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RESEARCH ARTICLE (PEER-REVIEWED)

Elevating Rural Voices: Strengthening Community Partnerships for Lasting Change

Lauren Paulson*, Rebecca Pechmann, Isabella James, Sophie Larson

Allegheny College, Meadville, PA, USA

Corresponding author: Lauren Paulson, lpaulson@allegheny.edu

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Abstract

This multi-method study centres on the perspectives of rural community partners in community engagement (CE), a population often underrepresented in the literature, to examine how partnerships function in a rural context. Using survey data, semi-structured interviews, the Transformational Relationship Evaluation Scale (TRES) and perceived closeness measures, the study examines how partnerships function in a rural context. Partners reported positive relationships with the college, including trust in faculty and a willingness to continue collaboration. However, partners consistently rated ideal partnerships as more transformational than their current experiences, with gaps in decision-making, resource sharing, roles, power, continuity and student preparedness. Qualitative findings identify structural challenges, including limited organisational capacity, inconsistent communication and variability in student readiness and professionalism, which place strain on rural organisations. Partners also emphasised the college's role as a rural anchor institution and the potential for deeper, relationship-based collaboration and contributions to community capacity. Overall, findings indicate that effective rural CE requires relationship infrastructure, not just goodwill, to support continuity, shared decision-making and mutual accountability. This study contributes to the limited scholarship on rural CE by offering a context-specific framework for strengthening equitable and sustainable partnerships in rural settings and a model that can be adapted by other institutions.

Keywords

Rural Community Engagement; Community Partners; Rural Partnerships; Experiential Learning; Power Dynamics

Introduction

Community engagement (CE) is a form of experiential education in which students participate in organised activities addressing community needs whilst engaging in structured reflection to enhance learning and civic responsibility ([Jacoby, 1996](#)). Research demonstrates that CE strengthens student academic, civic and developmental outcomes whilst supporting community service capacity ([Paulson 2018](#); [Celio et al. 2011](#); [Rinaldo et al. 2015](#); [Warren 2012](#)). Consequently, many colleges are integrating CE into their curricula.

Historically, CE scholarship has focused on student and college benefits, with community partners often seen as silent partners ([Hea & Shah 2016](#)). Even when partner perspectives are examined, studies frequently show variability in satisfaction related to communication, expectations and role clarity within collaborations ([Karasik & Hafner 2021](#)). Scholarship has long documented concerns regarding power imbalances in college–community partnerships, where institutions frequently control project design, decision-making and the distribution of benefits ([Bortolin 2011](#); [Sandy & Holland 2006](#); [Tryon & Madden 2019](#)). These dynamics underscore the importance of reciprocal partnership structures grounded in genuine collaboration, ethical practice and ongoing evaluation to ensure that institutional goals align with community priorities and support sustainable outcomes.

Despite the growing emphasis on CE, research continues to overlook the distinct realities of CE in rural contexts. Recent scholarship challenges deficit-oriented portrayals of rural communities by advancing asset-based frameworks for understanding rural partnerships. For example, [Crumb et al. \(2023\)](#) proposed a *rural cultural wealth* model that highlights rural resourcefulness, ingenuity, familism and community unity as key assets. They further demonstrated how, during the COVID-19 pandemic, rural communities mobilised dense social networks and local knowledge to sustain institutions such as schools despite funding and staffing constraints, illustrating the collective capacity and resilience that characterise many rural settings.

Rural communities differ from urban settings in ways that fundamentally shape partnership dynamics. Geographic isolation, limited infrastructure and persistent economic instability intensify organisational capacity constraints and influence how CE partnerships develop ([Holton et al. 2017](#); [Smalley et al. 2012](#)). At the same time, colleges often function as major employers, cultural hubs and economic anchors in rural regions, making institutional actions highly visible and consequential for local residents ([Perry & Menendez 2010](#)).

These characteristics have significant implications for CE practice. Rural organisations often operate as the sole provider of essential services in a wide region, and small staffing pools limit their ability to absorb inconsistent or short-term student involvement ([Walters et al. 2023](#)). Dense, overlapping social networks, often more common in rural settings, can deepen collaboration but also raise the stakes of misalignment or miscommunication. In small towns, issues involving a college can spread quickly through local newspapers, social media and interpersonal connections, shaping perceptions of the institution in a way that is far less diffuse than in urban areas ([Paulson & Davis 2024](#)). Such dynamics can exacerbate existing power imbalances between colleges and their surrounding communities, making trust-building, continuity and relational accountability even more critical. Scholars continue to emphasise the importance of addressing power dynamics and internal inequities within rural communities, as these forces can shape how partnerships are formed, experienced and sustained ([Crumb et al. 2023](#)). Recent research further suggests that the COVID-19 period reshaped CE partnership expectations and organisational capacity, prompting institutions to reconsider partnership structures, communication systems and resource

coordination ([Berkey & Lauder 2021](#); [Dempsey 2023](#)). These shifts may be particularly consequential in rural communities, where pandemic-related economic and service disruptions intensified long-standing structural constraints ([Mueller et al. 2021](#)).

