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Developing Evaluable Principles for Community-University Partnerships

Rachel E. Nelson

Abstract

As post-secondary institutions across the globe have identified community engagement as a central component of their visions and missions, the interest in measurement and evaluation at the institutional level has increased over the past few decades. Yet the complex, distributed, dynamic and ever-changing nature of community-university engagement poses a number of evaluation challenges. The purpose of this paper is to explore a possible evaluation match called Principles-Focused Evaluation (Patton, 2018) that uses principles as the core evaluand as opposed to specific projects, programs, or initiatives as the focus of evaluation. Principles, when clearly and meaningfully articulated, welcome complexity and provide direction to guide action and behaviour towards desired results within a variety of contexts, without prescribing specific activities or models for what should be done and how. The focus of the article is to articulate a set of effectiveness principles for community-university partnerships that reflect both university and community interests, which is the first step in a principles-focused formative evaluation process. Next steps for a principles-focused evaluation are outlined in order to determine to what extent the process of engaging in community-university partnerships in a principled way is contributing towards the desired results of community-university engagement at the institutional level.

Over the past two decades, postsecondary institutions around the world have increasingly engaged their communities in collective efforts to address complex social challenges (Hollister et al., 2012). Amid vast social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental strife, universities as place-based institutions have a significant role to play in developing the capacity, resilience, vibrancy, and sustainability of the communities in which they are situated (Boyer, 1996; Dubb et al., 2013). As a result, many of these institutions have identified community engagement as a central component of their visions and missions, and scholarly interest in the measurement and evaluation of community engagement efforts has increased (Tremblay, 2017). In defining community engagement, many universities have adopted the Carnegie Foundation definition: “collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (Public Purpose Institute, 2021). As the Public Purpose Institute further explains,

The purpose of community engagement is the partnership of college and university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to

enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good. (2021, para. 9)

The formal recognition of a commitment to community engagement through the Carnegie Foundation and through individual institutional strategy has created an expectation of accountability; however, better knowledge and tools are needed to evaluate and report on the outcomes and impact of community engagement at an institutional level (Dubb et al., 2013; Hart & Northmore, 2011; Shiel et al., 2016; Singh, 2017). Despite the broad acceptance of the definition and purpose of community-university engagement as laid out by the Carnegie Foundation, institutions lack a clear understanding and consensus of what the Carnegie Foundation's statements mean in practice, and the elusive, complex, and dynamic nature of community-university engagement tends to defy traditional and linear methods of evaluation.

The literature notes the challenges of coming to a shared understanding of community-university engagement as well as the variety of practices and activities that are considered “engagement.”

The particular activities undertaken at each postsecondary institution will inevitably vary due to differences in the communities within which the institutions are situated, the issues they are tackling, the history and culture of community-university relations in each area, community needs, and available resources (Charles et al., 2010). As Charles et al. (2010) stated, “the diversity of activities covered by engagement with the community presents great difficulties of comparison as well as fundamental problems of measurement” (p. 70). Although efforts have been made to standardize measurement approaches, no single measurement method or framework will be appropriate for every situation due to the fluid definition of community engagement and the diversity of initiatives among institutions and communities (Dubb et al., 2013; Hanover Research, 2014; Hart & Northmore, 2011; Olowu, 2012; Tremblay, 2017). Because the nature of community engagement work is highly complex, it may be unconstructive to advocate for the adoption of a standardized measurement approach (Holland, 2001). It may instead be more appropriate to determine assessment methods keeping the local institutional and community context in mind. Additionally, the benefits of community-university engagement are difficult to assess at the institutional level, and traditional methods of evaluation are not sufficiently adaptive to account for the complex and dynamic environments characteristic of community engaged work (Lorenzoni, 2013).

Principles-Focused Evaluation

Principles-focused evaluation (PFE) could be considered as a suitable match for the level of complexity in community-university engagement at the institutional level. The PFE method uses effectiveness principles, as opposed to projects, programs, or initiatives, as the core object of evaluation (Patton, 2018). When clearly and meaningfully articulated, effectiveness principles welcome complexity; they guide action and behavior toward desired results within a variety of contexts without prescribing specific activities or models for what should be done and how (Patton, 2018). Effectiveness principles communicate foundational values, experiences, knowledge, lessons, and assumptions from practice for the purpose of achieving desired outcomes in a manner that provides general guidance but does not constrain and is not time-bound, thereby facilitating “ongoing engagement across many discrete projects and multiple change initiatives”

(Patton, 2018, p. 40). PFE is not appropriate for every situation and should be a match for the purpose of the evaluation. It should also be useful to those engaging with it, as it is considered a type of utilization-focused evaluation (Patton, 2018). PFE is useful for large, complex, dynamic interventions at the organizational level and beyond that are not simple enough to fit into a logic model (Patton, 2018).

Murphy (2014) compared evidence-based practices with effectiveness principles from an evaluation perspective to outline their differences and to suggest when one might be used over the other. The question is not which evaluation method is better but which method is best for a given situation. Evidence-based practices assume that a particular systematic method, technique, or approach will be implemented regardless of context, and these practices are evaluated based on expectations of logical, linear results of a single program or of multiple identical programs (Murphy, 2014). Evidence-based practices are desirable in well-understood situations in which cause-and-effect relationships are clear.

Effectiveness principles, on the other hand, are best used in complex systems with high degrees of uncertainty, change, and interacting contextual factors, whether they be social, economic, political, ecological, cultural, or historical. These situations benefit from principles that provide guidance on process but allow for flexibility and adaptability in practice (Murphy, 2014). As Patton (2018) stipulated, principles and PFE can coexist with more traditional results-based approaches. It is likely that following principles will lead to more specific projects and activities that may employ different evaluation methods depending on what is useful for each situation. Yet as things change in the environment and as goals, objectives, targets, and other parameters shift for different projects and initiatives, the principles should remain constant (Patton, 2018).

