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The Symbiotic Relationship Between Grant Writing and Community-Engaged Scholarship

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Abstract

When integrated effectively, community engagement principles can enhance capacity and broaden impacts for community-engaged scholars seeking and writing grants. Viewed through the lens of a participatory framework that emphasizes the importance of mutual recognition, humility, and relationship-building in community-driven work, a grant development process that advocates for early and intentional community partner engagement, highlighting the benefits of cocreating solutions and building trust, begins to address concerns of historically extractive research and resulting mistrust toward higher education institutions, particularly among vulnerable communities. Although this approach requires greater intentionality, time, and even systemic changes at the institutional level, the authors propose that community-engaged grant writing can be ethical, beneficial, and conducive to genuine community impact, challenging traditional academic structures and promoting collaborative, reciprocal relationships between scholars, practitioners, and community partners.

Keywords: community engagement, grant writing, grant funding, participatory action, engaged scholarship

For community-engaged scholars and practitioners, strengthening and investing in the communities they serve is a priority. It is well understood that simply disseminating evidence-based information is not enough; the critical services most needed by communities must also have robust and sustainable funding. It's no surprise, then, that many of these professionals have to develop—concurrently—skills in public engagement and grant writing. However, these competencies are not typically learned in an integrated and complementary fashion. Below we suggest opportunities for effective integration.

Grant writing and public engagement—also known as community engagement—share overlapping principles and processes that can help enhance capacity and broaden impacts. Additionally, effective grant writing and proposal development are often bolstered through effective community engagement practices, and vice versa. This article compares grant writing and public engagement approaches, outlines the benefits of each, and makes the case for the integration of concepts into everyday approaches for boundary spanners and other change agents.

Community Engagement

Community and public engagement trace their roots to several well-known theories from psychology and the social sciences, including Kurt Lewin's (1943) approach to social and behavioral change via field theory. Lewin (1942) stressed the importance of starting "with a characterization of the situation as a whole" (p. 63), rather than cherry-picking isolated elements that paint only a limited picture.

Lewin's original work paved the way for the development of action research (Lewin, 1944/1999), which is based on the voluntary and equitable participation of all stakeholders using an iterative and democratic decision-making process and highlights the

importance of elevating community voices (Louder et al., 2023). Of note is the cyclical nature of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting that establishes a reciprocal environment for both learning and knowledge generation among university and community partners, shared ownership of the research, and cocreated and jointly implemented locally based solutions to real-world problems (Call-Cummings et al., 2023; Glassman et al., 2013; Kemmis, 2011).

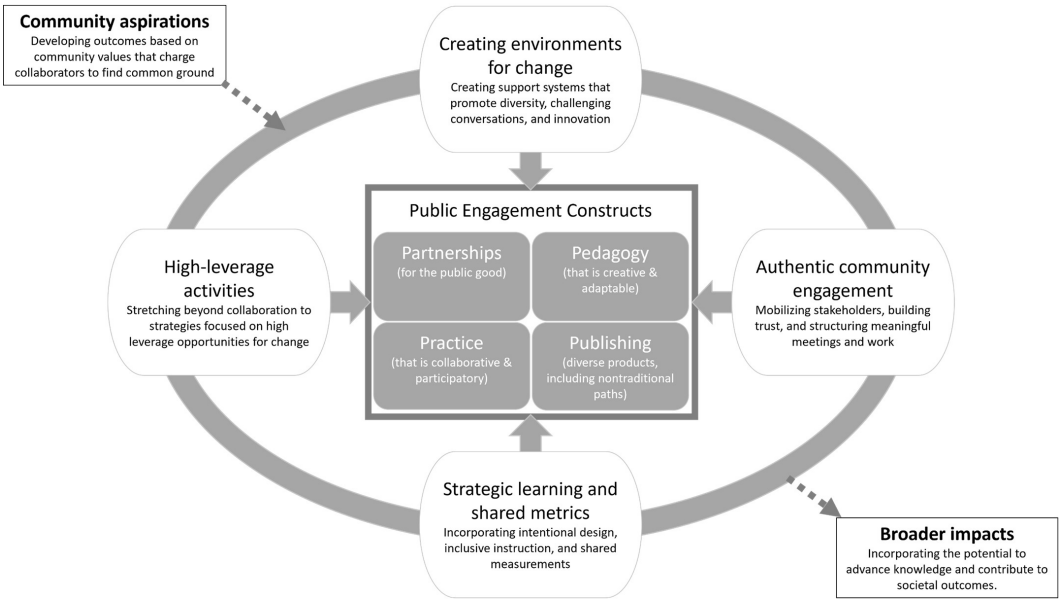
Evolving from action research are community-based participatory research (Hacker, 2013) and critical participatory inquiry (Call-Cummings et al., 2023), which challenge researchers to approach their community-driven work from a lens of mutual recognition and humility that is relationship driven, fosters collaborative and equitable partnerships, empowers and shares power, and builds capacity for all. Building upon these foundational principles, engaging the public for the respectful and meaningful integration of community needs into scholarly activities has many common elements, such as the following:

