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RESEARCH ARTICLE (PEER-REVIEWED)

## 'Can You Put Down Your Mission and Plug Into Mine?' How Place-Based Initiatives Leverage Collaborations with Academic Institutions to Enhance Their ABCD and CBR Potential

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### Abstract

Place-Based Initiatives (PBIs) involve efforts to mobilise and coordinate local resources, services and expertise across multiple organisations and sectors in order to strengthen the social, structural, physical and economic conditions of historically disinvested neighbourhoods. While promising, these initiatives have had some documented challenges, and some are leveraging partnerships with academic institutions to address those challenges. In this article, we explore perspectives of leaders and staff from three PBI organisations in Charlotte, NC to better understand the benefits of PBI-academic partnerships and the conditions under which they are most effective. Thematic analysis of 23 semi-structured interviews revealed that PBIs leverage partnerships with academic institutions to accomplish two key goals. First, these partnerships stimulate asset-based community development (ABCD) by connecting community organisations and neighbourhood residents with academic resources and by strengthening PBI service

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delivery. Second, some partnerships give rise to community-based research efforts that help address external accountability challenges and inform PBI programming. The findings also illuminated several pitfalls in academic-PBI partnerships, sometimes rooted in conflicting priorities and approaches of academic researchers and non-profit practitioners. Finally, insights delineate key recommendations for improving PBI-academic collaborations, including countering academic exploitation by plugging into PBIs' mission and respecting PBI expertise.

## Keywords

Community-Academic Partnerships; PBI; CBR; Engaged Scholarship; ABCD

## Introduction

Heightened awareness of economic immobility and barriers limiting people's success and wellbeing has spurred action in non-profits and higher education institutions to collaboratively address the complexity of factors constraining mobility. Among non-profits, place-based initiatives (PBIs), with their defining focus on improving neighbourhoods' physical, social and economic conditions, are uniquely positioned to help ensure that residents have the opportunity to attain upward mobility ([Purpose Built Communities 2019](#); [Rood & McGroder 2017](#)). At the same time, many higher education institutions are increasing their community-focused, place-based and collaborative commitment. As major social and economic entities, many higher education institutions are recognising that they have a social responsibility to help address complex community problems, including the long-standing inequities that plague many of the geographic areas in which these institutions are located ([Brown & Moore 2019](#); Holliday et al. 2015; [Olson & Brennan 2017](#); [Yamamura & Koth 2019](#)). Productive PBI-academic partnerships reflect one means by which PBIs and higher education institutions can increase community impact ([Drahota et al. 2016](#)).

In their efforts to advance place-based economic mobility, PBIs and academic institutions sometimes incorporate Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) and Community Based Research (CBR) – both of which are deeply rooted in the need to rectify unjust collaborations and to advance economic mobility in lower income communities. ABCD pushes back against 'client neighbourhood' approaches, where influential institutions (e.g. foundations, universities, NGOs) strive and thrive on the deficit narrative of collecting and analysing the problems and needs of beneficiaries – to promote a strengths-based, internally focused and relationship-driven neighbourhood transformation process where lower-income people and their neighbourhoods' local capacities, skills and assets are the control centre for developing policies and actions ([Kretzman & McKnight 1993](#)). Similarly, CBR, which developed in response to historical mistrust and poor relations between the 'academy' and community members who often felt exploited by institutions and researchers, promotes partnership-based approaches to social change that emphasise co-learning, reciprocal transfer of expertise, and joint decision making between researchers and community members ([Viswanathan et al. 2004](#)).

In practice, however, PBIs and academic institutions often struggle to exploit the full potential of ABCD and CBR approaches. For instance, though there is variation among PBIs, some incorporate ABCD (e.g. value local knowledge, strength-based delivery approach) and CBR principles (e.g. commitment to strategic learning) in their mission ([Dart 2018](#)). Furthermore, while PBIs typically are not founded in grassroots ABCD movements, they tend to have some community credibility (e.g. long-term community presence or connections with people and entities who do) that helps offset their institutional, semi-outsider structure (e.g. professional staff, external oversight and funding). In light of this background, PBIs must continuously negotiate their community credibility. In terms of CBR, critics have raised concerns that in higher education, and the academy broadly, community-engagement has become more of a 'buzz-word' than a genuine commitment for some; consequently, many academics and institutions may struggle to develop

the type of authentic community collaborations (e.g. equitable, strength-based) that aligns with ABCD and CBR principles ([Curwood et al. 2011](#); [Seifer et al. 2012](#)).

Given that PBIs and academic institutions are increasing their collaborative efforts to advance place-based economic mobility and equity, insights are needed to address the inherent challenges each face in incorporating ABCD and CBR approaches, as well as challenges that hinder collaborative efforts. To this end, this article explores, from the perspective of PBIs' leadership and staff, the following research questions:

- How do PBIs leverage academic partnerships to strengthen their ABCD efforts and better incorporate CBR to improve their own work?
- What recommendations do PBIs have to improve community-academic collaborations?

To answer these questions, we focus on three PBIs in Charlotte, North Carolina (USA) – a city with relatively low economic mobility ([Chetty et al. 2014](#)) – for those with the fewest resources and multiple academic institutions, with which to collaborate. We conducted 23 semi-structured interviews with the PBI leadership and staff to gain their perspectives on the benefits of, and barriers to, partnering with academic institutions and to elicit their suggestions for improvement.