Scholars have long argued that CE models developed in urban or well-resourced settings do not fully translate to rural contexts ([Berkey et al. 2018](#); [Bortolin 2011](#); [Karasik 2020](#); [Stoecker & Tryon 2009](#)). Rural education researchers have increasingly emphasised asset-based approaches to understanding rural contexts and partnerships, rather than framing rural communities through deficit perspectives ([Crumb et al. 2023](#); [Reed & Friedel 2022](#)). For example, [Barnes et al. \(2025\)](#) proposed a community culture framework highlighting the roles of community capacity, community orientation and ‘boundary-crossing’ actors in shaping the effectiveness of rural research partnerships, demonstrating how partnership outcomes are influenced by the relational and structural characteristics of rural communities. The ‘town–gown divide’, for example, manifests differently in rural communities. Whilst economic disparities and cultural differences create tensions everywhere ([Bender 1988](#)), these tensions may be heightened in rural regions where the college is highly visible, cannot blend into a larger ecosystem and engages with residents who interact with one another across multiple settings such as schools, health systems, religious institutions and local government. In these environments, perceptions of institutional elitism or ‘saviour’ dynamics may carry amplified influence and affect collaboration, trust and community willingness to partner ([Sandy & Holland 2006](#)). Recent empirical work further illustrates these contextual differences. In a multi-institutional study of rural colleges and community partners, [Zastoupil \(2022\)](#) found that rural service-learning partnerships are shaped by limited nonprofit infrastructure, capacity constraints and dense relational networks, reinforcing the need for engagement models that account for rural institutional and community dynamics.

Taken together, long-standing critiques of campus–community engagement and recent rural scholarship underscore the need for CE frameworks that explicitly address rural realities rather than assuming that urban-based models can be universally applied. Scholars have repeatedly called for more research that centres on the perspectives of rural community partners and examines how they experience reciprocity, capacity constraints, institutional power and the sustainability of campus–community relationships ([Stoecker & Schmidt 2017](#)).

Conceptual Framework and Study Purpose

This study employs the Transformational Relationship Evaluation Scale (TRES) as a guiding framework to assess CE dynamics. The TRES framework categorises relationships along a continuum of exploitative, transactional and transformational, providing a lens to evaluate the depth and reciprocity of partnerships ([Clayton et al. 2010](#)). This study examines how rural community partners perceive their engagement with the college and whether these experiences align with transformational engagement.

The present study addresses these gaps and builds on prior work conducted with community partners in the same rural region ([Paulson & Davis 2024](#)), which centred on partners’ perspectives on CE experiences. This study extends that work by examining how partners perceive the quality, reciprocity and sustainability of their relationships with the college. In doing so, it advances understanding of how these partnerships evolve over time and identifies conditions that support sustained, effective rural CE collaborations.

Framed as a process evaluation, the study centres on community partners’ perspectives on the functioning and development of these relationships. Importantly, community–college partnerships are treated as the primary unit of analysis, rather than as a context through which research is conducted, allowing for a focused examination of relationship dynamics. In addition to contributing to rural CE scholarship, this study offers a replicable analytic approach that institutions can use to assess and strengthen their own community partnerships.

Methodology

STUDY DESIGN AND RURAL CONTEXT

This study builds on previous research (Paulson & Davis 2024) by employing a multi-method design incorporating quantitative survey data and qualitative interview data to examine community partner perspectives. Whilst both data sources addressed related research questions, they were analysed independently and later interpreted in relation to one another to provide a more comprehensive understanding of partnership dynamics. Quantitative surveys were used to identify broad patterns in partners' perceptions, whilst qualitative interviews provided deeper insight into their challenges, opportunities and aspirations.

Rurality was defined using the U.S. Census Bureau's (2010) classification of areas not designated as urban. This rural region is characterised by geographic dispersion, limited transportation and broadband infrastructure, and constrained organisational capacity, conditions that shape partnership visibility and coordination demands (Paulson & Davis 2024; Smalley et al. 2012). Like many rural regions, this rural area has undergone long-term population decline and structural economic shifts. According to the local county comprehensive plan (Crawford County Planning Commission 2024), between 2000 and 2020, the population decreased by approximately 10 000 residents, and the surrounding county experienced an additional 6 per cent decline. Over the same period, the county's workforce shrank by 5 per cent, and roughly one in four homes sits vacant. These demographic trends intersect with challenges tied to industrial restructuring, declining local employment and the broader public health crises affecting rural communities nationwide.

The town is predominantly White (87 per cent), compared to the college's student population (69 per cent White). Socioeconomic disparities are also pronounced: the town's median household income is \$46 157, with 18 per cent of residents living below the poverty line, compared to the U.S. median of \$74 580 (U.S. Census Bureau 2022). Students generally come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds than local residents, shaping both the perception and dynamics of CE and the college.

The college has a long-standing institutional commitment to CE through curricular and co-curricular initiatives, including courses, internships, research placements and community-based student programs mostly, but not always, coordinated through campus engagement offices.

PROCEDURE

After receiving Allegheny College Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the Director of Community-Engaged Learning contacted 48 representatives from community organisations via email to invite them to participate in the study. The informed consent form and survey were administered online via Qualtrics. Prior to beginning the survey, participants reviewed the informed consent information and indicated their consent electronically.

Following the survey phase, the Director of Community-Engaged Learning distributed a second email invitation to the same 48 partner organisations, requesting participation in an online semi-structured interview. Thirteen community partners agreed to participate.

