

Community Partner Perspectives on Cocreating Strong Relationships With Universities

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Abstract

University researchers have defined characteristics of “successful” university–community partnerships. However, few frameworks center community partner perspectives, or examine the relationship between university and community partners as the point of analysis. We, team members from a community–based organization (CBO) and a university, ask: What conditions cocreate strong relationships? We distill literature–derived principles that contribute to strong partnerships, then use these principles to inform guided discussions among our partnership group. Our CBO coauthors highlighted three priorities from the literature as critical to strong relationships: aligning values, building trust, and honoring capacity. Further, CBO coauthors identified embodying reciprocity and acknowledging positionality as core, standalone principles. We discuss how centering these priorities can strengthen broader institutional relationships between CBO partners and universities.

Keywords: community perspectives, community–university partnerships, academic and community partnership, community engagement in higher education, community–institutional relationships



Long-term and persisting friction between community needs and academic incentives for research creates challenging partnership contexts. Indeed, community members, especially from historically minoritized communities, have reported a “legacy of negative experiences with university–based research,” often describing these partnerships as “irrelevant, burdensome, extractive, and even exploitative” (London et al., 2018, p. 175). The harm is that research conducted *about* communities without meaningful engagement *with* communities misrepresents and renders invisible the most important perspectives in the research process (Littman et al., 2021; Wallerstein et al., 2019). Under these circumstances, community members are rightfully wary of “partnerships” when participation in the “generation of knowledge” does not serve their community. Indeed, poor relationships can result in harm for communities (Strier, 2014).

With awareness of these challenges and tensions, scholars have put forth frameworks to guide the priorities and outcomes of university–community partnerships (Fitzgerald et al., 2010; Isler & Corbie-Smith, 2012; Lavery et al., 2010). The majority of these frameworks center the perspective of university partners and prioritize “outcomes” of engaged work (i.e., generating results more relevant to community members) as the marker of a successful partnership (Pasick et al., 2010). We seek to deepen understanding of the conditions that facilitate strong relationships between university and community–based organization (CBO) actors, especially from the perspective of CBO partners.

Here, we situate our work within scholarship that does center community partner perspectives on these collaborations (Chinekezi et al., 2023; Leiderman et al., 2002; Méndez et al., 2017; Oster & Lightning, 2022; Park et al., 2026; Pillard

Reynolds, 2014; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Williamson et al., 2020). Although these studies each center the perspectives of community partners, they generally do so by asking community partners to describe and reflect on their experiences collaborating with the university. Williamson et al. (2020) explored community partner perspectives within community-based participatory research (CBPR). One of their central findings was that the practices identified by their community partners largely aligned with the core principles articulated in university-defined CBPR literature. Pillard Reynolds (2014) offered an important contribution to what constitutes an “outcome” of an international service-learning collaboration, specifically asking how community partners perceived outcomes of these partnerships. She found that community partner perspectives extend beyond the “tangible” outcomes (e.g., improved access to clean water) often emphasized by university partners. Leiderman et al. (2002), in collaboration with 21 leaders from community organizations engaged in university partnerships, investigated the practices that facilitate university–community collaborations and “the rules and norms that influence the nature of community/campus collaboration” (p. 4).

Collectively, this body of scholarship demonstrates an ongoing effort to center community partner perspectives in disentangling university–community engagement dynamics. We situate our contribution within this work, introducing a different approach to collaborative knowledge production. Although our findings greatly affirm those of these studies, we add to these insights by using a novel approach in which the nature of community partners’ engagement process differs significantly. Rather than asking community partners only to describe or evaluate their partnership experiences, we use a synthesis of existing community partner priorities as the foundation for generative discussion and cocreation. Rather than post hoc analysis in which the research team contrasts the community partner perspectives with existing academic frameworks, in this article community partners themselves analyze partner-derived frameworks, collaboratively interpreting, refining, and expanding them. This dialogic approach positions our coauthors as collaborators in refining partnership theory, moving beyond validating existing principles and

toward the codevelopment of a nuanced understanding of relational practices that sustain collaboration.

A common metric in assessing the quality of a partnership is the extent to which it is perceived by partners as “short-term transactional” versus “long-term transformational” (Sandy & Holland, 2006). Whereas transactional relationships include short-term exchanges that result in net positive outcomes, where benefits exceed costs, transformational relationships include benefits and opportunities for growth, like questioning established norms, taking on complex roles, and potentially being changed by the relationship (Kniffin et al., 2020). Levkoe et al. (2016) argued that either partnership orientation can achieve transformative change if the partnership is reciprocal, including that partners are able to be reflexive about their processes, engage in ongoing communication, and remain flexible. We align with this view of partnerships and embrace the focus on reciprocity and relationality.

To that end, our project aimed to distill principles that help to foster strong relationships between university and community partners by drawing on both literature and reflexive conversations about these principles within our own university–community partnership. Our team includes CBO staff from the Community Action Board of Santa Cruz County, Inc. (CAB) and graduate students, postdocs, and faculty associated with the Center for Reimagining Leadership (CRL) at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC). CAB is a designated Community Action Agency whose mission is to partner with the community to eliminate poverty. CAB serves over 10,000 diverse low-income individuals annually, including Spanish-speaking and Indigenous-language-speaking communities. CRL is a UCSC center that aims to amplify the research excellence of historically underrepresented scholars, including by building opportunities for meaningful partnerships with community organizations.

In coanalyzing literature-informed principles as a partnership team, we were able to surface nuances in how these priorities are understood and enacted, exploring what these abstract principles look like when situated within specific community contexts, and which concrete practices and relational processes bring them to life. CAB’s unique expertise, drawing from decades of

knowledge navigating partnerships across institutions, governments, and community organizations, illuminates critical gaps in the academic literature about what it means to center relationships from a community partner perspective. We discuss how our findings can be applied to deepen relationships through everyday partnership interactions and the implications of these priorities for institutional practice.

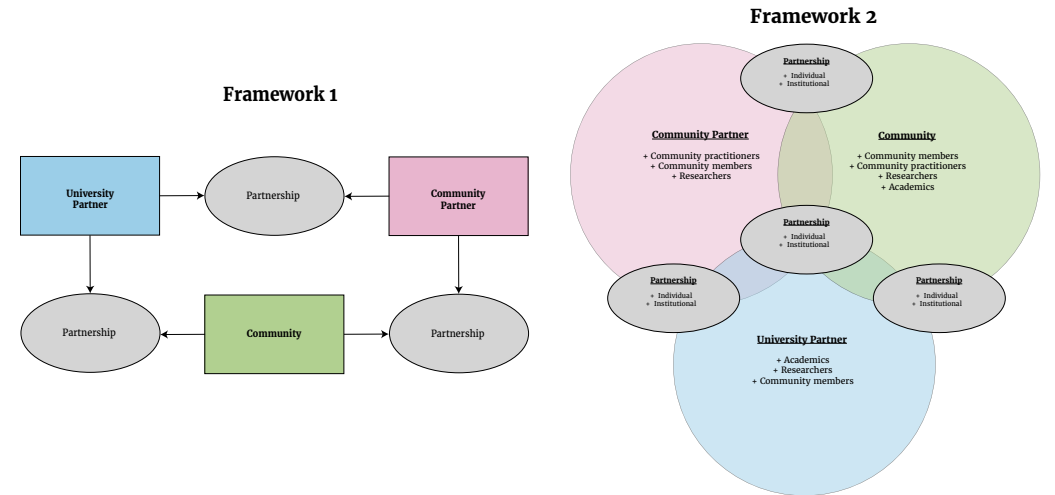
What Are University–Community Partnerships?

