

LEARNING TOGETHER

SHARING EMERGENT AND UNCONVENTIONAL APPROACHES TO COMMUNITY-UNIVERSITY COLLABORATION



The Community Engaged Scholarship Institute (CESI) brings together community and campus skills and resources to advance community-identified research goals. We work in collaboration, we honour diverse forms of knowledge, and we leverage university resources for community benefit.

“Learning Together” was conceived out of CESI’s desire to learn more about the different ways that people in various roles and locations pursue community-university collaborations. This forum took place at the Art Gallery of Guelph on October 29th, 2018, and showcased novel and varied approaches to community engaged work.

Panels, presentations, workshops, and roundtable discussions covered a range of topics, including:

- Impacts of community-university partnerships on Black students’ perceptions of history and identity;
- Using community perspectives to inform planning and evaluation of community engaged learning initiatives;
- Successes and challenges of cross-sector, community-focused collaboration;
- Community experiences and insights from long-term partnerships; and
- Justice-oriented approaches to community engagement.

Several guiding questions were posed to the presenters, such as:

How do you collaborate to address community interests and create mutual benefits?

How do you work together to achieve positive social change?

How do you overcome challenges and barriers?

How do you and your collaborators work together creatively?

How do you generate and measure impact?

Throughout the day, presenters and participants explored how radical, emergent, and unconventional collaborative work can generate significant impact – within institutions and communities alike. Below, the insights that emerged from these discussions are synthesized under four overarching themes.

The concerns and conversations at "Learning Together" were interconnected. Through these discussions at the intersections of our work, we can learn how to continue moving forward together and collaborate for positive social change.

Examples of community-driven collaboration included: community-initiated research databases, to avoid over-research and redundant research within communities; community-driven ethics committees; and community-led training for academic partners working with community members.

1 **Creative and Critical Approaches to Community-University Collaboration**

We cannot solve our shared problems alone. We need to learn together to create the best routes to sustainable change. In learning together, we must pursue equitable partnerships, where all knowledge is valued. Doing so requires critical reflections on the role of researchers in community-university collaborations.

Several presenters noted the importance of inclusive, accessible, physical spaces to collaboration. These spaces enable us to access different forms of knowledge and to build deep connections and relationships.

Within creative and critical community-university collaborations, relationship-building is a central principle. Building meaningful collaborations takes time, flexibility and responsiveness. The whole process can be long and messy, but, as noted by one presenter, that's the way it should be.

"Researchers must bring their identity into their work, and embrace the challenges of navigating their roles and responsibilities."

"Tensions within these roles must be acknowledged as spots within which to learn and grow."



2 **Community-Driven Models and Methods of Collaboration**

Community knowledge-holders are experts in their own communities. They bring important insights and expertise that should be central to the development of collaborative projects.

Within community-university collaborations, it is important to ensure community determine their own needs and level of engagement. To effectively navigate systemic challenges and make collaboration meaningful and useful for communities, communities must have agency in the process. Many participants highlighted the need to advocate for more opportunities for community members to be co-researchers in addressing some of the questions they put forward.



"Learning trust is key. Trauma lives in many of these communities, and building trust is a process that is central for any form of collaboration."

3 **Commitment to Student Learning**

Students play an integral role in creating and sustaining strong community-university relationships. As institutions work to cultivate strong relationships with community partners, students are motivated to remain engaged with their communities beyond university.

Many community and academic presenters expressed strong commitments to training the next generation of community-engaged learners. They described various community engagement opportunities for students that helped to bring learning outside of institutional walls. Through these opportunities, students are introduced to learning in service, and leadership for change.

In response to the call for more justice-oriented approaches to community engagement, careful and intentional models of experiential learning can ensure that students not only learn together, but emerge changed.

4 **Addressing Systemic and Structural Challenges**

Many of the collaborations discussed at *Learning Together* were initiated in response to broader political and social movements that seek to address systemic and structural challenges. While initiatives were diverse, these efforts all contributed to a larger picture; each effort sought to address deeper social issues in its own way. To further strengthen our approaches to collaboration, some participants called for better coordination across institutions.

Addressing complex problems requires better understandings of the power relationships that inherently exist within our collaborations. We need to move away from transactional research, and build more evidence-based programs that contribute to mutual benefit.

As individuals, we can think about how to create different kinds of collaborative frameworks, that prioritize relationships and social connection. We should learn to ask ourselves additional questions to deepen our collaborations, such as: how do we move from being present in collaborative spaces to being connected, and how can we use these new understandings to guide our conversations?

"There is a need for diversity and inclusion within collaboration itself to be able to see more clearly the issues that you are working on that you might not otherwise see from your lens alone."



Continuing to Learn Together: Your Feedback



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General Feedback

In the post-event evaluation survey, many respondents told us they appreciated the thoughtful organization and planning of presenters. To make this event even better, some suggestions were to have more breakout sessions, run some sessions concurrently, have longer and fewer presentations, and include more time for discussions.

What Resonated

Several respondents felt that *Learning Together* did a good job of showcasing the changing faces of leadership and different voices within community-engaged scholarship. Most people felt the presenters all underscored the importance of using different approaches for different communities, and intentionally incorporating inclusivity whenever possible.

What Didn't Resonate

Some respondents felt the event would have benefitted from fewer presentations and more opportunities to engage and connect with presenters and other participants more deeply. Several folks said they would have appreciated more tangible takeaways (e.g. tools, approaches) that they could apply in practice. Many attendees also felt that a land acknowledgement should be included.

Accessibility

All survey respondents felt welcomed and included, with around 85% feeling very or extremely included.

Over half of all survey respondents felt that approaches to community-university partnerships presented were either very or extremely innovative.

Innovation

Around 75% of respondents felt that their experience at "Learning Together" will have moderate to significant impacts on how they will approach their future work.

Impact

Connections

Most respondents (nearly 80%) made some or many new connections, and felt their networks were expanded.