Participants received informed consent information via email along with the interview invitation and scheduling link. Prior to participation, individuals provided consent both to participate in the study and to be video-recorded. Interviews were conducted by trained student research assistants who had no prior relationship with participants, a strategy used to minimise potential bias and encourage candid responses (Waters & Brigden 2013). At the beginning of each interview, consent was reconfirmed. All interviews were

video-recorded with participant permission. No compensation was provided for participation in either the survey or the interviews.

All data were stored on secure, password-protected institutional servers accessible only to the research team. Video recordings were transcribed and de-identified prior to analysis, and any identifying information was removed from transcripts. Video files were retained only until transcription and verification were completed and were then deleted. De-identified data will be retained for up to 5 years, in accordance with IRB guidelines, after which all study materials will be securely destroyed.

MEASURES

Community Voices Satisfaction Survey

To assess overall satisfaction with the partnership experience, we administered a survey developed for this study and informed by best practices in CE assessment (e.g., [Gelmon et al. 2018](#)) and prior literature on high-quality community-college partnerships and principles of reciprocal engagement. The survey captured partners' perceptions of relationship quality, including communication, mutual benefit, trust, resource exchange, and perceived impact and sustainability (see Appendix A). Items were reviewed and refined by individuals with experience in CE and partnership development to ensure clarity and relevance, with minor modifications made to reflect the local institutional context. The survey included a combination of categorical and Likert-type items, with scaled questions using a 5-point response format (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The instrument served two purposes: (1) to provide a structured assessment of partner satisfaction across key domains and (2) to identify areas of strength and areas for improvement in the partnership.

Transformational Relationship Evaluation Scale

The TRES ([Clayton et al. 2010](#)) is a validated, self-report instrument designed to assess the core characteristics of campus-community partnerships and to locate those relationships along a continuum from exploitative (characterised by one-sided or negative outcomes), to transactional (reflecting mutually beneficial exchanges), to transformational (reflecting mutual growth, shared decision-making and deepened capacity for all partners). The TRES offers a concise yet nuanced way to capture both the *current* and *ideal* qualities of a partnership from the community partner's perspective.

Conceptually, the scale can be understood as asking this question: Is this relationship one-directional, or does it reflect genuine reciprocity and shared agency? When community partners indicate that their ideal relationship falls closer to the transformational end of the continuum than their current experience, this points to a desire for greater shared planning, shared responsibility and shared outcomes within the partnership. Empirical work demonstrated that the TRES can meaningfully differentiate between transactional and transformational relationship qualities and that these distinctions are associated with other relational characteristics, providing evidence of construct validity ([Clayton et al. 2010](#)).

Interview Protocol and Perceived Closeness Venn Diagram

The interview protocol, adapted from [Gelmon et al. \(2018\)](#), included open-ended questions about the outcomes, impacts and overall functioning of partnerships with the college. To complement the interview data, we also administered a modified version of the 'Inclusion of Other in the Self' Venn diagram measure ([Mashek et al. 2007](#)) to assess both actual and desired perceptions of relational closeness between community partners and the college. After completing their interviews, each participant viewed two sets of seven diagrams depicting two circles, one representing the partner and one representing the college, with varying degrees of overlap. In the first set, participants selected the diagram that best represented their current level of closeness (actual). In the second set, they selected the diagram illustrating their preferred

or ideal level of closeness (desired). Greater overlap indicated a stronger sense of partnership connection. Each selection was coded on a 1–7 scale (1 = no overlap to 7 = almost complete overlap), and discrepancies between actual and desired closeness scores were calculated for each participant. These scores were then aggregated and compared with survey responses to explore how perceived closeness aligned with reported satisfaction. Prior research in CE contexts has shown that higher perceived closeness is positively associated with indicators of transformational partnership quality ([Clayton et al. 2010](#)).

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and paired-sample *t*-tests to examine differences between partners' reported experiences and desired partnership characteristics, and they were completed on the Venn Diagram Level of Closeness. Internal consistency reliability was assessed for all multi-item measures using Cronbach's alpha.

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis as outlined by [Braun and Clarke \(2012\)](#). All semi-structured interviews were video-recorded and transcribed verbatim. A team of five researchers independently coded the transcripts, followed by iterative, consensus-based discussions to refine codes and develop overarching themes. To enhance trustworthiness ([Patton 2014](#)), several strategies were employed, including negative case analysis, peer debriefing and reflexivity.

Results

PARTICIPANTS

Consistent with [James and Logan's \(2016\)](#) definition, community partners were defined as individuals or organisations with whom students engage to complete academic community engagement projects. Although all partners were connected to curricular CE activities, the nature and depth of their involvement varied across organisations.

A total of 19 community partners completed the anonymous survey, yielding a 39 per cent response rate. Among survey respondents, 42 per cent reported partnerships of more than 10 years, 37 per cent reported partnerships of 3 years or fewer, and the remainder reported between 3 and 10 years. Most participants were affiliated with nonprofit organisations (94 per cent). Participants represented a range of sectors, including health and well-being (31.6 per cent), community and economic development (26.3 per cent), education and social development (21.1 per cent), environment and sustainability (10.5 per cent) and arts and culture (10.5 per cent).

Thirteen community partners participated in semi-structured interviews. Interview participants also represented diverse sectors and roles within the community, including nonprofit organisations, government agencies, small businesses, education and healthcare. Years in their current roles ranged from 3 to 20 years. Although some survey respondents may have also participated in interviews, the survey and interview samples were not identical.