According to Patton (2018), a high-quality principle should provide direction and guidance for behavior and action, which in turn should lead toward desired results. The effectiveness of a principle or set of principles cannot be known, however, until evaluated. Principles therefore should be evaluated for quality as well as for process and outcome. PFE is intended to determine “(1) whether principles are clear, meaningful and actionable and if so (2) whether they are being adhered to and if so (3) whether they are leading towards desired results” (Patton, 2018, p. ix).

The Case for Effectiveness Principles for Community-University Partnerships

In the context of community-university engagement as defined by the Carnegie Foundation, partnership and collaboration between universities and communities should improve and enhance teaching and research, educate students, strengthen civic engagement and democracy, and make a positive difference in society (“Public Purpose Institute,” 2021). Because community engagement activities emerge in different ways, for different purposes, and to different ends, effectiveness principles are needed that guide community-university partnerships toward success without limiting complexity or prescribing a particular model of what should be done and how (Patton, 2018). Principles can facilitate agreement on foundational elements that provide direction and guidance for the work, but they should also be flexible enough to allow for differences in how they are manifested in practice (Patton, 2018).

Studying the creation, maintenance, and achievements of community-university partnerships is not a new concept in the evaluation literature (Rubin, 2000). Scholars recognize that community-university engagement is complex due to its inherent relationship dynamics, and there is consensus in the literature that community-university partnerships should be evaluated both for process and for the extent to which they improve teaching, research, and community development (Hart et al., 2009; Rubin, 2000). Partnerships are at the heart of community-university engagement activities that result in meaningful outcomes for everyone involved, and a synergistic relationship exists between the effectiveness of engagement initiatives and the quality of the relationship (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Holland & Ramaley, 2008; Pearce et al., 2008). Partnerships are dynamic, take time to develop, and require significant attention to the elements of process that facilitate their successful growth and maintenance (Kearney & Candy, 2004; Northmore & Hart, 2011; Pearce et al., 2008).

Kearney and Candy (2004) outlined the importance of attention to process, arguing that community and university partners’ approach to collaborative activities is directly connected to outcomes and that traditional rational planning models that assume a linear trajectory for projects do not sufficiently account for the evolving, complex, and dynamic nature of community-university relationships. Rather, guiding principles are needed that capture the important and

foundational process factors for the establishment and maintenance of strong partnerships within a variety of contexts, that embrace complexity, and that lead toward mutually beneficial outcomes (Holland et al., 2003; Kearney & Candy, 2004; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2005). These principles include intangible but meaningful precepts such as trust, shared purpose, transparency, accountability, mutuality, and sustainability, among others (Rudd, 2007). As Holland (2001) stipulated,

Just as looking at the organizational factors of the engaged campus might suggest points of measurement, we might also probe these lessons learned about successful partnerships as a possible source of measures related to relationships, community capacity, and other community impacts (p. 11).

Although this is an area of interest in the literature, there appears to be a gap in the development of actual mechanisms and frameworks that can be used to evaluate processes of community-university partnership creation and maintenance as well as the associated advantages, outcomes, and impacts of successful partnerships for both the community and university (Hart & Northmore, 2011; Singh, 2017).

Research Objective, Limitations, and Conceptual Framework

This research was conducted in 2018 to fulfill requirements for the Master of Arts in Community Development at the University of Victoria. The objective was to identify and articulate a set of effectiveness principles for community-university partnerships that reflect both university and community interests, with a particular focus on Simon Fraser University (SFU), the client for the project. Looking to the future, eventually a PFE would answer the questions of how and to what extent the process of engaging in community-university partnerships in a principled way contributes to the desired results of community-university engagement. Using the PFE method, it is possible to determine the quality and meaningfulness of principles; whether and how the principles are being followed; and if followed, whether and how they are leading toward the desired results (Patton, 2018).

The target audience for this research includes people working in community-university engagement initiatives at a community or

institutional level, such as university faculty, senior leadership, staff, students, and community organizations.

Limitations of this research include the relatively new and emerging nature of evaluation for community-university engagement, interview capacity constraints, the longer time frame needed for iteration on the development of the principles, and the researcher's dual role as an employee at SFU.

The conceptual framework used to guide this study is represented visually in Figure 1. It was created based on an interest in exploring the connections between process and outcome in community-university engagement, and it stemmed from an underlying assumption that the approach to, stewardship of, and process of collaboration between university and community partners are all connected to the outcomes of community-university initiatives. Therefore, the study aimed to develop a set of principles based on knowledge, values, experience, lessons, and assumptions from practice that can serve to guide behavior and action toward developing and activating effective community-university partnerships.

The GUIDE framework for the development of quality principles, as introduced in Patton (2018), suggests that principles must be guiding, useful, inspiring, developmental, and evaluable to be effective. This framework was used to create the first draft of principles for effective community-university partnerships. To be guiding, a principle must be stated in an action-oriented way to indicate a distinct and clear path forward; to be useful, it should be implementable in practice; to be inspiring, it should be undergirded by values and express what is important; to be developmental, it should be adaptable enough to allow for diverse interventions in a complex environment and stand the test of time; and to be evaluable, it should permit the determination of whether and how the principle was followed and whether following it facilitated desired results (Patton, 2018, p. 38).

Once principles are articulated, they should be evaluated to determine whether they are meaningful, how and to what extent they are being followed, and whether they are leading toward desired results (Patton, 2018). While such evaluation was beyond the scope of this project, these elements are included in Figure 1, as they are essential PFE components and helped to inform the conceptual framework.