## PROMISES AND CHALLENGES OF ABCD AND CBR FOR PLACE-BASED INITIATIVES

In Charlotte, as in many cities, Place-Based Initiatives (PBIs) have emerged in neighbourhoods facing layers of structural and historical discrimination. Based on empirical evidence demonstrating that the neighbourhood in which one is born and raised strongly predicts economic disparities, low intergenerational mobility is seen as a 'local-problem' that requires place-based solutions ([Chetty et al. 2014](#); [Purpose Built Communities 2019](#)). To address these place-based disparities, PBIs can play a critical role in coordinating resources, services and expertise across multiple organisations and sectors, and that this coordination can build on local assets to transform neighbourhoods' social, structural, physical and economic conditions and promote intergenerational economic mobility ([Liu & Berube 2015](#); [Rood & McGroder 2017](#)).

As part of their mission, PBIs often incorporate elements consistent with ABCD and CBR, including a strength-based delivery approach, and work with community members to identify priorities, build on local knowledge and commit to using data and evidence to inform programming decisions ([Dart 2018](#)). Thus, both ABCD and CBR have the potential to play an important role in PBIs' work and mission, but like other community organisations, PBIs often face challenges in implementing these approaches. As noted by critics of ABCD and CBR in general, there is often a gap between the 'ideals' of each approach and their 'real-world' implementation, especially when power and economic differentials make it difficult to establish equitable collaborations, and where limited person power capacity exists ([Freidli 2013](#); [Janes 2016](#); [Sousa 2021](#)). For PBIs, challenges include the ability to address systems of power, which constrains community resident participation, develop trusting relationships with community members, and the internal capacity to adapt to external accountability pressures, which limits their ability to utilise ABCD and CBR fully.

The crunch of the American reality – low wages, unaffordable housing, expensive health and child care, and access to social support programs only if you can prove and maintain need – makes citizen participation in ABCD difficult. In the U.S., individuals must have an extremely low income in order to qualify for federal support. For context the US median household income was \$70,784 in 2021, while the 2022 Federal Poverty Level (FPL), the prerequisite for accessing social support, was an income of \$27,750 for a family of four. All of these issues create unique challenges for citizens and community organisations, such as the PBIs, who are important mediating agents in helping citizens participate, connect to, and activate the various forms of social and institutional assets. However, amid growing concern over ABCD proponents who acknowledge external power systems, but do little to address power imbalances, place-based

development experts increasingly recognise the need for development efforts to simultaneously address community-level solutions and combat oppressive structures. Responding to this critique, [Maclure \(2023\)](#) outlines an augmentation to the ABCD model that integrates both Freirean emancipatory pedagogy and anti-oppression theory. Likewise, [Sousa \(2021, p. 11\)](#) argues for the reintegration of CBR into the practice of ABCD, thus returning to the emancipatory roots of CBR in the Global South, where it was a social movement of the people and where knowledge production was community-led and produced in action.

Like other organisations that support ABCD, PBIs must regain the trust of people who have been historically let down by statutory services or have had difficult life experiences in untrustworthy and under-resourced environments ([Harrison et al. 2019](#)). Gaining this trust may be particularly challenging for PBIs because they do not always adhere to a *pure* citizen-driven internal agent of change ABCD approach. Instead, PBIs often have a ‘semi-outside’ structure, with professional staff working to coordinate voices and assets for the community, which reduces the burden to participate that can often hinder ABCD efforts ([Maclead et al. 2014](#)). This means, however, that PBIs must be self-reflective about their semi-outsider status and intentional in cultivating community voices. They do, in part, by providing connections to resources to improve everyday life, and creating protected communal space for convening internal actors, some of whom would never otherwise have met. Additionally, their ongoing community presence and the positionality of staff help mitigate power imbalances and foster community engagement. Nonetheless, PBIs must be intentional in these trust-building efforts.

PBIs must also overcome external accountability and evaluation challenges that can hinder ABCD – an area where CBR could be beneficial. With the heightened focus on accountability and responsibility models, ABCD-oriented organisations often face intense donor pressure to demonstrate impacts ([Harrison et al. 2019](#)). This is similar to the pressure some PBIs face in demonstrating their impact, for example, their promise to mitigate intergenerational poverty, advance health equity and facilitate mobility, but limited research has examined the effectiveness of their efforts (e.g. [McGowan et al. 2021](#)). Consequently, these organisations are consumed by impact evaluation tasks (e.g. planning, monitoring and evaluation planning) that, combined with limited internal capacity, can hinder their community-driven mission and service focus, and result in hierarchical structures laden with top-down, results-based management ([Harrison et al. 2019](#)). Moreover, funders often fail to understand that organisational impacts should not only capture the outcomes of individuals and families in the community, but also the role of the organisation in stimulating and sustaining genuine community-driven development. In ABCD approaches, impact evidence lies in the linkages to, and networks of community members in continuing to access information, services and opportunities independent of the organisation ([Mathie 2005](#)).

## LEVERAGING PBI – ACADEMIC COLLABORATIONS TO HARNESS THE POTENTIAL OF ABCD AND CBR

PBIs often collaborate with a diverse range of academic institutions – universities, colleges, community colleges, and different entities within each institution, service-learning programs, faculty, individual researchers and academic programs, as a means to enhance their organisational and neighbourhood capacity to create intergenerational mobility opportunities ([Purpose Built Communities 2019](#)). Though academic institutions are just one of the many organisations with which PBIs collaborate, PBIs may be able to use these relationships to mitigate some of their ABCD- and CBR-related challenges. For example, PBIs may be able to employ the CBR knowledge of academic researchers and institutions well-versed in CBR practices to further community trust and address external accountability pressures.

