships. It is something that partnership managers must attend to across partnerships. It is key to supporting equitable participation and shared power, and to ensuring that all partners benefit from collaboration by having opportunities to learn and grow personally and professionally.

**Supporting individual leaders.** In order to support resident leadership development, partnership managers must have an understanding of leadership as distributed, or shared, across an organization or community (Pearce & Conger, 2002; Spillane, 2012). This perspective challenges traditional notions of leadership as top-down and reserved for those with positional power. Instead, it recognizes that well-functioning organizations and communities are “leader-ful,” with many different leaders playing different roles (Raelin, 2003). Partnership managers must also understand leadership as a developmental process rather than a fixed attribute: people are not born “natural” leaders but rather develop and become leaders through the practice of leading. From this perspective, a key responsibility of leaders is to support others taking up leadership roles, or, as Ganz (2010) puts it, “Leadership is accepting responsibility to create conditions that enable others to achieve shared purpose in the face of uncertainty” (p. 509).

Partnership managers need to develop some understanding of how people move toward leadership: the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they develop and the roles that managers can play in supporting that process. For example, Warren, Mapp, and Kuttner (2015) laid out six roles that community organizers play in supporting residents who are moving toward increased leadership. It begins with listening to people’s stories and passions and building relationships with and among residents. As individuals show interest in taking on more leadership, organizers act as mentors, encourage residents to take risks and step up into new roles, and create opportunities for residents to learn through doing. Finally, organizers support residents in linking personal struggles and priorities to larger goals. This kind of mentoring and support is not a

linear process but rather a delicate and relational art, as one UNP staff member explains:

You have to be very mindful of people and have clear understanding of the wants and needs of the community. You have to provide a lot of guidance so people will see you as a leader. But you also have to be open to sharing that leadership, passing it onto others. Also, be cautious about people being ready for that next step because if you push too hard you can lose people. Be aware and pay a lot of attention and have a lot of patience, knowing when it is the right time to, I don't want to say push, but to support people in their next steps.

**Supporting organizations.** A somewhat different set of competencies is required when supporting organizational development, whether new grassroots organizations or larger, more established partners. Organizational partners have vastly differing learning needs. A small start-up might need to learn how to establish a board or make a strategic plan, whereas a larger established organization may need to learn how to better engage community. Partnership managers do not need to be experts in organizational development—they can pull in partners with specific areas of expertise—but they do need some basic understanding of how organizations function, how they are structured and funded, and the strengths and weaknesses of organizations as agents of change.

Whether working with individuals or organizations, managers need to be aware of the danger of leader fatigue. Passionate and engaged leaders often risk burnout, and this issue can be exacerbated when partnership managers find themselves relying on a small group of leaders for multiple efforts. With its most recent strategic plan, UNP is looking to improve how it attends to the health and well-being of existing leaders and how engaging a larger array of individuals and organizations can ease demands on long-term partners.

**Community and systems change.** The community challenges that UNP and its partners are addressing—educational inequity, poverty, political marginalization, poor health outcomes, and more—are what are sometimes called “wicked problems” (*Rittel & Webber, 1974*). They defy clear and simple solutions because they are inherently complex, they are embedded in systems of interdependent parts in which the results of actions are hard to predict, and they implicate a wide range of stakeholders who do not agree on the

definition of the problem, let alone the solution (*Kania & Kramer, 2013*). Sustainable change in communities cannot be achieved purely by working with individuals to make better choices, access more resources, or institute new practices. It requires a systems approach.

Partnership managers must develop a critical understanding of how systems work to produce the outcomes we see. This means moving from a focus on the individual toward an understanding of individuals as embedded in families, communities, institutions, and larger economic, cultural, and social systems. It means learning how activities in each realm affect the others, often in unintended ways. It means developing a critique of the way systems privilege some people, groups, ideas, and cultures over others.

Fortunately, many concepts and tools are available to help managers better understand these interconnected webs: systems thinking (e.g., *Stroh, 2015*), emergence (e.g., *Wheatley & Frieze, 2006*), ecological systems theories (e.g., *Bronfenbrenner, 2005*), complexity theory (e.g., *Byrne, 2002*), living systems (*Capra, 1997*), and many more. Building an understanding of systems allows managers and partners to better navigate the systems as they are and figure out how they can be changed to work differently. It focuses attention on the root causes of social ills and helps avoid deficit frameworks that place the blame squarely on low-wealth communities and communities of Color for their struggles (*Valencia, 2012*).