COMMUNITY VOICES SATISFACTION SURVEY

The Community Voices Satisfaction Survey demonstrated excellent reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$, 95% CI [0.85, 0.97]). Analyses focused on the percentage of respondents selecting 4 or 5 (agreement or strong agreement, respectively) to identify strengths and improvement areas.

Overall, partners reported strong satisfaction across many domains. High endorsement rates were observed for communication with faculty (84 per cent), interactions with faculty (89 per cent), interactions with students (84 per cent), mutual benefit (84 per cent) and the partnership's overall success (84 per cent). Trust was similarly high, with 84 per cent expressing trust in faculty and 68 per cent expressing lower trust in students. Importantly, 100 per cent of community partners indicated that they would pursue a partnership with the college in the future, demonstrating strong goodwill and a desire for ongoing collaboration. Many also felt that the partnership made a meaningful difference in the community (89 per cent) and that it was generally sustainable (79 per cent).

At the same time, the data highlight several areas where satisfaction was notably lower. Only 63 per cent of partners were satisfied with the quality of student work, and 58 per cent were satisfied with the dissemination or sharing of project results, meaning that more than one-third did not feel fully supported in these areas. These findings suggest variability in student preparation, follow-through and the processes used to communicate project outcomes back to organisations, all factors that directly influence partners' ability to integrate student work into ongoing operations. Another area of concern was continuity, with only 26 per cent reporting a seamless handoff of projects across semesters. However, 37 per cent of partners marked this item as not applicable, indicating that continuity challenges are relevant for some engagement models, but not all.

TRANSFORMATIONAL RELATIONSHIP EVALUATION SCALE

A paired-sample *t*-test was conducted to evaluate differences between community partners' actual and desired scores on key elements of the TRES (see [Table 1](#)). In the present study, the TRES demonstrated excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$). Across nearly all domains, partners reported higher desired scores than actual scores, indicating that whilst they value their relationships with the college, they would like these partnerships to move further towards the transformational end of the continuum.

Significant gaps emerged in several areas central to transformational engagement, including outcomes, decision-making, resources, roles, power and change.

Table 1. The Transformational Relationship Evaluation Scale

Key attributes	Desired		Actual		<i>t</i> (18)	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>	95% CI <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>				
Outcomes (1–9)	8.05	1.43	6.26	1.97	4.16	<.001*	0.95	[0.40, 1.49]
Goals (1–4)	3.63	0.50	3.53	0.61	1.00	.331	0.23	[-0.23, 0.68]
Decision-making (1–6)	5.63	0.96	4.90	1.41	2.80	.012*	0.64	[0.14, 1.13]
Resources (1–3)	2.95	0.23	2.63	0.60	2.36	.030*	0.54	[0.05, 1.02]
Conflict (1–4)	3.94	0.24	3.56	0.86	1.94	.069	0.46	[-0.04, 0.94]
Roles (1–8)	6.53	1.74	5.28	1.97	2.99	.008*	0.71	[0.18, 1.22]
Power (1–3)	2.84	0.38	2.58	0.61	2.54	.021*	0.58	[0.09, 1.06]
What matters (1–6)	5.47	1.12	4.90	1.29	2.16	.045	0.50	[0.01, 0.97]
Change (1–9)	8.53	1.07	6.90	1.82	3.76	.001*	0.86	[0.32, 1.38]

Note. *N* = 19. * Denotes tests that survived [Benjamini and Hochberg's \(1995\)](#) false discovery rate method.

Several domains showed stronger alignment, particularly shared goals and conflict, where actual and desired scores were closely matched. In these areas, partners' responses reflected that they feel the college respects community priorities and that both groups are philosophically aligned in their intentions for the work. For values ('what matters'), desired scores ($M = 5.47$) were higher than actual scores ($M = 4.90$). Although this difference reached nominal statistical significance ($p = .045$), it did not remain significant after controlling for multiple comparisons using the false discovery rate method, suggesting only a modest gap between current and ideal partnership qualities from the community partners' perspectives.

COMMUNITY PARTNER INTERVIEW RESULTS

Theme 1: The College as a Rural Anchor Institution

Many community partners (CP) emphasised the college's central role in the community, recognising its economic, intellectual and social influence in the region. Specifically, CE fostered capacity-building by providing organisations with student and faculty expertise, fresh perspectives and workforce support, ultimately enhancing services, broadening impact and contributing to both community growth and personal development. Specifically, CP #5 discussed how '[the college] has taken our community as a whole to the next level ... we couldn't get a lot of things done if it was not for a lot of our [college] students; we [felt] hopeless ... we didn't have the manpower.' However, participants also voiced concerns about resource allocation and the need for more equitable partnerships between the college and local organisations.

The TRES survey results support this sentiment, highlighting a gap between the desired and actual contributions of resources by the college. Community partners expressed a need for the institution to invest more meaningfully in long-term, transformative engagement rather than short-term, transactional collaborations. As noted by CP #6, 'The college is a huge asset to our town, but if engagement is going to be truly beneficial, it has to be long-term and mutually reinforcing.'