Community-based Participatory Research (CBPR), one of the more egalitarian forms of community-based research, holds significant promise in fostering and measuring meaningful community impacts. This is, because CPBR is grounded in equity-based multicultural principles (e.g. includes diverse

stakeholders, facilitates equitable participation) aimed at empowering community voices in the research process ([Viswanathan et al. 2004](#)). Given that many academic institutions are increasing their place-based community–collaboration commitments, PBIs may be able to leverage this commitment and the CBR and CBPR expertise, including applied research and evaluation skills, in these institutions to address the external ‘impact’ evaluation challenges that they face. At the same time, this process of co-creating research with PBIs and their residents builds upon their own assets by increasing knowledge, skills and connections to academic resources (e.g. educational programs) that together can strengthen the PBIs’ level of community trust. Thus, combining the diverse resources of academic institutions (e.g. student person power, academic expertise and programs) with their own local knowledge can strengthen their programming and service delivery ([Seifer et al. 2012](#); [Suarez-Balcazar et al. 2005](#)).

Given that PBIs increasingly collaborate with academic institutions, they can provide insight on how PBIs and academic institutions can collaborate to enhance their implementation of ABCD and CBR approaches. We examine three Charlotte-based PBIs to provide these key insights and to identify ways to strengthen PBI–academic collaborations.

## Method

### STUDY OVERVIEW

This community-engaged PBI research study grew out of a new partnership involving interdisciplinary university faculty and three Charlotte-based PBIs. In Spring, 2020, the university-based team, with PBI input, developed a multi-step, mixed-methods evaluative research plan intended to garner the insights of different PBI stakeholders – PBI staff/leaders, collaborating agencies, neighbourhood residents and funders – and capture relevant programmatic and administrative data. The overall project aims were to elucidate facilitators and barriers to PBI work, build PBI’s data capacity, identify common PBI impact measures, improve PBI programming, and foster longer term PBI–university team collaborations.

The first-step of the project – conducting PBI staff/leadership interviews – is the focus of this article. It highlights the university team’s emphasis on utilising a CBPR approach. Although each university team member had a community organisation and evaluation background, they varied in their experience working with PBIs. Thus, by first interviewing PBI staff and leaders – the experts on PBIs and on each of their respective PBI neighbourhoods and programs – the university-based research team took on the role of the learner, seeking to better understand the PBIs and their collective facilitators and barriers (the initial research priority), while simultaneously building stronger collaborative relationships.

### PARTICIPANTS & DATA COLLECTION

First, we met with each PBI executive director individually to introduce ourselves and discuss initial interview topics and question ideas. We then created a draft interview guide and protocol, which we shared with the PBI directors for their suggestions and refinement.

After collaborative agreement on the guide and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to proceed, the university team conducted 23 in-depth semi-structured interviews with PBI staff and the leadership. Interview items asked about the respondents’ role, their perceptions regarding the strengths of their PBI and the challenges they encounter, community contextual factors (e.g. funder dynamics), the impact of structural racism, and other topics. The present study focuses on the data regarding collaboration with academic-based partners. Interviews ranged from one to four hours and took place between Spring and Fall of 2021. Based on self-identification, 20 PBI respondents were female and 3 male; and 14 self-identified as Black, 8 as White and one as Hispanic. Ages ranged from 30 to 64. Only three participants lived in the

PBI neighbourhood; seven were native to Charlotte. Their organisational positions ranged from project implementation staff, to CEOs, to the directors of outreach and funding, and their time in the organisation varied from three weeks to twelve years.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Analysis occurred in two stages: (1) a preliminary analysis and report of the main findings to PBI leaders for feedback and member checking; and (2) a more rigorous, in-depth qualitative analysis focused on PBI-academic collaboration themes specifically. In both stages, all Zoom audio files were first transcribed using otter.ai. This approach proved suitable for interviews with speakers of White ‘standard’ English, but, because a majority of the interviewees did not fit this profile, there were serious transcription errors. Thus, we sent some audio recordings out for professional transcription. After transcription, a research team member re-read each transcript to locate errors and to identify any potentially sensitive or identifying information. Then, based on the initial guide of interview questions, we defined and applied deductive structural codes using MAXQDA analysis software.

In the initial analytic stage, we analyzed the full-interview protocol for 12 of the 23 interviews. Following a process of team-based applied thematic coding ([MacQueen et al. 2008](#)), we then divided our university team of faculty and graduate student researchers into four groups. Each group was assigned text segments and structural codes based on specific questions from the guide. Each team member read through their selected sections and independently identified emerging themes that they then compared with those completed by another team member to identify overlaps and discrepancies. Together, team members defined new inductive codes. They next coordinated a second reading of the segments to apply the new inductive codes and identify salient quotes and examples. Based on this process, we identified four main thematic areas – collaboration, organisational facilitators and barriers, funding and metrics – and sub-themes within each area, including those related to PBI-academic collaborations.

In Fall, 2022, we reported these preliminary results to the PBI directors in an in-person feedback session and a second online meeting with the PBI directors and a key PBI funding agency. These member check sessions are an important component of CBPR; they verify that our initial analysis has accurately captured the data and that the project continues to align with the three PBIs’ respective research needs. In the second stage of the analysis, we conducted an additional focused analysis of PBI-academic collaborations – a prominent sub-theme identified in the first analytic stage. For this stage, we analysed all 23 interviews. During this analysis, we focused on the interview guide content and questions related to PBI-Academic collaborations (e.g. benefits and challenges, improvement suggestions; see Appendix A). Additionally, to ensure we captured interview content related to PBI-academic collaborations, we conducted a second, indirect key word search of each interview based on key words identified in the first stage.

