

# The Intersection of Knowledge and Engagement: Patterns in Community Partners' Experiences with a Place-Based Community Engagement Program

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## Abstract

*The challenge & consequences:* Higher education organizations (HEOs) invest in service-learning, internships, and community-based research, which generally require partnerships with community organizations. However, the impact of these programs on the community partners remains poorly understood. This results in a poor understanding of the potential benefits and/or costs to community organizations of these partnerships. *Description:* To address this, we conducted a mixed-methods embedded case study, examining community partners' experiences within a place-based engagement program at a four-year urban university in the Southwest. *Findings & reflection:* Focus groups revealed that student volunteers were valuable to community partners, but challenges in coordination were prevalent. Additionally, the alignment between the program's goals and mission varied among partners. Focus groups also revealed a two-dimensional understanding of community partners' experiences, categorized by engagement and knowledge. Survey results added nuance and breadth to these findings while providing a more detailed assessment of costs and benefits for community partners. Findings suggest that HEOs can leverage this two-dimensional understanding, prioritize mission alignment, and emphasize assessment and mitigation of costs to better support community partner organizations.

**Keywords:** place-based community engagement, community partners, case study, higher education, higher education-community partnership, mixed methods, partnership assessment, community-engaged research

## Introduction

Colleges and universities, henceforth higher education organizations (HEOs), can contribute to the social and cultural development of the community/(ies) and places in which they are located. In recent years, particularly since the mid-2000s, HEOs nationwide have increased their engagement with their communities (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020; Moore, 2014), including growth in place-based or hyperlocal engagement in recent years (Dostilio et al., 2019; Gruenewald & Smith, 2014; Yamamura & Koth, 2018). This engagement has taken various forms, including service-learning, internships, and community-based research opportunities, many of which provide students with real-world learning experiences (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009). These engagement efforts can strengthen the relations between the HEO and the community and animate HEO's commitment to the public purposes of higher education. However, they can also create or exacerbate tensions and conflicts between HEOs and their communities (Durlington et al., 2024; Strier, 2011).

While existing research has assessed the benefits of community engagement for students and faculty, and less frequently HEOs (Holland, 2009; Schatteman, 2014), limited attention has been paid to the experience of the community partners (CPs) and the larger communities (e.g., Koekkoek et al., 2021; Yamamura & Koth, 2018). This is a notable oversight, particularly in light of the increased emphasis on both the literature and community engagement practices surrounding the creation of equitable and mutually beneficial partnerships (Moore, 2014; Quan, 2023; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000).

This study aims to address this gap by focusing explicitly on the experiences of community partnership organizations (CPs). We employ a mixed-methods case study of a relatively young single urban HEO community engagement program at a four-year private urban university in the Southwest to evaluate the experiences of CPs. Using an exploratory approach and leveraging both qualitative focus group and quantitative survey analyses, we evaluate patterns of CP experiences and develop (1) a framework for understanding CP experiences and (2) suggestions for best practices for HEOs that are looking to establish, or have recently established, community engagement programs. We address two research questions:

- (1) What are the community partners' experiences of their HEO partnership?
- (2) What are the differences and patterns in community partners' assessments of their HEO partnership?

Our study makes three contributions. First, as noted above, our findings directly address a knowledge gap in the literature on higher education community engagement regarding the experiences of CPs. Second, this study combines qualitative *and* quantitative data to develop a comprehensive, two-dimensional understanding of CP experiences, that is, we argue, a useful practical tool to help HEOs that are looking to develop, or have recently begun developing,

community engagement initiatives do so intentionally. This framework is also a notable contribution to existing literature, capturing key aspects of CPs' experiences that are underdeveloped in existing literature. Third, we provide clear recommendations for HEOs that are developing these partnerships or are in the early stages of a community engagement initiative to foster more equitable and lasting relationships with CPs.

## Higher Education Community Engagement

HEOs have engaged with their community since their inception (Martin et al., 2005; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). For example, "land-grant extension is an ongoing example of higher education outreach and community engagement" (Collins, 2015, p. 37). In more recent years, HEOs have created formal structures, practices, and programs to support community engagement efforts (Driscoll, 2009; Osafo & Yawson, 2019). Community engagement has evolved, actively involving community members in the decision-making and planning processes that affect them (Moore, 2014). Many HEOs utilize engagement to establish trust, credibility, and relationships with community members as they strive to address social and community issues (Haarman & Green, 2023; Flanagan & Levine, 2010). However, HEOs also exist, both currently and historically, in tension with their communities due to patterns of exclusion and practices that seek to build walls rather than bridges with them (Baldwin, 2021). Therefore, for some HEOs, community engagement involves transforming that relationship to serve as an anchor and a positive contributor to their communities (Holley & Harris, 2017; Orphan & McClure, 2019).

Regardless of the motivation, community engagement among HEOs often takes the form of service-learning projects, internships, community-based research, and community service spanning the research, curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular aspects of HEOs' activities (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009). Curricular and co-curricular engagement, often taking the form of service learning, combines classroom instruction with practical, organized service projects in the community that engage multiple stakeholders both within and outside of the HEO (e.g., students, faculty, and CPs) (Lounsbury & Pollack, 2001; Rinaldo et al., 2015). Research has repeatedly highlighted the benefits of these partnerships for the students and less often for CPs (Compare et al., 2022). This is underscored by Chika-James et. al. (2022, p.2) who assert, "[i]n assessing the impact of service-learning ... most studies focus on its effects on students' learning outcomes, whereas the experiences and perspectives of community partners have received far less attention." The lack of attention to CPs is particularly striking, given that Petri (2015) concluded that for a successful service-learning partnership, it is essential that CPs feel the HEO recognizes and values their investment and, with others (e.g., Stewart & Alrutz, 2012; Vernon & Ward, 1999), has called for greater involvement of CPs in service learning.

Faculty engagement with communities can be in the context of student engagement efforts (e.g., service-learning), or via research on, or in collaboration with the community/CPs, (Butcher et al.,

2011). In these roles, faculty members can serve as ambassadors for the HEO with the community (Holley & Harris, 2017; Martin et al., 2005). When faculty engage in successful campus-community partnerships, they develop mutual trust and respect, communicate clearly and listen carefully, understand and empathize with each other, remain flexible, and share power (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). However, it is not uncommon for research partnerships between faculty and/or HEOs and the community to be points of tension (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000; Weerts, 2007). This can occur when faculty fail to recognize and capitalize on the expertise of the community and the individuals therein, which can lead to ineffective research and resentment from the community in response to what some have called the “cult of the expert” (Cantor et al., 2013; Holley & Harris, 2017). Sometimes, leading to experiences of extractive knowledge and epistemic injustice (McHugh et al., 2024).