In addition to understanding systems, partnership managers must be able to move across system “levels” and work at different scales. For example, depending on the partnership and its strategy, managers might be working with individual families, large institutions, or the broader culture and policy environment. In each case a systems analysis is necessary, but the starting point is different, so partnership managers need to be able to “zoom out” and “zoom in” as needed. Importantly, managers need to be able to see and make connections across levels, building up feedback loops and relationships (*Capra, 1997*). For example, UNP’s walk-in center is often called upon to support families to secure and maintain housing. The partnership Community Voices for Housing Equality (CVHE) uses action research to propose policy changes related to tenant-landlord relations and evictions. These two efforts are equally important and ideally inform one another, with the individual experiences of residents in the walk-in center informing CVHE policy proposals and CVHE offering participation opportunities for residents who want to make broader change in the community. Partnership managers can support these connections by linking

individuals, information, resources, and ideas across partnerships, something UNP is increasingly focused on.

Many efforts at systems change have been critiqued for bringing together powerful institutional leaders but leaving out the voices of community members most impacted (e.g., *Cabaj & Weaver, 2016; McAfee, Blackwell, & Bell, 2015*). One UNP partnership manager similarly cautions against approaches to systems change that don't keep the people most impacted at the center. For him, the key is humanization:

How do I humanize and give value and voice to not only myself but to the people that I know who have historically been left out? Partnerships, partners—these are all made up of people. Everything functions at that level in one way or another. We can think of how groups of people form structures or organizations, but at the end of the day it still matters. It's not a machine. It still requires interaction and the relationship piece. At the more fundamental level, it's the maintenance of relationships and the desire to be in community.

Creating systemic change in our communities is a complex process impacted by factors far outside any one group's control. Partnership managers must live in the tension between planning for the future on one hand and letting go of control on the other. At UNP, partnership managers work with partners to develop explicit goals, set observable outcomes, collect relevant data, and assess progress toward goals. At the same time, they recognize that, within complex systems, outcomes are difficult to predict and effective solutions often cannot be predetermined (*Kania & Kramer, 2013*). Many times the best way forward begins as an outlier idea that challenges the normal way of doing things, an idea that is new and risky but that energizes the partners. It is for this reason that managers put so much of their focus on the quality of partnership processes, trusting that effective solutions will emerge from effective processes (see Figure 1).

In addition, partnership managers must avoid the instinct to control, or own, a particular change effort. UNP is not in competition with others who share similar goals. In fact, many of the most significant impacts that UNP has had were not the direct result of UNP's work but rather resulted from a "ripple effect" of UNP's activities. UNP might help launch a partnership but may not be involved in how the partnership evolves or how others learn from

the partnership to shape their own work. For example, UNP runs a “partnership center” in its neighborhoods that, over the years, has inspired and informed similar projects both in and outside Salt Lake City.

Finally, systems change is slow. Even as small successes are celebrated along the way, partnerships often hit setbacks, and the full impact of partnership work can take years to materialize. Managers need to have a strong understanding of *why* they are doing this work if they are going to maintain their motivation. Although the language used by each partnership manager may vary, they need at the very least to have a commitment to equity, to centering minoritized voices, and to a vision of a more socially just future. And they must attend to the ongoing risk of burnout and exhaustion, finding ways to care for themselves and to preserve their health and well-being and that of their families.

**Engaging power.** The inequities that UNP seeks to address are rooted in unequal power relationships; therefore, any attempt to make systemic improvements must take power into account. Partnership managers must develop an understanding of how power functions across multiple domains to produce injustice, as well as how it can be built and used by groups that have been historically marginalized and oppressed. Although power is sometimes very visible—for example, when an advocacy group uses political power to advance a new policy—power also functions in many less visible ways: through how systems are structured, through the policies and procedures of institutions, and through the narratives and norms of our shared culture (*Collins, 2009*). Partnership managers must be able to work with partners both to identify power relationships in the realm where they are working and to determine how their efforts can help shift relationships toward greater equality.