We used MAXQDA and a similar team-based applied thematic coding process as used in the first stage, i.e. multiple team coders, deductive and inductive coding techniques, and repeat reading and coding of the interview transcripts. The approach adopted for analysing the study drew on the applied thematic analysis described by [Guest et al. \(2012, p. 16\)](#), where the primary concern ‘is with presenting the stories and experiences voiced by study participants as accurately and comprehensively as possible’.

## Results

### OVERVIEW: CHARLOTTE’S LOW ECONOMIC MOBILITY AND THE PBI RESPONSE

Similar to other US southeast cities, Charlotte NC is grappling with population booms that are increasing cost of living and exacerbating long-standing economic and racial inequities. Despite a thriving economy,

Charlotte ranks last in economic mobility among the 50 largest U.S. cities ([Chetty et al. 2014](#)). In Charlotte, as in many cities, PBIs have emerged to transform neighbourhoods and other geographically bounded areas.

The three Charlotte-based PBIs that participated in this study were working with three different historically Black neighbourhoods. These neighbourhoods are unique, but share common challenges. They are all located in Charlotte's urban centre. Additionally, compared to neighbourhoods in Charlotte broadly, the three PBI-serving neighbourhoods (1) are more racially/ethnically isolated on average, non-Hispanic Black persons make up 82 percent of the PBI neighbourhoods versus 32 percent in Charlotte neighbourhoods broadly; (2) face more economic hardship – an average neighbourhood poverty rate of 47 percent versus 13 percent in Charlotte broadly; (3) have more single-parent households (32 percent versus 8 percent); and (4) have a higher share of residents with low levels of education (i.e. less than a high-school degree: 27 percent vs 10 percent ([US Census 2019](#))).

Though the three PBIs vary in origin, approach, funding and stage of organisational development, all three developed to address the multifaceted and deeply rooted challenges in their neighbourhoods. Consistent with ABCD approaches, these three PBIs work with community members, leaders and organisations to amplify resident voices, connect neighbourhood resources, and facilitate collaboration to tackle systemic barriers. Below is a brief description of each PBI and their overall priority areas:

- *CrossRoads Corporation for Affordable Housing and Community Development, Inc.*: Established in 2008, CrossRoads seeks to honour the history and rejuvenation of a historically Black neighbourhood founded in 1886 by Sam Billings, a former enslaved Black man. Billings was the first Black man on record to have purchased over 100 acres in Mecklenburg County. Today, the community founded by Billings is an island within Charlotte's most wealthy and sought-after neighbourhoods. CrossRoads strives to drive community improvement, focusing on five social determinants of health: economic stability, education, social and community context, health and access to health care, and the neighbourhood and built environment. CrossRoads provides some direct services and coordinates the efforts of numerous partner organisations in providing diverse services (housing, medical, financial, educational, workforce development pathway, programs and experiences).
- *Renaissance West Community Initiative (RWCI)*: In 2009, the Charlotte Housing Authority received a \$20.9 million HOPE VI grant to revitalise the Boulevard Homes public housing site as a mixed-income community. RWCI was launched to lead the implementation. Their ultimate goal was to contribute to the economic revitalisation of their targeted geographic area. To this end they: (1) developed and implemented a high-quality cradle-to-career educational continuum that includes a child development centre and pre-K-8 schools; (2) coordinated 50 partners to ensure wraparound services that would meet their unique needs related to health, mental wellbeing, job training, parent support, education and social services; and (3) supported the development of mixed-income housing in their area.
- *Freedom Communities*: Established in 2017, in direct response to Charlotte being ranked last in economic mobility ([Chetty et al. 2014](#)), its founding board members convened to identify tangible ways to personally, professionally and through their churches address the challenge of upward mobility. They mobilised philanthropic and impact investments to activate real estate and programmatic opportunities. Their work focuses on one of the six geographic sites identified by the city and the mayor's racial equity initiative. Freedom Communities makes targeted investments, coordinates efforts, and establishes partnerships to address the priority areas of housing, education, employment and wellness.

## OVERVIEW: PBIS' DIVERSE ACADEMIC COLLABORATIONS

Across the PBIs, academic institutions are viewed as a key collaborative partner – a sentiment best highlighted by the following PBI-staffer quote: '[W]e've got a great university, broad base university system in the area, and love to see those [collaborative] opportunities come together.' In the Charlotte-metro there are 13 different academic institutions and each PBI collaborates with a diverse array of them, including the area's largest community college (Central Piedmont Community College, CPCC) and a public four-year university (UNC Charlotte).

There is wide variation in the types of collaborations that PBIs form with academic institutions. As one PBI staff member noted, '[f]rom interns, to research assistants, to professors, we've been lucky because our work ... I don't know if our work is considered an innovation, or because our work is so broad, that people can find the place that's of their research or academic interest.' As a result, PBI-academic collaborations take many forms. A main commonality, however, is that each collaboration aims to help PBIs meet some part of their place-based mission. Broadly, each PBI-academic collaboration can be classified as either aiming to (1) advance PBI programming and service delivery, or (2) support PBI evaluation, grant and fundraising efforts.

To improve programming/service delivery, PBIs collaborated with academic institutions to both help staff enhance current PBI services and create new opportunities and connections for residents. PBIs relied on student interns, field placements (e.g. social work practicum) and volunteers to help staff a wide variety of programs. For example, they engaged college student volunteers to mentor neighbourhood youth and the early child development field placement students to staff the PBI child development centre, and had student interns create PBI branding materials. PBIs also used academic collaborations as a way to connect neighbourhood residents with new opportunities, particularly in terms of workforce development. PBIs worked hard to connect neighbourhood residents with academic degree programs/certificates and training opportunities (e.g. GED assistance) provided by academic institutions. In turn, they invited collaborators from academic institutions to talk with the residents about 'the different programs, [and] the grants that are available', encouraged and facilitated the academic institutions to create scholarships for their neighbourhood residents and created youth college mentoring programs.