While community engagement is widely documented in higher education, this work is not contained solely within this literature. Disciplines such as geography, anthropology, sociology, and environmental studies have long-standing traditions of place-centered and community-collaborative research (Bunge, 2022; Kane, 2024; Koopman, 2024). These fields often use different terminology (e.g., participatory action research, public geographies, or collaborative ethnography) but share commitments to localized knowledge, shared authority, and attention to spatialized power relationships that we highlight here (London et al., 2024; Kondon et al., 2007).

Overall, the literature to date has documented the benefits that students, faculty, and to a lesser degree, HEOs derive from this engagement. Yet far less emphasis is placed on understanding the benefits to communities and community partners (e.g., Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). A notable exception is in the field of geography, which has published special issues featuring community leader perspectives that center community voice and positionality in partnership development (Barcus & Trudeau, 2017). Existing literature also notes the inequities in these partnerships and how they can create tensions between and within the organizations involved (Brackmann, 2015; Strier, 2011); however, our knowledge of the CPs' experiences remains limited. Given this gap, we turn to place-based and hyperlocal community engagement, which centers on the possible inequities of HEO-community engagement practices and grounds our study conceptually.

## **Place-Based and Hyper-Local Community Engagement**

Place-based and hyper-local community engagement emphasize equal attention to both the community and HEOs, explicitly acknowledging town-gown relationships and tensions in seeking while pushing back against the literature that has historically centered the HEOs within our understanding of HEO-community engagement (e.g., Jackson et al., 2020; Leigh, 2017). The place-based and hyper-local aspects of this work acknowledge the unique situation of each HEO-community partnership, arguing that there is no ideal set of practices that can be a solution to all

community problems. Instead, it focuses on the long-term relationship, as each CP's needs will differ (Leigh, 2017). This work also centers on the diversity, equity, and power dynamics between HEOs, their communities, and their CPs (Gruenewald & Smith, 2014).

We have adopted the place-based community engagement (PBCE) framework to situate this paper because it centers the CPs, our focus, and it is also central to the HEO-community partnership studied here. Specifically, we draw on the work of Yamamura and Koth (2018), who argue that PBCE is distinct from other types of community engagement because it focuses on building relationships and addressing local issues. In their words, it is a "comprehensive strategy for universities and communities to more democratically partner with each other through long-term efforts focused on distinct geographic areas" (Yamamura & Koth, 2019, p. 181). Yamamura and Koth (2019) developed a PBCE model centered on five key elements, united by a strategic focus and supported by resources, to maximize its impact on those communities. These elements are a geographically defined focus, "equal emphasis on campus and community", a "long-term vision and commitment", HEO-wide engagement, and utilizing an emphasis on collective impact (Yamamura & Koth, 2018). These elements serve to ground long-term HEO-wide commitments to partner with residents, organizations, and other leaders to focus equally on campus (Perrotti et al., 2024) and community impact within a clearly defined geographic area.

## Data and Methods

This exploratory mixed-methods embedded case study describes the experiences of CPs and identifies patterns in how they experienced a single higher education PBCE program in 2022 (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2003). We chose an exploratory embedded case study because it allowed us to (1) develop an empirical understanding of the structure, dynamics, and context of the case (Yin, 2003). It also allowed us to compare CPs' experiences as embedded units in the case so that we could understand how the CP experiences differed given their different missions, capacities, and partnership durations. We secured IRB approval for this study and its associated protocols.

We utilized a mixed methods approach beginning with qualitative focus groups to provide an initial understanding of the CPs' experiences. This then grounded our quantitative survey development and analysis to understand the larger patterns in those experiences. By leveraging both focus groups and surveys sequentially, we developed a more intentional research design and captured a broader range of information about the CPs we focused on in this study (Creswell, 2014; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

## Site and Community Partners

As noted above, we have a single case, an HEO-community partnership program, which contains embedded units—CPs—that we are interested in comparing. The selected site and case met two criteria: (1) it operationalized a PBCE framework and (2) it equally emphasized the campus and community, drawing upon the concept of collective impact through published reports and stated website goals. The Metro Engagement Program (MEP) is focused on an explicitly delineated geographic area, has a long-term vision that centered community-HEO alignment, and is part of an HEO-wide engagement effort, involving multiple offices on campus. MEP is housed within a 4-year private midsized, historically white; majority undergraduate university located in a large urban area in the Southwest. Within the urban area the university is located in a more affluent area, while MEP focuses on is less affluent and more demographically diverse than the university.

The HEO employs a full-time staff member to oversee MEP, and a board of campus partners is responsible for implementation. MEP also employs undergraduate students as student directors to engage with CPs, plan monthly and large-scale service projects, and organize undergraduate student volunteers. At the time of our study, MEP was within its first three years of implementation, and the program engaged with 34 CPs covering a range of areas and social issues, including youth engagement programs, community services (e.g., housing, food pantries), and community wellbeing and support. Though MEP offers avenues for sustained, individual service with CPs through solo service and internships, the most popular forms of engagement at the time of the study were monthly small group projects for 10-15 students or a large-scale annual service project for several hundred students. This resulted in an undergraduate student volunteer base that changes frequently and engages intermittently.

The participants of interest for both the focus groups and surveys, were the MEP CP organizations and their representatives. We obtained a roster of official program CPs and their representative(s) from MEP program administrators who served as gatekeepers at the time of the study. CP organizations ( $n = 34$ ) had 35 representatives who were all contacted via a roster method (Marsden, 1990) to participate in the focus group and subsequent survey. All members were invited to complete the survey regardless of participation in the focus group. A personalized, tailored recruitment design method (Dillman et al., 2014) was utilized to increase participation. All participants provided informed consent before enrollment in each phase of the study.

## Focus Groups

We convened two focus groups with the CP representatives based on their availability and provided participants with a \$40 retail gift card as an incentive (Creswell, 2014). For each focus group audio and video recordings were collected and transcribed by a professional transcription service. Table 1 presents descriptive information for the 11 focus group participants, from 10

CPs, which yielded a 29% organizational participation rate overall. These participants were majority female and majority underrepresented minority. Five had been with their organizations for less than one year and three for more than four years and they occupied a number of different roles within their organizations representing a diversity of experience.

**TABLE 1.** Focus group participant table

<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>Pseudonyms</b>	<b>Organization Type</b>	<b>Position/Title</b>	<b>Time at the organization</b>
1	Jessica	Social Services	Operations Director	4 years
1	Chelsea	Environmental	Coordinator	Less than 1 year
1	Meredith	Education	Manager	Less than 1 year
1	Jade	Community Development	Director	1 year
1	Ashley	Social Services	Associate Director	2 years
2	Denise	Education	External Relations Manager	5 years
2	Jane	Social Services	Community Coordinator	Less than 1 year
2	Rachel	Social Services	External Relations Manager	Less than 1 year
2	Sara	Education	External Relations Manager	5 years
2	Alice	Education	Operations Director	Less than 1 year
2	Jake	Education	CEO	5 years

After a norming meeting, one research team member served as a moderator and another as a note-taker in each focus group. The note taker observed non-verbal notes of agreement or dissent and took notes throughout the focus group, which were used for triangulation during data analysis. The research team developed a facilitator script to aid the dependability that the moderator used within both focus groups (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Eight questions were developed and organized to build rapport, with introductory and transition questions preceding the core questions (Krueger & Casey, 2002). These questions focused on the benefits and

challenges the partners experienced within the partnership; how the partnership contributed to the partner organization's mission and goals, or not; and about other partnerships the partner organizations were involved in relative to the partnership with MEP.

In our analysis we used a two-cycle coding approach. We first met as a team to develop a priori codes based on our review of the focus group transcripts and our knowledge of the existing literature (Saldana, 2016). We utilized Dedoose to aid in developing an audit trail and facilitating collaboration among the research team. We adapted Glesne's approach to coding, which views it as "a progressive process of sorting and defining those scraps of collected data...that apply to your research purpose" (2006, p. 152). Two people coded each focus group transcript independently, incorporating additional inductive codes as needed to capture the voice and sentiments of the participants (Saldana, 2016). A second coding meeting was held to discuss the new inductive codes and ensure that we were all applying them consistently. We then conducted an additional coding round to ensure that all codes were fully applied to all transcripts. In our third meeting we discussed the patterns and themes that emerged from our coding creating an additional grouping of codes and developing the three findings outlined below along with the two dimensions we used to understand how the CP organizations compared to each other.

## Survey

After we analyzed the focus group data, we developed an online, 44-question survey to identify the larger patterns within the CP's experiences of the MEP partnership. We used the focus group themes to develop our survey, which included six sections: informed consent; representative and organization details; awareness of engagement modes; knowledge, importance, and satisfaction with MEP; benefits/costs of the partnership; and proposals for improvement. Construct and face validity of all of these questions were checked by members of the research team and the MEP leadership staff (Creswell, 2014).

The same 35 MEP CP representatives were invited to participate in the surveys as in the focus groups. Surveys were sent to CP representatives approximately four months after the conduction of focus groups. Of those representatives, 60% started and 43% finished the survey, representing 21 participants at 19 unique organizations. Participants were incentivized to complete the survey with a \$10 gift card to a coffee shop. We used data from all responses, but were attentive to complete responses within each question. Therefore, percentages are relative to the total responses for individual questions. Across the survey participants, the average tenure at their organization was 5.30 years, and they had been in their current role for 3.85 years on average. Approximately half were MEP partners for less than one year, seven for 13 – 24 months and three did not know how long they had been an MEP partner. The CP representatives varied in the amount of time they worked explicitly with MEP in their organizations, ranging from less than six months (45%), 7-12 months (25%), and 13–24 months (30%). Survey responses were

analyzed using descriptive statistics which are appropriate for our second research question, which focuses on patterns across CP experiences (Creswell, 2014).

## Positionality

The research team consisted of two faculty members, one staff member, and a graduate and an undergraduate student. Two were very familiar with MEP, while the other members were less familiar with the program. No member of the research team had formal interactions with the CP representatives before the study. We are predominantly women (n = 4) and White (n = 3), and all believe in the potential benefits of HEO community engagement.

## Findings

We first use our focus group analysis to assess the experience of CPs via their partnership with MEP (RQ1). We outline the three key findings drawn from the focus groups and then turn to a two-dimensional framework of CPs that more holistically captures their experiences and can be used as a tool for both researchers and practitioners seeking to establish community engagement initiatives. We then use the survey data to evaluate the broader patterns and trends in how the CPs assess their partnership with MEP (RQ2). Throughout this section, and in all tables and figures, participants were assigned pseudonyms and CP organization names and demographic details were also blinded to ensure confidentiality for both the individuals and the organizations.

### Focus Groups: Community Partner Experiences

Three findings emerged in our focus group analysis; we address each in turn. First, an often-cited benefit of the partnership for the CP organization was the benefit of college student volunteers and that the partnership was a source of volunteers. For example, Jane shared that having college student volunteers often resulted in the students later serving in internships with partner organizations. Another CP, Sara, noted that “having college students working with the kids is a big benefit because a lot of the kids don’t have someone with college, so having that in their life and learn from that is great.” Jessica shared similar sentiments, stating that “volunteers are the heartbeat of everything we do. We could not do any of our programming and serve people well without volunteers like the [MEP] students.”

Second, these CPs highlighted the difficulty of coordination and communication between the two partner organizations, often relative to paid student workers that served as coordinators between MEP and the CPs. Alice summed up a common experience of CPs by stating that:

[t]he other challenge...was when I was coordinating with my [student coordinator], sometimes that communication might have been a little bit spotty or a little difficult, and that was my only person to coordinate getting a group together So, it's kind of hard relying maybe on that one person to do all the coordinating on their side to make sure we have a group coming or that kind of thing.

