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Embodying PAR: A Reflection on Building Trust Across Institutional Hierarchies

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Abstract

In this cowritten reflection, two co-principal investigators of a federally funded participatory action research (PAR) project that involved a university–community collaboration discuss how they built a relationship of trust through a deep shared belief in PAR ethics and ethos and through what they learned together from their collaboration with community researchers about the importance of building relationships and solidarity across differences. They argue that building ethical, reciprocal relationships between faculty and staff within universities, especially in the context of collaborations with communities outside the university, is a worthwhile and necessary component of living out the ethics of a participatory framework.

Keywords: bridging institutional status differences, participatory action research framework, solidarity across differences in higher education institutions

In this article, we examine the complex dynamics of our relationship as the co-principal investigators (co-PIs) of a federally funded participatory action research (PAR) collaboration between an elite predominantly White liberal arts college and a working-class racially diverse rural town in Minnesota. We explore how our shared institutional space (Carleton College) interacted with our identities and positionalities and with the PAR framework. Given that identities are always multiple and ever evolving, we focus mainly on our racial, class, and professional identities during our collaboration: Anita is an Asian American professor who comes from a middle-class background, and Emily is a White American staff member from a middle-class background. We discuss the myriad structural barriers created by our institution's understanding of our work with community researchers and of our partnership across faculty–staff positions. We also delineate how we were able to build a reciprocal and trustful relationship, despite these barriers, mainly through our deep shared belief in the ethics and ethos of the PAR framework and through what we learned together from our collaboration with community researchers about the importance of building relationships of solidarity.

As co-PIs, we witnessed and experienced the power of relationship among the community researchers as they shared stories of racist experiences and engaged in collective action to change the existing dynamics in their community. PAR is

> a framework for conducting research and generating knowledge centered on the belief that those who are most impacted by research should be the ones taking the lead in framing the questions, the design, methods, and the modes of analysis of such research projects. (Participatory Action Research, 2025b)

One important PAR tenet that was especially relevant to our experience as co-PIs and this analysis of our relationship is the importance of acknowledging and honoring different kinds of experiences and expertise. The kind of vulnerability and honesty that we saw among the community research teams gave us a framework to push back against the norms of higher education that rarely allow for the development of truly reciprocal relationships between faculty and staff and for staff members to have agency in shaping their work. In particular, having the project focus on processes and relationships,

and not on "products," gave the two of us ample opportunities for ongoing and honest conversations about power dynamics; about how to "center" the community partners in our work, especially the Latine and Somali parent and youth researchers; and about strategically using our positionality within our institution to support each other and our community partners. Although we learned powerful lessons about the possibilities and limitations of our power, ultimately these lessons led Emily to leave the institution because it could not support her vision for what reciprocal, ethical relationships should look like between universities and communities, a vision forged through being a co-PI on the PAR project.

We address our analysis mostly to our university colleagues—staff and faculty—who are engaging in or want to engage in transformative projects with communities who have not only been historically excluded from universities but have often been harmed by universities through deficit-framed research (Mitchell & Chavous, 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2014). We argue that building ethical, reciprocal relationships between faculty and staff within universities, especially in the context of collaborations with communities outside the university, is a worthwhile and necessary component of living out the ethics of a participatory framework. Although we cannot individually or even in small groups fully transform university structures that limit the space available for the messy, iterative work of building relationships within and outside institutions necessary for PAR and other types of community-based projects, we can better account for our own positionality and power within institutions. For example, a faculty person may commit to rigorous contemplation of the community–faculty relationship and endeavor to respect and honor community expertise and goals, but ethical shortcomings will remain if they then turn around and uncritically take advantage of the labor of graduate students, staff members, junior faculty, or anyone else involved who has less power and prestige in an institutional context. We realize it may seem unusual for a reflective piece involving PAR to focus so little on community voices; however, we want to keep this essay's focus on academia's own structures of power.

As Lake and Wendland (2018) noted, community-engaged work can broadly "benefit from PAR's commitment to a more careful and explicit analysis of power" (p. 22), and we would posit that these analyses are necessary for examining relationships within higher education institutions as well as between institutions and communities. Writing this piece together has been one way to honor our collaboration and relationship, even as our institutional relationship with each other came to an end. We start with a description of our shared institutional context as co-PIs before delving into individual stories of our experiences during the first few months of the project, the barriers we faced, and the factors that made it possible for us to truly become partners in this work.

Our Shared Institutional Context

When we first became involved with the grant-funded PAR project in spring 2018 (Participatory Action Research, 2025a), we both worked at Carleton College, a small elite liberal arts undergraduate college in Northfield, Minnesota. Anita was a tenured professor in the Department of Educational Studies and had begun her career at Carleton in 2008. Emily began working at Carleton in 2017, first as the interim and then the associate director for academic civic engagement and scholarship at the Center for Community and Civic Engagement (CCCE). Carleton College enrolls approximately 2,000 students and, as of 2024, had an endowment of $1.26 billion (Carleton College Investment Office, 2024). In the 2018–2019 school year, when we started the PAR project, approximately 60% of the students were identified as White; 8% as Hispanic/Latino; 8% as Asian; 5% as Black/African American; and 11% as international students (Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2024). During Anita's time at the college, the student body's racial and ethnic diversity had increased more rapidly than that of faculty and staff. A consulting firm's report in June 2021 revealed that compared to 25 peer schools nationally, Carleton had the second highest percentage of White faculty (Cambridge Hill Partners, personal communication, June 3, 2021). In 2021, when Anita was an associate professor, the mean percentage of White associate professors for the 25 schools was 70%; at Carleton, 85% of associate professors were White. The racial diversity among staff was even lower: Emily was classified as "exempt staff," a category that was approximately 91% White.