The second PBI-academic collaboration classification type centred on collaborations that aimed to support PBI evaluation, grants and fundraising efforts. PBIs often partnered with different faculty, graduate student researchers and academic institutes/centers within an academic institution on a variety of research-based endeavours, for example, data collection and management, logic model development, program evaluations, grant development and program implementation. Generally, the PBIs hoped to use these efforts to make internal improvements and to enhance their own competitiveness for external funding (e.g. draw on data in grant applications).

## HOW PBIS LEVERAGE ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIPS TO STRENGTHEN THEIR ABCD MISSION AND INCORPORATE CBR APPROACHES TO STRENGTHEN THEIR WORK

The PBIs leveraged academic collaborations and resources in a variety of ways to strengthen and sustain their community connections and to meet and challenge external pressures and power systems that might hinder their ABCD mission. As part of this, PBIs often used CBR resources, particularly data and evaluation skills, of academics. However, in their collaborations with academics, PBIs had to work to ensure that challenges associated with academic collaborations did not hinder their own trustworthy reputation.

### Using Academic Partnerships to facilitate immediate and long-term community connections

PBI staff and leadership believed that academic collaborations created direct and indirect benefits that enhanced their ability to develop genuine, sustained community connections. In terms of direct benefits,



by collaborating with academic programs and services, PBIs were able to bring new resources into the community and/or connect community members to new opportunities (e.g. job training programs) that empowered them as individuals. Arguably, this was important for transforming neighbourhoods and strengthening community trust in the PBI and demonstrating PBIs' accountability and responsiveness to community-member preferences and needs.

The PBI leadership and staff also identified an indirect benefit – new academic social connections with neighbourhood residents. PBIs felt that the process of collaboration and physical exchanges by neighbourhood residents with students and researchers served as a lever of change towards improving the health and mobility of residents. For instance, several respondents noted how simply participating in programs and research exposed residents to career possibilities in research and offered an opportunity for social bridging. Participants described how youth interacting with students from higher education institutions had an opportunity to demystify academic pursuits: 'the exposure of what being a college kid looks like . . . being around collegiate students and having that exposure there and seeing what life is like there . . . [and] scholarship opportunities too'. Thus, the academic–social connections created by PBI–academic partnership (i.e. the mentoring program) had the potential to benefit the residents of neighbourhoods served by PBIs.

Lastly, PBIs often viewed investing in students at academic institutions as a way to give back and create employment or a volunteer pipeline for their PBI to promote long-term social change.

*I think, with the students, teaching them about the reality of these communities and what they look like, how they work, how they've been affected by systemic challenges over the years, understanding history better. There's a lot to be learned for the students as they go out into any field ... [S]ome of that will inspire them, whatever they happen to do, to maybe, not forget about that. And whether they stay engaged philanthropically, or they stay engaged from a volunteer standpoint, or ... they vote a different way. I think it's a good part of the academic experience.*

Thus, beyond the present day, student involvement in PBIs is viewed as a way to plant seeds for longer term social change, and expand philanthropic and volunteer networks that may help the specific neighbourhood and PBI build trustworthiness, as well as advance the broader cause of creating a just and equitable society. Thus, PBIs are demonstrating a long-term accountability commitment to social change.

#### Using Academic CBR Partnerships to advocate for more meaningful ABCD metrics

PBIs viewed academic partnerships, particularly research and evaluation partnerships, as especially useful in helping them meet funders' 'result-based' accountability demands. This was so even among PBI staff members who were critical of data demands and skeptical that quantitative data could truly capture the difference PBIs make in residents' lives.

*... hearing stories with tears or seeing celebrations in person, that's just what I believe in. And I think there's an understanding that comes with that that can't be done, by watching the numbers ... having said all that sounds like I'm against the metrics and helping to measure, but frankly, the measurables are one of the greatest benefits that universities can bring to our work ... Because some of that is access to data that the universities had that we can never have. And then overlaying that to some of the reality pieces that we can bring to the table. I think that's a huge asset there.*

Here we see the potential for academic partners to meaningfully document person-centred indicators as well as the ways these organisations are facilitating sustainable changes in local actors. For those in the thick of program implementation, data collection can seem like a challenging add-on to their work. However, CBR partnerships can help ease this burden:

*The capacity we have is just, you know, trying to keep up with data as we get it, as we can collect it, as we know it... but it's an add-on to everything everybody does... And that's where university situations and others can help us, is to sometimes say to us, "Can you collect this?" ... [Can you] Interpret what we do collect?*

The participants described a type of credibility and social capital afforded to them both by publicising their relationship with academic institutions and via the data and reports generated by academics:

*I'd like the data because the data then helps me inform my investors...I just think... Universities can bring...a level of credibility that these PBIs need. And if you can actually get the research out of it ...not even published, reported...cause I know there's terminology ... that it's validated data that I can use with funders and with my volunteers and all that. If you can come in and leave with some kind of proven outcome, that then also allows that non-profit to have even more credibility and legitimacy. That should be your goal, that you're loaning your social capital.*

The above quote reflects a deep understanding by the community partner of the nuances of academic terminology and the core value of having externally recognised and validated data associated with their work. This participant goes on to explicitly link this asset of credibility to their sustainability in demonstrating their impact and securing funding.