Our third finding was that their partnership had both benefits and costs for CP organizations. Many of the CPs highlighted how the partnership was beneficial and contributed to their goals through the presence of additional volunteers, which provided them with increased capacity. Ashley noted that “[v]olunteers have been extremely important for us right now...and having the students has been something that's kind of helped me...So we're extremely grateful for the opportunity, having young energy.” Courtney shared similar sentiments, explicitly sharing that “volunteers are the heartbeat of everything we do. We could not do any of our programming and serve people well without volunteers like the [MEP] students.” However, other partners highlighted how the format of engagement and schedules of student volunteers didn't strongly align with the services they provided for their constituents. For example, a CP noted that campus-wide service days are “always a challenge because it requires that they cater to volunteers.” Another highlighted how even when presented with different opportunities, students rarely took them up on them, saying, “I feel like we presented quite a few volunteer opportunities, but they only took us up on one during that time period so.” This was a sentiment shared by multiple CPs. In addition, some highlighted how the nature of engagement necessitated diverting resources from other activities. For example, the need to have staff present on the weekends to support the volunteer engagement of MEP students and the monetary costs of having the students present via the need for simple things like additional tools, water, etc. Sara shared that big volunteer groups are:

not free for us. And it costs a lot on our side to prep for big groups to come to have the supplies, the materials, ... So, it's always helpful when they're conscious of that and knowing that the burden that they're placing on the organization when they bring these large groups.

Thus, for some partners, while the partnership didn't hinder their mission and goals, it did divert resources and the capacity of their staff away from other activities.

While these findings were common across both focus groups, as a team, we determined that they didn't fully capture the nuance and multidimensional nature of how the CP organizations described their varied experiences. Across both focus groups, it was clear that while there were commonalities and differences in how the CPs presented their experiences of engagement, there were also dimensions by which their experiences differed.

## Focus Groups: Two-Dimensional Understanding of Partners' Experiences

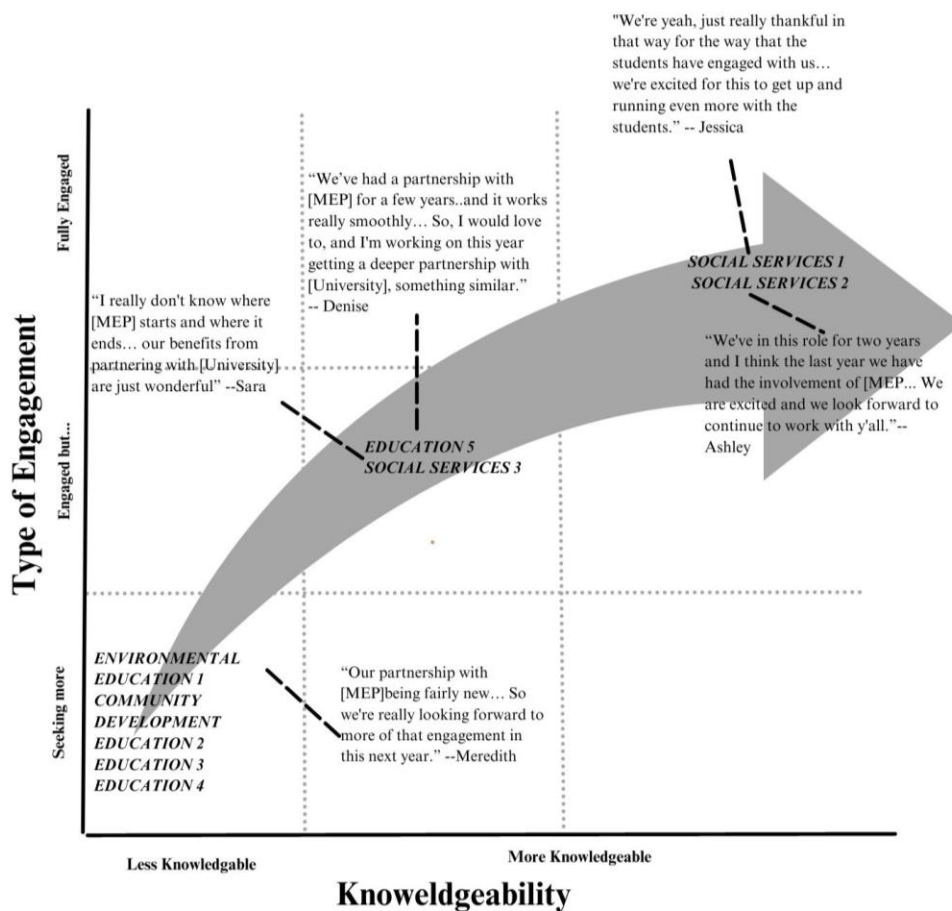
Upon a closer and more holistic examination of the patterns of responses of the different CPs across the themes above, and more generally, two key dimensions arose: the current type of engagement and knowledge of the MEP partnership. We could classify all ten partners across these two dimensions. We used a visual depiction of the cases during our coding and analysis discussions to understand the two dimensions and the classification of cases. Figure 1 shows a refined version of this below.

The first dimension, types of engagement, captures CPs' perceptions of their engagement with MEP. There are three forms this engagement takes on. The first is *fully engaged*. These are the CPs that are engaged with the partnership, experience its value, and want to continue/maintain the partnership. An example of this is a social service provider who, through their MEP connection, became involved in other initiatives at the HEO that proved very beneficial to their organization; Jessica said, "we were submitted as part of [a community funding initiative] through [MEP], and we won. And so that was like a huge, awesome connection." Ashley from a second social service provider shared her excitement with how well the engagement was working for them "So I am extremely happy to have this working relationship and partnership with [HEO] because it's helped filled slots in spaces where we really needed volunteers and we didn't have that capacity...[w]e are excited, and we look forward to continue to work with y'all."

The second engagement category is "*engaged but...*" and includes the CPs that are engaged and appear to experience some benefits like the *fully engaged* group. However, the two organizations in this group emphasized, sometimes on multiple occasions, how some of their other partnerships were more beneficial than the MEP partnership. Denise, from an education-oriented CP, shared that their partnership with another HEO that "works really smoothly," following this up with an interest in expanding engagement with MEP: "I would love to, and I'm working on this year getting a deeper partnership with [MEP], something similar." Rachel, from a third social service provider, shared their experiences with some of their longstanding partners, highlighting how those partnerships work well because "we know what to expect, we know how many people are coming." She then implicitly contrasted this with the experience with MEP by saying that "[i]t's just knowing what is coming up versus kind of waiting and seeing what happens." It is important to note, as the quotes demonstrate, that there is no malice or overt critique or censure by these CPs towards MEP.