Theme 2: Bridging the Town–Gown Divide

This theme reflects the mutual perceptions and challenges shaping town–gown relationships. Many participants noted significant social and cultural divides between students and the local community, often exacerbated by perceptions of 'elitism' or 'saviourism' by the college.

a. Student Experiences in the Community: Several partners observed that students, particularly first years, often struggled with a sense of belonging in the town. Some felt intimidated by unfamiliar cultural markers found in rural areas, and a few interviewees explicitly mentioned safety concerns. As highlighted by CP #2, 'We recognize that [this town] can be intimidating for students. There are Confederate flags, or students feel like they're being watched. My goal is to help students feel safe and valued so that they engage more meaningfully.' Whilst these concerns were not universal, they highlight the importance of structured, reciprocal engagement programs that foster positive, respectful interactions between students and rural community members.

b. Community Perceptions of the College: Several participants noted that community members often perceive the college as an elite institution detached from local realities. As noted by CP #7, 'There's a general perception that the college is just this elite institution that doesn't care about the town, bringing in students from all over to pump their brains full of nonsense.' Some partners also expressed frustration with saviour complex narratives, where students and faculty approached engagement work as charity rather than collaboration. CP #1 quipped, 'We don't need the college to save us. We need it to be a partner.' This is also supported by the TRES in relation to roles. Addressing these divides requires intentional efforts to integrate students into the community in ways that prioritise mutual learning and shared decision-making, rather than one-directional assistance.

Theme 3: Barriers to Rural Community Engagement

This theme captures the structural and logistical challenges that community partners face in sustaining meaningful CE partnerships. These challenges fall into four major categories.

a. Capacity Limitations: Many partners struggled to manage multiple engagement requests from the college, citing time constraints and staffing shortages as major barriers. As noted by CP #6, ‘This isn’t technically part of my job, so I’m taking time away from work to do these things. I’ve been involved in multiple partnerships like this, and each time, it becomes a whole other job.’ This reflects broader trends in rural CE, where community organisations often operate under significant resource constraints and rely on volunteer efforts to sustain engagement ([Stoecker & Schmidt 2017](#)).

b. Managing Expectations: Managing realistic expectations was another consistent theme identified across all participant interviews. CP #3 emphasised this challenge: ‘I think the biggest challenge is managing expectations- the students’ expectations and the lead partners’ expectations ... there’s a huge commitment for a community partner in terms of mentoring students ... what are the students’ expectations about what they’re going to be doing [and] about their own agency ... That can vary from student to student ... Students who need a lot of hand-holding, students who don’t want any kind of hand-holding or any kind of input, and yet without input, their work is not that useful.’

Several community partners talked about the importance of expectations to be clear and laid out ahead of time. For example, CP #5 stated, ‘What I’ve learned is that it’s very important, once you give someone a project that you really got to spell out the steps and kind of overview of what needs to be done. I think sometimes, we as professionals, think that students should know what needs to be done at every level, and that’s not the case.’ CP #9 added, ‘I think it needs to be very clear what the organization expects and needs and can offer ... What kind of time, mentoring, etc. can the organization offer to the student, and what backup does the student get from [the college], and then what are the students’ expectations? Why are they doing this? What’s motivating them to do this?’

c. Unprofessional or Ill-Fitting Student Placements: An unfortunate theme that we identified across eight of the 13 participant interviews was the challenges of supervising students in CE work due to problematic/unprofessional student behaviours. Specifically, some students were unprepared, not a good fit within the organisation and unmotivated, and they exhibited unprofessional behaviour. Community partners reported generally ‘feeling stuck’ with these unprofessional and ill-fitting students.

The challenge of managing unprepared students, whether it was due to gaps in knowledge and skills or issues related to professionalism, was an identified theme across the interviews. CP #7 noted the challenge of working with students who are not from the region: ‘These are students that are not from [this rural area]. They have no concept of what the needs and challenges and resources in the community are, and they don’t know where to start.’ CP #2 also explained that it can be challenging for students to work with new and different populations [in the town] (i.e., the Amish population). Related to lack of skills, CP #4 explained, ‘we just would like to see students have the basic building blocks that we can build on as organizations to achieve our projects ... if [the college] is not 100% sure about a kid, don’t just send them out anyway.’ Another partner, CP #12, discussed the importance of the developmental level of students working at their agency, ‘I would not take on freshmen or sophomores. I would only take on juniors or seniors, and they would have to be actually interested or tied into [our specific work]. I don’t have the capability of preparing students 100% for fieldwork. But I do have the ability to supplement.’ CP #4 succinctly highlighted this challenge in the following comment, ‘When the students are not skilled it becomes a time suck on your organization and it takes a lot of management of the students and ultimately, in my case, the need to get rid of them.’

Another challenge was students’ lack of motivation or poor fit within the organisation. As CP #12 highlighted, ‘It was just something that the college said, “well you [the student] need an internship

or you're asking for an experience and we just happened to have an organization that you're interested in" and the student didn't take any initiative, they didn't reach out ahead of time. They weren't interviewing or trying to apply for the opportunity. They were just placed there.'