*Cause those sophisticated funders, they love that. They love to be part of research. They're just not funding a charity. They're funding something that can be – if it's done in the way that research is done – then you're going through eliminating stuff that doesn't work. Because we probably got thousands of people out here doing stuff that doesn't work, but they don't know it doesn't work because they don't really research it.*

Thus, the academic partnership helps the organisation go beyond the selective telling of stories of success to a deeper process-oriented and systematic understanding of what is working well versus less well and how data may guide improvements. At the same time, the academic researcher is in a position to challenge some of the top-down metrics and co-create new, complementary ways to document how PBIs are stimulating and sustaining asset-based community development.

#### Using Academic Partnerships to enhance internal validation & challenge power systems

PBI leadership and staff noted that academic partners, both researchers and students, often provided the type of inspirational anchor and internal validation and motivational support that PBI staff – who are often drained by rigorous schedules and unending demands – need to fulfil their mission and challenge external power structures:

*I think a part of what I've seen as a benefit is the ability to have, quote-unquote, these growing edge moments, places and spaces where you can have the necessary intellectual conversations about the work as a practice, as a discipline. As a nonprofit, we spend the vast majority of our time acting, reacting or responding to the needs of the community and constituents we serve. We don't always have the time and space or we have to intentionally create the space to be strategic—to think about being a place-based initiative theoretically while in the midst of being a place-based initiative in actuality.. You need to have this intellectual honesty about the work that you're doing and the mission you are serving and trying to advance ... I think the greatest part, in our collaboration with you all, is just like the solidarity ... you get us in ... in a way, that's ... really encouraging. Because when you're measured with a ruler ... to be able to just celebrate something ... is really freeing, and ... validates our work in new levels that are really important when so often you're measured in a numbers way.*

The underlying message here is that academic partners can engage in critical discussions that create space not only to reflect on structural factors, but to implement an ABCD approach that promotes internal participation and social action, while also targeting external power systems ([Maclure 2023](#)).

Along these same lines, students were the most inspirational and internally motivating benefit noted across interviews on this study. Participants repeatedly described students' positive energy and curiosity as important contributions: 'The students are the best part of universities. I think there's a thirst for knowledge and thirst for understanding.' Student collaborations facilitated the ability of PBI staff to connect back to the 'big picture' and their own initial motivations.

*I would say 98% of the students that we worked with have just been like ... how I was when I learned about it, like 'this is amazing.' And ... the enthusiasm and energy that they bring into it ... they're generally hard-working and ... want to help [PBI] be successful. That's been huge.*

PBI staff also learnt new skills on social media and new perspectives from students, benefits that could help the PBI staff be more effective in their own work, especially in finding new ways to connect with residents.

### **Ensuring Academic Partnerships do not hinder PBIs' mission and exploit community members**

Lastly, when collaborating with academic partners, PBIs had to ensure that their own reputation would not be damaged or their mission derailed. For instance, though participant responses were overwhelmingly positive about student interactions, they cautioned that mediocre student performance could negatively affect residents and PBI community relationships. Unfortunately, there are situations where interns are not committed or lack preparation/competencies for the role in which they were placed. As one PBI staff respondent noted, students do not always 'take things seriously. We're place-based so the community is always watching, so that reflects on us'. Similarly, the cyclical nature of student involvement can hurt the PBIs' image and force them to guard against students and their academic supervisors taking advantage of community members for research or credit.

*[Students are] a great asset, but they cycle through. And so there's limitations to how much you can actually connect them with your clients, with the residents ... So, part of doing this work, one benefit of being a place-based initiative is that we're a constant presence in the community. And so as long as we're constant, then the other people coming and going is a different narrative, versus if it was just a free for all and no community quarterback, then it would take on an air of exploitation, not necessarily negative exploitation, but still exploitative [opportunistic].*

As this quote shows, a unique strength of PBIs is that they are able to leverage academic resources and partner to their benefit, without letting challenges associated with these partnerships hurt their community mission and trustworthiness.

PBIs also have to protect residents from being over, or inappropriately, researched. Because of their stable and central role within the community and with numerous partnering community organisations, PBIs are uniquely poised to ensure relevant research is conducted and that findings are used to inform policy and programmatic decisions. The failure of academics to report back to community members, for instance, can contribute to perceptions of academic exploitation and to the need for PBIs to protect their community members from research. As one staff member explains:

*...[some community] feedback is like, 'Well, but the universities walk away with the data, and the data is of value to them, but the community never really gets supported in implementing what the data says.' And so I think ... some of these community people ... have interpreted it as exploitative, that the universities come in, and they exploit for data, not money or power, but for data ... that's how these people perceive it, 'You guys swoop in here and you do all these...' We've had 20 research projects done, and it helps people get their PhD, it helps the university get a grant, it helps ... but what does it do for the community?*

Consequently, PBI leaders and staff noted that, when collaborating with academic researchers, they often need to ensure that the PBI and community needs are being addressed, that research is beneficial for the PBI and the community, and that there are not unintended consequences for residents.

*You know, we have to be careful that we understand research is needed and it helps, but we also have to be careful that people are not looked at as you know, experiments ... we have to be that protector of the residents ... but also be able to help bring [the research] back to us, to serve us in our day-to-day operations.*

Across interviews, participants noted the regular failure of academic partners to bring information back to the organisations so they could apply what was learned. In fact, in some instances, there were community-driven calls for action towards academics and academic institutions working in these settings:

*And so most recently, I've seen where these same community leaders are saying, 'We're not gonna participate unless you promise to use your capital, your social capital, to move the needle in the thing that you want to research.'*

Given the historical and structural discrimination faced by those living in and serving these communities, the overall concern about academic exploitation – both data exploitation and failure to ensure communities benefit from research – emphasises the importance of PBIs in serving as mediators in helping academics develop more equitable community relationships.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BENEFICIAL COMMUNITY-ACADEMIC COLLABORATIONS

PBI staff and leadership provided several suggestions on how to facilitate more beneficial PBI-academic partnerships. Many suggestions were linked with the different PBI-academic challenges they highlighted. These provide a roadmap to fostering better PBI-academic collaborations and, more broadly, efforts to employ ABCD and CBR principles.

### Establish and maintain a common purpose

First, they recommend that PBIs and academic partners establish and maintain *a common purpose*. Doing so will better enable PBI-academic partnerships to overcome the structural constraints and the timing and communication challenges that can hinder development. Community and academic partners often identify a broad purpose in working together, but success requires maintaining and clarifying the common purpose over time:

*... doing as many things together as we can, getting the community, identifying purposes, you know, what do we want to accomplish? If we're gonna collaborate, our greatest collaboration for success will be to have a common purpose ... I think sometimes there are challenges that we don't identify our purpose very specifically enough, that we know when we've been successful.*

Having an identified and updated common purpose is key to building the relational foundation for achieving mutual goals. This need is widely recognised as central within the cross-sector partnership literature (Coburn et al. 2013; Kania & Kramer 2011; Lanford et al. 2022). In a similar vein, efforts to identify and address needs of relevance to all partners are critical components of relationship trust and sustainability (e.g. Author et al. 2021).

### Dear Students: Partner with a passion and a purpose

Though student involvement was the most cited PBI-academic collaboration benefit, respondents articulated student-associated challenges. One PBI staff member stressed the importance of students (and by default their advisers) partnering with intentionality:

*As collegiate students ... we wanna make sure that what we're involved in is something that speaks to what we really wanna do and something that we're really passionate about. We just don't wanna waste time collecting data and doing it just because it was an assignment. If that's the case, then you're gonna make yourself miserable along with (laugh) the people you are partnering with. And so, I think just partnering with a passion and a purpose. Like if it's something that you are really into, or if it's something that you feel like you can really provide support to [the PBI] ... do it that way while also gaining the experience and knowledge for yourself to move on as a student as well.*

This suggestion highlights the need for students and their advisers to approach collaboration with the PBIs with the utmost professionalism, in a manner that aligns with the community-based work already in progress, and with the goal of adding value to the organisation. Though not explicit, this suggestion hints at the reality that sometimes the fit is just not right, and the student (or adviser) should not proceed with PBI placement. Pushing poorly matched students into these placements to fulfil degree requirements can be detrimental to the student, the organisation, the residents and the community, and the PBI-academic partnership's long-term viability.

#### Dear Researchers: 'Can you put down your mission and vision and plug into mine?'

PBI staff and leadership noted that they need to be the main drivers of the PBI-academic partnership and that, as with students, there needs to be a conversation about 'fit'. Respondents noted that academics need to be mindful of potential power or positionality differences and engage in practices that support the partnership, including respecting and valuing the capacity and competencies of their community partners. Given that the PBIs are the experts on their neighbourhood and its residents, they need to be the main drivers of the partnership:

*Can you really see and value that organisation's mission and vision? So, I would wanna say, 'Can you put down your mission and vision and plug into mine?' And then we come back to, 'Okay. What is it ... What outcomes do you need?' So it's evaluating the fit, and being comfortable having the conversations about whether or not there is a fit and being able to walk away when it doesn't really fit ... [A]s the PBI, we are the broker for the community. So, you need to take a second seat ... Now, I'm not saying take a second seat in your areas of your expertise, I'm saying take a second seat when it comes to the mission and vision that's going on in that community. And so be complementary of the work and not dominate the work and ... assume that the people already out here know what they're doing.*

As this staff member underlines, it is important to have uncomfortable conversations evaluating fit; there is a need to be able to walk away when the partnership is not suitable. Academic partners choosing not to walk away should embrace that collaboration with PBIs necessitates thoughtful curation of communication and deliberate articulation of and action toward the steps for moving forward together.

As part of this 'fit', academic partners must also respect and value the knowledge base of PBI staff, the leadership and neighbourhood residences:

*In the community, you speak a different language. And just because it's not the Queen's English doesn't mean it's unintelligent. And so sometimes, you get that. That would be the advice. Yeah. It's all the stuff that they probably teach. Don't talk down to people when you're in the community, make sure that they're heard, make sure that they're legitimised. [C]ome in as a partner, not as a saviour.*

The message here is that academic collaborators have to know their place and proceed with humility in these partnerships. This may mean that PBIs do not offer direct access to their residents. As much as academic partners may think that they are not 'that person' coming in as a 'savior', they should tread very lightly and engage in substantial self-reflection, with checkpoints to ensure they are leaning into the partnership with respect.

## Conclusion

Because Place-Based Initiatives are launched with the intention of transforming neighbourhoods facing historical, racial and structural discrimination, collaboration is critical to their work. Each of the three PBIs in this study – all located in Charlotte NC, USA – collaborated extensively with a diverse range of academic institutions and entities within each institution to offset challenges related to place-based effectiveness. Based on the perspectives of leaders and staff from these PBIs, we demonstrated how PBIs leverage PBI–academic collaborations to incorporate ABCD and CBR principles that strengthen their work. We also provide suggestions for improving PBI–academic collaborations.