The third category is *seeking more* which captures CPs who want to be more engaged in their participation, knowledge, and training/onboarding. Put another way; these partners haven't found the "ideal" level for their MEP involvement. It should also be noted that these partners are optimistic and hopeful about the potential of the partnership, which contrasts with the second *engaged but* group. For example, Jake from a second education-oriented CP shared, "[s]o, I think we're looking for a more unique skill set with some of our areas...But for our larger events...that'd be a great opportunity for students to be able to tap in there, but we just couldn't

really offer too much for this past semester for the students.” Chelsea, from an environmental CP, shared her excitement about opportunities: “I feel like there is huge opportunity to partner with [MEP] in the future and see how we can best use the students and give them experiences that are going to perhaps enhance their resumes that they go into the workforce.” Sara from a third education-oriented CP showcased the benefit of working with MEP sharing how the children they work with “get a lot out of just talking with someone and building that relationship and having that influence in their life to know that's an option for them and to discover more ways of how they may attend college and to get that help for their future aspirations.” She further put it more succinctly saying “[t]hat's priceless for our kids.” In short, these three different types of engagement exhibit variation across CPs in the nature and scope of their engagement with and view of MEP, resulting from their type of engagement.



**FIGURE 1.** Two-dimensional understanding of community partners.

The second dimension is the level of knowledge the CPs have about the MEP partnership. For example, how familiar they are with the different opportunities for engagement and the different aspects of the partnership. Within the knowledgeable dimension, we had two categories, *knowledgeable* and *less knowledgeable*. *Knowledgeable* included those CPs that clearly

understood the structure, processes, and cadence of the partnership, the forms or modalities of engagement, and had experience participating in these. These partners were often, but not always, the partners that had been involved for longer periods. The liaison with MEP was also often more stable or established within these organizations. For example, Ashley illustrates her knowledge of partnership sharing “[t]he students are good at communicating. I will say that we were in a place of transition when we first started working with [MEP]...So that just wasn't communicated, and we've tried to do better with that.” Ashley initially expressed frustration, which was alleviated as she gained a deeper understanding of the students and the MEP program, and adapted strategies to enhance the partnership. Jessica shared her experience with the program and continued with how it relates to their regular opportunities providing rich explanations of the different impacts of services which illustrated her knowledge of MEP offerings.

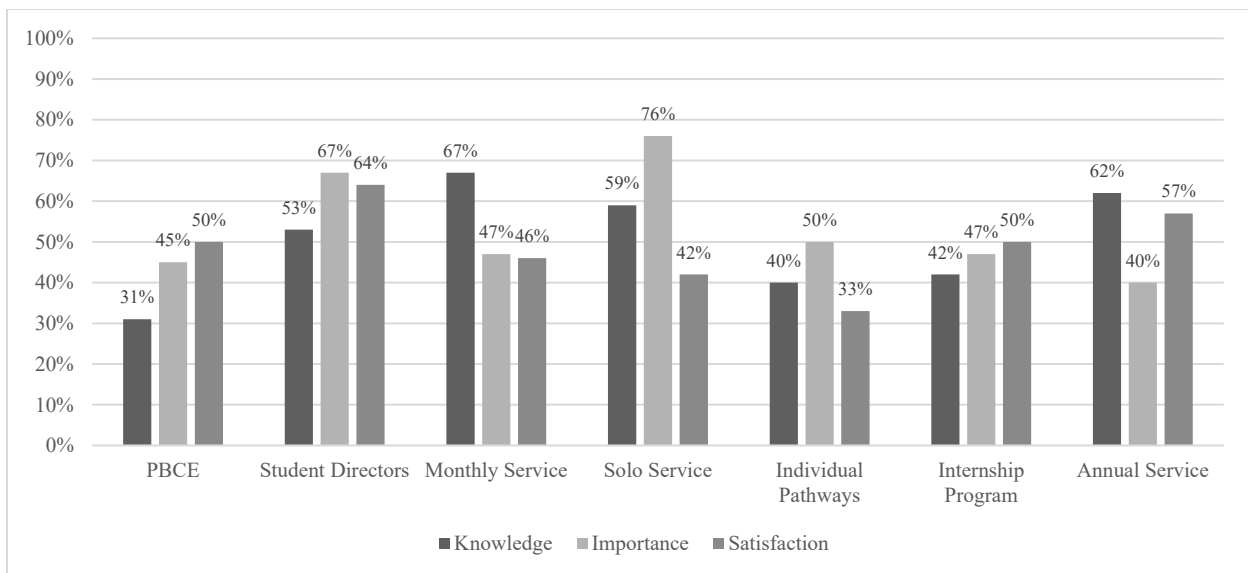
Those *less knowledgeable* partners were frequently, but not always, newer CPs that had only been members of the partnership for six months or less and thus had less knowledge and experience with the partnerships. For instance, Chelsea remarked, “I don't know the answer to that question, exactly. I'm not sure how often [MEP] specifically was working with us...” when asked about how MEP students contribute to their organizational mission. Plus, Meredith recalls when addressing the difficulty of partnering due to COVID “our partnership with [MEP] being fairly new and because a lot of our work is direct with the schools.” Other participants indirectly referenced their lower level of knowledge of MEP with caveats to their statements like “correct me if I'm wrong” or “I can't remember if this is [MEP] or [another HEO], but...”.

It is important to note that while we had options for putting CPs in six discreet categories across these two dimensions. However, as Figure 1 shows, the CPs participating in the focus groups fell into only three of the six possible categories. There were no *less knowledgeable* organizations in the *fully engaged* or *engaged but* categories, nor was there a *knowledgeable* organization that was also in the *seeking more* engagement category. In short, these dimensions would suggest that a certain level of knowledge is necessary to achieve higher levels of engagement within this partnership. This framework was crucial in helping us to understand the CPs' perspectives and how knowledge and engagement are interrelated. We explore these patterns, particularly in relation to knowledgeability, using our survey results, which we turn to next.

## Survey Results: Knowledge of Community Partners

As noted above, we surveyed the CPs involved in MEP to evaluate the broader patterns and trends in how they assessed their partnership with MEP (RQ2). We first address their knowledge of MEP before turning to mission and goal alignment, and the costs and benefits of this partnership for CPs.

To follow up on the importance of the knowledge of the partnership from the focus groups, we asked a series of questions regarding CPs' knowledge of, perceived importance, and satisfaction with various aspects of MEP (e.g., paid student directors, service opportunities, and place-based engagement). Figure 2 illustrates the percentage of respondents who rated their knowledge ( $n=17$ ), importance ( $n=17$ ), and satisfaction ( $n=14$ ) with MEP aspects as high or very high. Figure 2 highlights the variation in knowledge about different aspects of the program that echo the patterns seen in the focus groups (e.g., most knowledgeable about monthly service, least knowledgeable about the PBCE framework). It also highlights a disconnect between those aspects where CPs had the most knowledge and which were most important to them. The partners indicated that solo service opportunities and paid student directors were the most important aspects of their work (76% and 67%, respectively). However, just over half of respondents expressed high or very high knowledge of these (59% and 53% respectively). In addition, despite being very knowledgeable about annual service opportunities, only 40% of CPs indicated that this was of high/very high importance to them. In addition, while the overall satisfaction of CPs was relatively high, there were also disconnects here. For example, despite its perceived importance to CPs, solo service and individual pathways had among the lowest satisfaction levels, with only 42% and 33% of respondents respectively expressing high/very high satisfaction.

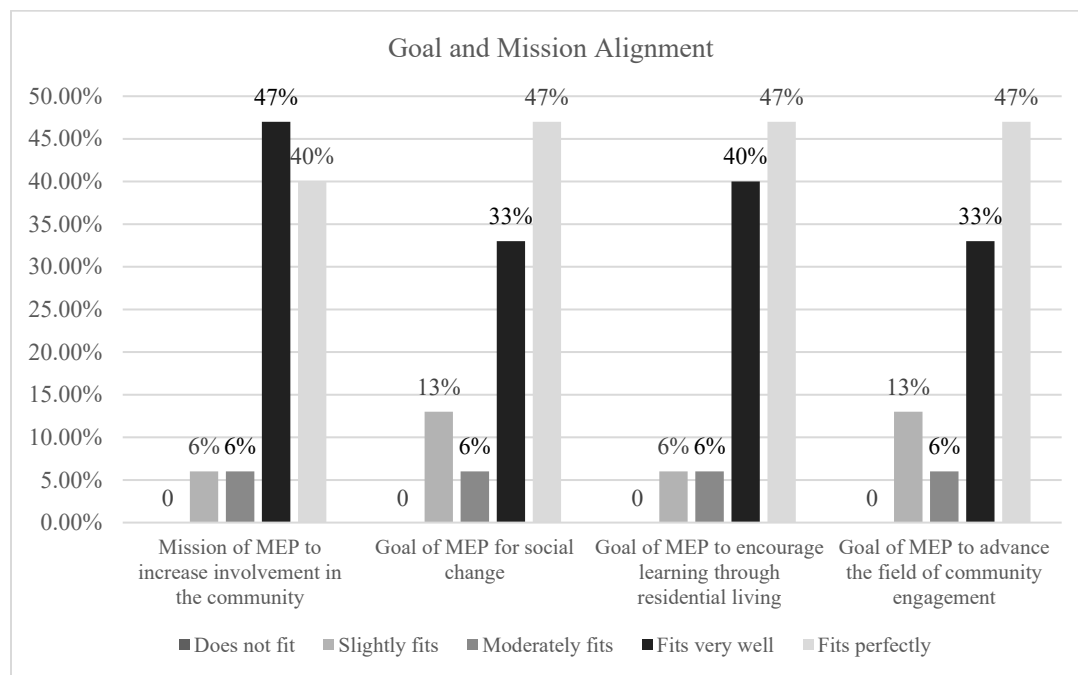


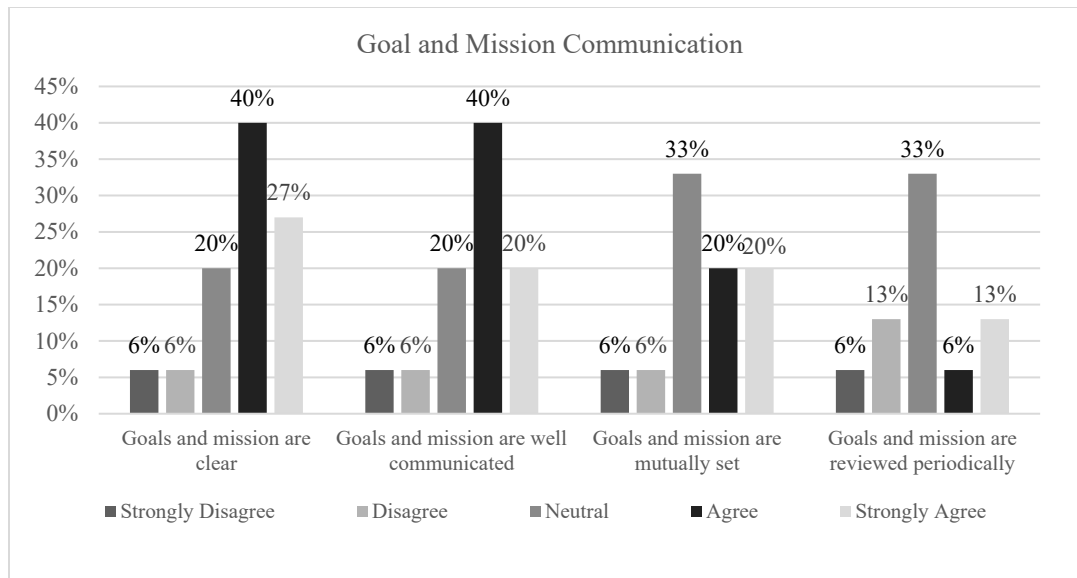
**FIGURE 2.** Knowledge ( $n=17$ ), importance ( $n=17$ ), and satisfaction ( $n=14$ ) with MEP elements: Percentage of community partners rating these as high or very high.

### Survey Results: Mission Fulfillment and Alignment

We also sought to understand the motivations of CPs for collaborating with MEP and therefore asked them to select their top five reasons for engaging in this partnership. The three reasons most often identified by respondents ( $n=15$ ) were that the partnership fulfills their mission (86%), develops relationships with the HEO (79%), and the positive impact on “social issues and the community/ies served” (71%). This highlights the multiple utilities of the MEP partnership for CPs.

Figure 3 echoes the respondents ( $n=15$ ) reasons for engaging the partnership. Panel 1 shows that most CP felt that the MEP's mission and goals were highly aligned with theirs. Respondents indicated their organization’s mission and goals fit perfectly or very well into MEP’s mission to increase community involvement (87%), goal of developing local opportunities for social change (80%), goal to encourage learning through residential housing (87%), and the goal to advance the field of community engagement (80%). However, CPs were less positive about MEP’s communication related to mission and goals. Overall, the CPs felt that there was clarity and communication regarding mission and goals, (67% and 64% respectively agreeing/strongly agreeing). However, less than half of CPs agreed or strongly agreed that the goals and mission were set mutually (46%) or reviewed periodically (27%).





**FIGURE 3.** Community partner perspectives of mission and goal alignment and communication (n=15).

### Survey Results: Costs and Benefits of Resources

To delve deeper into the satisfaction of CPs with the MEP partnership, we asked a series of questions on resources, costs and benefits of partnering with MEP. Table 2 shows that the most prominent resource currently received by the CPs (n=18) is volunteers from MEP, with all 18 respondents selecting this option. In addition, some organizations also received time (17%), donations (6%), and other resources (17%). Volunteers also topped the list of resources that CPs (n=20) *wanted* to receive, with 100% of the 20 respondents selecting that option. In addition, a high number of respondents also would like donations (80%), access to community members (65%), and communications assistance (55%). These resource requests aligned with the value of these resources to these organizations which was asked as a separate question. The most commonly incurred costs for community partnerships (n=13) were staffing (noted by 62% of respondents) and time (46%). Thus, while CPs value the volunteers they receive from the MEP, it also costs them staff and volunteer resources to facilitate these opportunities, and there are other resources of interest as well.

**TABLE 2.** Resources utilization and needs

Variable	Currently Receive ( <i>n</i> =18)		Would Like to Receive ( <i>n</i> =20)		Costs to the Community Partner ( <i>n</i> =13)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
	Respondents	Respondents	Respondents	Respondents	Respondents	Respondents
Volunteers/Staffing	18	100.00%	20	100.00%	8	61.54%
Donations/Financial resources	1	5.56%	16	80.00%	1	7.69%
Access to Community members	0	0.00%	13	65.00%	1	7.69%
Communications Assistance	0	0.00%	11	55.00%	0	0.00%
Time	3	16.67%	8	40.00%	6	46.15%
Access to Data/ Research Support	0	0.00%	6	30.00%	0	0.00%
Infrastructure/ Supplies	0	0.00%	4	20.00%	0	0.00%
Other	3	16.67%	3	15.00%	1	7.69%

Note: For each question, respondents were allowed to select all that apply; therefore, at the top of each section of this table, we included the number of respondents to each question and the total number of choices made by those respondents.

Looking more closely at the benefits and echoing the value of volunteers for these organizations expressed above, and in the focus groups, the majority of our survey respondents (*n*=15) highlighted benefits specific to student volunteers noting how students “bring high energy, poise, and social skills” (80%), “expand the CP’s outreach to the community” (73%), and “bring new ideas or theories learned in class” (53%). In addition, just under half of respondents (47%) also noted that college student volunteers expose their population to college experience or mentorship. However, the partners noted costs of working with college students, most notably limitations related to their availability/time (73%), student turnover (40%), and student reliability (33%). While communication was a noted cost in the focus groups, only about a quarter of survey respondents (27%) indicated that communication was a key cost of working with college student volunteers.

Based on the focus groups, we asked three additional questions on scheduling and communication to gain a more comprehensive understanding of partner sentiments. When asked about scheduling challenges (*n*=13) over half indicated that “it is challenging to schedule a mutual time for events with [MEP]” (62%) and that “there is misalignment between our events and student volunteer availability” (54%). Less than half of CPs expressed scheduling concerns related to the compatibility of the systems used to schedule volunteers and the difficulty of

tracking of volunteer engagement. For each question, respondents were allowed to select all that apply; therefore, at the top of each section of this table, we included the number of respondents to each question and the total number of choices made by those respondents.

Most CPs (n=15) responded favorably to questions regarding communication, which was somewhat unexpected given the focus group results, where communication was a significant concern for CPs. Overall, CPs are satisfied or highly satisfied with communication from MEP (73%), Student directors (86%), student volunteers (55%), and MEP Staff (73%). CPs' lowest satisfaction was interactions with other CPs (43%). However, CPs also indicated that while the majority (66.7%) were satisfied with communication for event planning, less than half were satisfied with communication at the event itself, or after the event, and only one-third said that communication at all stages was effective.

## Discussion

Our study focused on understanding the experiences of CP organizations and how these differ across organizations within the context of a single case, the MEP partnership. Results from the focus groups highlight the value of college student volunteers, difficulties related to coordination and communication, and the mixed degree of goal and mission alignment. We also developed a two-dimensional understanding of CPs' experiences based on our focus group results, allocating the ten partners across types of engagement and levels of knowledge. The role of knowledge in our two-dimensional understanding echoes previous findings that highlight CPs' desires to expand their knowledge in service-learning partnerships (e.g., London et al., 2024) but goes further in highlighting the intersection between knowledge and engagement. In addition, we argue that this could serve as a reflective self-study tool for HEOs as they assess their community partnership programs, especially those that are in the formative stages like MEP. In addition, it can also be a teaching tool for those HEOs that are looking to develop community partnership programs, using the PBCE framework or others.

We explored the occurrence of these findings within a larger set of CPs via novel survey data from the same MEP partnership. Results from the surveys echo the importance of knowledge of the partnership for CPs and also highlighted mixed sentiments regarding communication, coordination, and resource sharing but generally strong perceptions of mission and goal alignment. Overall, the results across the focus groups and the survey suggest that knowledge of the partnership plays a crucial role in engagement and satisfaction. Results also indicate that the perceptions of CPs, although often aligned, can also be quite varied. This suggests that a more customized approach to engaging with each CP individually would lead to greater engagement and more sustainable partnerships especially as partnerships are being developed. We address the implications of these findings for both policy and practice below before turning to limitations and directions for future research.

## Recommendations

### Capitalizing on Two-Dimensional Understanding

The findings illustrated that CP representatives possess varied knowledge about MEP and its program components which was related to the level of knowledge. These two dimensions emerged as a powerful model for understanding the patterns and trends between HEOs and community organizations especially as programs are being developed. Therefore, we recommend that HEOs seeking to establish PBCE programs, or community programs more generally, consider two dimensions —knowledge and type of engagement —in how they work with and support CPs. We highlight two ways this can be done here.

First, programs as they are establishing relationships with CPs should prioritize clear communication and regular updates to ensure that partners are well-informed and knowledgeable because these are likely to be more engaged and invested in the success of the partnership (Cress et al., 2013; Eyler & Giles, 1999). In practice, this may inspire PBCE programs to (a) develop clear and concise materials (e.g., online resources or training) that explain the program and the role of community partners/HEO early on and (b) schedule regular check-ins or feedback sessions with partners as the program is being developed to ensure they are up-to-date on the program and to solicit their feedback for constant improvement.

Second, we suggest that as HEOs develop relationships with CPs, they should communicate regularly with partners to inform them about the project or program, sharing knowledge on engagement options as asking CPs what is most useful for them. This will in turn increase both knowledge and engagement which research shows are likely to be more effective and have better outcomes (e.g., Kezar et al., 2016). Additionally, HEOs should develop relationships with partners that are based on trust and mutual respect from the beginning, both of which can be fostered by (a) listening to the needs and constraints of the CPs, (b) providing opportunities for CPs to give input and help shape the project or program and (c) acknowledging and celebrating the contributions of CPs as equal partners within the relationship

### Mission Fulfillment and Alignment: Clarity and Assessment

It is essential to establish mutually beneficial outcomes for all organizations within a partnership, in this case both the CPs and the HEO. We therefore recommend regular evaluation of PBCE programs especially in the first couple of years to assess their impact on CPs, HEO stakeholders, and the broader community and to identify areas for improvement and growth as partnerships continue to develop. Although most CPs reported clear communication about goals and missions, fewer said these were set mutually or reviewed periodically. This indicates that intentional efforts to align mission and goals may be necessary to ensure ongoing alignment.

Therefore, we recommend intentional communication guided by mutual respect and understanding of each CP's capacity. Each CP has different financial, social, and human resources, and so their capacity can vary widely. We also suggest deliberate, collaborative efforts to align missions and goals from the beginning, consistent with CP's capacity to ensure the successful establishment of the HEO-community partnerships and their sustainability. This is consistent with the PBCE framework's emphasis on shared visioning and collective impact and existing research (e.g., Osafo & Yawson, 2019).

### Limitations and Future Research

As with all research, our study has limitations and has generated a number of directions for future research. We first address five limitations here, including related directions for future research, before outlining two additional directions for future research suggested by our findings. First, the MEP initiative was relatively young during the study, less than three years old. This could have contributed to varying levels of experience and knowledge among CPs. The newness of the partnership may have also discouraged honest feedback in the focus groups. Future research that compares new and long-term partnerships or focuses more explicitly on the role of partnership duration could provide additional insight into these dynamics. While this is a limitation, it also provided us with a novel opportunity to generate a framework or tool showcasing the interrelationship between knowledge and engagement for CPs. This has potential utility as a self-assessment tool, a framework for those considering new community engagement partnerships, and a framework for researchers seeking to understand CP experiences. Future research that evaluates the utility of this framework, shown in Figure 1, would build on our work and further advance research.

Second, while qualitative research does not aim for generalizability, it is important to acknowledge limitations in terms of transferability, which is a core goal of qualitative research (Holley & Harris, 2019). The localized nature of PBCE restricts the partnership's scope geographically. Therefore, these specific experiences and patterns may not be applicable to non-PBCE partnerships that operate in broader or different contexts. Additional research comparing PBCE to other types of community engagement, and this urban PBCE partnership with others, and also with those in rural contexts, could shed light on the transferability of our work. In addition, our study focuses on a relatively new PBCE program, therefore, research that explores other developing, rather than established, programs using our two-dimensional framework would allow for the assessment of its transferability and allow for further refinement, which would advance the utility of the framework as a tool for practitioners and scholars.

Third, unlike some other PBCE programs, the MEP initiative did not have a single social issue focus but rather many. This resulted in a diverse range of CPs varying in size, age, focus,

services, and offerings. These dynamics influenced the design of the focus group questions and survey and likely contributed to the diversity of experiences showcased in our findings above. Fourth, we did not systematically assess the extent to which CPs were working with multiple programs, faculty, and/or staff at the university or the extent of their partnerships with other HEOs. However, some CPs did indicate that they were working with others within this university, and others referenced their partnerships with other HEOs as they reflected on their experiences with MEP. Based on this, it seems logical to conclude that the larger context of each CP's partnership network likely impacts their experiences and assessment of the MEP partnership. Future research that explores the networks of CPs is needed to assess variation in the scope and complexity of these networks and the implications of those differences on the CPs' experience, assessment, and overall success in their mission.

Finally, while our focus was on CPs, it was on their experience and assessment of the MEP program. This limited our ability to assess the role of CP identities in that experience systematically and also the intersection of the CP and HEO identities (e.g., gender and racial composition). Future research that addresses this would build on our work here by continuing to center CPs while also going further to address potential sources of tension within the HEO-community partnerships.

There are two additional directions for future research suggested by our findings. First, while the MEP utilized a PBCE framework, results from the focus groups and survey suggest that CPs did not distinguish this type of engagement as inherently different from their other HEO-community partnerships. Since the literature regarding CPs' perspectives is quite limited, further research is needed to understand how a program's particular framework may influence a CP's perspective of the partnership.

Second, despite the MEP prioritizing an equal emphasis on both campus and community as part of a place-based framework (Yamamura & Koth, 2018), our findings suggest that tensions evident in the literature on HEO partnerships continue to persist in this PBCE program (e.g., Strier, 2011). In particular, our findings illustrated tensions between HEOs and CPs. Further research examining the potential role of a place-based model in alleviating these tensions would be beneficial.

## **Conclusion**

HEOs are implementing community engagement programs to offer practical learning experiences for their students. However, these programs have traditionally focused on students' experiences, learning, and growth, with a limited understanding of the impact they have on non-profit organizations and other partners. Our embedded case study of a single, relatively young urban PBCE program allowed us to gain insights into the CP experience. We developed a two-

dimensional understanding of partners' experiences, and CPs emphasized mission alignment, costs and benefits, and knowledge, importance, and satisfaction of MEP program elements. Based on our findings, we recommend that HEOs starting, or having recently started, a community engagement program adapt their relationships with CPs based on knowledge and engagement levels from our framework; expand their understanding of their partners' costs and take steps to address them; engage in more collaborative partnership development and maintenance processes; and conduct further research related to PBCE programs.

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