

The Transformative Engagement Process: Foundations and Supports for University-Community Partnerships

*Robert E. Brown, Celeste Sturdevant Reed
Laura V. Bates, David Knaggs
Karen McKnight Casey, Jessica V. Barnes*

Abstract

This article describes one university's approach to transformative engagement: An engagement process based not on transfer of expertise from university to community (technology transfer), but rather on an interactive process in which all partners apply critical thinking skills to complex community problems. Iterative in nature, it is informed by a university-wide model of engagement built on the land-grant tradition and by grounded principles from the literature. University Outreach and Engagement (UOE) provides several modes of connecting for structural support. To be successful, partners must have appropriate and multiple ways of making and sustaining connections to each other and to information that will help them move through transformations. These modalities encompass individual and systemic connections in both face-to-face and electronic venues. The structures are designed to meet the needs of those engaged in partnerships while promoting evidence-based best practices in community agencies.

Introduction

The transformative engagement process described in this article has been developed to aid University-Community Partnerships (UCP), a unit of University Outreach and Engagement at Michigan State University, in accomplishing its goals. These goals are:

1. Resolve policy- and community-defined problems; promote the development and use of strength-based models and interventions to improve the effectiveness of those working to achieve healthy, fundamental, and sustainable change for individuals, families, groups, neighborhoods, and communities.

2. Facilitate and support the dissemination and use of actionable knowledge and evidence-based interventions and models through the practice of community-based research and evaluation concerning problems defined in goal 1.
3. Enhance the capacity of faculty and staff to conduct research in community-based settings by providing opportunities for them to increase their skills and competencies.

In order to realize these goals, UCP is enacting a variety of strategies aimed at university faculty, staff, and students; community members, organizations, and structures; and staff from our own unit.

Transformative Engagement

The transformative engagement process is based not on transfer of expertise from university to community (technology transfer), but rather on an interactive process in which all partners apply critical thinking skills to complex community problems. This process is based on transformational learning. According to Mezirow (1991, 167), transformational learning involves a change in the learner's beliefs, attitudes, and emotional reactions; the learner engages in critical reflection on his or her experiences, leading to a change in perspective.

We have found that this transformative engagement process tends to occur in a series of iterations. Often partnerships begin with a request from the community for assistance with a specific problem or need. Early success in meeting this specific need, coupled with the learning that occurs in the process, leads partners to understand that they need more information. Obtaining the needed new information leads partners to additional understandings of their need for more complex information and to deeper engagement in the partnership. Each new understanding is a transformative process that changes their ways of thinking and operating, leading to an ever-widening spiral of engagement.

In line with Michigan State University's stated goal of "Advancing Knowledge, Transforming Lives," University-Community Partnerships (UCP) performs service in ways that address higher education's other missions as well. UCP participates in engagements directed toward community-based research (research mission) and in partnerships that encourage individuals and groups to apply best practices in addressing complex community problems (teaching mission).

Community-Based Research: Community-based research (CBR) embodies MSU's scholarly model of outreach and engagement. CBR has been defined as a collaborative process between community groups and researchers that is undertaken to create new knowledge or understanding of a practical community issue in order to bring about change (*Israel et al. 1998*). It is characterized by community participation in every phase of the endeavor, especially in identifying the issue to be addressed. This approach to research has emerged in answer to the criticism that universities are unresponsive to communities' needs.

Example of the transformative engagement process in CBR: Genesee Intermediate School District. Genesee Intermediate School District serves the needs of local school districts in a single county by providing supplementary and special education services. In 1998 Mott Children's Health Center approached MSU UCP with a request for evaluation of a single program, the Passport Program. This initiative was a community-wide effort to ensure that all children receive the health and social services they need to get ready for school. Evaluation of this program led to the identification of additional needs and to the community's decision to launch a broader initiative to build a developmental support network in the community. Over time, this initial request expanded into a comprehensive partnership with the Genesee Intermediate School District to evaluate a wide range of school-based services, including out-of-school-time programs and school-based health clinics.