Of particular relevance are power relationships between institutions of higher education and surrounding communities—what is often called the “town and gown” divide (*Martin, Smith, & Philips, 2005*). This power relationship is particularly unequal when primarily White institutions (PWI) like the University of Utah are engaging with low-wealth communities and communities of Color like those in Salt Lake City’s west side. UNP was founded, in part, to address this imbalance. During the research that led to UNP’s founding, west side residents said they were tired of university faculty and staff coming into the neighborhoods to study them, or provide services for them, and then leaving when their project ended or their grant ran out. They wanted a say—power—in the research projects and other programs taking place in their neigh-

borhoods. UNP's goal is to shift from an extractive relationship to a reciprocal relationship, one in which residents are at the decision-making table and seeing the benefits of partnership to the community. Managers need to understand the ways that they are implicated in this dynamic and be committed to shifting it. They are asked to navigate the university's systems and leverage its resources while challenging those same systems to make changes.

More broadly, managers must develop an understanding of the "lay of the land" in terms of power, resources, and decision making. Who are the major players in the neighborhoods, the city, the state, and so on? What assets are available for partnership work, and what are the main barriers? When consequential decisions are made, who makes them and at what system level? Keeping up with this evolving landscape requires research skills. Sometimes this includes formal research, as when UNP has taken part in asset mapping. At other times it is about more informal, ongoing inquiry into UNP's context.

**Shifting power.** For partnership managers, the work of shifting power relationships often starts at the micro level, within the partnerships themselves. Partners come to the table from very different places and are the beneficiaries of different levels of privilege based on their position in an institution, their race and ethnicity, their gender and sexual orientation, their age, their formal education, and other factors. Partners also bring their cultural assumptions and biases into the space with them. Managers must be able to see and name these dynamics when they threaten to harm the partnership and take steps to equalize power among partners without having key stakeholders leave the table. Because of historic power imbalances, it is particularly key to be able to center resident leaders and resident voices. This is a delicate but vital dance, as one staff member explains:

One of the skills a partnership manager needs to have is to be able to see power differences around a table. They need to be able to hear what's not being said. They need to be able to see in people's body language what's happening, literally around the table. Because one thing we're doing is balancing out power relationships. People who are blind to power cannot do this work. If you can't manage a relationship in which racism is coming up at the table you cannot do this work.

There are many different methods managers use to disrupt power imbalances in partnerships. For example, numbers matter: If a particular partner is at risk of being marginalized, managers might invite a group rather than just an individual. Who is at the table matters as well, and bringing a more diverse array of partners can help to hinder any one group from dominating. But a lot of the work of balancing power comes through the partnership manager's role as a facilitator. The art of facilitating groups of partners is something UNP staff have had explicit training in—how to guide discussions and planning in ways that are inclusive of all voices, take into account and value the different life experiences of partners, address conflict in healthy ways, focus partners on shared goals and reciprocity, and promote collaborative learning. Finally, it is difficult to address power relationships in the partnerships without addressing them among the staff first, where many of these same unequal power dynamics arise.

## **Partnership Management and Positionality**

One aspect of partnership management that is obscured by a generalized competency framework is the question of *who* is doing the work. Partnership managers' positionalities—their identities, values, personal histories, and so on—impact how they engage in partnerships, who they engage with, and what partnership work means to them. For example, one staff member described how his approach to partnership management is rooted deeply in his own cultural background as someone who came to the United States years ago as a refugee from Somalia:

I would say it all depends on the culture you grew up in. If you come from a culture that is individualistic you look at individuals and what are the benefits. But, if you come from a communal, collectivist culture, then what is the benefit for the community? It just depends on the culture you grew up in and how you were raised. How I approach partnership management is exactly how I was raised: What is the benefit for everyone that lives on the west side?

Another staff member, meanwhile, explains that multiple aspects of his identity shape how he works with community:

The way that I do the work is because of who I am and the kinds of interests that I've had. I grew up in this



public school system, I'm from this city, I am Chicano, I come from a migrant family. These identities play a role first in almost everything.

Of particular importance for UNP is the question of whether staff members are residents of UNP's neighborhoods and whether they identify culturally, racially, or ethnically with the communities living there. UNP has long made a practice of bringing local residents into the organization, and today over half of the staff identifies as former or current residents of the neighborhoods and/or representative of the communities living there (though these staff members tend to be in less senior positions, reflecting, as mentioned above, larger power imbalances). Staff members with community roots bring critical knowledge, deep relationships, and firsthand experience, all of which are invaluable to the work and very difficult for outsiders to develop. The work is extremely personal for them because they are working for their families, their neighborhoods, their history, and their future in a way that is not as true for those with fewer roots in the area. These staff are often asked to take on additional roles: to hold the trust of family and community members, to connect personal relationships to new people and spaces, to be spokespeople for their communities at the university and other institutions, and to sit in spaces where they are often misunderstood or their knowledge invalidated. Resident staff members report great benefits and a sense of power from this work, but it can also place residents in positions of tension between work and community, and it requires a high level of patience, resiliency, and long-term vision.