First, PBIs in this study utilised their partnerships with academic institutions and programs to strengthen their ABCD approach. Though each PBI was unique, each used an ABCD approach to amplify resident voices and work collaboratively with residents to facilitate change. Most PBI leadership and staff did not reside in the neighbourhoods that they served. Furthermore, the founding and funding for these PBIs relied heavily on external actors and institutions. Consequently, each PBI was intentional about connecting with community residents and capitalising on diverse PBI–academic collaborations as one way to facilitate immediate- and long-term community connections. Each of the PBIs was highly sought after by a diverse array of academic institutions and programs/researchers within each academic institution. In response, the PBIs put to use different academic resources, e.g. job training programs and new resident–academic social connections to strengthen community trust in the PBI and demonstrate that PBIs are accountable and responsive to community-member preferences and needs. Such steps are seen as important for transforming neighbourhoods and for addressing inherent trustworthiness ABCD challenges that PBIs and similar ABCD organisations face ([Harrison et al. 2019](#)).

Second, PBIs utilised their academic partnerships to help address external accountability challenges and inform PBI programming. Intense funder accountability demands and external power structures can often derail ABCD and make it difficult to sustain genuine community-driven development ([Harrison et al. 2019](#)). PBIs in this study, however, utilised academic partnerships and CBR efforts to minimise these challenges. For instance, PBIs pragmatically put to use their academic partners’ data capacity and ‘credibility’ to fulfil funder requirements to measure program impacts. At the same time, however, they drew on these same resources to push for more meaningful person-centred and process-oriented impact metrics that better highlight the longer-term, intergenerational social change foundations they are building. This and other examples demonstrate how, by collaborating with academic partners, PBIs can simultaneously address community-level solutions and combat oppressive structures that often derail ABCD effectiveness ([Maclure 2023](#)). Given the results of PBI staff asking academics to ‘use your capital, your social capital to move the needle’ and the role of holding space for staff to engage in ‘intellectual honesty about the work that you’re doing and the mission you are serving and trying to advance’, it is essential to consider the potential for PBI–academic partnerships to integrate ABCD and CBR towards addressing structural factors and internal and external systems of power.

Findings also illuminated several pitfalls in PBI–academic partnerships being rooted in sometimes conflicting priorities and approaches between academic researchers and community practitioners. However, a particular strength of the PBIs in this study is that they were able to use PBI–academic relationships to strengthen PBI effectiveness, while still maintaining their own PBI identity and mission. In particular, the three PBIs were able to minimise many of the pitfalls associated with community–academic collaborations and CBR. As the ‘backbone’ resource coordinators of the community, PBIs are well-positioned to manage long-standing academic–community power imbalances and to ensure that CBR and other community–academic collaborations benefit the community (instead of harming the community via academic exploitation). That is because throughout all PBI–academic collaborations – student and research-based – the PBIs worked hard to ensure community, and not just academic, needs were being addressed.

Finally, our findings delineate recommendations for improving PBI-academic collaborations, including countering academic exploitation by plugging into the mission of PBIs and respecting PBI expertise. To ensure that PBI-academic collaborations truly benefit the community and fully harness the combined power of ABCD and CBR to promote social change, PBIs need to be the drivers of the collaboration. Academic institutions need to be willing to say yes when community partners literally or figuratively ask ‘*Can you put down your mission and plug into mine?*’ PBIs are the organisations best placed to support community involvement, and for academic institutions to partner with them, not the other way around. This is because PBIs and other ABCDs are the conduits for both creating space for community agents to enact asset-based community development and the mediator of community-based research higher education partnerships.

Importantly, PBIs and academic collaborators need to find a *common purpose*. To do so, PBI and academic partners must have honest, even if uncomfortable, conversations that assess ‘fit’. To be a good ‘fit’, the academic partner – whether comprised of students, researchers and/or a centre – should support and complement the PBIs’ efforts, not dominate them. This requires that, in the PBI-academic collaboration, the PBIs function and are recognised as the experts on their neighbourhoods and their intended beneficiaries (the residents), and that the academic partner – particularly students, but also researchers – *partner with a passion and intentionality* (e.g. prioritise the PBI’s mission), and, in the case of research-based collaborations, provide useful and practical study results to the entire PBI community. By doing so, academic partners can minimise the academic mismatch and exploitation risk that can hinder PBI-academic collaborations, and build the trustworthiness necessary to promote participation and social action.

Though valuable, our study’s lessons have limitations. Most importantly, our research team, a mix of faculty and students, conducted the in-depth interviews with PBI staff and leadership. Consequently, they may have been hesitant to fully discuss challenges and critiques related to PBI-academic partnerships. Additionally, our study provides only the perspective of the community partner, not the academic partner. The latter faces their own institutional challenges, which may limit the applicability of some of the PBI-provider suggestions. Nonetheless, based on the collaborative expertise of PBIs, our study provides key insights regarding how PBIs leverage PBI-academic partnerships to strengthen their community connections and programming, and overcome external accountability challenges. These recommendations are locally and globally actionable for improving utilisation of PBI-academic partnerships for ABCD and CBR, toward fostering deeper neighbourhood impacts and improving the quality of life and possibilities for community members.

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## Appendix A: Content Analysis Focus Questions

- We've talked about the relationship between PBIs, now I would like to shift to talking about your collaborations with University partners, not just our group or University, but in general.
- What are the benefits in partnering with individuals from Universities? In your experience, what has gone well?
- What challenges have you faced in your attempts to partner or collaborate with University-based researchers?
- As we are thinking about your initiative as well as other PBIs, what suggestions can you provide to University-based partners that would help them to fulfil the potential of this type of collaboration? What sorts of resources or support would be of most benefit? What would help facilitate more collaboration?