Promoting Best Practices: The Outcome-Asset Impact Model (O-AIM): UCP promotes best practices in community programs by offering practical support and resources for grounding action in research. The partners in these endeavors are local groups and organizations that are working to improve their communities and the lives of their residents in more effective and efficient ways. These partnerships are based on the Outcome-Asset Impact Model (*O-AIM; Reed and Brown 2001*). The goal of O-AIM is to make outcome evaluation relevant to practitioners in diverse settings and to shift their thinking from deficit-based approaches to community asset-oriented or strength-based approaches to community problems. The Outcome-Asset Impact Model is a hybrid model that creates a structure and a process within which

community participants can identify asset-driven outcomes that are grounded in research, and then create locally driven designs to make the systemic interconnections necessary to actualize those outcomes. It offers a comprehensive framework for understanding, planning, and evaluating the complex and interrelated activities that must be enacted to achieve any desired impact. UCP engagement specialists use the O-AIM as a framework to guide their partnering work with individuals, organizations, systems, and communities.

Example of a community partnership using O-AIM: St. Vincent Catholic Charities. St. Vincent Catholic Charities is one of the larger private nonprofit child and family service agencies in Michigan. For over fifty years it has provided assistance to people of all ages and faiths in the greater Lansing area. Clients include children in the child welfare system and some of the poorest and most vulnerable in the community. The work is challenging and the diversity of services provided makes it difficult for staff to maintain a unified focus on the agency mission and goals.

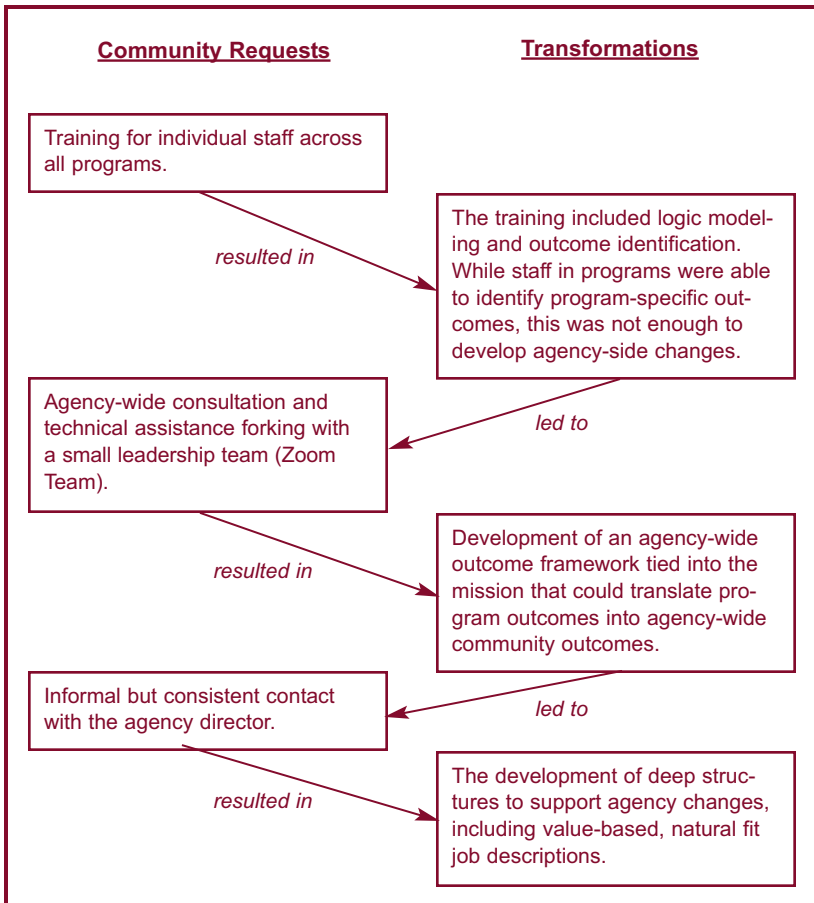
The CEO of St. Vincent Catholic Charities contacted the university to access its resources for change-oriented staff development. This initial training focused on logic modeling and outcome evaluation; it enabled staff to identify program-specific outcomes but was not enough to prompt agency-wide organizational change. UCP then began an agency-wide consultation and technical assistance program with a leadership team to focus on developing an agency-wide outcome framework tied into the agency mission. A core of twelve people who agreed to act as change agents within the organization formed a leadership team known as the “Zoom Team” (named after the children’s book *Zoom* by Istvan Banyai). The Zoom Team members were selected with two criteria in mind. First, the group should represent the range of areas covered by the organization. Second, the members should be people particularly interested in working to promote positive change in the organization. The team represented the organization both vertically and horizontally in that it included the CEO, supervisors, and workers from all major program areas, and a lead administrative support staff member.