If partnership work varies based on who the manager is, then the question may not be just "What competencies do all partnership managers need?" but also "Who needs to be on staff in order for the organization to have the full range of necessary competencies?" UNP has benefited greatly from hiring staff who represent the diversity of its multiple communities in terms of race, ethnicity, country of origin, gender, sexual orientation, educational background, connection to local neighborhoods, and more (although, again, these staff members tend to be in less senior positions). Within UNP, staff members bring diverse perspectives to the table and often play the role of advocate for their partners and communities. The resulting discussions may be difficult at times, but they deepen everyone's understanding of the work. Partnership managers can also take on different roles based on their unique capabilities and positionalities. It is not as simple as managers con-

necting best with those most similar to them, though shared experiences definitely play a role. Rather, managers tap into different facets of themselves at different times, using these to build bridges among partners and spaces. One staff member, for example, is a local resident of refugee background, a leader in his mosque, and is now finishing his second master's degree at the university, giving him a foot in multiple worlds and a powerful position from which to build bridges.

If there is an overarching competency here, it is perhaps introspection. Partnership managers need to have a good understanding of their own positionality within communities, organizations, and systems, and be aware of how others see them. This allows them to be strategic in using their various forms of privilege and capital to engage and influence partners. Managers must be able to bring their full selves into the work and make room for their colleagues to do the same, recognizing the complex identities and assets each brings to the table. When UNP is at its best, staff members work to understand one another not only in the context of UNP, but in the context of their families, communities, cultures, histories, and hopes for the future. They support one another in addressing life priorities, whether that means advancing their educations or making time to be with family. They take into account the physical, mental, and emotional health of themselves and others, and they support one another in developing the practices, boundaries, and attitudes needed for self-care.

## Discussion

In this article, we put the preliminary competency model for community engagement professionals published by Campus Compact (*Dostilio et al., 2016*) in conversation with the community partnership approach of University Neighborhood Partners at the University of Utah. The result can help us deepen our understanding of what it takes to “cultivate high-quality partnerships” in a place-based partnership effort rooted in a university-as-convener model (*Hodges & Dubb, 2012; Martin & Crossland, 2017*). In particular, it stresses the ability to build webs of trusting relationships across communities and to engage effectively with questions of power and positionality. Although underemphasized in research on CEPs, these competency areas are well developed in other fields, such as community organizing.

This research also suggests two possible additions to the six functional areas in the initial framework that could benefit from

further research. The first is related to advancing community and systems change. During pilot testing of the competency model, it was suggested that “community and economic development” be added as a functional area, but it was too late in the process to add it (*Dostilio, 2017*). This research suggests something similar: a functional area related to the type of long-term impacts that community–university partnerships seek. The second possible addition is a functional area having to do with supporting the development of leadership and organizational capacity among community partners. This may not be a focus of all centers, but those invested in resident-led, grassroots community change may find this a key underpinning of successful work and an important corollary to the areas of faculty development and student learning.

This study also complicates the competency model by raising questions about how staff positionality affects the way CEPs understand and carry out their work. For example, it is true that all CEPs need to have competency in the area of relationship building. However, that broad statement can obscure the fact that how CEPs build relationships, what kind of shape those relationships take, what those relationships mean, and the stakes involved all vary greatly. This dynamic deserves further exploration. For example, does the competency model contain assumptions about the positionality of CEPs, based on who answered the survey or who tends to hold these positions? How can it be more encompassing of multiple positionalities? These questions do not challenge the usefulness of the model. Rather, they remind us to live in the tension between the generalized and the particular, between dominant trends on the one hand and the beautiful messiness of reality on the other.

## Conclusion

It is certainly not the case that all managers at UNP practice all of these competencies all the time. Rather, these competency areas represent ongoing areas of individual and collective learning. UNP itself has some way to go in terms of developing a shared understanding about what it takes to be a partnership manager and how best to help staff develop those capabilities. In the past, UNP relied on informal mentorship, supporting staff members’ own educational priorities and hiring people who already possess many of the required skills. The process of writing this article has helped to catalyze a discussion within UNP about the skills, knowledge, and dispositions that help staff do their work, and how the organization might be more intentional about creating opportunities to develop

them. In return, we hope that, by sharing the work of UNP, we can help to enrich and further this important fieldwide conversation.

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