In 2018, the CCCE had recently undergone a turnover of the entire staff after the college had merged cocurricular student

engagement activities and academic civic engagement into one campus center. The influx of new personnel resulted in a lack of deep institutional knowledge alongside an undercurrent of pressure on the Center to prove its worth and expertise to the college. Carleton is a place with a keen sense of itself; many staff and faculty are college alumni themselves. Emily learned quickly when she joined the CCCE that instead of being interested in cocreating projects with the newly appointed staff, a certain contingent of veteran faculty wanted to conserve the norms and history of community engagement on campus and maintain the Center's previous focus. For example, faculty with longstanding involvement in projects in the Northfield schools showed marked resistance to the new director, who had previous professional experience with international human rights work. They felt the new staff was pushing an agenda around "global" engagement and issues of racial and social justice that deemphasized their work.

The institutional culture promoted a prevailing sense of overwork and time scarcity for faculty and staff. "Even Faribault," a faculty person once told Emily to emphasize this point, "is going to be too far for many faculty." This faculty member was referring to the 15-minute drive from campus, but the observation implied other types of distance as well: economic, racial, refugee/immigration status, and so forth. Faribault is adjacent to Northfield, the town where the college is located, and is more diverse across multiple factors. For example, in the 2018–2019 school year when we started the PAR work in Faribault, 55% of students in the Faribault School District but only 25% of students in the Northfield School District were identified as students of color (Minnesota Report Card, n.d.). The CCCE's new approach to community-engaged work and the focus on Faribault might have been seen as an implicit critique of some faculty members' previous work. And to some degree, there had been a shift in public consciousness and the Center's thinking about the often extractive relationships between institutions of higher learning and communities, where faculty's academic freedom in designing projects and student learning outcomes were often the primary focuses, rather than impact on and outcomes for community partners. Whose knowledge is valuable and who gets to direct the production of that knowledge are topics reflected in evolving practice, scholarship, and training. For example, leading higher education and community engagement scholar John Saltmarsh (2020) noted,

> Equity, in this context, refers to efforts to resist systemic forms of oppression and cultivate a more equitable world—one that centers democracy as a primary core value and in which everyone has equal opportunity to thrive regardless of their backgrounds and situations. . . Regarding scholarship (like community engaged scholarship), enacting epistemic equity would mean examining and responding to the impact higher education systems have on privileging whose knowledge is valued, what research is legitimized, and who gets to participate in the creation and spread of knowledge. (p. 153)

The emphasis of the grant that we applied for on participatory projects also speaks to this issue. The PAR framework explicitly names not only the importance but also the necessity of collaboration across differences—including academic, experiential, and community-based knowledge systems—for "good" research.

Our Stories

Anita

Looking back at some of the reflective memos I wrote during the first few months of the grant work (December 2018 to May 2019), I realize that I have clearly forgotten some of the specific things I was stressed about! Although we encountered difficulties while working with our community partners (mainly navigating through different understandings about how we were going to recruit members for the community research teams and language differences), the main theme in my reflections was my frustration about the lack of clear communication from the CCCE, which was my main partner at the institution, and my uncertainties around how to navigate power dynamics among staff members as a faculty member, especially as a faculty member of color.

The work on the grant began in March 2018, when Emily contacted me to ask whether I would be interested in being a co-PI for a federal grant focused on PAR with the CCCE director, who was Emily's supervisor

at that time. Although I had initially sent information about the grant to the CCCE, I had no plans to be a co-PI because the project did not need to be focused on education, my area of expertise. I was thrilled when Emily emailed me back to ask if I wanted to be a part of the grant. The PAR framework aligned with where I was arriving as a scholar and researcher. The writing of the grant itself is a bit of a blur—I remember meeting with the three community partners in Faribault who would be a part of the grant, doing a lot of work in shared Google Docs, and then waiting to hear back from the granting agency. We were, of course, successful (otherwise we wouldn't be writing this article!), and the first community research teams were in place by January 2019.

> There's also some tension within the CCCE staff about who's doing what. So far, it seems like everyone's doing everything in some ways! Everyone wants to be included in all meetings, which maybe is the way they have decided to do [this work] . . . it's not really clear to me who's taking on what role. So far, it's been fine. But it would be helpful to know who's planning on doing what. At some point, there does need to be delegation of tasks. It's not like we're all going to be calling the interpreters or the restaurants or whatever. (Chikkatur, Reflective memo, January 9, 2019)

Although the CCCE director was my co-PI and it was 20% of her time that was written into the grant as an "in-kind" contribution from the college, how this work was actually distributed among three of the center's main staff members was much more complicated. Reflecting on these early days together with Emily during the writing process for this article, she was surprised that I was so aware of these dynamics so early on. We both now wish that we had thought to spend time—perhaps even while we were waiting to hear back about the grant—to start to build a more robust relationship between the CCCE staff and me. I also realize now that I might have misunderstood the depth of relationships that the director had with some of our community partners, which was something I was counting on as a base for building robust, reciprocal relationships for the PAR project.

> Honestly, this project would have totally fallen apart if it weren't for Emily, who's been amazing. . . it seems like it falls on Emily a lot to pick up the slack when [others don't] do what they are supposed to do. (Chikkatur, Reflective memo, March 27, 2019)

I absolutely noticed that it was Emily who showed up. She came to most meetings with the student and parent community researchers. She picked up the donuts for our 7 a.m. before-school meetings and the snacks for our after-school meetings. We developed agendas for these meetings together and reflected on how things were going during our commutes to the project site. I came to trust her commitment through her presence and through her determination to ensure that the community researchers had what they needed to do their work. I began to see that, like me, she believed deeply in the central premise of PAR: that those who are most impacted by a problem should be the ones to investigate the problem and generate solutions collectively (Torre, 2009). I started to trust that she was committed to not only supporting the working-class communities of color we were collaborating with but also supporting me as a faculty member of color at a predominantly White institution.

Emily

I recall the exact day I began to feel I could be honest with and trust Anita about the work dynamics of the project. We were in her Honda Fit, late spring of the first year of the project, maybe June, outside a cupcake shop on one of Faribault's broad main drags. We were carpooling after a meeting that had gone well, and there was a feeling of optimism after the messy and confusing first 6 months of the project. The streets there are similar to those of many rural Midwestern mill towns, open and largely empty, save the sparse dots of pickup trucks or people. I told her a story about, when I was relatively new on campus, a large meeting the library had organized to discuss how they could better support faculty public scholarship. In response to a comment I made about collaborating with the CCCE office, a faculty person had snapped, "I don't work for you, you work for me." Many of the other staff who had been in that meeting sent me an email after or stopped me in the hallway to say they were sorry about how rude and dismissive the faculty person had been in a

public forum. Although it felt representative of my early experiences on campus, I had infrequently discussed this moment with other faculty.

After Anita had sent us the grant proposal, I advocated to my supervisor, the CCCE director, that we should suggest to her that she and our office should jointly pursue it. The Center's director and I were united in the belief that, in order to advance our stated mission and values, we needed to support and showcase robust examples of activist scholarship and teaching that addressed structural and system-level issues, rather than episodic and often surface-level civic engagement embedded in courses. We also wanted to build deeper ties in the Faribault community. I was eager to work with Anita because, although we had not significantly collaborated in the past, I deeply admired her perspective, teaching, and scholarship. It echoed the type of activism I had been involved in outside work. Prior to the grant's approval, our office had already been experiencing time scarcity and balancing too many priorities. Despite this reality, I anticipated (naively in retrospect) that acquiring a major federal grant with a faculty person would give our office more license, in the eyes of college administrators, to center our work time on building deeper relationships with communities in Faribault. In fact, the grant application noted that although existing programs through the CCCE and faculty-initiated projects in Faribault "are effective in reducing ongoing educational outcome disparities, they . . . have not yet included the depth of authentic community participation and holistic-need-identification that PAR could help bring about." This framing in the grant, I believed, was a way to legitimize a shift toward fewer but more substantial and longer term community-engagement projects with faculty.

Although college leadership seemed delighted by our successful grant application, there was no discussion about altering faculty expectations on campus for support from our office so that we could successfully focus on this work, which would take vastly more of our time than supporting one-off community-engaged projects in courses. Additionally, because the director—the project's actual co-PI—was drawn away from different responsibilities because of her own complex and contested staff role at the college, I attended nearly all the community meetings in Faribault on her behalf. That first spring, I was mired in confusion about the nature of my responsibilities on the project. Of course, my workload was not reassigned to accommodate this responsibility. Critically, I also did not ask for alterations to my workload because I was afraid I might be taken off the project, which, even in the logistical confusion of the first 6 months, felt starkly different and more meaningful to me than the other work in which our center was engaged. This workload was unsustainable and left me feeling like I was constantly coming up short, which increased my anxiety around Anita and hurt our ability to communicate openly.

The strained working condition of our office was rooted in larger systemic issues of how community engagement offices are positioned on campuses, which we will address in more depth later. But because it was such an important early and lasting lesson of the project for me, I want to note how this project showcased how self-advocacy is an essential skill of ethical PAR and of working across different levels of institutional power or status in general. During the first 6 months of the project, I did resent, as I could tell Anita did, that our office made a commitment to this project, which I saw as so vital, but did not insist on making appropriate space for the work it required. Multiple staff members were working piecemeal on a project that involved deep community building with working-class communities of color who had not previously worked with our college. It felt like trust was at stake. Entering the PAR research team meetings in Faribault, I simultaneously navigated the parallel experiences of internal confusion about my place as a White person in these Somali and Latine community meetings as well as the murky power dynamics between Anita as a faculty member and co-PI and me as a staff person vaguely assigned to support the project.

My commitments to the project were professional and political but also personal. I never experienced the profound weight of daily racism in school that many of the community researchers recounted. But I had been held back a year because of a learning disability and felt marked by failure and shame throughout my public school education. Hearing the community groups, and Anita, envision how educational spaces could support whole students, whole families, and whole communities, was incredibly powerful to me and deepened my sense of

dedication to the project's aims. I did what obviously needed doing: the logistical and administrative work. I took notes, I organized student workers to help out, I did all the paperwork. I came to the meetings with the snacks and materials, ready to help as tasks arose. Handling logistics and consistently participating as a team member, I felt grateful to be able to contribute to the infrastructure needed for the community teams to perform the intellectual labor envisioned by the project, and to listen to the teams' stories and growing agency. In retrospect, hanging back gave both Anita and the research teams time to get to know me. By the time, after the first 6 months of the project, I became the co-PI with Anita (as well as interim director of CCCE), I began to contribute more actively because I felt the community researchers and I had developed relationships. Like the community researchers, I had gained deeper knowledge and practice around participatory action research. Lastly, I came to trust Anita through watching how she lived out the ethos of PAR in practice during the community meetings.

Institutional/Structural Constraints

As we thought about how we wanted to approach this discussion of our partnership as co-PIs on this grant, we both concluded that we were interested and invested in analyzing what got in our way from an institutional and structural perspective. We are cognizant that our shared institutional context is a small college, and it's difficult not to mention some details about individuals. Although we will not name anyone in this essay, people in the context might be able to identify themselves or others. We do want to note that many of the individuals we worked with are no longer in the same positions or at the institution. Nonetheless, as Anita has noted about the experience of writing about her experiences at the institution as a faculty member of color on a co-authored public blog, "Based on principles of anti-racist activism and intergroup dialogue, we were careful to frame our analysis of the interaction as a critique of behavior, discourse, and institutional norms, and not of a person. And yet, our critique was 'heard as personal attacks on reputation' (Ahmed, 2012, p. 50)" (Chikkatur, 2019, p. 73). This essay may yield similar readings and reactions. However, we believe that the lessons we've learned from our partnership about ourselves and our institution are worthwhile enough to share publicly, despite that risk.

Faculty–Staff Relationships

In interactions with faculty members, the power dynamics already established within academic institutions can pose a challenge for staff (Bernhagen & Gravett, 2022; Bessette, 2022; Pollock, 2022; Rosenberg, 2022; Sharpe & Born, 2022; Syno et al., 2019; Verjee, 2012). Administrators often prioritize faculty needs and demands for resource allocation because teaching and research are seen as central to the mission of the college, and staff roles in teaching and research are often neglected. Kuh and Banta (2000) wrote that faculty are often recognized as "first-class" members of universities because they "focus on the core academic tasks of the universities" (p. 5). Although individual faculty members may understand their role differently (and of course, there are hierarchies within faculty based on tenure status, social identities, and other factors), the end result is that faculty are often viewed by administrators and view themselves as the center of the institutional enterprise (Krebs, 2003). Based on this hierarchy, staff members are often exploited at academic institutions in both material ways (e.g., lower pay, different benefits, ability to set work priorities) and affective ways (e.g., staff often have to cater to faculty demands and timelines; staff are expected to perform emotional labor; Bernhagen & Gravett, 2022; Bessette, 2022; Pollock, 2022; Rosenberg, 2022; Sharpe & Born, 2022). These kinds of tensions between staff and faculty are certainly present at Carleton. For example, the results of a 2022 staff survey shared at a faculty meeting included comments from staff who noted concerns about how faculty treated them (A. Chikkatur, personal communication, November 7, 2022); similar concerns have surfaced in every staff survey Anita has been aware of furing her time at Carleton.

Carleton's CCCE had explicit social justice frameworks that supposedly undergirded our work, and we had experienced staff, credentialed in academia. However, for Emily, as the person most directly working with faculty, it was often very unclear if and when she (or even her supervisor, the director) had agency over what projects to focus on and whether it was possible to say no to faculty. The attitude Emily most often encountered from College administrators was that all staff offices needed to both advance their larger goals and mission (i.e., collaboratively seek major grants alongside faculty and serve in key support roles

on big campus initiatives) and be available for whatever project or support any faculty person brought to staff at any time. The roles in CCCE were generally ill defined, oscillating based on the whims of faculty, the CCCE director, and college leadership.

When I (Emily) came into my job as the associate director for "academic civic engagement and scholarship," I was very surprised by the level of skepticism I faced from some faculty, especially in my first year on campus. At the time, I attributed this attitude primarily to the fact that my predecessor had developed the position after a visiting teaching stint in an academic department and had served in it for a decade. She was also an alumna of the college. I, on the other hand, had been initially hired in an interim capacity, was relatively young (29), and had earned my terminal degree in poetry. My supervisor, who hired me, had also been a controversial, external hire herself. In retrospect, however, we would argue that what Emily encountered was not personal but fairly representative of the often fraught power dynamics between faculty and staff at the institution. It is also typical of the kind of conflict experienced by "boundary-spanning" staff at universities in such positions. As Gauntner and Hansman (2017) noted, full-time staff who are employed to develop and manage university–community partnerships often experience role conflict as they have to "deal with potential conflicts between the individual, professional, and institutional agendas of university participants and the community objectives of obtaining and leveraging resources, accessing networks, and increasing perceived legitimacy" (p. 106). Emily worked doggedly to prove herself worthy and capable of upholding the oft-cited culture of rigorous standards at the college, which often involved extraordinarily long weeks.

This difference in status between faculty and staff was also built into the structure of the grant. Anita's time on the project was clearly defined and accounted for in the funding—she was going to teach one fewer course—but staff time on the project was less clearly defined. The grant included an "in-kind" contribution from the college, dedicating 20% of the director's time to the project. However, there were no discussions about what tasks would be removed from the list of the director's responsibilities to make available that kind of time. It also became clear that, in practical terms, the project responsibilities would fall on three staff members, including Emily, and there were few discussions among the staff about how those responsibilities would be distributed. To reiterate our point, there were no discussions at any point while writing the grant or after we got the grant concerning how to reallocate time and responsibilities so staff could spend the necessary time on the grant project. The structuring of this grant makes "sense" in the kind of institutional logic that expects staff to "figure it out" and encourages faculty "to see workers around [them] as there to make [faculty] jobs easier, rather than as fellow employees of a nonprofit corporation with its own corporate culture" (Krebs, 2003, para. 2). There was no priority placed on having honest, hard conversations among the CCCE staff and between Anita and the staff about how to make this partnership work equitably. Much of the literature on faculty–staff relationships, especially when community engagement is also involved, points to the necessity of clear communication around shared goals as well as delineation of roles and responsibilities (Florenthal & Tolstikov-Mast, 2012; Kirschner et al., 1996; Syno et al., 2019; Wangelin, 2019). Although having these discussions would not have erased institutional hierarchies, the PAR framework might have shifted our perspective—and therefore potentially our practices—around power. For example, because PAR "values the power within connections" rather than power over people, these conversations could have helped "rework the boundaries" of our relationships in service of the community researchers and their needs and goals (Lake & Wendland, 2018, p. 22). We do not mean to suggest that this kind of delineation of roles should be dictated or micromanaged by higher level administrators; rather, faculty and staff should be encouraged and provided time to have ongoing conversations about their work together.

Structure of the Community Engagement Center and Its Position Within Institutional Hierarchy

The professionalization of the community engagement field has had particular consequences for the role that staff in community engagement centers often play on campus (Dostilio, 2017). These staff, especially at the leadership level, are often well-credentialed and bring a wealth of experience and expertise to their jobs. As Pollock (2022) noted

about "alt-ac" professionals, "We are awkwardly located at the edges of a rigid status hierarchy, which is itself situated within the larger corporate bureaucratic enterprise that is the contemporary university" (p. 52). Bethman and Longstreet (2013) defined "alt-ac" as

> an umbrella term to refer to full-time non-teaching and non-research positions within higher education. These can be staff or administrative positions, and these positions may (and often do) include teaching and/or research duties, but teaching and research are not the primary focus of the position. (para. 3)

The staff at a community engagement center have more direct interactions and deeper collaborations with faculty than staff in custodial or student residential services. Therefore, the friction of status inequity is more palpable and frequent within these relationships. These professionalized staff also are positioned higher within the hierarchy of staff structures on campus. For example, at Carleton, until fall 2022, hourly paid staff members were not eligible for tuition benefits for their children, whereas faculty and salaried staff were. There is then a kind of "awkwardness," as Pollock (2022) noted, that the salaried staff, especially those who work closely with faculty, have to navigate "in relation to [their] own marginalization and privilege, both within the institution and in our relationships with each other" (p. 68). Emily's role on campus was to direct the portfolio of community-engaged courses and public scholarship and to support and enhance Carleton's faculty community-engaged teaching and research. This work included collaborating with faculty to incorporate community-engaged pedagogy into a class; facilitating meetings between faculty and relevant community partners; designing and implementing regular training around best practices for community-engaged work; visiting classes to set norms with students around ethical community engagement expectations; and helping faculty submit community engagement grants or conference proposals. Before the professionalization of community engagement work at Carleton (and as it still is at other institutions), sustaining or heightening the profile of campus–community engagement might be something an interested faculty person would be provided time to do.

In most fields, people implementing programming or projects often have to follow the dictates of managers or supervisors who have less familiarity with the daily realities of their work. Even when Emily eventually became interim director of the CCCE for 10 months, she was expected to simultaneously maintain her entire associate director portfolio. Because College leadership's experiences were so abstracted from the day-to-day running of the CCCE office and even more so from the deep relational work of the PAR project, their suggestion to provide some relief was to hire a just-graduated fellow who, though extremely bright, was brand new to the workforce. The College included the PAR project in public announcements but continued to press staff labor as a means of maintaining a corporate culture of constant "innovation" and manufactured urgency. This conflict is one of the reasons Emily left her role.

Additionally, there is often a gap in terms of worker agency in higher education institutions, as noted by many researchers (Bernhagen & Gravett, 2022; Bessette, 2022; Pollock, 2022; Rosenberg, 2022; Sharpe & Born, 2022; Syno et al., 2019; Verjee, 2012). At Carleton, for example, one class of workers—faculty and administrators—has a great deal of agency over what projects they choose to take on and their role in them. Their choices may include projects that involve collaboration with another class of workers—staff members who are "alt-ac" professionals—who have limited say over their work portfolio. This gap in agency also made clear to us that Anita, as a tenured faculty member, had more power to shape her work life according to her values, including those embedded in a PAR framework. However, for us to participate in this work together in an ethical way, we both needed some amount of agency. For Anita, having this external grant provided not only material resources but also legitimacy as a scholar that allowed her to make choices about how to spend her time at the institution.

Although the PAR project was a resounding success for the CCCE and the College and their goal of expanding their relationships and connections in Faribault, it did not give Emily even a fractional amount of leverage to shape her work life, compared to Anita. Several other faculty members,

besides Anita, ended up collaborating with community researchers on several separate projects. Community researchers also became involved in CCCE student worker orientations and participated in a regional summit touted as steering Carleton's future community engagement. When negotiating her contract to continue in her position as associate director of the CCCE, Emily asked explicitly to be able to reorganize a minor percentage of her work priorities to focus on fewer and deeper projects with more long-term impact. However, she was told that projects, such as the PAR project, were not part of the role's core responsibilities. In addition to believing that all workers across sectors and roles deserve more agency in determining the boundaries of their evolving work, we think it particularly possible at a small liberal arts college with a billion-dollar endowment to provide more space to staff supporting projects that administrators publicly claim as successes.

Emily's experiences also speak to the deeply horizontal nature of alt-ac positions. In many cases, a staff person in a community engagement role (through collaborative course design, project implementation, conference presentations, grant writing, or cowritten papers) is materially supporting the career advancement of faculty at that institution. However, beyond some increased internal clout and very limited pay raises, few mechanisms within a higher education institution offer the potential to reward staff for their work. In the corporate university, the individual career advancement of tenure-track and tenured faculty members is a central focus of the organization (Krebs, 2003; Kuh & Banta, 2000), and their needs and wants are prioritized. Beside them, however, there are a huge number of academic workers—renewable lecturers, adjuncts, and many alt-ac staff—whose static roles, job precarity, and lack of agency over their workload are positioned in the very same workplace as normal and unchangeable. For these roles, most meaningful professional advancement, such as shifting work responsibilities, is considered outside their relationship with their employer.

In our case, college administrative leadership supported the endeavor to apply jointly to the grant across faculty–staff lines. However, in retrospect, even in these initial phases of planning and approval, our faculty–staff team encountered the incongruities in college administrators' and even grant makers' perceptions of staff labor, which is regarded as both an afterthought and an ever expanding resource to support faculty and college achievement. The limitations of this approach were made clear in the challenges Emily faced in being able to find the time and capacity to work on the PAR project in a thoughtful and meaningful way, without constantly working during evenings and weekends.

Challenging Positional Hierarchies

Most importantly, for this article, one of the norms that got challenged by our work was our relationship as co-PIs across faculty–staff lines. Although the framing of community–college relationships as one where the college "helps" the community was one that impacted the project generally, Anita's involvement with the project was legitimized institutionally in ways that Emily's involvement was not. For example, the grant-funded project was included in a dossier given to potential candidates during the search for the president of the College in 2021; however, it was included in a section that touted the research profile of the college faculty. The prestige of the grant did not matter when Emily tried to negotiate more time in her position for such projects. Throughout our work together, Emily was often positioned by administrators as "helping" Anita, the faculty member, on Anita's project, which was not how we envisioned our partnership (and of course, it also wasn't Anita's research project but that of the community). Gauntner and Hansman (2017) noted that many institutions often employ boundary-spanning staff members to develop and manage community partnerships; these staff often are in the position of having to connect faculty to community partners and to manage potential conflicts between the interests of faculty and the institution and those of community partners. However, in our work, both of us were developing these relationships with community researchers directly, and we both approached the work knowing that we wanted to prioritize community partners' interests and needs.

Conversations around staff agency (and other within-institution power dynamics) are essential to ethical PAR work because the dynamics of the "professional" team impact the overall project. We cannot build transformative research models by exploiting the labor of staff who are exhausted, overworked, and afraid to speak up about

their needs. Obviously, there is the practical reality that staff people will eventually reach their capacity, regardless of how committed they are to the aims of a project. But, more centrally, it is simply not easy for faculty or staff to move between a rigidly hierarchical workplace and a community-based setting where everyone's knowledge is valued. In order to fully commit to the latter, we have to sincerely question and work around the former. Once Emily was able to approach Anita honestly about these dynamics and we could talk frankly about them, she was able to see how staking out her own professional agency (within the constraints of an at-will employee position) furthered her ability to be of service to the project, philosophically and materially. It also made Emily believe in Anita's commitments in a new way that engendered more trust and comradeship, more evidence of how a PAR framework can facilitate change across power differences, even with the "awkwardness" of such hierarchies (Pollock, 2022).

The status of staff as subordinate to faculty impacted the project in multiple ways. It hampered honest dialogue at the onset of the project about how the center staff and Anita would share the responsibilities of collaborating with community researchers. The "awkward" positioning of the staff among themselves—and the complicated interplay of race and gender especially—as well as the position of the director, a woman of color, within the institution, made these relationships difficult to navigate on multiple levels.

Challenging the Norms of Institutional Operations

The few faculty and staff working on community-based research projects at our institution have found humor where we can to relieve the stress. For a time, one of us could say to another, "Gift cards," and both of us would burst out laughing. This phrase had become a shorthand for describing the many challenges we encountered while trying to compensate community researchers and knowledge holders for their work. Until recently, the college did not allow the purchase of gift cards even if external grants permitted it. Many community researchers that we worked with in Faribault lacked bank accounts and email addresses—conveniences preferred by the college's business office. The complex online forms that were required to set up electronic payments were beyond the abilities of some Latine and Somali parent researchers who were not fluent in English.

Although outside the norm in academic settings, these realities are not unusual in communities of color and working-class communities. A recent news article, for example, noted, "According to the F.D.I.C., one in 19 U.S. households had no bank account in 2019, amounting to more than seven million families. Compared with white families, Black and Hispanic families were nearly five times as likely to lack a bank account" (Desmond, 2023, para. 35). The grant specified that the bulk of the funding should be for the community, and we both valued that aspect of its structure, but it took work to ensure that existing institutional processes and practices supported that focus. Emily bore the brunt of the extensive institutional and logistical work necessary to ensure that, for example, all community researchers got paid. We both decided that this division of labor would ensure that the people of color working on the grant, which included nearly all of the community researchers and Anita, had the time and space to focus on the work on research and advocacy. We also were very aware of the power hierarchy between faculty and staff, so we decided to have Emily field those interstaff conversations initially as one way to acknowledge and not exacerbate such power differentials. We do not attribute the difficulties we encountered in carrying out the goals of the grant to college staff's resistance to working more effectively with working-class communities of color. Instead, we see them as stemming from these staff being overworked and overwhelmed themselves, without having clear directives about how to do their work differently to account for class, language, and cultural differences.

Although receiving large external grants adds to the prestige of the institution, it is unclear to us how these grants are used to increase staff capacity, especially among hourly paid staff who work 9-to-5 jobs on campus. College administrators at the highest levels follow a career path from faculty roles; consequently, we wonder if they fully understand the dynamics and structure of hourly staff positions. The difficulties we encountered also arose from a lack of understanding on campus about the principles and ethics of PAR projects. For example, in the first year of the grant, we were told to classify the community researchers as "independent contractors" for

the college. This classification both violated the principles of PAR—these researchers were not doing work for the college—and required onerous amounts of paperwork. At the end of the first year, we met with the relevant offices and came to an agreement that the community researchers would be paid honorariums instead—akin to how guest speakers or external tenure reviewers get paid on campus—which both came closer to the spirit of the grant and meant less paperwork. However, these kinds of negotiations are ongoing because of a lack of larger structural changes to core institutional operating processes.

Why We Could Build a More Robust Relationship of Trust Despite These Constraints

To sincerely believe in the principles of PAR and in its power as a framework means that collaborators should not begin when experiencing strain, exhaustion, and confusion. It is a disservice to the slow, messy, and iterative nature of this type of work, which centers building relationships with people with honesty and presence. Building trust requires not only time but headspace. On that day, in Anita's car, Emily reflected on this notion and shared her frustration about how unclear her role was on the project. Emily and Anita had already been friendly, but it was on these grounds—of this shared commitment to this project and to a PAR ethos—that their work relationship became more open and deeper. As time went on, we were able to enact more explicitly these principles between ourselves. This deeper understanding, of course, served the project as well.

For us, the framework of PAR became a shared guide not only for our work with our community partners but also between the two of us. It gave us a concrete set of values to try and live out in our work together; as noted earlier, it is vital that faculty and staff discuss and develop shared values for on-campus and community collaborations (Bryant & Craft, 2010; Syno et al., 2019; Task Force on Faculty/Staff Partnership, 1999). We believed in making space for community researchers by prioritizing support for them, which was what kept us going, especially in those first few months of high uncertainty and tension among the CCCE staff and between Anita and the Center staff. We both shared a vision of what reciprocal community–college relationships could look like while being realistic about the limitations of our institutional context. We agree wholeheartedly with K. Kim Holder's characterization of academia:

> The reality is that you cannot look to an institution that is based in the capitalist system and expect it to work towards [its] destruction. . . Let's not fool ourselves . . . I do not speak for the masses. I try to provide material and avenues for them to be heard . . . and we do have tools that we can bring back to the community, but what it doesn't address is that the community has the answers a lot better than academia has the answers. And what they need is the space and some of the tools we have in order to do that. What they have . . . is the culture of resistance. (Briond & Ware, 2023, 29:05-31:06)

When we applied for the grant, we did not know how much time it would take to work with four different community research teams, and we on the Carleton team did not know each other that well either. I (Anita) knew the director the best among the CCCE staff, but we had not collaborated on a project. I did not know her working style, she didn't know mine, and the same was true with Emily and the other CCCE staff members. Emily and I were so focused on ensuring that we were doing "right" by the community researchers that we perhaps neglected being just as purposeful about building our relationships with each other on the Carleton end. However, as the two of us watched the community research teams build on each other's strengths and stories, we came to see the value of spending some of our meeting times building a relationship with each other, which allowed us to be more honest with each other about the experiences we had at our institution. This kind of relationship building also was made easier the second year when Emily became the official co-PI for the grant.

Additionally, as the community research teams in Faribault began to assert their own power and agency in situations where they faced conditions of far greater disempowerment and alienation and higher stakes, Emily could not help but feel that her own hesitancy around advocating for herself at the institution was increasingly ridiculous. In retrospect, she wonders if she could have better used the vagaries of her position and

office to take more time on the project and create a reasonable workload for herself sooner. College administrators are rarely going to actively make space for a staff person to embark on projects that are countercultural to the institution. Eventually, Emily took the time the project needed (while still being careful to make sure all other operational duties were covered). It is hard to determine whether the changes around this time were primarily rooted in this philosophical revelation or an actual (though limited) change in her structural power at the College because the project's other co-PI unexpectedly left the College, and Emily became both project co-PI and interim director of the Center. But once in that position, she did, for example, limit the additional faculty activities the office supported and tried to maintain somewhat reasonable work hours. Having the community as our main concern helped both of us shift our priorities and, importantly, these shifts helped make our jobs more fulfilling, joyful, and meaningful.

Part of this joy and meaning came from our deepening relationship with each other. We learned that we had things in common other than our shared institutional context, including being involved in racial justice organizing projects outside our jobs. And we want to make it clear that although we do enjoy each other's company as friends, our working relationship was primarily built on our shared principles and commitment to the work we were doing and wanted to do with our community partners. In her discussion about mutual comradeship, Burden-Stelly (2018) echoed our experience: It was our shared expectations for each other about the kind of values and priorities we wanted to embody in the grant project and our shared political vision around community self-determination and resource redistribution that solidified our relationship. This kind of relationship building also allowed us to become allies for each other in the institutional context: Anita felt she could share more openly about her experiences as a woman of color on campus with Emily, and Emily felt she could share more openly her experiences as a staff member with Anita. Anita's experiences as a faculty member of color at Carleton had led her to have a skeptical view of the institution, which meant that she was open to the critiques that Emily offered from a staff perspective and to using her power as a tenured faculty member when she could to support Emily at the institution. We learned to be more comfortable with the messiness and uncertainties of what it means to do work with/in communities and with each other. We understand that it may seem like it was yet another burden for Anita as a faculty member of color to spend time supporting a White staff member, but our immersion within the PAR framework helped us understand the complicated way that institutional power intersects with social identities and positionality. For Anita, her relationship with Emily only deepened her knowledge and commitment to questioning hierarchies within and between institutions, and she remains grateful for what she learned from Emily and their collaboration. Additionally, as Anita has noted elsewhere in more detail (Chikkatur, 2022), the collaboration with community researchers of color was so important to her own sense of well-being and purpose as a woman of color in a predominantly White institution, and this work would have been impossible without Emily's commitments and contributions.

We want to emphasize that building this relationship across differences does not mean that we are always perfect allies or even that we are now always able to see beyond our perspectives. In fact, a recent conversation with a friend, who is a staff member at a different institution in a position similar to Emily's, made this point abundantly clear to Anita. The friend and Anita had both recently read Community as Rebellion, a book written by a Latinx studies professor about her experiences being denied tenure at Harvard (García Peña, 2022). When discussing this book, the friend pointed out that the faculty member did not mention much about the professional staff of color at Harvard; the absence of this perspective never even occurred to Anita as she was reading it! But what this interaction reiterated for Anita is the importance of building relationships across differences within and outside institutions so that we can have honest conversations and become aware of our limited perspectives.

Lessons Learned

In this final section, we want to explicate some of the lessons we learned in working together as well as in our ongoing reflections on this work during and after the official period of being co-PIs that we believe will be useful for other faculty and staff in higher education institutions wanting to collaborate on community-centered work.

Putting Aside Our Egos and Insecurities

Working with community researchers within a PAR framework meant that those of us from Carleton—regardless of our personal, social identities—needed to approach the work from a perspective that understood our limitations in this context. Although we did have tools and resources available to support the work of the community researchers, they were the experts in their local context. This acknowledgment of community expertise sometimes means literally stepping back and not taking up space within meetings with community partners, a move that can be particularly difficult for faculty or staff, who may not be as fully acknowledged or respected for their expertise and experiences in their campus contexts because of their race, gender, sexuality, or job status. For example, in a discussion of how critical race feminism can support a more transformative vision for community engagement, Verjee (2012) wrote, "The day-to-day reality for women of colour in the academy involves overcoming hurdles, constantly having to negotiate the institutional landscape, mediating confrontations, and fighting to survive a relentless onslaught of racialized microaggressions" (p. 59). Even as the two of us acknowledged and understood that we were not always accorded the respect or recognition we expected and that our institutional experiences often fed into our insecurities, we both believed in the necessity of setting aside our egos and institutional traumas to center community needs and expertise in our work on this project.

We need to be pretty secure in our identities and positionalities to perform this work. The principles of PAR let us create a new imaginative space with each other, despite the power dynamics, because we would lay bare these dynamics. The community research teams were a quicker study in how to accomplish this work because they had each other and the collective thinking of their group. It took us longer to subvert the expectations we had inherited from our institutional context. Witnessing the belief in the power of community among the parent and student researchers in Faribault led us to understand that we need to build community and solidarity between the two of us across institutional hierarchies.

Learning Together to Be Allies for Each Other Across Differences

The difference in structural power between Anita and Emily was made clear over and over in their dealings with institutional actors at Carleton College on behalf of the project. For example, Emily would ask several times about a matter with the administrative office processing the paychecks for community researchers and get noncommittal answers. When Anita intervened, because of her faculty role, there was often at least the appearance of urgency through the arrangement of meetings with departmental leaders and so forth. Staff across the institution were aware that if they were not seen as responsive to faculty requests, they could face negative consequences or reprimand.

However, as she became more versed in the PAR frameworks of the project, Emily uncovered another type of power that involved invoking interstaff solidarity. Sometimes, Emily was able to get actual traction on a project task by first acknowledging shared conditions. She would start by saying something like, "From my work in the CCCE, I know how hard it is to manage complex requests from faculty that are outside your typical job description and how totally understaffed all our offices are in general." Although this move positioned Anita as yet another faculty person making a difficult request without appreciating the constraints on office workers, Emily could sometimes successfully navigate the interpersonal, institutional space of Carleton using this tactic. This tactic had practical utility but also helped Emily bring back a small fragment of the ethos of PAR to their hierarchical work context. In the same way, as Emily reflected earlier, that it was initially hard to shake off the power dynamics of faculty and staff even in the community research space, as the project progressed, the inverse was also true. As Anita and Emily's relationship became more authentic and open and rooted in mutual comradeship, it illuminated what was possible interpersonally between colleagues, despite institutional norms. This realization bled into Emily's relationships with other faculty at the college and allowed her to approach her position with less apprehension. This change continued to be fostered by the ongoing dialogue and conversation about both the project and the power dynamics at Carleton. Emily experienced the space we made for her reflections and realities as an impactful act of solidarity by Anita. It was an example of taking PAR ethos to heart to embody holistic project leadership, even though it took time and energy.

We want to end here because this point is an especially important reflection for those with structural power in higher education engaging in community-based work, including PAR projects, and especially when such work involves deep collaboration between faculty and staff. The two of us certainly did not figure it all out, and we did not do everything perfectly. We did try our best together to make a bit more space in our work with each other to accommodate the messiness and unpredictability of community-based work, especially when approached from a PAR perspective, by trying to pay attention to power and to build relationships from a position of solidarity. Making space for all parties involved in a project to reflect on their work experience and relational power is fundamental to honoring the ethics and ethos of PAR, one that institutions of higher education, funders, and tenured faculty must take seriously in the kinds of structures we create for equitable, reciprocal university–community partnerships.

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