Over time, the partnership developed a number of modalities for promoting and supporting organizational change. One innovative initiative was a “teaching agency” involving agency staff and MSU social work students and faculty in a

learning process modeled after the grand rounds method used in medical education. As in medical grand rounds, social work interns placed at St. Vincent Catholic Charities learn to apply their new knowledge through discussion of real cases with experienced practitioners. Agency staff are included in the discussion so that they can also benefit from the expertise of the presenters. Thus the project benefited both partners by enhancing the education of university students and building the competencies of agency staff.

Work with the leadership team led to the development of an agency-wide framework that allowed fifteen programs—as diverse as refugee services, adoption, residential care, mental health, and senior services—to establish program-specific outcomes that all link directly into the agency’s

Figure 1: St. Vincent Catholic Charities



mission. To sustain and support agency change, the agency director has continued an informal but consistent contact with UCP engagement specialists. This ongoing relationship has resulted in the development of deep structures to sustain change, including value-based, natural-fit job descriptions.

The Foundation for Transformative Engagement

The transformative process of engagement practiced by UCP is informed by the university-wide model of engagement and by grounded principles from the literature and growing discipline of engagement.

The MSU model of engagement: As a land-grant university, MSU has a mandate to develop, apply, and share knowledge to serve the public good. In so doing, MSU advocates a scholarly model of outreach and engagement that fosters a mutually beneficial collaborative relationship between the university and the public. While every major academic unit articulates outreach and engagement within the framework of its own mission, there are three common foundations to engagement throughout the university (*Provost's Committee on University Outreach 1993*).

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First, engagement is reciprocal. Rather than viewing the university as holder of expertise, partners engage in ways that reflect equality and reciprocity. Mutual interaction and input from all partners contribute to planning, implementation, and assessment.

Second, the university's three primary missions of research, teaching, and service are fully integrated in the engagement process. Engagement activities across academic units at MSU must integrate these three primary missions of the university.

Third, all engagement is scholarly. In our model of engagement, both the act of engaging (bringing universities and communities together) and the products of engagement (the spread of generated, evidence-based practice in communities) are scholarly endeavors.

Grounded principles of engagement: UCP bases its process of developing community partnerships on a set of grounded principles of successful partnerships derived from research and experience. The following set of principles was developed by Community-Campus Partnerships for Health (CCPH, CCPH Principles), but the components are commonly accepted (see, for example, *Israel et al. 1998* for the university perspective and *Leiderman et al. 2002* for the community perspective).

1. Partners have an agreed-upon mission, values, goals, and measurable outcomes for the partnership.
2. The partnership is based upon mutual trust, respect, genuineness, and commitment.
3. The partnership builds upon identified strengths and assets and addresses needs.
4. Power is balanced among partners, and resources are shared.
5. There is clear, open, accessible communication among partners.
6. There is feedback to, among, and from all stakeholders in the partnership.
7. Partners share credit for accomplishments.
8. Partnerships take time to develop.

In our experience, adhering to these principles helps bring clarity to the purpose and goals of the partnership and makes it more likely that the needs of all partners in the collaboration are heard and addressed. The principles also encourage the notion that all partners contribute to and all partners gain from the engagement process. A partnership based on these principles is likely to result in greater satisfaction for all participants, particularly community partners.

Supporting Structures for Transformative Engagement

For transformative engagement to be successful, partners must have appropriate and multiple ways of making and sustaining connections to each other and to information that will help them move through transformations. University Outreach and Engagement (UOE) provides several modes of connecting to support the UCP work. These modalities encompass individual and systemic connections in both face-to-face and electronic venues. They are designed to meet the needs of those engaged in partnerships while promoting evidence-based best practices in community agencies.

Ways of connecting to promote best practices: Capable communities Web site: The Capable Communities Web site (Michigan State University, University Outreach and Engagement), maintained by UOE, offers interested parties easy access to information about promoting positive change at the individual, family, neighborhood, interagency, or community level to deal more effectively with complex problems. It provides initial information about the Outcome–Asset Impact Model and real examples of how learning to use the model has led to community change.

The site offers a portal for community members, a low-cost and low-commitment way to initially connect. It includes information on training and technical assistance provided by UCP engagement specialists and contact information for those who want to pursue a connection. For those already engaged in a partnership and working through transformations, it provides further information.

Ways of connecting for community-based research—The AKTL Networks and Engagement Specialists’ Confab: The university expects individual faculty members to be involved in their own community research projects with individual groups or agencies; however, complex problems may not be amenable to single-discipline approaches. In addition, many funders are now requiring multidisciplinary teams. To support this shift, UCP organized two structures: AKTL Networks and the Engagement Specialists’ Confab.

The Advancing Knowledge, Transforming Lives (AKTL) Networks are designed to facilitate connections among faculty and staff who are or want to become engaged in community research in a certain community. UCP supports four networks of faculty working in the major urban areas and one in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, a rural area. These networks use electronic and face-to-face events to bring together faculty and staff who collaborate with community agencies, organizations, schools, public institutions, and businesses. This facilitation helps to create environments that can quickly respond to federal and foundation research opportunities for studies that have the potential to ameliorate complex community issues.

The Engagement Specialists’ Confab provides a forum for outreach specialists from across the university to connect with one another. The purpose is threefold:

1. To build multidisciplinary/multi-unit teams of engagement to facilitate AKTL Networks and connect those networks deeply into communities;

2. To increase the competency of our collective engagement work by learning from the various approaches used by different units to engage faculty and community; and
3. To build a cross-unit scholarship/research agenda on the act of engagement.

Members of the confab have formed work groups. Some groups provide consultation to members concerning specific community projects; others develop common definitions of engagement work.

Curricular ways of connecting: MSU defines curricular engagement as teaching, learning, and scholarship that engage faculty, students, and community in mutually beneficial and respectful collaboration. These interactions are supported by the institution to address community-identified needs, deepen student learning, enhance the well-being of the community, and enrich the scholarship of the college or university. Educational opportunities focused on engagement are offered through such venues as academic service-learning and civic engagement, course-affiliated internships, community-centered field experiences and practice, and study abroad.

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Because teaching is a central purpose of the university, curricular ways of connecting are important. UOE curricular engagement activities seek to enhance student learning by offering opportunities to apply learning in real-life situations and to develop curricular tools that will assist faculty in teaching about the engagement process. For example, the grounded principles of engagement and the O-AIM model form the core of a master’s level social work class that is required for MSW students who wish to concentrate on organizational and community practice.

Connecting students to communities: Service-Learning. MSU uses the Campus Compact definition of service-learning as “a teaching method which combines community services with academic instruction as it focuses on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility. Service-learning programs

involve students in organized community service that addresses local needs, while developing their academic skills, sense of civic responsibility, and commitment to the community” (Campus Compact). The students relate their service to their studies and other university-based experiences, allowing for real-world application of their learning and their personal, professional, leadership, and citizenship skills. In the 2004–2005 academic year, the UOE/Vice President for Student Affairs and Services Center for Service Learning and Civic Engagement placed 10,040 students with 350 community partners.

Teaching about connecting: Tools of Engagement. UCP is developing a series of learning modules on engagement competencies that will enhance current practice and help to instill in students and others the skills needed for community engagement. These modules could be delivered face to face, online, or through service-learning. Tools of Engagement will include topics such as:

- Personal qualities that are helpful within university-community engagement
- Skills and competencies needed for successful university-community engagement
- Roles within successful university-community partnerships
- Principles of university-community engagement.

The modules were selected based on a review of the literature on engagement as well as input from faculty and staff across the university. Recently UCP staff have begun developing an undergraduate course incorporating these modules that will be available to sophomores in a new residential college.

Summary

In this article we have described the ways in which UCP has taken a transformative approach to enact its three goals: (1) improve the ability of community partners to achieve changes that aid in the amelioration of community problems; (2) promote the use of actionable knowledge through our own community-based research and evaluation; and (3) enhance the capacity of faculty, students, and staff to conduct community-based research. Within the examples of UCP work—both community-based research and community interactions using outcome-based approaches—are

embedded such partnering principles as the coconstruction of projects and the transformation of those projects through the action-reflection iterative process.

UCP is well situated organizationally to disseminate these approaches and to provide connections among faculty, students, and community members. First, its administrative unit, University Outreach and Engagement (UOE), is an academic support unit reporting to the provost; thus it has parity with colleges and other academic units. Second, UCP has access to the expertise of other UOE units. UOE technical experts launch and maintain the Capable Communities Web site as a means for others in Michigan and beyond to locate the UCP's resources. In partnership with the Vice President for Student Affairs and Services, UOE coadministers the Center for Service-Learning and Civic Engagement through which students, faculty, and community partners are linked in a wide variety of student-, faculty-, and community-initiated projects.

Finally, UCP has initiated specific methods for connection to support its goals. The AKTL Networks and the Specialists' Confab are designed to increase the likelihood that faculty and staff working on complex community problems will be able to locate others with similar interests. A recent breakfast meeting UCP hosted for the Lansing (Michigan) AKTL and members of the "Power of We" Consortium (the expanded human services coordinating body) brought together seventy-five individuals to hear about each other's projects and meet in small groups to discuss topics such as the local economy, early childhood education, and health. The Tools of Engagement project was launched to provide curricular modules that faculty can use with their students; the modules will eventually be offered as a course in the residential college that will admit students in fall 2007.

UCP staff consider the approaches described in this article to be "promising" rather than "best" practice. That is, the practices described are locally or specifically successful, but are not necessarily generalizable. Two initiatives are under way that transcend these predominantly local community- or university-oriented approaches. The first is an evaluation of UCP's own work that a new UCP staff person has undertaken, querying faculty, staff, and community members who have been partners on projects since 2000. This study will not only provide insight into UCP's engagement interfaces (where faculty, students, community members, and staff work jointly to solve problems; *Fear et al.*

2001), thus offering opportunity for improvement in the unit's practices; it will also add to the growing body of literature on university-community engagement. The second initiative is a proposal to a national foundation that has been jointly developed by the UCP, faculty members, and individuals from the Lansing Power of We Consortium. The aim of this initial proposal is to plan a model process through which faculty and community members can engage for mutual benefit, transforming the culture of the university. The goal of the larger (second) proposal will be to carry out that transformation, changing the ways that the university and communities can work together to solve problems and build healthier communities. When this initiative is concluded, the entire university, not just individual faculty or students or units charged with the role (i.e., UOE, Extension, and Service-Learning) will be versed in transformative engagement.

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About the Authors

- Robert E. Brown is the associate director of community engagement at University-Community Partnerships. His specialty is in the integration of planning, evaluation, and asset development through the design of multiple-level change strategies and their adaptation for use by local community leaders. He is coauthor, with Celeste Sturdevant Reed, of “Outcome/Impact Assessment Model: Linking Outcomes and Assets” in *Evaluation and Program Planning* and “An Integral Approach to Evaluating Outcome Evaluation Training” in the *American Journal of Evaluation*. A description of their work can be found on the Capable Communities Web site. Currently, Brown utilizes the Outcome-Asset Impact Model in both training and community partnership settings. Prior to joining the University-Community Partnerships team, he worked for United Way of Michigan in a variety of management positions, including interim president. Brown holds a master’s degree in public administration from Western Michigan University.
- Celeste Sturdevant Reed is an evaluator at University-Community Partnerships and the Institute for Children, Youth, and Families. During her tenure at MSU, she has worked on youth development, community problem-solving, evaluation, and professional development efforts. Currently Reed is the co-principal investigator for the Michigan Statewide Evaluation of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers project, a contract with the Michigan Department of Education. Previously she was a member of the MSU-based research/evaluation team working with the Michigan Statewide Evaluation of the All Students Achieve Program—Parent Involvement in Education (ASAP-PIE), the Northwest Michigan GivEm 40 initiative, and the evaluator for the Traverse City public schools 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant. Most of her evaluation efforts focus on building the capacity of evaluation partners, carried out through formal training as well as individual consultation. She is coauthor, with Robert E. Brown, of “Outcome/Impact Assessment Model: Linking Outcomes and Assets” in *Evaluation and Program Planning* and “An Integral Approach to Evaluating Outcome Evaluation Training” in the *American Journal of Evaluation*. A description of their work can be found on the Capable Communities Web site. Reed holds a Ph.D. in labor and industrial relations from Michigan State University.
- Laura V. Bates is a research associate at University-Community Partnerships and the Institute for Children, Youth, and Families. Bates has seven years of experience in managing community research projects and developing university-community partnerships. She is on the management team for the

state evaluation of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers after-school programs and works on several other community-based projects. She coordinates the Michigan Family Impact Seminars, which inform state policymakers about research on family issues, and edits a series of briefs that translate research into the language of policymakers. Before coming to the university she had twenty years of experience in program development and management in early childhood and youth development. Bates holds an M.A. in child development from Michigan State University.

- David Knaggs is an engagement specialist at University-Community Partnerships and a clinical faculty member at the MSU School of Social Work. As an engagement specialist, Knaggs provides asset-based social change training and consultation to human service agencies and community groups in both rural and urban settings. Some of Knaggs' projects include: facilitating the design and implementation of a five-year strategic plan for United Way of Genesee to shift their fund distribution from project-based to asset-based outcomes; designing and implementing a plan to refocus the Catholic Social Services/St. Vincent Home organization to develop mission-based, asset-grounded outcome measures across sixteen of their programs; and helping to facilitate the West Saginaw/Oakland Study of the Built Environment and Its Effects on Social Capital and Community Health. Prior to joining UOE, Knaggs worked in human services for over twenty-eight years. He spent much of that time working in state government, primarily for the Michigan Family Independence Agency, as director of various divisions related to children's services. Knaggs holds a master of social work degree from Western Michigan University.

- Karen McKnight Casey is the director of the Center for Service-Learning and Civic Engagement (CSLCE), which is jointly funded by UOE and Student Affairs and Services. Casey is responsible for facilitating university initiatives that provide curricular and co-curricular service-based learning and engagement opportunities for MSU students. Casey works closely with faculty, university administrators, community partners, and students to ensure that opportunities are offered that meet academic, personal, professional, and civic development goals, while also addressing the expressed needs of the community. Casey also directs the MSU America Reads/America Counts initiatives. In addition, she serves as adjunct faculty in the Department of Family and Child Ecology, and as a field instructor in the School of Social Work. Casey holds a B.A. in social work from Michigan State University.

- Jessica V. Barnes is a research associate at University-Community Partnerships and a University Outreach and Engagement fellow. She conducts both program evaluations

and basic research. Barnes has established and led the evaluations for numerous prevention programs for families with young children. The evaluations have focused on gathering information about the relationships among family members in prevention programs and family functioning, child social development, and child cognitive development. Currently, Barnes is working in collaboration with Genesee Intermediate School District to develop a longitudinal study that examines the effectiveness of a variety of physical and mental health programs. Barnes holds a Ph.D. in developmental psychology from Michigan State University.