Unfortunately, the community partners had to manage students' unprofessional behaviour, such as not calling off when they were unable to attend their job, Facetiming at work, and wearing headphones. As highlighted by CP #7, 'The main barrier was just getting people to show up reliably and consistently. If we're spending a decent chunk of our time saying "Why aren't you here?", hunting people down, or having to cover for someone- there were a couple days where I had to come in on the weekend because the people who were supposed to show up did not show up and we had no one to cover ... which complicates everything and defeats levels of trust.' Another disturbing comment by CP #2 was, 'I've given up on responding and trying to reprimand because it's just going to keep happening.' Despite this comment, CP #2 also noted, 'I'm not interested in terminating that relationship because I'm operating under the assumption that it can be fixed.' Some community partners discussed feeling stuck or limited by the pool of students that the college was providing to work at their organisation.

d. Impact of COVID-19: Interviewees, although not explicitly asked, brought up the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students. Specifically, community partners mentioned that the pandemic 'interrupted programming' and caused a noticeable shift in the students' professionalism and desire to engage. For example, CP #2 stated, 'The population of students who went through COVID ... they're going through so many different things and we just don't know what their needs are. So maybe it just looks different across the board as to what we can expect from students ... as part of like the new reality ... post-pandemic.' CP #7 noted, 'The pandemic has kind of put a hard reset on that whole program that has been running for 30+ years; we had expectations that had carried over from pre-pandemic and now we're just sort of reworking what the expectations should be.'

Themes 4: Recommendations Moving Forward: Strengthening Rural CE Partnerships

Partners consistently noted that maintaining continuity across semesters was challenging, especially when projects depended heavily on individual students or faculty members without a designated point of contact. Several participants explained that the lack of a coordinating mechanism led to inconsistent communication and uneven follow-through on long-term initiatives. As a result, partners sometimes found themselves responsible for ensuring continuity, which added strain to already limited organisational capacity. To enhance the sustainability and impact of rural CE, community partners identified several key areas for improvement. These included the following: (a) clearer communication and more formalised agreements among partners, faculty and students; (b) stronger pre-placement training to ensure that students are prepared, professional and aligned with community needs and values; (c) greater institutional support for sustaining long-term partnerships, rather than relying solely on individual faculty initiative; and (d) intentional efforts to bridge the town-gown divide by cultivating relationships that are reciprocal and respectful rather than transactional.

The central importance of relationships, and the trust required to sustain them, was emphasised by 11 community partners. As CP #1 explained, strong relationships enable both day-to-day coordination and deeper problem-solving: 'I have such a strong, personal, professional, positive relationship with the college and specific people on campus ... I've gotten to that point where I can just pick up the phone and talk to somebody and have a frank discussion. More people in the community need to get to that point. We don't want the relationship to be merely transactional. We want it to be more restorative and generative, where we're really getting at root causes and looking at deep-seated issues and finding solutions that are sustainable and long term.'

Several partners also expressed a desire to be recognised as co-educators in the CE process and to have more meaningful involvement in course planning, feedback loops and communication with faculty. As

CP #1 noted, ‘Perhaps we could have more input into the planning of the curriculum or the syllabus. Maybe there are more meaningful ways that we can provide feedback to the faculty member on how that student is doing. Sometimes it just feels like the only time faculty reach out to us is when they have a student they need placed ... It would seem to me that we ought to have input into the syllabus, so that what’s being communicated to the students—and reflects on us—is accurate, and so there’s a sense of fairness and balance.’

INTERVIEW VENN DIAGRAM LEVEL OF CLOSENESS

A paired-sample *t*-test was completed on the Venn Diagram Level of Closeness from the individual interview responses ([Paulson & Davis 2024](#); [Mashek et al. 2007](#)) and revealed a statistically significant difference between actual closeness and desired closeness, $t(12) = 5.93, p < .001$, with a moderate effect size (Cohen’s $d = 0.50$). The mean scores for the actual and desired levels of closeness were 3.50 ($SD = 0.67$) and 4.83 ($SD = 0.718$), respectively. In practical terms, this means that community partners generally want their relationship with the college to feel closer and more collaborative than it currently does.

Discussion

This study is part of a multi-year, collaborative initiative examining CE partnerships within a specific rural region. This discussion centres on the perspectives of rural community partners and interprets findings in relation to prior rural community engagement scholarship ([Berkey et al. 2018](#); [Karasik 2020](#); [Stoecker et al. 2009](#)). Although quantitative and qualitative data were analysed independently, convergence across findings (e.g., gaps in communication, continuity and partnership expectations) strengthens the overall interpretation.

These findings build on and extend existing scholarship by showing that rural community organisations experience a complex mix of positive, challenging and sometimes contradictory impacts through their participation in CE. These results underscore the need for CE models that recognise the distinctive conditions of rural communities, including resource constraints, overlapping social networks and heightened institutional visibility. Drawing on partners’ perspectives, we offer recommendations for strengthening rural CE practice and highlight considerations that are particularly critical for cultivating equitable, sustainable and context-responsive partnerships in rural settings.

THE COLLEGE AS A RURAL ANCHOR INSTITUTION

Rural community partners consistently identified the college as a critical anchor institution, one capable of leveraging its economic influence, social networks and intellectual resources to support local rural community development. Findings from the TRES show a meaningful gap between partners’ *actual* and *desired* levels of resource contribution, underscoring a clear call for the college to invest more intentionally in transformative, long-term initiatives. CE provides a strategic avenue for institutions to fulfil this role, strengthening student learning whilst supporting local priorities ([Kronick & Cunningham 2013](#)). Recent research with rural community leaders reinforces this framing. In a study of a community college, [Reed and Friedel \(2022\)](#) found that rural higher education institutions in the United States operate in contexts shaped by population decline, workforce challenges and limited resources, with communities often relying on institutional partnerships to meet regional needs. Across three rural towns, residents described their local college as central to workforce development, educational access and the cultivation of human and social capital – highlighting the developmental role of higher education institutions in rural communities, a dynamic echoed by participants in the present study. However, sustainable CE requires enduring institutional commitment, including staff time, continuity structures and financial investment, needs that are

especially acute in rural contexts where community organisations often face constrained capacity ([Paulson & Davis 2024](#); [Reed & Friedel 2022](#)).