Methods

Qualitative semistructured interviews with faculty, staff, and community partners were used to collect most of the data for this project. Open-ended interview questions allowed participants to freely express their thoughts and perspectives on the topics of discussion (Creswell, 2014). Patton (2018) recommended "principles-focused sampling" (p. 197), which advocates for selecting interviewees who are embedded in the work and adhering to principles in practice as a way of ensuring that the study focuses on the richest available cases. Faculty, staff, and community partners were chosen for interviews based on their teaching, research, or service involvement with signature SFU community engagement entities and initiatives such as Public Square, Vancity Office of Community Engagement, RADIUS, Innovation Boulevard, City Studio, Centre for Dialogue, and others. Efforts were made, based on the knowledge of the client and researcher, to engage participants with long-term experience working in community-university partnerships so that they could draw upon a sufficient depth and breadth of experience in their interview responses.

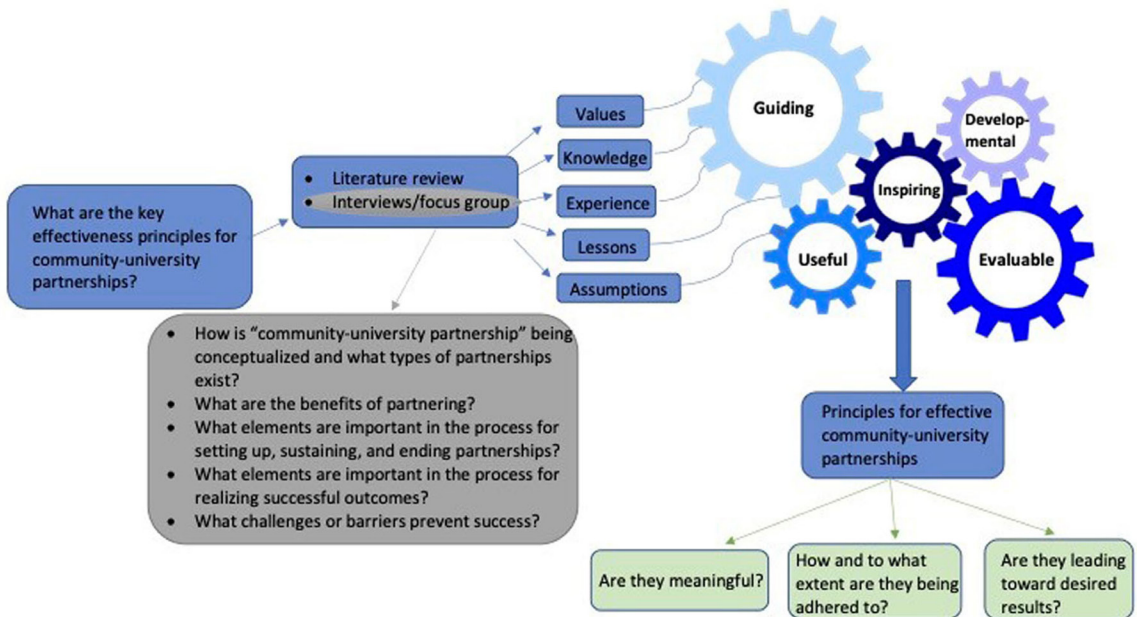
Each interviewee was asked to participate in a dyadic interview alongside a colleague with whom they had a positive working relationship. Dyadic interviewing pairs individuals together for an interview, facilitating a process of interaction and conversation between interviewees that enables a deeper and more nuanced exploration of the research topic (Morgan et al., 2016). This approach is grounded in social constructivist epistemology, which suggests that people co-construct knowledge and understanding through their interactions with one another, therefore truth and meaning is subjective and complex (Burr, 2015; Creswell, 2014).

A total of 12 dyadic interviews and one one-on-one interview were conducted. Six of the dyadic interviews and the one-on-one interview were held with faculty and staff, and the other six dyadic interviews were held with community partners. One focus group was held with five students. This research was reviewed and approved by the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board as well as SFU.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data derived from the interviews and focus group were examined through a content analysis approach. Interview and focus group recordings were transcribed verbatim, imported into NVivo, and coded using

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



Note. The evaluation questions that flow from the "Principles for effective community-university partnerships" are out of scope for this paper, but they helped to inform the conceptual framework for the study. Recommendations are made with regard to next steps in the PFE process to address these questions.

the "analytic induction" method (Patton, 2015). Analytic induction is a process for deriving themes that uses both deductive and inductive approaches to coding data. The coding began with a deductive approach based on a preexisting framework of 12 foundational principles for building and maintaining successful community-university partnerships (Community-Campus Partnerships for Health Board of Directors, 2013). Passages from the interviews and focus group were coded in connection to the existing principles if they addressed related themes, and in many cases passages were coded for several principles at once. In addition to this deductive coding approach, an inductive approach was used to code emergent themes. Several queries were made in the NVivo software to identify the frequency of themes based on the questions asked of participants as well as connections between themes.

Results

As Patton (2018) stipulated, effectiveness principles are statements that guide decision-making based on learning, experience, values, and knowledge of what works in practice for the purpose of achieving desired outcomes. As a first step to developing such effectiveness principles for community-university partnerships, five

main themes were distilled from the research: relationships, context, respect, flexibility, and communication. These themes are discussed below in the context of the literature and the findings from the interviews and focus group. Patton's (2018) GUIDE framework for developing principles was then used to distill each of these themes into overarching and operating effectiveness principles. Overarching principles are the main foundational principles, and operating principles provide practice-based guidance on how the principles can be applied. As Patton (2018) stated, "overarching principles provide general guidance for effectiveness. Operating principles provide more specific guidance for effectiveness" (p. 68). The benefit of having an overarching principle coupled with several operating principles is that the operating principles can provide grounding to the meaning and activation of the overarching principle. In addition, the operating principles are not exhaustive of all the ways in which the overarching principle can be applied, thereby keeping the principles adaptable and developmental in an ever-changing environment. The overarching and operating principles are presented in the following sections in relation to each of the five themes, and they are also presented in chart form in Appendix A.