- Intentional integration of community values, concerns, and assets when identifying the problem to solve and research questions to ask (Doberneck et al., 2010);
- Expertise and learning processes shared in formal and informal settings to identify problems and develop solutions (Vines, 2018);
- Attention to appropriate research design, evidence-based methodology, and relevant translation and application of knowledge (Doberneck et al., 2010);
- Commitment that all aspects of the process are for the public good (Call-Cummings et al., 2023).

A recent framework (Denny, 2024) developed for Oregon State University illustrates the complex nature of public engagement that accounts for and integrates the needs of community partners into the process of community-engaged scholarship (Figure 1).

It is important to note that engagement of the public in community-engaged scholarship occurs on a continuum, from simple and transactional to complex and highly involved. The type and degree of engagement depends on several variables, including the range of community and institutional values

Figure 1. Framework for the Scholarship of Public Engagement, Showing the Integration of Community Partner Needs With Community-Engaged Scholarship



Note. From *OSU Public Engagement Framework* by M. D. Denny, 2024, Oregon State University (https://engagement.oregonstate.edu/osu-public-engagement-framework).

that need to be understood and respected. Understanding this continuum and approaching each community from a place of understanding and respect increases the likelihood of success when working with external partners (London et al., 2020).

A history of extractive or exploitative research (Gaudry, 2011; Kouritzin & Nakagawa, 2018) undertaken by universities, coupled with deep sociopolitical divides, has resulted in a negative reputation for place-based research among communities. Action-oriented projects that adopt appropriately defined research ethics and are tailored to the target communities, however, have successfully engaged communities (Kouritzin & Nakagawa, 2018). This participatory approach to cocreating solutions places value on the process as much as the outcomes, and in doing so it empowers communities and builds capacity.

Effective engagement processes enhance community members' abilities to mediate conflicts, represent their interests, manage resources sustainably, and build community assets (Menzies & Butler, 2021). Unfortunately, most researchers fail to engage participants beyond data collection (Vacchelli, 2021). Applying an engagement framework and ethical research best practices as early as the research ideation and grant-writing stage has the potential to establish creative participatory approaches where participants are coproducers of knowledge, ensuring trust and safe spaces for sharing experiences.

This approach is supported by federal funders such as the National Science Foundation, who recently sponsored a series of virtual workshops to equip principal investigators of research teams with the mindsets, tools, and techniques that will give them the skills and abilities needed to lead large-scale scientific enterprises that address critical questions (Leap to Large, 2021). In one workshop, presenters encouraged scholars to use a stakeholder alignment model that emphasizes demonstrating empathy with their community partners to build trust and understand their needs, concerns, and assets. Working from a place of empathy allows all partners to develop a shared understanding of the issue, the confounding variables, and even a common language and shared measures of success. When everyone is on the same page, codeveloping value propositions, shared aspirations, and shared goals for the project will be easier. Higher education and community partners need not share identical goals, values, and aspirations; community engagement can occur as long as they are not in direct competition.

Grant Development Best Practices

The process of developing grant proposals has a lot in common with community-engaged scholarship. In recent years, sponsors have increased their focus on the need to solve society's grand problems. In doing so they have emphasized the importance of projects that meaningfully engage communities and positively impact society. Recently this concern has been reinforced by the 2024 revision to the Federal Uniform Guidance, which "encourage(s) applicants to engage, when practicable, during the design phase, members of the community that will benefit from or be impacted by a program" (Guidance for Federal Financial Assistance, 2024). To address this increased emphasis on meaningful community engagement, grant applicants need to work with community partners at the ideation stage to identify community-driven needs prior to proposal preparation. Like communities themselves, grant-funding opportunities are unique, each one requiring many considerations and multifaceted care. We suggest that utilizing the public engagement framework (Denny, 2024) and ethical research practices in the development and execution of a grant's life cycle will result in the outcomes sought by funders and enhance a community's agency to create sustainable change.

The grant life cycle starts with ideation, teaming, and the identification of a funding opportunity, leading to the development of a draft project or program idea. Through the proposal preparation and submission process, this idea is refined into one that is capable of being executed and evaluated. If funded, the project moves into the award and management stages during which the project is refined and carried out through the collection and evaluation of data, and/or through the delivery and evaluation of a program. Upon project completion the grant award is closed out and project results are disseminated (Flannigan-Lewis, 2019; Hacker, 2013). The grant life cycle requires perseverance and dedication. Like community engagement, the execution of this cycle demonstrates "the project's intention to survive and succeed" (Carroll et al., 2003, para. 5). A well-executed grant proj-

ect should lead to continued collaborations and sustainable contributions for both the scholar and the community partners.

Taking a deeper look at this process, one of the best practices of grant writing is starting early. Grant deadlines can be imposing and applications are often rushed, so the best proposal development happens when teams start early in the process. Often grant seekers submit proposals as a reaction to a specific funding opportunity. However, a more effective approach is to identify a project first and then look for appropriate funding sources (Carroll et al., 2003). Project leaders need to anticipate many components when conducting grant writing for community-engaged scholarship, including

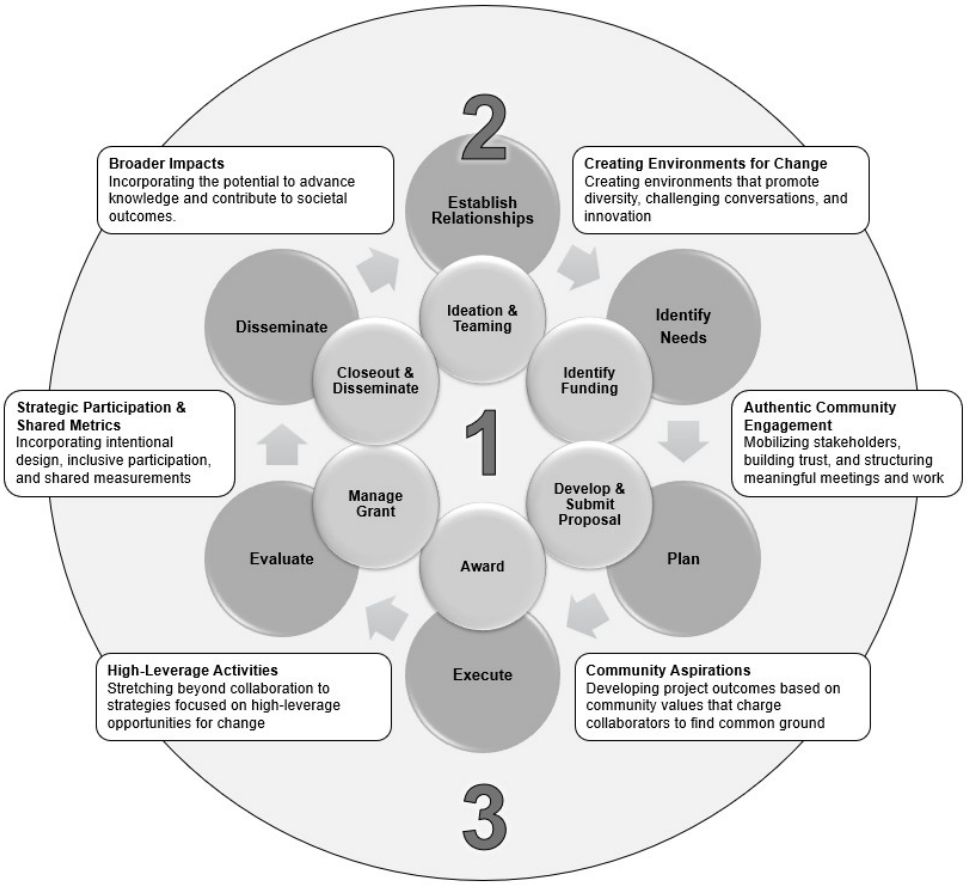
- What community will be impacted by this work?
- Who are your collaborators and community partners?
- Who within the community can help you build relationships and establish trust?
- How will the community be ethically engaged to identify a community-driven need that aligns with the scholarly work and the funder's goals? (Hacker, 2013).

Once a funding opportunity is identified, the project lead also needs to consider the opening and closing dates of the opportunity and who will help with putting together the application. Merging the community engagement and grant-writing processes takes time and a team. Engaging with your communities and grant-writing teams early will ensure they are ready to go when you request their contributions (Carroll et al., 2003). Developing processes based on the integrated framework (Figure 2) will help your team members, whether the grant-writing team or the community partners, identify their aspirations and values and establish common ground early in the process. We suggest the best time to begin this process is before the funding opportunity is announced. Providing forums for community input early will help create a sustainable system of support and provide team members the opportunity to give input throughout and beyond the life cycle of the grant.

One example is a tool developed by Purdue University and adopted by Oregon State University, the proposal enhancement process (Angima et al., 2014). This model provides early identification of community needs through pre- and postassessment actions that can help grant writers write strong proposals relevant to their communities. This process also empowers the community to assess the risks and benefits of the proposed scholarly activity and allows scholars to incorporate community-driven insights and concerns into the project plan (Call-Cummings et al., 2023; Hacker, 2013). Using this process to collaboratively set expectations early will lead the way to authentic engagement throughout the life of the project and for future partnerships with the community. The intentional sharing of power between community partners and scholars will help all partners feel empowered to cocreate new knowledge and meaningful long-term change for the community (Call-Cummings et al., 2023).

How do grant seekers apply such a process to ensure fit between the funder's goals, the project idea, and the needs of a community? Write a summary of the project early in the process based on the information gathered using the proposal enhancement process (Angima et al., 2014). Even a short paragraph about the proposal concept will help you communicate with your team, interested parties from the community, and your leadership. A short summary will be easily digestible and will open up conversations that lead to colearning, open dialogue, and equal involvement across all partners in the project. As you share your summary, ask your team, leadership, and other interested parties for input. Getting their input will help assure all partners on the project that their voices are being heard early in the process and that their interests will be met as you move forward. This input can be gained through conversations with individuals, small groups, or open community forums. This process will help you establish authentic community engagement and cocreate trust. Fostering these conversations will also help the project lead understand the relevance of their work to the community (Hughes & Ledbetter, 2009). Presenting this relevancy in the proposal will demonstrate to grant reviewers that your project is mutually beneficial to both the scholarship and community needs. Incorporating community input will provide opportunities for colearning and cocreation and allow grant-writing teams and community partners to intentionally design projects with shared metrics benefiting all parties.

Figure 2. A Public Engagement Framework Incorporating the Grant Life Cycle and Community-Engaged Scholarship Life Cycle



Note. (1) The grant life cycle (Flannigan-Lewis, 2019). (2) The life cycle of community-engaged scholarship (Call-Cummings et al., 2023; Glassman et al., 2013; Hacker, 2013; Kemmis, 2011; Vines, 2018). (3) A public engagement framework supporting and enhancing these processes (Denny, 2024).

The next steps in the grant development cycle will further community engagement. A team of scholars and their community partners can begin by reviewing grant proposal guidelines to determine how their project's goals will align with the funder's goals. Through this process, they will identify documents that need to be completed and develop a timeline with benchmarks and allocated responsibilities for the development of the grant proposal. This cocreation of a set of shared metrics for the completion of the grant application will help everyone on the team recognize that all involved bring knowledge and value (Call-Cummings et al., 2023; Marshall et al., 2006). As the next step, collaboratively setting recurring meetings will combine opportunities for iterative feedback, promoting shared ownership and empowering everyone on the team to mutual accountability and a high level of caring (Eigenbrode et al., 2017).

Building mutual recognition can be furthered through the collaborative development of grant documents that promote conversations about each team member's roles, responsibilities, values, and principles. Some critical documents to this conversation are the grant budget, letters of commitment, project plans, management plans, and memorandums of understanding (MOUs; Eigenbrode et al., 2017; Hacker, 2013). A precise and reasonable budget will help build credibility into your proposal (Marshall et al., 2006) and will help your collaborators see themselves in the pro-

posed project by recognizing the skills and expertise that they bring. Securing letters of support and/or MOUs formalizes agreements and creates transparent communication about expectations (Hacker, 2013). Working together to determine project tasks and evaluation methods will help your community partners see how their values are recognized by the project and how the results of the project will be given back to the community to help implement meaningful change (Call-Cummings et al., 2023; Hacker, 2013). Finally, a management plan will help create methods for establishing a team culture that reflects mutual values and principles while defining each team member's roles and responsibilities (Eigenbrode et al., 2017).

The process of collaboratively submitting a grant proposal can enhance capacity and broaden impacts for change agent practitioners from academia and community organizations. By using the above methods to collaboratively create a grant proposal, change agents can bolster effective community engagement practices and actively avoid harm to vulnerable individuals within the community. These steps ensure that whether or not the grant is funded, strong collaborations are built, leading to meaningful future work that respects and benefits all with a vested interest in the community.

To ensure sustained community change, closing the grant cycle loop does not mean researchers should cease engaging with communities. A single, positive engagement experience between universities and communities can strengthen trust and confidence, but it is only the beginning. Subsequent meaningful engagements, through continued networking and maintained relationships, can help both communities and researchers build capacity and foster opportunities for continued collaboration by identifying new needs, embarking on new projects, and pursuing more grant funding and other mechanisms for sustainability (Vines, 2018). Consider involving key community leaders on advisory boards or project workgroups as a way to maintain connection, solicit feedback for continuous improvement, and stay grounded in the criticality of community-driven, community-engaged scholarship.

Conclusion

Gaudry (2011) described the "extraction model of research" as a process whereby scholars enter marginalized communities to gather information and report back to institutions, often without involving the communities in the research process or following up with them. When this happens, communities have no role in shaping the project's scope or validating the findings (Corntassel & Gaudry, 2014). Additionally, it overlooks local knowledge and cultural protocols, leading to a lack of commitment to the communities affected by the research; it also results in skepticism and barriers to future engagement. This extraction model of research sees the community as subjects. However, ethical community-engaged scholarship must go a step further and see the community as people with their own values and knowledge to contribute.

The extractive approach can also infect the grant development process, which is why integrating community engagement best practices throughout the entire grant life cycle is critical. For grant writing to be ethical and beneficial, communities should have ample opportunities to provide consent and be involved throughout the process, not simply during the implementation and/or evaluation phases of the project. True consent requires trust-building, empowering the community with ownership of the decision-making process, and revisiting the community participants' understanding and consent throughout the scholarship process. Thorough engagement for the community includes contributing to the project analysis and outcomes and ensuring that the results lead to tangible benefits for the community. Community members should contribute ideas and engage in analysis through community reflection, providing input into how the request for consent is developed and implemented. Privacy, confidentiality, and protection of vulnerable groups must be carefully considered and discussed with the community. They should have an equal say in how data is created; who controls and owns it; and how, when, and whether it is translated, shared, and used. All steps of the data process should be transparent and allow the community to be involved in discussions on how this process evolves (Call-Cummings et al., 2023; Hacker, 2013). The community also should be given the chance to use the data to make decisions that will create meaningful change for the vulnerable populations they may represent. The collaborative development of a grant application provides one method through which community-engaged scholars can

facilitate these transparent trust-building conversations.

Those of us in higher education who are involved in community-engaged work are referred to as change agents or boundary spanners, and we pride ourselves on working collaboratively with communities outside academia on issues relevant to their interests and well-being. Yet more often than not, there is a misalignment between academic structures and the creation of true community impact. Constraints such as time and promotion criteria—in particular for early-career faculty—can stifle the community engagement cycle. So, at the end of the day, are we genuinely engaging communities when writing grants for community-engaged projects, or are we simply taking the path of least resistance?

In the context of an increasing expectation for grant awardees to engage with the community at the design phase of a project and demonstrate broader societal impacts for funded projects, there is clear alignment of principles between public engagement and the grant-writing process. Scholars, practitioners, and community partners must work together to create collaborative, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial projects. Applying an engagement framework to ethical research best practices at the point of ideation and grant writing will ensure that participants are coproducers of knowledge, creating trust and safe spaces for sharing experiences and implementing meaningful social change.

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