Bridging this resource gap in rural areas requires a shift from transactional collaborations to more transformational, co-created partnerships. The TRES data suggest that rural partners want the college to move beyond short-term, course-based projects and adopt a systemic approach that includes dedicated staff support, consistent communication structures and alignment between institutional goals and community needs. Without this shift, CE risks unintentionally reinforcing existing inequities rather than contributing to sustainable rural development. A transformative model demands genuine long-term shared planning and responsibility, positioning community partners as co-educators rather than as sites for student placement and community labs ([Sandy & Holland 2006](#)).

BARRIERS TO RURAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Whilst CE offers substantial benefits, partners in rural settings continue to encounter persistent structural and relational challenges. Many of these challenges stem from limited organisational capacity, uneven communication and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. A recurring concern across participants was the burden of managing multiple engagement requests from the college. For small rural organisations with restricted staffing and resources, coordinating numerous student or faculty projects can create strain, especially when those requests arrive without clear expectations or adequate lead time. This aligns with prior research showing that community partners often shoulder disproportionate logistical and supervisory responsibilities in CE partnerships ([Stoecker & Tryon 2009](#)), and without purposeful structures, CE can unintentionally increase workload rather than support organisational goals.

Although only a few community partners in the present study explicitly referenced COVID-19, recent research indicates that the pandemic reshaped CE infrastructures and organisational capacity in ways that continue to influence partnerships ([Berkey & Lauder 2021](#); [Dempsey 2023](#)). These effects may be particularly pronounced in rural settings, where economic and service disruptions intensified long-standing capacity constraints ([Mueller et al. 2021](#)), reinforcing the importance of coordinated engagement processes and sustained institutional support.

Managing expectations emerged as one of the most consistent themes across both survey results and interviews. Community partners described difficulties in balancing students' varying levels of preparedness with the realities of their organisational needs. Several reported that some students arrived without essential professional skills, sufficient motivation or an understanding of rural community norms. Instances of unprofessional behaviour, such as inconsistent attendance, lack of follow-through or limited accountability, further complicated partnerships and eroded trust. Concerns about inconsistent student readiness have been documented widely in the CE literature, with partners reporting frustration when students lack professionalism or adequate preparation for community-based work ([Watson et al. 2023](#)). This issue is especially salient in rural communities, where fewer staff and higher visibility amplify the impact of student behaviour. Some partners linked these concerns to broader post-pandemic shifts in student engagement, noting that patterns of distraction, burnout and disengagement seemed more common in recent years. [Reed and Grabsch \(2025\)](#) found significant declines in college students' civic attitudes and participation following the onset of COVID-19 and argue that institutions must reconsider how CE is structured in response to these changes. Their findings suggest that the challenges that rural partners described may reflect not only local conditions but also broader, pandemic-driven shifts in student preparedness and engagement that continue to shape CE partnerships.

These qualitative findings were reinforced by the lower ratings for quality of student work and dissemination of project results in the survey data. This mirrors long-standing critiques that CE partnerships often falter due to unclear expectations, insufficient communication and limited feedback loops between

campuses and community agencies ([Holton et al. 2017](#); [Karasik 2020](#)). Rural partners, in particular, report that short-term or episodic involvement undermines both trust and continuity in under-resourced areas ([Smalley et al. 2012](#)). The alignment between survey and interview results suggests that whilst partners value their collaborations with the college, they require clearer structures that prepare students for the work and more intentional communication about project outcomes. Strengthening these processes is essential for building reliable, reciprocal and sustainable rural CE partnerships.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRENGTHENING RURAL CE PARTNERSHIPS

The recommendations that follow are informed by the quantitative and qualitative findings of this study, as well as lessons learned across multiple years of partnership-building and continuing assessment efforts in this rural context. Together, these sources provide a fuller understanding of the structural and relational conditions shaping rural CE.

Findings from the Satisfaction Survey, TRES, interviews and Venn Diagram measures reveal four interconnected challenges: (1) unclear role expectations and uneven resources between the college and rural community partners; (2) the need for stronger equity practices embedded in partnership agreements; (3) inconsistent preparation and support for students entering this specific rural context; and (4) lack of a mechanism to sustain knowledge and continuity beyond individual students or faculty members. Together, these challenges can contribute to a persistent rural town–gown divide ([Bingle & Hatcher 2002](#); [Mitchell 2008](#)), particularly in rural contexts where limited organisational capacity and tightly interconnected social networks can amplify the effects of miscommunication. Accordingly, we propose the following recommendations to strengthen rural CE partnerships.