It is pertinent to note that these principles should be considered as an integrated and “mutually reinforcing whole” (Patton, 2018, p. 86) as opposed to an independent and mutually exclusive list. The principles connect closely with one another, have areas of overlap, and strengthen and support one another. Similar to how Shulha et al. (2015) identified principles for collaborative evaluation, the principles articulated for effective community-university partnerships should be considered together, though the significance and relevance of any one principle will inevitably vary depending on the situation. Therefore, while all principles should be considered for effective community-university partnerships, the degree to which each of them is implemented in practice will depend on context and circumstance.

Relationships

The importance of building trusting relationships emerged as the strongest theme throughout the findings and was especially prominent when respondents discussed effective processes for beginning and sustaining partnerships. Participants brought up this theme over 60 times in the context of beginning and sustaining partnerships across all the data. Interviewees shared several practical pieces of advice for building and sustaining trusting relationships, including the importance of showing up and participating in the community, building authentic human connection outside of work titles, being there for each other beyond the parameters of the official partnership, coming through for one another and delivering on promises, and building networks and bringing people together.

Mutual benefit was also an underlying theme in connection to relationships. Interviewees identified relationships themselves as key to the benefits of any partnership; they noted that relationships facilitated benefits that would not have otherwise occurred and/or that the combination of trusting relationships and mutual value allowed for the partnerships to evolve in a positive way. Participants also drew the connection the other way around: Demonstrating commitment to mutual benefit in a partnership helped to build relationships. For example, respondents discussed the importance of participation in the community without a preconceived agenda as a way of building relationships. The benefits for any given activity may not be equal for all partners, but this open approach to collaboration demonstrates a

commitment to the partnership and to a spirit of mutuality overall, as opposed to only reaching out when something is needed.

The literature corroborates these findings for the importance of building personal and human connections, coming through on promises, supporting each other, showing up in an authentic way without a hidden agenda, and having each other’s best interests at heart (Buys & Bursnall, 2007; Cocuzzi, 2017; Drahota et al., 2016; Holland & Ramaley, 2008; Holland et al., 2003; Kenworthy-U’Ren & U’Ren, 2008; McLean & Behringer, 2008; Northmore & Hart, 2011).

The concept of respect surfaces in the literature in direct connection to relationships, but in the context of the research findings, respect seemed to be better approached as a distinct overarching theme. While respect is essential for effective relationships, the concept encompasses a larger set of practices and values and so warrants further articulation and unpacking. Therefore, it will be considered separately.

Relationships seem to be at the foundation of effective community-university partnerships, and the literature review surfaced other important factors for maintaining successful relationships, including respecting community knowledge, listening, being honest, sharing resources, and managing expectations. These themes also arose in the research findings and will be described further in connection with other themes and principles in the following sections. Due to the central nature of the relationship principle, it may be pertinent to consider it as a “pole star principle,” or a principle “so important that it dominates all others” (Patton, 2018, p. 88).

Overarching principle. Develop and sustain trusting relationships based on a foundation of authenticity and mutual value.

Operating principles. Using the lessons and experiences from the research findings and literature review, practice-informed operating principles to accompany the above overarching principle could include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Participate in community and add value without a preconceived agenda.
- Demonstrate reliability and commitment by delivering on promises.
- Facilitate the space to get to know partners on a personal and human level.

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- Be responsive and helpful, where capacity allows, to requests for assistance outside of the parameters of the particular partnership project or activity. Leverage available resources, networks, and knowledge to benefit the partner.
- Explore ways to deepen relationships by building networks and social fabric. Introduce and recommend partners to other contacts and positively promote the partnership.

Context

Another overarching theme is attention to context, history, power, and politics when engaging in community-university partnerships. Respondents indicated that each partnership is different depending on the context, and each situation deserves an individualized and nuanced approach to developing partnership parameters.

The historical divide between university and community is relevant in this discussion, as institutions often need to overcome community distrust arising from historic power imbalances that have benefited the university at the expense of the community. Elements of this concept emerged in all the interviews and in the focus group. Respondents spoke about the history of universities operating as “ivory towers” and imposing or extracting ideas, knowledge, and resources in a one-sided way that both exemplified and took advantage of power imbalances. Because of this history, universities must exercise vulnerability, humility, self-awareness, and care when moving forward with partnership activities, especially when working with equity-deserving communities. However, it is often not possible to know what experiences partners have had with universities in the past. Therefore, an awareness of and sensitivity around this topic in any partnership situation is important. The literature also acknowledges that academic institutions have a reputation for exhibiting condescending and paternalistic behavior when working with community partners. This attitude may not necessarily be conscious, but it may be a product of deeply embedded systemic structures and a social hierarchy that separates the academy from its community (Cherry & Shefner, 2004; Hammersley, 2017).

In addition to this historical dichotomy between the university and the community, other contextual factors affect the nature of partnerships. Interview respondents spoke about the value of understanding the broad environmental, cultural, and political dynamics within a community and

between collaborators, which can help universities determine how they might best play a role within the bigger picture. Each community-university partnership will be affected and shaped in diverse ways by the unique interplay of social, economic, environmental, cultural, political and organizational factors in its environment (Dempsey, 2010; Hammersley, 2017; Kearney & Candy, 2004; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2005). Therefore, paying attention to context, history, power, and politics is relevant not only for work with equity-deserving communities but also across different types of partnerships.

Overarching principle. Consider the unique social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental context, history, and power dynamics as factors in how each partnership is approached, designed, and sustained.

Operating principles. Using the lessons and experiences from the research findings and literature review, practice-informed operating principles to accompany the above overarching principle could include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Acknowledge the history of unequal power dynamics and social hierarchy separating the university from community. Approach collaborations with vulnerability, openness, and humility, and be willing to step back or change course based on feedback.
- Avoid perpetuating systems of oppression by engaging in regular self-reflective practice and being open to feedback and learning.
- Codevelop implicit or explicit principles and processes with partners for each collaboration, considering the context and nature of the activity. Use formal agreements if necessary for establishing parameters, managing resources, and balancing power.

Respect

The overarching theme of respect surfaced implicitly in the findings. While the word itself came up relatively infrequently in the interviews and focus group, several practices, approaches, experiences, and lessons learned spoke to the importance of a respectful process when engaging in community-university partnerships. Respect can be further defined as relationships in which all voices and opinions are given the opportunity to be heard and valued (Drahota et al., 2016).

The importance of listening emerged as a key theme related to respect. Subthemes included engaging partners early enough to help shape activities and ensuring that initiatives are useful to the community. Both faculty/staff and community partner interviewees spoke about the value of listening to the perspective of community partners—particularly to learn what is important to them, what is of interest, and what would be of use—before deciding on a direction for projects and activities. This suggestion is highly connected to the concept of respect, as bringing partners in at an early stage of project conception ensures that all voices and perspectives regarding the direction of the initiative are heard and given equal consideration. The opposite of this process would be to make decisions and move forward with initiatives based on university-centric goals and perspectives and to invite community participation as an afterthought—in other words, as articulated by an interview participant, “we’re going to do this, and you’re either with us or get out of the way.” Holland and Ramaley (2008) noted that all engagement initiatives would benefit from having early conversations—to discuss ideas, possibilities, collaboration opportunities, goals, and processes for moving forward, without preconceived agendas—in ways that value and respect all voices and interests at the table. Efforts to listen and ensure that all partners have a voice in shaping projects should also extend beyond the beginning stages of collaboration and should continue throughout partnership initiatives.

Another concept that surfaced in connection to the notion of respect was the importance of valuing different forms of knowledge. Although this is also tied to the theme of listening, it goes beyond including community perspectives when determining the direction of projects. Participants spoke about the inclusion of different ways of knowing for the coproduction of knowledge, research, programming, and educating students, and they noted the importance of appropriately valuing these different contributions within the partnership. Both faculty/staff and community partner interviewees connected this point to equity and respect. They spoke about how community-university partnerships should prioritize and facilitate an inclusive environment to ensure that all partners feel comfortable sharing their experiences, and they emphasized that the distribution of resources in the partnership should properly reflect the value of community knowledge. Participants acknowledged that while resources

might not be equally shared, they should be fairly shared. Postsecondary institutions inherently value academic knowledge, whereas the informal, lived, experiential and embodied knowledge within communities may not be given the attention it deserves in partnership projects (Cherry & Shefner, 2004; Fisher et al., 2004). Attention to process factors is therefore needed to help mitigate this issue.

Appropriately valuing and respecting community knowledge also extends to recognizing and acknowledging a partnership’s accomplishments in ways that reinforce the reciprocal nature of the relationship and celebrate all partners for their contributions. Celebrating joint contributions legitimizes the value of all partners, whereas giving only one-sided recognition to powerful institutional partners communicates a dynamic of charity and may lead to mistrust in the relationship (Blake & Moore, 2000; Kenworthy-U’Ren & U’Ren, 2008).

A final theme under the umbrella of respect is the importance of understanding and respecting community capacity, time, and boundaries. This issue came up primarily in the interviews with community partners. Almost all respondents described the challenges of taking on new projects with postsecondary institutions, being involved in research, and mentoring students—all endeavors which community groups are not necessarily funded for or mandated to do. This is not to say that community partners do not benefit from collaboration activities. However, interviewees strongly suggested that institutional partners need to respect and understand the context within which community partners are working, be mindful about what they are asking of community partners, and enable community partners to set boundaries depending on their capacity and what additional resources might be available to support them.

Overarching principle. Demonstrate respect for the knowledge, experience, and capacity of all partners and strive for equity in the relationship.

Operating principles. Using the lessons and experiences from the research findings and literature review, practice-informed operating principles to accompany the above overarching principle could include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Approach partnerships with a listening and learning mindset, and ensure that all partner voices are heard to help shape and bring forward collaborative initiatives.

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- Create inclusive environments where all partners feel welcome and valued for their time, experience, and knowledge.
- Discuss what a fair distribution of resources and benefits looks like for the partnership based on the specific initiative, the capacity and contributions of the various partners, and the resources available.
- Celebrate partnership accomplishments in ways that honour and value the contributions of all partners.

Flexibility

Across the interviews and focus group, participants spoke about complexity, flexibility, and adaptability in connection to relationships and outcomes in community-university partnerships.

The idea of flexibility and adaptability also connects to the theme of listening. Participants identified the need to be open to various directions that projects could take based on the inclusion of different perspectives, including the possibility that certain projects may not work for the community at all. As one participant stated, “as a university partner [you] really have to be open to things changing and having your ideas blown out of the water, and you [may] need to totally go back to the drawing board.”

In both the faculty/staff and community partner interviews, participants discussed the complex environments surrounding community-university partnerships. Throughout partnership initiatives and over time, elements such as funding, leadership, priorities, and capacity may change unexpectedly. In some cases, changes may bring forth new opportunities for expanding and deepening partnerships, and in other cases, they may result in a scaling back or shifting of activity. In either scenario, participants recognized that people engaged in partnerships need to have a certain comfort level with complexity, ambiguity, and change in order to adapt and take advantage of new opportunities. Nonlinearity is to be expected, and as partnerships evolve, develop, and shift in these dynamic environments, the original mission, vision, goals, and outcomes may need to be altered or clarified, processes may need to be confirmed, and assumptions may need to be reassessed at various points in the relationship (Cauley, 2000; Hammersley, 2017).

Across all interviews and the focus group, participants emphasized the importance of building in space and flexibility for outcomes to emerge and change throughout the partnership.

Participants also noted that due to the complexity inherent in community-university partnerships, unanticipated outcomes may surface from initiatives, and it may be valuable to recognize and track those when possible. Methods for evaluating outcomes from collaborative activities should also be kept open for partners to decide what makes the most sense depending on the initiative, what they are hoping to learn, and the available capacity and resources.

Overarching principle. Facilitate the space for emergence and be open and adaptable to change in a complex environment.

Operating principles. Using the lessons and experiences from the research findings and literature review, practice-informed operating principles to accompany the above overarching principle could include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Be willing to shift direction for projects and initiatives, provided there continues to be mutual value in the partnership.
- Take advantage of unanticipated opportunities where capacity allows.
- Allow for outcomes to emerge and change throughout partnership initiatives where possible while taking into account established parameters.
- Choose evaluation methods that are a match with the initiative, desired insights, and available resources. Attempt to capture unanticipated learnings, outcomes, and ripple effects.

Communication

A general theme of communication surfaced across the interviews and focus group. This theme encompassed a few subthemes and practices, such as understanding interests and checking in, managing expectations, setting boundaries, being mindful of language and process, being honest, and providing feedback. These themes are also echoed in the literature, where it has been documented that effective communication is critical for facilitating a mutual understanding of interests; developing a sense of shared purpose, goals, benefits, and processes; and managing expectations (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2005).

Connected to the theme of flexibility and adaptability, faculty/staff and community partner interviewees indicated the importance of coming to an early understanding of what partners are hoping

to get out of the collaboration, checking in with each other along the way to adjust as needed, and ensuring that partners continue to derive mutual benefit as things change in the environment. While flexibility is important, some projects may have more concrete and set deliverables than others, so having an early understanding of baseline requirements for outcomes provides clarity and enables better decision-making as things move forward. As a community partner respondent stated, “you have to lay that on the line—what’s the personal skin in the game. . . . [If] I’m a graduate student . . . and it’s critical that this move forward in a way that allows me to get my dissertation done, then we all need to know that.”

The concept of managing expectations came up in both the faculty/staff interviews and the student focus group. In community partner interviews, a similar theme came up around setting boundaries. For faculty, staff, and students, the idea of managing expectations seemed to come from an underlying assumption that community partners may have high expectations of university partners given their relative abundance of resources. Concerns were expressed that community partners may expect promises from their institutional partners that ultimately cannot be kept. Unrealistic expectations based on preconceived assumptions can be harmful to partnership relationships, as feelings of letdown, frustration, and failure may arise if internalized expectations are not met (Kenworthy-U’Ren & U’Ren, 2008). For community partners, the importance of setting boundaries stemmed from their need to make strategic decisions about what kinds of projects they can get involved in and to what extent, depending on the projects’ fit with their mandate, capacity, and available resources. Their concerns seemed to center on protecting their time and avoiding overcommitting. In a similar vein, faculty and staff also spoke about the importance of boundaries and self-care, as keeping up with the workload associated with community-university partnerships and maintaining these relationships can be challenging. Whether the need is to manage expectations, set boundaries, or both, honest communication among all partners regarding what is possible, what the limitations are, and what can be reasonably committed to is essential.

Attention to communication processes and language also came up briefly in the interviews and focus group. Focus group participants identified the importance of determining the best methods of communication among partners and naming communication point people in

partnerships with multiple collaborators. Faculty and staff interviews revealed the documentation of commitments and promised deliverables to be another important communication process factor. This type of documentation could be in the form of a structured contract or agreement, recorded email conversations, or a combination of both, depending on the partnership. Regardless of the format, attention to a communication process that works for the partnership, provides clarity, and enables accountability around commitments is key.

Regarding language use, community and university partners may be accustomed to using certain terms, acronyms, and vernacular within their fields of work and study that others outside that realm may not understand. In the literature, research found it to be problematic when partners did not share an understanding of the definitions and terms used to communicate about the partnership’s work (Drahota et al., 2016). Being mindful of language use helps to create an inclusive environment and ensures that all partners are on the same page.

Finally, communication subthemes related to honesty and feedback arose across the faculty/staff and community partner interviews. These concepts surfaced mainly in relation to situations in which collaborations experienced issues, and interviewees described how honesty and feedback were used either to learn from challenges and improve partnerships or to end them if they were no longer mutually valuable. Participants spoke about the reality of “things going sideways” and the importance of tackling issues head-on, and they identified communicating honestly with partners if there is a concern, if circumstances change, or if something unexpected happens as a factor in maintaining trust and respect in the relationship. Feedback processes are also essential to continuously improving and monitoring the mutually beneficial nature of the partnership (Bingle & Hatcher, 2002; McLean & Behringer, 2008; Sebastian et al., 2000). If partnerships do require dissolution, the key is to approach the situation with respect, honesty, compassion, and thoughtfulness in order to leave the door open for more appropriate collaborations in the future (Bingle & Hatcher, 2002).

Overarching principle. Communicate openly, honestly, accessibly, and with enough frequency to establish clarity, facilitate ongoing improvement, and navigate challenges.

Operating principles. Using the lessons and experiences from the research findings and literature review, practice-informed operating principles to accompany the above overarching principle could include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Establish a shared understanding of interests, goals, commitments, and limitations.
- Check in with partners along the way to provide feedback for improvement and ensure continued mutual benefit. Make adjustments as needed.
- Determine preferred modes and frequency of communication.
- Use accessible language.
- Communicate concerns or changes in the partnership with timeliness, respect, and honesty.

Outcomes Framework

As Patton (2018) stipulated, the processes articulated by effectiveness principles are important for achieving results, as “outcomes depend on and flow from processes within some particular context” (p. 101). Principles should be evaluated to determine how and to what extent they contribute to desired results. In order to do so, it is important to create credible connections between the principles and desired outcomes while acknowledging that following principles is only one contributing factor toward the achievement of results (Patton, 2018). It is not possible to draw direct causal links between principles and results in community-university partnerships because these partnerships operate in complex environments in which many other circumstances affect outcomes. Nevertheless, principles, if they are meaningful and adhered to in practice, can contribute significantly toward positive results by providing useful guidance and direction for “navigating complex dynamic systems and engaging in strategic initiatives” (Patton, 2018, p. 21).

A principles-focused approach can be thought of as similar to a theory of change approach in that both attempt to articulate a trajectory toward impacts. A principles-focused method, however, does not prescribe specific results or steps to achieve them (Patton, 2018). For high-level strategic interventions such as community-university engagement, which permeates entire institutions and manifests in diverse forms across departments as opportunities emerge, “both processes and results are non-standardized, contextually variable,

changing, adaptive and emergent” (Patton, 2018, p. 12). Therefore, it is important to articulate a vision for engagement while keeping outcomes and objectives general to allow for a diversity of interventions. Much like the complex environment in which principles operate, working with and evaluating principles is inherently ambiguous and requires a level of comfort with uncertainty (Patton, 2018).

Although it was beyond the scope of this research to evaluate the principles noted here, a sample outcomes framework is presented in Appendix B to showcase how the principles might be evaluated in connection to outcomes. The framework lists the overarching principles and identifies short-term outcomes that may result from following them based on the findings and literature review. Possible medium-term outcomes are articulated based on the mutual benefits from community-university partnerships derived from the research findings. Finally, long-term outcomes are listed, which are taken directly from the definition of community engagement as articulated by the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement (“Public Purpose Institute”, 2021). The basic logic underpinning the outcomes framework is that the principles guide the behavior and actions of practitioners to enable the development and maintenance of mutually beneficial partnerships, which in turn produce results that contribute to the desired outcomes of community-university engagement. These outcomes are not exhaustive of what could be included in a community-university partnership outcomes framework, as what constitutes a mutually beneficial collaboration and desirable impact will differ depending on the context of the collaboration and the specific academic and community partners involved (Goemans, 2016; Singh, 2017). Nevertheless, this framework demonstrates how principles can be connected to possible outcomes and could be used as a foundation for more specific frameworks.

Next Steps for PFE

Once principles have been developed, the first step in a PFE is to evaluate how meaningful the principles are for the people who will be using and implementing them. To assess their meaningfulness, individuals with experience engaging in community-university partnerships, including faculty, staff, students and community partners, should review the principles using the GUIDE criteria (Patton, 2018).

The principles should then be evaluated to determine how they are being followed, to what degree they are being manifested in practice, and how they are contributing toward desired results (Patton, 2018). This type of evaluation can be carried out using principles-focused sampling, in which a number of cases aligned with the principles under investigation are chosen across different programs and types of initiatives, “but [with] each adapting those principles to its own particular target population within its own context” (Patton, 2018, p. 200). This could be done quantitatively and/or qualitatively. For example, Murphy (2014) synthesized information from 14 qualitative case studies to make a summative judgement on the adherence to and results of following principles for six agencies working with youth facing homelessness. McNall et al. (2009) used a regression analysis to measure the extent to which certain principles were present in community-university partnerships and to uncover the effects of relationship dynamics on the partnerships’ outcomes.

The exact methods and processes for evaluating adherence to principles and results should be codeveloped with the people who will be involved in the evaluation and to whom the results will be of use. It is important for evaluations to stay grounded, to think through what information should be captured and why, to match the evaluation plan to the resources available, and to remember that “it is not possible to evaluate everything all of the time” (Mulvihill et al., 2011). In order to ensure the evaluation is useful, relevant, practical, and achievable, it will need to involve decision-makers and other interested stakeholders to determine the best path forward.

Conclusion

The suggested niche for PFE is at the institutional level, where principles for community-university partnerships can be used as a unifying framework across different types of community-university engagement activities to better understand, learn, and improve how institutional processes of engaging with communities affect the desired higher-level outcomes of these activities. This premise is supported by literature, as Hart and Northmore (2011) advocated for evaluation processes that use community-university partnerships as a theory of change toward desired outcomes of community-university engagement initiatives; according to Hart and Northmore, these processes “[help] us to understand whether community–university partnerships are a useful mechanism for achieving desired outcomes” (p. 13).

Engaging in a PFE would enable institutions to methodically and rigorously inquire how their espoused values of community engagement are manifesting in practice and, in turn, how outcomes are affected. It is important to critically examine how measurement and evaluation efforts may influence what is being valued and how assessment methods can better align with espoused values. When institutional measurement efforts focus on the collection of quantitative data for accountability and reporting purposes, for instance, it may not adequately represent the true story, impact, and value of the work (Shephard et al., 2018). A mismatch between values and measurement efforts could unintentionally shift the focus of community engaged work to meeting a preidentified target to the detriment of working toward outcomes and impacts (Charles et al., 2010). It may be particularly meaningful for people engaged in this work to move beyond quantitative indicators and targets for success and to hold themselves accountable to principles for effective practice in community-university partnerships. This would allow for reflection on the connection between process and outcomes and the discovery that sometimes process and outcome are one and the same. Placing value on community-university partnership as a method for achieving desired community engagement outcomes requires that evaluation methods are developed to match this ambition (Shephard et al., 2018). PFE offers one possible option for further exploration in this field of inquiry.

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Appendix A. Effectiveness Principles for Community-University Partnerships

Themes	Overarching principles	Operating principles
Relationships	Develop and sustain trusting relationships based on a foundation of authenticity and mutual value.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in community and add value without a preconceived agenda. • Demonstrate reliability and commitment by delivering on promises. • Facilitate the space to get to know partners on a personal and human level. • Be responsive and helpful, where capacity allows, to requests for assistance outside of the parameters of the particular partnership project or activity. Leverage available resources, networks, and knowledge to benefit the partner. • Explore ways to deepen relationships by building networks and social fabric. Introduce and recommend partners to other contacts and positively promote the partnership.
Context	Consider the unique social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental context, history, and power dynamics as factors in how each partnership is approached, designed, and sustained.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge the history of unequal power dynamics and social hierarchy separating the university from community. Approach collaborations with vulnerability, openness, and humility, and be willing to step back or change course based on feedback. • Avoid perpetuating systems of oppression by engaging in regular self-reflective practice and being open to feedback and learning. • Codevelop implicit or explicit principles and processes with partners for each collaboration, considering the context and nature of the activity. Use formal agreements if necessary for establishing parameters, managing resources, and balancing power.
Respect	Demonstrate respect for the knowledge, experience, and capacity of all partners and strive for equity in the relationship.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approach partnerships with a listening and learning mindset, and ensure that all partner voices are heard to help shape and bring forward collaborative initiatives. • Create inclusive environments where all partners feel welcome and valued for their time, experience, and knowledge. • Discuss what a fair distribution of resources and benefits looks like for the partnership based on the specific initiative, the capacity and contribution of the various partners, and the resources available. • Celebrate partnership accomplishments in ways that honour and value the contributions of all partners.

Appendix A (continued). Effectiveness Principles for Community-University Partnerships

Themes	Overarching principles	Operating principles
Flexibility	Facilitate the space for emergence and be open and adaptable to change in a complex environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be willing to shift direction for projects and initiatives, provided there continues to be mutual value in the partnership. • Take advantage of unanticipated opportunities where capacity allows. • Allow for outcomes to emerge and change throughout partnership initiatives where possible while taking into account established parameters. • Choose evaluation methods that are a match with the initiative, desired insights, and available resources. Attempt to capture unanticipated learnings, outcomes, and ripple effects.
Communication	Communicate openly, honestly, accessibly, and with enough frequency to establish clarity, facilitate ongoing improvement, Participate in community and add value without a preconceived agenda.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a shared understanding of interests, goals, commitments, and limitations. • Check in with partners along the way to provide feedback for improvement and ensure continued mutual benefit. Make adjustments as needed. • Determine preferred modes and frequency of communication. • Use accessible language. • Communicate concerns or changes in the partnership with timeliness, respect, and honesty.

Appendix B. Outcomes Framework

Overarching principle	Short-term outcomes
<p>Develop and sustain trusting relationships based on a foundation of authenticity and mutual value.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enable mutually beneficial projects to emerge and take hold. • Enable efficient transactions. • Provide a strong foundation for trying new things and taking risks. • Facilitate nimbleness to take advantage of new opportunities. • Enable partners to work through and overcome challenges together.
<p>Consider the unique social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental context, history, and power dynamics as factors in how each partnership is approached, designed, and sustained.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contribute to overcoming a history of distrust. • Contribute to advancing social justice and balancing power. • Enable identification of roles and determination of where value can be added. • Facilitate a nuanced approach to achieving mutual benefit. • Contribute to building credibility, relationships, trust, and respect.
<p>Demonstrate respect for the knowledge, experience, and capacity of all partners and strive for equity in the relationship.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enable all partner voices to be heard for the establishment and maintenance of mutually beneficial and relevant initiatives. • Prevent imposition of assumptions and one-sided projects. • Prevent overburdening partners. • Enable codevelopment of new knowledge. • Facilitate greater commitment and buy-in. • Contribute to advancing social justice and balancing power. • Contribute to building credibility, relationships, and trust.
<p>Facilitate the space for emergence and be open and adaptable to change in a complex environment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enable partners to see the bigger picture, to take advantage of emerging opportunities, and to withstand challenging times. • Enable discovery of new and unanticipated benefits. • Enable adjustments to maintain the balance of relevance and mutual benefit for initiatives.
<p>Communicate openly, honestly, accessibly, and with enough frequency to establish clarity, facilitate ongoing improvement, and navigate challenges.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate mutual understanding of interests and enable good decision-making to achieve goals. • Enable accountability and follow-through on commitments. • Facilitate learning, improvement, and growth of partnerships. • Uphold relationships, credibility, trust, and respect during challenging times. • Prevent disappointment and frustration. • Prevent unbeneficial initiatives from continuing while keeping the possibility for future opportunities open.

Appendix B (continued). Outcomes Framework

Medium-term outcomes (based on identified mutual benefits)	Long-term outcomes (from the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement definition)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase access to learning and knowledge. • Increase relevance and effectiveness of projects and research findings. • Foster innovation and risk-taking. • Build networks. • Increase inclusion of community voices for the development of new knowledge. • Gain support for activities outside partnerships. • Build institutional support, reputation, legitimacy, credibility, relevance, and trust in community. • Build evidence and credibility for funding, practice, advocacy, and promotion. • Build capacity with shared knowledge and resources. • Increase interdisciplinary work. • Provide high-quality learning opportunities for students. • Build inclusive communities and social infrastructure. 	<p>Increase the impact of community-university partnerships to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; • enhance curriculum, teaching, and learning; • prepare educated, engaged citizens; • strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; • address critical societal issues; • contribute to the public good.