There are diverse types of university–community partnerships (see Appendix A). Much of the traditional literature about university–community partnerships casts the “university partner” and “community partner” as two siloed roles coming together for a project, then returning to their separate camps—a framing noted and critiqued by scholars (DiEnno et al., 2024; Fransman et al., 2021). Within the siloed framework, and as illustrated in Figure 1, Framework 1, the university partner comprises “academics” and “researchers,” whereas the community partner includes “community practitioners,” who serve a third group, the “community.” The community can be understood as “groups of people who are affiliated by geographic proximity, special interests, or similar situations with respect to issues affecting their wellbeing” (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 1997, p. 9). Some literature treats “community partner” as

synonymous with “community,” assuming that their interests always align or that the “community” represents a unified monolith. These rigid boundaries minimize the mutual and diverse affiliations and roles that any given member might hold within a partnership (e.g., community members might identify as researchers).

More recent scholarship, where we situate our own perspective, adopts a more fluid model and explores overlapping identities, relationality, and power-sharing (DiEnno et al., 2024; Fransman et al., 2021; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). We build on Strier (2014), who argued that the “interrelatedness of collaboration and conflict” are “formative and generative aspects” of partnership. We consider that the challenges (and opportunities for transformative justice) associated with university–community partnerships stem from the intersections of identities, priorities, and lived experiences spanning universities, community partners, and communities. As put forward in Figure 1, Framework 2, we understand partnerships as consisting of overlapping and shifting roles and responsibilities among diverse partners that can span individual and institutional scales (see also Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Soska & Butterfield, 2004; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). These overlaps and shifts occur as a result of the dynamic nature of these relationships, thus our focus on relational features and conditions that support growing partnerships.

Figure 1. Axes of Partnerships



Note. Framework 1 illustrates partnership occurring as a collaboration between siloed entities of (1) university and community, (2) community partner and community, or (3) university partner, community partner, and community. Framework 2 demonstrates partnership occurring at the intersections of communities, community partners, and university partners, members of whom may identify with any other group.

Distilling Partnership Principles From the Literature: Community Partner Perspectives on University- CBO Partnerships

To understand existing best practices for building strong relationships in community-university partnerships, the UCSC coauthors first reviewed the relevant literature. We used Google Scholar and Google web search, using search terms identified in Figure 2. These terms were generated from different types of university-CBO partnerships (see Appendix A). We included literature published in peer-reviewed journals and public-facing outlets (e.g., university collaboration guidelines on the websites of community partner organizations) to include broader perspectives. During the review process, we identified recurring priorities that contribute to strong partnerships. When we reached the point where no additional sources were introducing new partnership priorities, we considered this theoretical saturation (Saunders et al., 2018). This process resulted in an examination of 50 papers or websites as the foundation of our analysis.

We further narrowed our scope of analysis based on five selection criteria. First, our inclusion criteria required that materials be authored by community partners or focus on the perspectives of community partners (e.g., through interviews). Second, because our aim is to build on existing frameworks and think systematically about how partnerships can be enhanced, we included sources that detailed specific frameworks or

lessons learned. Third, we included sources published 2004–2024 to reflect a shift in the literature toward partner perspectives in the last two decades. Fourth, as we approached saturation, new items were included only if they contributed new ideas or novel practices to our set of priorities. This procedure allowed us to include fields as diverse as health equity (CBPR; $n = 4$), service-learning (multidisciplinary; $n = 3$), environmental justice (EJ; $n = 3$; one agroecology, one sustainable food systems, and one EJ in general), social work (PAR; $n = 1$), and justice-oriented community-engaged research (broadly; $n = 1$). This process yielded 11 papers and one CBO website for a total of 12 sources.

We then coded these 12 sources, to better understand what community partners prioritize as the important metrics of university-community partnerships. We started with inductive coding, constructing an initial list of codes related to partnership priorities (Charmaz, 2008). We then compared these codes against all 12 sources, marking the presence of identified codes within the other sources. From this process, we identified eight priorities, each present in at least four frameworks, that community partners identified as core components of partnership: (1) building trust, (2) aligning values, (3) clarifying expectations, (4) honoring capacity, (5) sustaining the partnership financially, (6) focusing community leadership, (7) committing to social change, and (8) centering community-based knowledge. Table 1 summarizes these community-driven principles; we define each and provide examples from the 12 sources to illustrate their meanings.

Figure 2. Search Terms

The primary search terms included

[“university” OR “academic”] AND [“community partnerships” OR “community engagement”]

OR

[“participatory action research”] OR [“service-learning”] OR [“community engaged research”]

AND

[“best practices” OR “framework” OR “recommendations” OR “principles” OR “guidelines” OR “lessons learned” OR “community perspectives”]

Reviewing the University–Community Partnership Principles With CAB

We then expanded upon the distilled principles through guided discussions (described below) between CAB and CRL partners. The evolving relationship, which we detail next, shaped our methodological approach and interpretative method.

Partnership Between CAB and CRL

This article was inspired by CRL’s efforts to support our early-career faculty fellows, most of whom are scholars of color, in

building community partnerships. A precondition for strong engagement involving diverse scholars is a sustained effort to transform the current university culture by advocating for the creation of a culturally fluent community of scholars that reflects the values of the local sphere we inhabit. CRL creates programs that work toward this goal by building communities where minoritized scholars belong and thrive.

CAB is uniquely positioned to inform this inquiry with a long history of partnerships created to serve their community members through advocacy, essential services, and other resources. Building on this history,

Table 1. Literature-Derived Priorities for University–Community Partnerships

Priority	Identifying the code	Examples from the literature
1. Aligning values	We identified instances of “aligning values” as the degree to which collaborator values, priorities, and goals are compatible.	• Grounding goals and methodologies in questions most important to the community involved, ensuring “goodness of fit” (Darling et al., 2015) and the creation of meaningful results (Williamson et al., 2020) • Moving away from prioritizing academic outputs or isolated programs and, rather, prioritizing long-term partnerships that reflect community priorities (Sandy & Holland, 2006)
2. Building trust	We identified instances related to “building trust” as referring to participants’ expressions of comfort, shared values, accountability, reliability, and degree of confidence (or lack thereof) in other people, projects, and institutions.	• Nurturing the relationship on which the partnership is founded (Sandy & Holland, 2006) • Seeing the relationship as not time- or product-bound, valuing the partnership beyond a specific project (Chinekezi et al., 2023; Oster & Lightning, 2022; Sandy & Holland, 2006) • Demonstrating accountability by following up words with action (Méndez et al., 2017)
3. Clarifying expectations	We identified themes of “clarifying expectations” as instances related to the importance of defining expectations, roles, and responsibilities.	• Clearly communicating partnership expectations before a project begins, with ongoing communication about whether expectations are being met (Levkoe et al., 2016; Rinaldo et al., 2022) • Defining roles and responsibilities, often through tools like a Memorandum of Agreement outlining principles of collaboration, mechanisms of accountability, logistics such as project timelines, and compensation (Little Village Environmental Justice Organization, 2024) • Both communicating and understanding when flexibility is needed (Sandy & Holland, 2006)
4. Honoring capacity	We identified “honoring capacity” as instances regarding setting collaboration boundaries, respecting capacity, and discussing limitations.	• Transparency about and respect for the unique strengths and capacities of each partner (Williamson et al., 2020), as well as limitations, biases, goals, funding, and desired outcomes for the collaboration (Chinekezi et al., 2023) • Respecting community partner operations as the priority over new research or project demands (Darling et al., 2015)

Priority	Identifying the code	Examples from the literature
5. Sustaining the partnership financially	We identified themes of “sustaining the partnership financially” from mentions of financial compensation at the individual level for collaborative work accomplished, and the necessity for funding at the project or institutional level to sustain the projects and organizations involved.	- Considering familiarity with a community as a position of expertise that should be recognized with financial compensation (Darling et al., 2015) - Being transparent about project fundraising and being open to connecting partnership organizations to additional funding opportunities (Little Village Environmental Justice Organization, 2024)
6. Focusing community leadership	We identified themes of “focusing community leadership” from instances prioritizing community participation and influence over the project process and outcomes of collaboration.	- Initiating and designing projects through collaborative processes, where all partners contribute to as many phases as possible, coplanning and training, designing research questions, conducting methods, and engaging in coproduced, actionable solutions (Little Village Environmental Justice Organization, 2024; Méndez et al., 2017; Sandy & Holland, 2006) - Seeking community-led ownership of project outcomes, including intellectual property rights and control over research findings (Oster & Lightning, 2022)
7. Committing to social change	We identified “committing to social change” as instances discussing a desire for a larger, long-term, justice-oriented impact that extends beyond one project or organization.	- Community partners are motivated by collaborations that exhibit a “belief in collective power” (Méndez et al., 2017) and “a true and honest desire to help” (Williamson et al., 2020) - In the service-learning context, Worrall (2007) found CBOs often engage in partnerships with the expectation that student service learners will use their experiences to challenge injustice and contribute to broader systemic change in the future; their perspective reflects a long-term commitment to creating change through their belief in the impact of educating future decision-makers
8. Centering community-based knowledge	We identified the priority of “centering community-based knowledge” through instances discussing how knowledge is created and whose knowledge is valued.	- Demonstrating respect for and valuing all forms of knowledge involves prioritizing knowledge from lived experience (Littman et al., 2021), listening to those closest to injustice (Chinekezi et al., 2023), making space to explore multiple worldviews and ways of knowing (Oster & Lightning, 2022), and amplifying traditionally marginalized perspectives (Méndez et al., 2017) - Centering community-based knowledge acknowledges historical epistemic power dynamics and recognizes community-based knowledge as extremely rigorous (Levkoe et al., 2016)

CAB’s expertise was critical to this research.

CRL and CAB have been building a relationship for approximately two years. Formalized elements began with an invitation to CAB’s executive director and co-author MariaElena De La Garza to speak at a CRL event at UCSC, and have evolved to include various collaborations, including a joint position (coauthor Sidney Madsen is a UCSC postdoc and CAB staff member), CAB connecting a CRL fellow with important

community leaders for a K–12 science outreach project, and, most recently, a collaboration on a project to train community leaders in climate justice organizing and outreach. The informal elements have been equally important, as the partnership has been driven centrally by relationship building, not outputs. Informal activities have included sharing meals, stargazing at the Lick Observatory, and attending a party to celebrate the 60th birthdays of both CAB and CAB executive director and coauthor

MariaElena De La Garza.

Our process was facilitated by this foundation of informal, but intentional, relationship-building before considering research. We ultimately pursued this project in response to stories of partnership mistakes, with a view toward ensuring we did not repeat past mistakes in our efforts to further build our partnership, and in hopes of supporting future researchers interested in fostering relationships with CBOs. CRL secured IRB approval for this project. Though IRB processes introduce a level of formality into the relationship, they also help us to reflect on our shared responsibilities for the project, prioritizing how to reduce risk of harm to CBO partners.

We recognize that it is difficult to engage in a partnership without a defined outcome and focus on shared values as the starting point for a relationship within the current incentive structures set up in the university, which typically reward outputs over processes. Yet, drawing on the work of adrienne maree brown (2017), CAB and CRL believe that when we begin to practice new ways of being in relation to one another, “what we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system,” catalyzing systemic change (p. 57). Our collaboration is thus uniquely suited to expand on existing partnership models because both partners are committed to learning about and practicing these approaches together, with a view toward long-term systemic change. Given this motive, we wanted to better understand if/how centering relationships, rather than predefined outputs, could contribute to stronger long-term partnerships with CBOs for universities.

Our Approach: Guided Discussions

The UCSC coauthors designed two guided discussions with our CBO coauthors to explore and expand upon the literature-informed set of principles outlined in Table 1. We took an informal, conversational approach, akin to the focus on “everyday talk,” mutual sharing, and ongoing reflexivity commonly found in talking methodologies (e.g., see everyday talk; Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015). We intentionally centered relational elements, such as being in community over a meal and choosing locations that were meaningful (i.e., through celebrating family/elders or by traveling to locations that signaled gratitude for CBO time spent on the project). Both meetings were semistruc-

tured in that questions were preidentified by the UCSC team, but we honored organic conversation shifts and followed the lead of CBO partners when they invited alternative discussion topics.

We adopted a practice of shared facilitation, ensuring participation and codirection from all members. For example, a CBO partner redirected a prompted question to the university partners in the room, reframing roles in the research space. In other moments, more experienced partners paused to invite newer voices, asking, “What are your thoughts?” Although all participants contributed to the discussions, our results focus on CAB perspectives, in line with our goal to center community partner perspectives.

The first guided discussion took place in September 2024 over lunch at a restaurant near the CAB offices in Watsonville, California, which was long owned by the family of a CAB coauthor. The conversation focused on the topic of collaborations. The second guided conversation took place 4 months later (in January 2025) at the CAB offices over dinner from a local restaurant. In this conversation we summarized insights from the first conversation, and collectively reviewed and refined the distilled principles from the literature (Table 1). Following these discussions, the UCSC coauthors revised the principles, incorporating new elements emphasized by CAB. All members iteratively edited the principles until satisfied with the final product.

Several components enhanced the methodological rigor and trustworthiness of our approach. We engaged in three forms of triangulation to improve the credibility of our findings (Patton, 1999). First, we relied on multiple investigators to read, discuss, and cross-check one another’s understandings of the data, leaving room for multiple interpretations and engaging in ongoing reflexive discussions around our assumptions (see investigator triangulation; Adler, 2022). Second, in sharing our synthesis of the literature and summary of the grounded conversations with CAB partners, we engaged in a form of member checking where community partners provided feedback on how our meaning-making (mis)aligned with their own perspectives (Adler, 2022). Finally, in studying and synthesizing across various theoretical perspectives and frameworks, we employed theoretical triangulation to our analysis and sense-making of the

grounded discussions (Patton, 1999).

First Guided Discussion

We began the first guided discussion by asking CAB what they look for in potential partnerships. CAB shared key questions they consider when deciding whether to enter a new collaboration:

1. Does the partnership align with CAB's values and mission?
2. Is the partnership going to help the community that CAB serves? And conversely, might the project harm the community?
3. What can CAB offer? For example, does the project align with CAB's expertise and capacity?

These considerations led to discussion about CAB's experiences with strong and challenging partnerships. CAB highlighted difficulties when collaborators sought their involvement in projects with fixed visions or rigid timelines, using CAB as a resource rather than a codeveloper. In contrast, CAB described strong partnerships as those built on mutual understanding and respect, and highlighted the value of developing a relationship beyond the work itself. Finally, the conversation shifted into discussion about CAB's mission and commitment to community-driven action. CAB highlighted community organizing and responsiveness to community needs as central to their operation, emphasizing the challenge of reaching those furthest from essential systems, such as health care and education, and CAB's role in advocating for these communities. Reflecting on their own relationship to their work, CAB coauthors expressed that "being at CAB is not just a job, it's a mission—it's a mindset." They noted how their strongest relationships are those with partners who share this dedication to community work.

Second Guided Discussion

During the second guided discussion, UCSC coauthors summarized key findings from the first discussion and invited CAB coauthors to expand or refine them. The team then discussed the eight principles identified in Table 1. CAB coauthors were invited to respond to the following open-ended questions:

1. How have the priorities reflected in the literature-derived set of priorities emerged (or not) in your own collaborations? What would you change or add as

important practices?

2. In past partnerships, how have you felt (or not felt) valued and respected by your collaborators?
3. How could university partnerships be improved, drawing from your other types of partnerships with CBOs, foundations, and so on?

CAB coauthors particularly emphasized three priorities as foundational to strong relationships: (1) aligning values, (2) building trust, and (3) honoring capacity. They further underscored that two principles—practicing reciprocity and acknowledging positionality—are integrated within other principles in the literature but are so central to strong partnerships that they should be identified as core principles (see Table 2). Reciprocity and positionality are both prevalent concepts in the university–community partnership literature but were not included in our initial list of eight partnership priorities. Although we focused our analysis on literature examining university–CBO partnerships, there are also parallel bodies of literature, such as that on Indigenous methodologies, that center principles of reciprocity and positionality (Denzin et al., 2008; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Kurtz, 2013; McGregor & Marker, 2018; Porsanger, 2004; Simon et al., 2023). We acknowledge and honor those contributions and explore their meaning in the context of university–CBO partnerships, adapting these ideas to our own partnership experiences.

CAB Perspectives on Literature-Derived Priorities for Partnerships

Overall, CAB coauthors affirmed that the eight priorities summarized in Table 1 function as essential building blocks for meaningful collaborations. CAB emphasized the importance of aligning values, building trust, and honoring capacity; thus, we focus our attention on these three priorities. In the following sections, we use our guided discussions and two examples of CAB partnerships (see Appendices B and C) to illustrate these priorities in practice. The quotes presented in the following material, unless otherwise attributed, occurred during our guided discussions.

Aligning Values

CAB is a mission-based organization, so the most decisive factor underlying the decision for CAB to form a collaboration is whether

Table 2. CAB-Informed Refinements to Partnership Priorities

Priority	Explanation
Literature-derived priorities	
1. Aligning values	Ensuring partnership values and goals are mutually compatible and rooted in community priorities.
2. Building trust	Establishing and maintaining relationships based on shared accountability and mutual respect beyond one collaboration.
3. Clarifying expectations	Clarifying and agreeing on roles, responsibilities, and goals.
4. Honoring capacity	Communicating, respecting, and planning around the strengths and limitations of all partners.
5. Sustaining the partnership financially	Securing equitable compensation for individuals and ensuring adequate funding to support long-term, impactful partnerships.
6. Focusing community leadership	Prioritizing community-driven decision-making, leadership, and ownership throughout the collaborative process.
7. Committing to social change	Contributing to long-term, justice-oriented transformation beyond individual projects.
8. Centering community-based knowledge	Subverting traditional epistemic hierarchies, centering community-based knowledge rooted in lived experience.
CAB-informed additional priorities	
9. Embodying reciprocity	Inviting and empowering each partner to give what they can to the partnership.
10. Acknowledging positionality	Recognizing and openly discussing how identities, from the individual to the institutional level, and related power dynamics, shape relationships.

the proposed partnership aligns with their mission to serve their community:

Our service areas and our mission—to me that’s the foundation. Are we aligned, is this serving our mission, or is this distracting us . . . is this going to serve the mission of our agency and impact the community in a positive way? That’s it. Everything else is “what do we have the capacity for?”

CAB seeks alignment with their collaborators through demonstrated shared values and respect for CAB’s ongoing work. They assess whether the outcomes of the proposed collaboration support their mission, which is to serve CAB’s community—low-income residents of Santa Cruz and Monterey counties. If a proposed collaboration serves university students but not CAB’s community, it lacks mission alignment:

It’s not just about the student experience, which we [do] value, but that’s not the primary outcome for the community-based organization.

When researchers approach CAB with a pre-defined, inflexible agenda and timeline, CAB struggles to align the project with the needs of the community they serve. CAB contrasted negative experiences of those who “parachute in and out” with an example of successful, highly aligned collaboration. This story illuminated a fundamental step in creating mission alignment with university partners, namely active listening:

He [a university professor] came to us [CAB’s physical office] like you do. . . . He didn’t bring in a project and dump it, we had conversations about the questions we need answers to. . . . [His partnership] helped us build stories and

narratives, impacting the systems that ultimately help support resources for our work. . . . Because of how he worked with us to frame the narrative of one of our programs, then the system, the county funding decision-makers, were able to hear the story in a different way . . . and we were able to get funding.

When partners asked and listened to what questions CAB needs answered, the project was more likely to reflect the priorities of the community CAB serves. However, in CAB's experience, this curiosity about what CAB needs is frequently missing in partners' preexisting agendas or assumptions about community needs:

For example, we have a sponsor who's funding us for something, but they come with an agenda, and they want to check their box. And when we talk to them about what it is we actually need and what the families need, what the clients need, they're not really all that interested. There's one thing that they want to do instead of being flexible and open to seeing what the needs are and hearing from us. The way they talk to us is super top down.

Moreover, value alignment for CAB is critical not only with collaborators, but also when determining funding sources for their organization. Alignment requires careful ethical considerations, as CAB has had a practice of not accepting funding from sources whose operations ultimately harm the community they serve

Building Trust

Beyond mutual mission alignment, CAB views their best partnerships as the ones "where you can rely on one another" and trust one another beyond the immediate project. CAB coauthors described examples of partnership proposals in which potential collaborators asked for exactly the same project commitments, but in some cases the collaboration never worked out because "the relationship component was missing." Thus, the trust component sometimes determines the future of a partnership even more than on-paper project demands. Collaborative relationships founded on trust enable partners to navigate challenges when they inevitably come up, whereas without that foundation, obstacles can derail the project:

When we deal with hiccups and that relationship is there, we can get through them, because we rely on that foundation: the relationship.

In trusted relationships, each partner is aware of and supportive of the evolving needs of their collaborator. For example, CAB described their trusted relationship with the CEO of a foundation and how the foundation's response after a disaster demonstrated their ability to anticipate the needs of CAB and their community:

Sometimes we'll end up calling them but sometimes they'll call us. They'll ask, what do you need? Especially when we were so overwhelmed. I love that. That awareness that this [disaster] is probably impacting your community, let me just reach out, let me just see how you're doing. Do you have any needs and what can we do? What can we do together?

CAB described trusted relationships as ones in which they can "just check in and the other partner would do the same for you." They emphasized the need to solidify a partnership beyond a Memorandum of Understanding and beyond compensation, through an ongoing "dance" that builds on itself over time and beyond the timeline of one project.

Furthermore, trust fosters an openness to embracing friction as a necessary growth component of cocreation. In trusted partnerships, there is space to challenge ideas and introduce new perspectives. Welcoming friction demonstrates respect between partners by valuing their contributions as meaningful even when they are different.

You might be part of a partnership, and you may have some truth to tell that may not be supporting the way things are headed. Does that partnership value those that have different things to say? Challenging things to say? . . . Is there space for that? To me that makes a huge difference.

Honoring Capacity

CAB coauthors emphasized honoring capacity as a critical component of trust-building. They appreciate partners who are sensitive to CAB's workload, who understand the need

for flexibility as a reality of community-based work, and who recognize a “seasonality of change” in partnership work. For instance, they described being overloaded at the end of the year, thus requesting to move our second guided discussion for this article from December to January. Further, honoring capacity includes demonstrating respect for CAB’s existing, ongoing work and adapting projects to fit the scope of CAB’s mission instead of prioritizing new ideas. CAB described difficulty working with partners who lack this understanding:

We have to understand the need for flexibility in this work—if it’s community work, it needs flexibility. We need to pivot, and that is hard, but it is a requirement of the work we do.

In addition to respecting CAB’s capacity, collaborators must also be mindful of their own capacity, carrying out their commitments to move the collaboration forward.

Priorities at Different Partnership Levels: Reciprocity and Positionality

CAB’s experiences demonstrate that partnership priorities matter at different scales, from the individual to institutional level. The individual level involves relationships between individuals with a view toward building trust for longer term collaboration. Such relationships could be achieved formally (i.e., through project-based work or attending one another’s events) or informally (through sharing meals, etc.), or a combination of both. The institutional level encompasses broader partnerships between universities and communities or community organizations, shifting from individual projects to institutionalized structures, practices, policies, and commitments.

CAB recognized that some of their partners worked at institutions with larger barriers to embodying the outlined partnership priorities than others. For instance, partnerships involving individuals from a teaching-focused university with a service-learning program were facilitated by overlapping institutional mission alignment. The service-learning program was synergistic: Interns gained professional experience at CAB, and their skill set was appropriate to support the nonprofit’s work. In contrast, although individuals at a research-intensive university may share aspects of CAB’s service-oriented mission,

their institution’s research-focused mission was less closely aligned. However, even at a research-intensive university, CAB coauthors recognized the role of programs such as CRL in creating more supportive conditions for individual partnerships, and a path toward stronger partnerships at the institutional scale.

CAB coauthors considered mutual recognition of the institutional contexts surrounding individual relationships a key partnership strength, as an individual’s partnership work is embedded within the supports or constraints of their institution. Those individuals who embodied the partnership principles in their relationships with CAB, even when their institution did not, were repeatedly distinguished by CAB. However, CAB perspectives suggested that, although some individual partnerships with academics at research-intensive universities met their partnership priorities, institutional-level partnerships did not, in large part because they did not exist. CAB expressed frustration with the number of requests for collaboration they have received from faculty based at the same university: “When we get approached by different entities at this university, folks there don’t seem to know what other folks at their institution are doing.” Although individual faculty involved in this example may be seeking to establish partnerships that align with CAB’s mission, this effort is constrained by the lack of institutional structures for coordinating university–CBO partnerships. Referencing CAB’s institutional partnership with that university, which lacked such structures, a CAB member said, “We need bones for the partnership; there are no bones yet.”

In the following section we describe two priorities that emerged as central to CAB’s approach to fostering strong relationships—embodying reciprocity and acknowledging positionality—and discuss how these priorities emerge across both individual and institutional scales. Importantly, these priorities were not explicitly captured in our codes from the literature review, revealing how a partner-centered methodology nuances and extends literature in this area.

Reciprocity

In the best university relationships, CAB emphasized that benefits of any partnership were not one-sided, but instead comprised reciprocal exchanges of knowledge, services, or career support, and were key to healthy

partnerships at individual and institutional levels. As a CAB coauthor expressed, these offerings were not transactional, but rather were based on a shared commitment that “everyone brings what they can to the relationship.” For the community partner, “bringing what they can to the relationship” involves accommodating not only the limits of existing capacity, as described earlier, but also the positive capacity for CBOs to contribute institutional knowledge and skill sets that support novel forms of academic collaboration.

We adapt Kolm & Ythier’s (2006) definition of reciprocity in this context: “Reciprocity is treating others as they treat you, because [of a shared mutual respect] and not as the result of some agreed upon or expected exchange” (p. 376). We add that reciprocity includes recognizing each partner’s unique strengths and actively creating opportunities to catalyze those strengths. For example, CAB described how a relationship with a professor evolved over time, from a project that addressed a specific need to his position on the advisory board for a CAB program. A key moment that solidified that relationship was the professor asking CAB for a letter of support for a tenure review. This mutual benefit is part of the “dance” that builds trust between partners by demonstrating respect for each partner’s respective contribution. At each step, partners gave time, resources, and expertise appropriate to the situation without the expectation that these contributions would immediately yield some return.

At the institutional level, CAB saw the university’s strength as offering education—a tool for improving employment opportunities and social mobility—yet they saw little evidence of the university employing this strength to support CAB’s work of poverty reduction. Despite being less than 20 miles away, few youth from CAB’s community attended the university or saw the university as a possibility. A CAB coauthor shared, “There is the gap. The university is not serving our community. It is not a vision for our families, our clients, our parents, our kids.” The lack of participation from CAB’s community in the university is a significant loss for the university and a missed opportunity to learn from those students’ perspectives, both academically and through their contributions to the university community.

Higher education could also develop a skilled hiring pool for nonprofit staff positions, yet

the university had cut programs, such as Community Studies, that prepared students for these positions. By failing to provide its most relevant contribution—higher education—to antipoverty efforts in the community, the university was not effectively practicing reciprocity.

Positionality

CAB coauthors stressed that positionality must be explicitly acknowledged and discussed between collaborators, as positionality shapes how we relate to one another and our work. Positionality influences relationships at individual levels and at the institutional level—in how the institutions that partners represent shape power dynamics, both present and historical. How we engage with positionality determines whether our partnerships are grounded in mutual respect or reproduce deeply embedded inequalities.

CAB coauthors discussed how positionality shapes how they feel respected or devalued by collaborators. One coauthor reflected on a moment when she was invited to be present, but was not heard, and her voice as a woman of color was completely dismissed. Her verbal contribution was ignored until it was repeated by a White man in the room. This dismissal of her perspective demonstrated a lack of value for her contributions and lack of respect for her person, and effectively ended the relationship. As the coauthor shared,

I knew I was the token in the room for so many reasons. And I accepted the responsibility of being the token in the room. . . . But being invited to be in the room and not being acknowledged or my contribution not being acknowledged until the White man in the room said it, to me that severed the relationship . . . the valuing part is what keeps me there or not—if my contributions matter.

In contrast, CAB coauthors emphasized that leaders of color have a certain understanding of shared experiences that creates common ground on which to build the kinds of relationships that form strong partnerships.

I think people of color understand it [respect] better, there’s something there. There’s an understanding where leaders of color have a shared experience, that respect doesn’t have to be earned in the same way.

I don't have to prove myself to you, and you don't have to prove yourself to me.

Recognition of the institutional backdrop of individual partnerships was also central to this theme. Indeed, the positionality of individual academics was considered particularly important because of their larger institutional context at a historically White, elite university.

If the representatives of that White institution on the hill come as White representatives of that institution on the hill and all that that means, that's a different experience.

The positionality of the university-affiliated partners, their institution's positionality, and the individual's awareness of these positions shape the partnership dynamics and the terms on which equitable cocreation can occur. Most universities are predominantly White institutions; this reality affects the partnership context.

Finally, CAB coauthors additionally discussed the need for their partners to understand CAB's position in the context of the diverse community they serve. One coauthor described an instance when they were treated by a university partner as an "ambassador" for the community involved in a project, when they do not identify as a part of that community. A researcher made a false assumption about lived experiences of the CAB staff member. In addition to making the CAB staff member uncomfortable, the mistake revealed the researcher's lack of awareness of positionality. This incident reinforces our concept in Figure 1 (Axes of Partnerships), where we discuss how some researchers treat "community partner" as synonymous with "community," disregarding the unique positionalities of each individual, and treating "community" as a monolith. Explicitly acknowledging and understanding positionality is a step toward avoiding this kind of mistake that damages the relationship.

Discussion

Many robust frameworks outlining guidelines and principles for partnership exist (Levkoe et al., 2016; Littman et al., 2021; London et al., 2022; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Williamson et al., 2020). Several of these works synthesize best practices based on

the perspectives and standpoints of academic researchers (Fitzgerald et al., 2010; Pasick et al., 2010); others center the perspectives of CBOs by interviewing them or inviting them to coauthor these frameworks (Oster & Lightning, 2022; Rinaldo et al., 2022; Worrall, 2007). Beginning from these insights, we sought to build dialogue about this robust literature as academic and CBO partners to develop a deeper understanding of the conditions that facilitate strong relationships. CAB partners expressed excitement about this approach, sharing that in their 30+ years partnering with the university, they had never received such an invitation to discuss scholarly literature as a reference point for collaboration.

Indeed, published research on the insights gained from coanalyzing synthesized partnership literature with community partners does not yet exist to our knowledge. The principles that emerged as priorities for CAB are well-documented in literature, including the importance of building trust, aligning values, and honoring capacity (e.g., Darling et al., 2015; Fitzgerald et al., 2010; Levkoe et al., 2016; London et al., 2022; Rinaldo et al., 2022; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Williamson et al., 2020; Worrall, 2007). At the same time, these priorities are discussed and interpreted differently across partnerships and partners, so defining them together is critical to working toward them. For example, embodying reciprocity and acknowledging positionality are central to participatory action research (PAR; Littman et al., 2021; Maiter et al., 2008; Ochocka et al., 2010; Robertson, 2000) and Indigenous (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; McGregor & Marker, 2018) methodologies but less commonly practiced (or understood differently) in service-learning and engaged STEM fields. Delaine et al. (2024) noted that in engineering contexts, reciprocity is not frequently a priority in service-learning and community engagement (SLCE) literature. Coding for elements of reciprocity in engineering SLCE publications, they found "generally exploitative" areas included how power relations were addressed, the treatment of knowledge, the structuring of relationships, and elements related to community, with harmful dynamics highlighting a lack of attention to positionality.

Similarly, Hammersley (2012) built on scholars (Oldfield, 2008; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009) who critiqued the "myth of mutual

benefit” promoted in service-learning literature, attributing unsubstantiated claims of reciprocity to limited inclusion of community partner voices. Ultimately, Hammersley argued that service-learning partnerships would be significantly strengthened by integrating principles from PAR and other decolonizing methods—methods that often embody more nuanced understandings of reciprocity and positionality. When reciprocity does appear outside Indigenous and PAR methodologies, reciprocal practices may be framed in transactional terms around mutual benefit—what Knight (2022) called “thin reciprocity.” McGregor and Marker (2018) observed that Western frameworks of reciprocity tend to emphasize self-interest, exchange, and “the ethos that it is ultimately undesirable to be dependent on or responsible to others” (p. 322). In contrast to “exchange,” Dostilio et al. (2012) described “generativity” as the most transformative orientation to reciprocity, where partners cocreate knowledge and outcomes that neither could produce alone, transforming individual ways of knowing and being. Generativity is what Knight (2022) would term “thick” reciprocity and aligns closely with the values expressed by CAB coauthors—an orientation to partnership as a process of equity-based coconstruction. These examples demonstrate the necessity and value of engaging in deliberate, collaborative processes, like the methodology we used, to iteratively redefine partnership priorities that, while frequently cited across different contexts, can hold different meanings in practice and require this dialogue to enact meaningfully.

In coanalyzing these terms and processes with CAB, we could better capture nuances in the meanings of these priorities. For example, CAB opposed “mutual benefit” interpretations of reciprocity where dependence on others is undesirable, instead welcoming the ability to depend on one another as a privilege and defining feature of strong, reciprocal partnerships. CAB coauthors also understand reciprocity as inseparable from positionality, acknowledging how identity and power shape reciprocal relationships. Their perspectives demonstrate how identity and power shape all collaboration, and their critiques of tokenization and misrecognition demonstrate the consequences of ignoring these dynamics. These ideas resonate with Indigenous theories of reciprocity that similarly intersect

relationality, positionality, and reciprocity. As McGregor and Marker (2018) wrote,

There is no clean promontory for viewing reciprocity between the researcher and the researching with Indigenous peoples. It is a swampy forest; we make our way through this landscape slowly and carefully knowing that we carry along power, history, and colonization as both maps and encumbrances. (p. 320)

In capturing nuanced understandings of partnership processes with CAB, our adapted set of priorities (Table 2) does not simply reflect a refinement of existing literature. Rather, they represent the ongoing result of our relational process, where our team created conditions in which new understandings of partnership could be generated, contested, and reimagined. That is, rather than view these principles as a universal checklist for strong partnerships, we focus on the process by which they were derived, which we argue aligns with the kind of partnerships illustrated in Figure 1, Framework 2. Our collaborative guided discussions allowed us to identify and define core principles and understand the processes that work toward achieving them.

Specifically, our methodological approach enabled us to reconsider rigid delineations between different constituents and instead emphasize the dynamic nature of relationships and roles within these partnerships. The design of our guided discussions—co-facilitated, intentionally informal, situated in community spaces, and driven by mutual curiosity—functioned as embodied practice of reciprocity and positionality. We outline the implications of our learnings from this methodology for interactions with partners and institutional practice.

Deepening Relationships Through Partner Interactions

Unlike other participatory approaches, such as PAR, where research questions often emerge directly with and from the community (Cornish et al., 2023), we entered these conversations with a specific interest: to better understand the role of relationships in partnerships, and how to strengthen them. Our talking methodology illustrated how we moved from abstract principles derived from the literature to concrete experiences, revealing nuances in how these principles are enacted in practice.

This structure sparked mutual curiosity and excitement among partners, allowing us to reshape our preexisting intentions. Through organic conversation, we not only generated rich insights but also deepened our relationships and made the work feel joyful with genuine connection, ease, and frequent laughter. The insights that emerged from this informal process were certainly more unexpected than what we would have discovered had we relied on a fixed set of guiding questions or appointed one facilitator.

This focus on relational dynamics invited reflection on the everyday interactions that sustain collaborative work. Interestingly, many of the priorities outlined in Table 2 centered on improving everyday interactions at the individual level. CAB coauthors emphasized the significance of everyday ways in which partners engage—building trust, practicing reciprocity, and respecting positionality. Simple gestures like checking in without an agenda, actively listening, or offering flexibility are indicators of relationships that extend beyond traditional project outcomes. The importance of these actions corroborates Leiderman et al.'s (2002) finding that “good partnerships are created and sustained over time, through the cumulative effects of even the most routine interactions and outcomes” (p. 5). CAB coauthors extend this insight by identifying and theorizing the everyday relational practices that are foundational to strong relationships. These everyday interactions are practices of internal maintenance, what Strier (2014) distinguished as efforts that deepen the relational fabric of collaboration; internal maintenance reflects a distinct goal from the pursuit of “organizational effectiveness.” We offer these findings as a contribution to the growing scholarship that centers ethics and relationships in community-engaged research (Banks et al., 2013; Blee & Currier, 2011; Cordner et al., 2016; Mikesell et al., 2013; O’Sullivan et al., 2023).

Limitations of Our Approach

We recognize important limitations of our approach. The breadth of our review of literature sources came at the expense of depth within any one particular subfield or disciplinary perspective. As a result, the review is not comprehensive of the full body of scholarship within each discipline, and relevant literature may have been missed due to the limitations of our search strategy. Indeed, the final set of 12

sources reflects a relatively small sample size. Future researchers might consider in-depth explorations of particular disciplinary spaces to unpack meanings behind these principles further.

Expanding the inclusion of “researcher” or “community” perspectives is another area for future research. The perspectives presented here did not include members of the community that CAB represents—low-income residents of Santa Cruz and Monterey counties. The principles we elevated may not be top priorities for community members who are not employees of CBOs/universities, or for research partners in other contexts. Broadening these perspectives also serves to gain a situated definition of diverse partners’ priorities and practices to support them. Future scholarship can continue to elucidate the conditions under which everyday talking methodologies create mutual understanding of partnership priorities. It would be particularly illuminating to involve community members, like those served by CBOs, in these types of discussion.

Conclusion: Collective Accountability for Individuals and Institutions

Our set of principles both provides a structure for individual researchers seeking to engage in more equitable, community-driven partnership, and illuminates the institutional priorities required to catalyze and sustain partnerships. For individuals, our principles offer tools to introspectively evaluate engagement and shift toward more responsiveness to community needs.

However, partnerships require institutional support to be sustained long term through the implementation of policies and distribution of resources; these actions recognize strong relationships as central to the university’s mission, valuing work that prioritizes the relationship as both rigorous and worthwhile. Indeed, in our discussions, it became evident that even when individual relationships are thriving, institutional barriers create challenges to sustaining partnerships. This emphasis on the formative role of institutional context aligns with the finding of Park et al. (2026), who demonstrated that community perceptions of engaged research are inseparable from the university’s institutional history. We suggest that perhaps the substantive challenges to partnership posed by the university’s positionality, mission alignment, or approach to reciprocity explain, in part,

why the individual, relational element is so critical to sustained collaboration.

Although relationship-building practices are rooted in individual interactions, they are always shaped by institutional contexts. One of the most powerful insights from CAB coauthors was the importance of acknowledging intersectionality and positionality not just at the individual level, but as structural realities that inform how institutions engage in partnerships. Our findings call for a shift from university and community partners working together in parallel to actively “desiloing” through a foundation of shared values and a genuine curiosity to seek out opportunities for better alignment. Indeed, as offered by Figure 1, Framework 2, individuals are understood to inhabit multiple, sometimes conflicting subject positions that influence how they show up in a partnership—from institutional affiliations to racial identity and lived experience. CAB’s reflections demonstrate the necessity to consider these overlapping identities and power dynamics in the context of deepening relationships.

To enact the integrative model described in Framework 2, institutional engagement must also move toward a deeper orientation of reciprocity. In this vein, CAB coauthors offered several recommendations. These recommendations broadly focus on enhancing institutional accessibility and representational equity to create opportunities for reciprocity that catalyze the unique strengths of university partners, community partners, and individuals spanning each. To make a research-focused university more accessible to local students, the university could organize a campus tour day specifically for

Watsonville students. The university could also develop paid internship opportunities for students to work at CAB; CAB greatly values these internship programs that exist at the local teaching-focused university. Further, CAB emphasized the importance of physical presence—“being there,” literally. The university could establish a dedicated physical space in Watsonville to demonstrate a commitment to long-term collaboration. Another suggestion was finding mission alignment between programs that are not as easily connected to CAB’s mission. These suggestions for the institutional scale are not isolated ideas, but rather express CAB’s view of partnership as intersectional and inherently shaped by power, relationality, and positionality.

Finally, CAB’s discussion of the power of positionality in their partnerships highlights one of the many needs for more faculty and students of color in academic institutions. Racial politics shift power structures and cultural barriers to collaboration; the process of forming good relationships is inherently different between White researchers and communities of color, and POC researchers and communities of color. Lived experience, education, and class positions are other aspects of social difference that must be acknowledged for their role in shaping relationships. Therefore, positionality changes how partners embody our set of priorities and realities for building partnerships. CAB’s reflections highlight the importance of considering *who* comes as an ambassador of the university; institutional reform is needed to create pathways that support leaders of color, including members of CAB’s community, in these roles.



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Appendix A. Typology of University–Community Partnerships

Collaboration type	Example
Research: collaboration that engages both partners in investigation of a question of interest to both parties. There are many models and approaches to this type of collaboration, including community-engaged research and PAR.	Méndez et al. (2017) conducted an agroecology project in El Salvador combining the knowledge of more formally trained researchers with the expertise of smallholder coffee farmers holding deep knowledge of place and agricultural practices. The project evolved into a PAR process as farmers redirected the research questions toward the topic most relevant to their community priorities: food security.
Service-learning: educational pedagogy in which students engage in and learn through community service activities integrated with instruction and course outcomes (Voss et al., 2015).	Rinaldo et al. (2022) discussed the experiences of nine community partners who participated as service-learning sites through one southwestern university. The partner agencies provided a range of social services, including child social services, family crisis support, an arts community, a food facility, and a hospital foundation.
Extension: educational instruction, demonstrations, or other informative programs intended to share knowledge outside the institution or organization. Extension can occur through university programs for community members or vice versa, as community programs for university members.	The Extension Institute of Community Development at the University of Wisconsin provides educational programming, resources, and support to leaders, families, youth, communities, and organizations. They conduct needs assessments and partner with local organizations. Educational programming includes organizational and leadership development, community economic development, food systems, local government, and more (University of Wisconsin–Madison Extension, 2025).
Internship: university-affiliated students gain experience and provide services through job positions at community organizations.	The Internship program of Chicago’s Policy Research Action Group (PRAG) provides university students with paid internship positions codirected by both the university and CBO staff. Students participate in a range of topics, including barriers to employment, nonprofit roles in affordable housing, and environmental cleanup (Mayfield et al., 1999).
Policy advocacy or civic engagement: university–community collaboration on advocacy for public policy.	The Detroit Community–Academic Urban Research Center (URC) established the Neighborhoods Working in Partnership (NWP) project to strengthen policy advocacy skills and eliminate health disparities by translating research into policy change. The URC implemented a “train the trainers” program to support community leaders and their future mentees in policy advocacy (Israel et al., 2010).
Community-engaged creative art: collaborative creation of art, including music, performance, and exhibitions (Michigan State University, n.d.).	Through the Community Mural Project (CMP) at Skyline College, public entities, schools, NGOs, and businesses apply for murals. Skyline students then paint murals with environmental and social justice themes, teaching students art activism, skills in mural-making, and supporting critical reflection on identity and place (Skyline College, n.d.).

Appendix B. CAB-Identified Successful Partnership A: CAB & CRL Joint Postdoctoral Position (2024–ongoing)

A novel CBO–university partnership, coauthor Sidney Madsen’s postdoctoral position is jointly appointed and mentored by CAB and UCSC. Madsen’s time is split between UCSC and CAB offices, and her research projects are codesigned and comentored by CAB staff and UCSC faculty from the CRL and the Environmental Studies Department.

CAB coauthors described Madsen’s position as a “bridge” between CAB and UCSC. For CAB coauthors, the process of cocreating the position and jointly selecting for it was critical to its success:

From the initial sparks of a conversation about the possibilities, to whatever they [CRL] needed to do to write the grant, to including us in the recruitment and the job description, and the creation of the interview questions and the joint interview process—all those steps we [CAB and CRL] did together.

CAB coauthors emphasized that Madsen’s openness to cocreation facilitated the partnership’s success because she offered space from the start to listen to CAB’s hopes for the partnership:

What was very impressive to me about [Madsen] was [her] openness to hearing about what we needed [as opposed to coming in with a research agenda], so [she] embodied what we’re talking about here [in the present partnership article] in many ways.

CAB coauthors also highlighted Madsen’s attention to cultural humility and accountability to the community as integral to building trust. One remarked, “[Madsen] still double check[s] that [she]’s not hurting the community, or that [she’s] giving space for them to react, or for what they might think is an important process. And the community trusts [her].” This respect of community norms and community-based knowledge was perceived as a counterpoint to typical university tendencies to prioritize academically generated knowledge:

In the university . . . that values its own knowledge so much, you can lose perspective on all of the other institutions and their knowledge and the cultures within them and how valuable and different they are . . . what you need for somebody to have this type of position is humility of culture but also humility of knowledge.

As CAB coauthors articulated throughout these reflections, Madsen’s postdoc position as a partnership between CAB and CRL exemplifies many of the partnership priorities described in this article: “This is a best practice model postdoc . . . not only w[as] [Madsen] the most qualified [candidate], [she] had cultural humility and cultural understanding . . . and that has helped in [her] connection to Pajaro and [her] connection to the team.”

Appendix C. CAB-Identified Successful Partnership B: UCSC Professor on CAB Governing Board (2011–ongoing)

CAB coauthors emphasized the importance of UCSC Professor Eva Bertram’s long-term investment, 14 years, serving on CAB’s governing board. As one CAB coauthor noted, “We’ve had UCSC professors on our board before, but Eva’s invested a lot of time. She’s worked collaboratively with us, and she shows up for us as an agency.” One example has been her work (since 2016) with CAB staff on a series of biennial community needs assessments, required by the state as part of CAB’s strategic Community Action Plans. The collaboration has included evolving strategies to capture the experiences of the county’s hardest-to-reach communities, designing surveys that build on prior findings to capture multiple and layered challenges facing low-income community members, and working alongside CAB staff to analyze and interpret survey and focus group findings.

Bertram’s background bridges both academic and nonprofit work, and CAB highlighted her “social justice background” as important to the success of this partnership, representing value alignment with CAB’s mission. She has, at various points, worked with the joint board–staff Advocacy Committee on strategies to build public and policymaker support for CAB’s programs and priorities, and responded to requests for data or analysis on poverty and inequality trends and policy contexts; in each case, the collaboration was grounded in CAB’s articulated needs and priorities.

CAB coauthors also reflected on how Bertram has facilitated additional connections between CAB and other UCSC faculty and departments, helping to seed relationships and collaborations. “Her connections to the university have opened doors for us, have helped expand and enhance the work that we do.” This work includes an ongoing partnership with the UCSC Center for Economic Justice and Action (CEJA, where Bertram serves as associate director). CEJA has supported research related to CAB’s Community Action Plans and recruited and provided funding for undergraduate summer interns for CAB programs.

In multiple discussions, Bertram’s relationship to CAB was repeatedly cited as an important example of how an individual, representing an institution, can positively influence CAB’s perception of their relationship with the university. “I think it has absolutely shaped the agency,” one CAB coauthor reflected. “Her presence on the board, as a representative of UCSC.” Across these reflections, Bertram’s role as a long-term board member was repeatedly uplifted as an example of the kind of trusted, reciprocal partnership CAB strives to cultivate at the individual and institutional scale.