1. Clearer Communication and Formalised Agreements

Rural partners emphasised the need for clearer communication and formalised partnership agreements. Co-created Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) can establish shared expectations around roles, timelines, communication and follow-through whilst embedding equity safeguards such as stipends, cost-sharing and transparent benefit structures ([Bingle & Hatcher 2002](#); [Mitchell 2008](#)). When collaboratively developed, such agreements reduce coordination burdens and support more sustainable and accountable rural partnerships. It is particularly important in rural regions, where a single project can consume a disproportionate amount of local organisational capacity and where miscommunication spreads quickly through overlapping social networks. Co-created MOUs can help rural colleges avoid unintentionally overburdening community partners and can contribute to more sustainable, accountable and mutually beneficial partnerships.

2. Integrate Rural Community Partners into Academic Structures to Bridge the Town–Gown Divide

Integrating CE more fully into academic structures can provide continuity for rural partners who often operate with limited staffing, geographic isolation and constrained organisational resources ([Holton et al. 2017](#); [Smalley et al. 2012](#)). Embedding projects within courses, maintaining stable faculty points of contact and co-designing initiatives with community partners can preserve institutional knowledge and create predictable engagement cycles that strengthen long-term collaboration in rural settings ([Paulson 2018](#); [Gelmon et al. 2018](#)).

3. Pre-placement Training for Students in Rural Engagement

Rural partners identified student preparedness as a persistent challenge, underscoring the need for rural-specific pre-placement training addressing professionalism, rural community contexts and structural challenges such as transportation barriers and limited service infrastructure ([Sandy & Holland 2006](#); [Smalley et al. 2012](#)). Context-specific preparation can improve student effectiveness whilst reducing strain on rural community organisations and strengthening partnership sustainability ([Reed & Grabsch 2025](#)).

4. Faculty/Staff Liaison and Data Feedback Loops in Rural Partnerships

Establishing a dedicated faculty or staff liaison for major rural partnerships can strengthen continuity, preserve institutional memory and ensure that partner feedback informs ongoing program improvement (Holton et al. 2017; Smalley et al. 2012). Consistent liaison roles help maintain communication, support long-term collaboration and reinforce reciprocity within rural CE relationships (Paulson & Davis 2024).

Limitations

This study's modest sample size reflects the limited number of community organisations within the region and may constrain generalisability to other rural contexts. In addition, self-selection bias may have influenced participation, as partners with greater availability or stronger relationships may have been more likely to participate.

Future research should explore rural community engagement across a wider range of rural geographies to better understand how distinct rural conditions shape partnership dynamics. Comparative studies across multiple rural regions would help identify which findings reflect broad rural trends and which are context-specific. Additionally, future research should examine structural factors influencing rural CE and should continue to track long-term changes in partnership quality, reciprocity and sustainability. Longitudinal mixed-methods designs and participatory approaches that position rural partners as co-researchers would further strengthen the field's understanding of what supports lasting, equitable community engagement in rural settings.

Conclusion

This study addresses a gap in the CE literature by centring on the perspectives of rural community partners and examining how partnerships evolve within a single rural region over time, particularly amid broader social and institutional disruptions that have disproportionately affected rural communities in recent years. Across surveys, closeness measures and interviews, partners expressed a clear message: effective rural CE requires relationship infrastructure, not just goodwill. In communities where a single organisation may be the sole provider of essential services and where social networks are tightly interconnected, continuity, shared decision-making and institutional memory are essential. The TRES findings illuminate persistent structural inequities, showing that whilst partners share the college's goals and values, they experience gaps in power-sharing, resource contribution and collaborative decision-making. Rather than seeking more engagement, rural partners want engagement that is accountable, reciprocal and co-created.

The originality of this work lies in highlighting what rural partners themselves identify as necessary for sustaining transformational partnerships. Their insights point directly to the structural supports that enable equitable collaboration, including co-created agreements, rural-specific student preparation, academic integration and liaison roles. Together, these findings offer a concise roadmap for strengthening CE in rural settings and advance the field towards a more contextualised, equitable and sustainable vision of CE, one that is grounded in the lived realities and expertise of rural communities.

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Appendix A

SATISFACTION SURVEY

First, we would like some information about you.

Is this your first time working with Allegheny College?

- Yes
 No

How long have you been working with Allegheny College?

- Less than 1 year
 1–3 years
 3–5 years
 5–10 years
 More than 10 years

What is your organizational status?

- Public or Private
 For-profit or Nonprofit

What are the benchmark areas addressed by your organization?

Check all appropriate

- Health and Wellbeing
 Community and Economic Development
 Environment and Sustainability
 Education and Social Development
 Arts and Culture

OTHER:

Please rate your level of satisfaction with your connection to an Allegheny CE in the following areas.

Overall communication with students

- Strongly disagree
 Disagree
 Neutral
 Agree
 Strongly agree

Overall communication with faculty

- Strongly disagree
 Disagree
 Neutral
 Agree
 Strongly agree

Level and quality of interaction with students

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Level and quality of interaction with faculty

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Quality of student work

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Feedback and input into planning of experiences

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Scope and timing of activity

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Level of trust with faculty

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Level of trust with students

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

This partnership was successful

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

I will pursue a partnership with Allegheny in the future

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

This partnership made a difference in the community

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

This partnership was mutually beneficial

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

This partnership is sustainable

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree



The dissemination and sharing of the project and research results is sufficient

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

There was a seamless handoff protocol that allowed for continuity of projects (if applicable)

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree
- Not applicable

My expectations about the class or projects outcomes were met

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree