



UTS
ePRESS

Gateways:
International Journal
of Community
Research and
Engagement

Vol. 16, No. 2
December 2023



© 2023 by the author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), allowing third parties to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format and to remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercial, provided the original work is properly cited and states its license.

Citation: Goodman, H. P., Yow, R., Standberry-Wallace, M., Dekom, R., Harper, M., Nieto Gomez, A., Watson, A. D. 2023. Perspectives from Community Partnerships in Three Diverse Higher Education Contexts. *Gateways: International Journal of Community Research and Engagement*, 16:2, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.5130/ijcre.v16i2.8693>

ISSN 1836-3393 | Published by UTS ePRESS | <http://ijcre.ePRESS.lib.uts.edu.au>

PRACTICE-BASED ARTICLE

Perspectives from Community Partnerships in Three Diverse Higher Education Contexts

Hunter, P. Goodman^{1,*}, Ruth Yow², Miranda Standberry-Wallace³, Rachel Dekom⁴, Mamie Harper⁵, Amalia Nieto Gomez⁶ and Alicya D. Watson⁷

¹ University of Arkansas System, Division of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension

² Center for Sustainable Communities Research and Education, Georgia Institute of Technology

³ Steans Center, DePaul University

⁴ SageD Consulting (student alumna, Georgia Institute of Technology)

⁵ Carrie's Closet of Georgia

⁶ Alliance of the Southeast (ASE)

⁷ University of Arkansas System, Division of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension, Cleveland County

Corresponding author: Hunter P. Goodman, hgoodman@uada.edu

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5130/ijcre.v16i2.8693>

Article History: Received 27/06/2023; Revised 10/10/2023; Accepted 21/11/2023; Published 12/2023

Abstract

Asset-based Community Development (ABCD) approaches in higher education have the potential to benefit a diversity of higher education settings and partners, but they can also present challenges and opportunities for growth in higher education institutions. Co-curricular community engagement and academic service-learning programs may struggle to balance the broader political and logistical constraints imposed by the university with equitable, long-term, community-guided relationships that reflect a genuine commitment to ABCD. Extension programs may face difficulty engaging community members and maintaining their commitment to the long-term nature of ABCD in an environment where ABCD is not universally utilised. Although these challenges may seem daunting, partners in all three contexts can draw on a wealth of ABCD tools and resources, including case studies like those anchoring this discussion, in order to answer the question: How can ABCD approaches be utilised most effectively in higher education contexts to address challenges and improve outcomes? Specifically, can an asset-based orientation help position community participants as peer 'experts' alongside their academic partners,

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **FUNDING** The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

share power and authority in the collaboration? If so, how? If not, why not? The authors explore these questions using a case study methodology, allowing for nuanced portraits of three different contexts depicting interactions among community and university partners seeking to ground their collaborations in the mobilisation of assets, gifts and strengths. This article also seeks to identify key lessons learned in each setting of the three participating United States universities – the public, four-year research institution, the private religious university and the land-grant college/cooperative extension in order to make recommendations on using ABCD to build and nurture academic-community partnerships that are generalisable across other contexts.

Keywords

ABCD; Community Partners; Equity and Justice; Partnership Building; Higher Education; ABCD Challenges

Introduction

For those to whom the origins of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) are well known, it is intuitive that partners in higher education settings – whether they be faculty, staff or students – can adopt an ABCD approach with enormously positive outcomes. In the late 1960s, tasked with creating new infrastructure for community engagement and urban studies at Northwestern University, John McKnight and his colleague Jody Kretzmann rejected the deficit lens that university researchers had traditionally brought to communities. In McKnight's ([MN Disability Minnesota 2023](#)) words:

To me it was just apparent that you could never... understand urban neighborhoods if you looked at what the universities were telling you was the important data, because all they knew about was what was wrong. I often use a half-full glass as an example of that. They were always studying the empty half. They seemed to have no knowledge of the full half. And therefore, I thought, if I'm at a university, the thing I can do that will be useful will be to document the full half.

The use of this 'glass-half-full' approach – now widely known as Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) – produces a profound reframing for university partners because it is a necessary starting point, in that solutions reside in communities and their myriad assets, not in academic institutions. ABCD seeks to create sustainable solutions to local challenges by harnessing the skills of local residents, the power of local associations, the resources of institutions, the physical spaces in communities, the economic resources of local places, and the history and culture of the neighbourhood ([Kretzmann & McKnight 1993](#)).

This approach has the potential to benefit community-engagement work undertaken by colleges and universities, including public four-year research institutions, private religious universities and land-grant colleges' cooperative extension services. We thus explore ABCD in each of these three contexts, outlining both the benefits of ABCD approaches and the challenges that accompany infusing ABCD into these diverse higher education settings. To explore our key idea of positioning community partners as experts who share power equitably, authors at each of three US academic institutions – DePaul University, Georgia Institute of Technology and the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension – invited co-authors from among their closest community partners to participate.

Throughout this article, we refer to 'academic partners' and 'community partners' or 'community-based partners'. Academic partners are situated in universities or colleges and have the resources of their academic office or centre at their disposal. Community partners are those operating in the context of local communities with a web of collaborators – for example, academic, municipal, philanthropic and others – but without, generally, the large staff and deeper pockets of large non-profits.

We interviewed our partners and spoke to them of setting up a foundation for co-writing. We were seeking to underscore ways in which ABCD's successes in its 'traditional' spheres, such as neighbourhoods, could translate to higher education settings that revealed aspects of ABCD approaches in each context, and that explored what lessons higher education partners have learned in engaging ABCD as a primary mechanism for stronger and more fruitful university-community collaborations. Higher education institutions may be a less obvious target for an ABCD case study than neighbourhoods, faith communities or voluntary associations, and that may be why there is limited research on ABCD's adoption in higher education. Through interviewing and co-writing, we cultivated a lively dialogue around expertise, power-sharing and the ABCD 'recipe' for successful university-community collaboration.

Literature Review

BENEFITS OF ABCD

Asset-based Community Development (ABCD) is an approach to sustainable community-driven development that has the transformative potential to build stronger communities. [Mathie and Cunningham \(2003\)](#) argue that ABCD emphasises the importance of recognising and valuing the experience and expertise of community members, which positions them as active participants rather than passive recipients of external interventions. By intentionally centring community voices and recognising community members as experts in what their community needs and wants, the ABCD approach challenges the traditional top-down approach to community development and seeks to reconfigure power dynamics ([Mathie & Cunningham 2003](#)). This shift in power dynamics enables communities to define and drive their development agenda, resulting in more sustainable and contextually appropriate solutions that are also more likely to respect cultural traditions and nuances ([Mathie & Cunningham 2003](#)).

An alternative to traditional deficit-based models, the ABCD approach has several key benefits for all constituents engaging in collaborative work for community benefit. The overall aim of ABCD is to empower communities, promote collaborative problem-solving, recognise and mobilise assets, generate sustainable solutions, and enhance social cohesion and resilience ([Kretzmann & McKnight 1993](#); [Mathie & Cunningham 2003](#)). This approach enables communities to take ownership of their development, fosters inclusive and participatory processes, and leverages existing resources and capacities ([Delgado 2016](#); [Lasker & Weiss 2003](#)). These benefits make ABCD a valuable framework for community practitioners, researchers and policymakers seeking to foster community-driven and sustainable development outcomes.

ABCD AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Gaining recognition as an effective approach to community development in the context of local communities and higher education institutions, ABCD can play a crucial role in broadening participation by actively involving diverse stakeholders in problem-solving processes. [Lasker and Weiss \(2003\)](#) and [Holland \(2012\)](#) attest to the potential of ABCD approaches to foster collaboration, community engagement and social change. [Lasker and Weiss \(2003\)](#) take the position that using ABCD principles in higher education settings can promote a shift from traditional top-down approaches to community engagement toward more participatory and collaborative practices. [Holland \(2012\)](#) emphasises the role that ABCD can play in connecting higher education and the community, and linking students, staff and faculty to the world outside academic settings.

[Holland \(2012\)](#) discusses how service learning, aligned with ABCD principles, enables students to apply their academic knowledge and skills to address community needs. The ABCD approach, aligned with an experiential learning pedagogy, promotes active citizenship, social responsibility, and a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness between academia and society. [Lasker and Weiss \(2003\)](#) contend that civic

engagement initiatives based on ABCD principles create opportunities for students, faculty and community members to collaborate on community-driven projects, leading to meaningful and sustainable social change. However, further research needs to explore the long-term impact and scalability of ABCD initiatives in diverse contexts as it relates to the application of ABCD in higher education partnerships with and within the community.

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

While ABCD plays a crucial role in broadening participation by actively involving diverse stakeholders in problem-solving processes in both community and higher education, it is not without challenges and limitations. The literature acknowledges the challenges in implementing ABCD within community and higher education partnership settings.

Implementing Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) in higher education comes with obstacles: (1) Faculty members may lack familiarity with ABCD principles and practices, necessitating training and professional development to effectively integrate ABCD into their teaching and research ([Holland 2012](#)). Integrating ABCD into the curriculum can be intricate, often requiring faculty to redesign courses to align with ABCD principles, demanding both time and effort ([Brown & Jones 2013](#)). (2) Securing institutional support is crucial, as higher education institutions need to provide financial resources and administrative backing to sustain ABCD initiatives ([Tregaskis & Newton 2013](#)). If academic partners want to pay community-based collaborators honoraria and stipends, acknowledging the mentoring that community-based partners provide and the expertise they share, the university must be willing to support those stipends ([Hirsch et al. 2023](#)). (3) Another significant challenge lies in addressing power imbalances between higher education institutions and communities. While ABCD aims to empower communities, existing power dynamics can impede genuine collaboration ([Lasker & Weiss 2003](#)).

While the literature underscores the transformative potential of ABCD in strengthening communities and fostering community-driven development, it is crucial to recognise that realising this potential requires overcoming significant challenges. In the upcoming section, we will delve into case studies from three distinct academic institutions. These case studies shed light on how these institutions have grappled with and navigated challenges related to capacity-building, offering valuable insights into the real-world application of ABCD principles within higher education settings from the perspective of a public four-year research institution (Georgia Institute of Technology), a private four-year higher education institution (DePaul University), and a public land-grant institution (University of Arkansas).

Methodology

Our conversations with partners were held on Zoom, and while they were structured loosely around the themes described below, each conversation followed the course defined by the partners' specific insights and reflections, constituting their unique offerings on our guiding question regarding how higher education institutions can use ABCD approaches most effectively to address challenges and improve outcomes, and how an asset-based orientation can help position community participants as peer 'experts' alongside their academic partners. After the interviews, university and community-based partnered pairs met again to discuss what material would be included in the piece and to co-write key sections related to specific partner insights and experiences. The following questions constituted the foundations of the interviews. Our questions focused on (1) how the organisation embodies ABCD principles; (2) how the organisation challenges the deficit models common in their sector; (3) how the organisation nurtures relationships in their local community; and (4) how the organisation and its leadership would assess higher education institutions' efforts to take an ABCD approach, in concert with community partners.

Case 1: A Public Four-Year Research Institution

The Center for Serve-Learn-Sustain (SLS) was launched in 2015 as Georgia Tech's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) with the Provost's Office committing \$6 million to the initiative over five years. The plan merged two themes that QEP reviewers found equally compelling for enhancing undergraduate education at Georgia Tech – sustainability and community engagement. Hence, SLS's primary charge was to engage students and faculty in community-based partnerships aimed at advancing sustainability in communities across Atlanta and Georgia. From the outset, the Center sought to counterbalance Georgia Tech's focus on sustainability interventions and curriculum in technology, design and engineering that drew primarily on expertise from Georgia Tech, with a strong emphasis on elevating the expertise of local community partners working in sustainability areas like urban farming, watershed health, environmental justice and educational access. From the beginning, SLS foregrounded the equity and justice issues that are sometimes neglected in sustainability discourses dedicated narrowly to environmental or economic sustainability.

A central framework for SLS's educational mission and its relationship-building efforts with community partners is asset-based community development. SLS's first partnership principle is 'Start with Assets' (Partnership Principles 2019). Each of the principles is at work in the case described here, but the particular emphases are starting with assets and focusing on equity and justice, which are inextricable in taking asset-based approaches to community higher education partnerships. The discussion below was adapted from two conversations with SLS partners, one with community partner and social impact entrepreneur Mamie Harper and the second with both Harper and her former intern and Georgia Tech alum, Rachel Dekom.

Mamie Harper leads the community-based organisation, Carrie's Closet of Georgia, which she founded in 2015 and named after her mother, Carrie, a social worker, community leader and gifted 'connector' in the language of ABCD. Staffed only by Harper, supported by a network of volunteers, Carrie's Closet initially focused on providing clothing to youth in foster care – before expanding into advocacy for foster children and clothing and hygiene support for people experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness. After her internship with Harper in 2020, Rachel Dekom focused her job search on mission-driven social impact organisations that had a profound local impact. She now works with SageD Consulting. Founded to support impact-driven leadership, SageD Consulting specialises in authentic executive coaching and development, community-building and equitable innovation. Dekom and Harper both participated for multiple years in SLS's Sustainable Communities Internship Program, and Harper has also had other engagements with Georgia Tech faculty and programs.

MAMIE HARPER

As a community partner, I see the importance of centering the lived experience and expertise of the partner and the communities the partner supports. I am both a full-time social worker and an entrepreneur. The relationship building approach of Carrie's Closet – a focus on interconnection and interdependence rather than on deficits – has made the organization indispensable in communities across Atlanta, especially those cultivating resilience in the face of continual dispossession and economic stress. In light of those realities, one of the challenges interns at Carrie's Closet face is the "culture shock" they sometimes feel entering communities and attempting to shed an inculcated deficit approach. It is essential to integrate history into the interns' experience and help students understand that at many points in history there have been incredibly rich [Black] communities with very successful citizens. I also use on-site learning and on site "privilege-busting," laced with grace and mercy that doesn't make anyone feel isolated. I do systems education; I say there are systems in place that make the poor, poor and the rich, rich; can we agree on that? It is this kind of grounded expertise that impacts students, an expertise that is honored through SLS' asset-based approach and its efforts to support students in fully participating in their engagements with partners as transformative learning experiences – about themselves and about the systems they move through (Harper 2023).

RACHEL DEKOM

My internship with Carrie's Closet of Georgia was part of a series of learnings from Black women social impact entrepreneurs regarding how universities and community partners traditionally interact. A lot of higher ed institutions have a "build it and they will come" mentality, which isn't the same as "we will build this in partnership with you" and this produces different results, because the partners with lots of resources may "come" but those without resources can't always. Relatedly, staff and faculty in higher education settings are used to being perceived as the experts . . . but that expertise is different from that of someone working on the ground. Not enough emphasis is placed by academic institutions on the expertise of people doing the work in communities. The community expertise is the secret sauce to making partnerships and programs work – building with community partners and amplifying the expertise of partners on the ground ([Dekom 2023](#)).

This case study addresses the challenge that Dekom articulates of 'building with' partners. Higher education institutions can play a critical role in connecting partners, especially BIPOC entrepreneurs and organisation leaders, to resource networks. Seeking to create a program that supports its increasingly Black and Brown cohorts of internship hosts, SLS pays the full stipend of each partner's intern and requires that all interns participate in a weekly seminar as well as weekly reflective journaling. The seminar focuses on themes of equity and justice in the contexts of social innovation and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, supporting interns to approach their work – whether it be in advocacy for youth, urban farming, or watershed health – with an equity lens and an attention to history.

MAMIE HARPER

What Carrie's Closet and many organizations led by Black women need most is continuous capacity building and wraparound services. An internship program with an asset-based approach can provide essential support to us, especially through interns who, like Rachel, are prepared to really engage with issues of race and power. There isn't enough conversation when it comes to black and brown entrepreneurs; some founders who don't share my identity can use the homes and resources of their families. The way they would use an intern is very different than how I use mine; in this sense the interns are a lifeline. At Carrie's Closet, we need them in order to do the work. That is a way that universities like Georgia Tech can play a constructive role; if Carrie's Closet and other community-based organizations like it can depend on, for example, having a full-time intern every summer who is equipped to do sophisticated project work then leaders like me don't have to spend additional time applying for funding to execute those same projects ([Harper 2023](#)).

As this case suggests, when a university or its affiliated centre takes an asset-based approach to developing student programs and forming partnerships, the foundation has been laid to 'build together' and thereby address several of the challenges identified in this article; specifically those related to power imbalances (Challenge 3); creating infrastructure for resilient, lasting partnerships (Challenge 2); and addressing the issue of unequal resources and the need for material institutional support from the academic partner (Challenge 2 and Challenge 3). When universities take an asset-oriented approach to collaborating with community-based partners, there is an opportunity for engagement that acknowledges historical and current structural inequity, centres the strengths of communities, and thereby begins to reimagine university-community partner relationships as fundamentally grounded in the deep knowledge, gifts and vision of communities and their innovators.

Case 2: Private four-year institution of higher education

Located in Chicago, the third largest city in the US, the DePaul University Steans Center was established through the Steans family endowment in 2001. The Steans Center provides an academic bridge between the university and the community that supports student learning, community development, and faculty teaching and scholarship. The Centre's mission is to develop mutually beneficial relationships with community

organisations to engage DePaul students in educational opportunities grounded in Vincentian values of respect for human dignity and the quest for social justice.

The Steans Center is a dynamic, multifaceted community-engagement centre that fosters community connections and a deeper understanding of social issues, and promotes a more holistic, authentic approach to community development that focuses on assets rather than deficits. Emphasising the ABCD framework as the foundation for reciprocally beneficial relations between the institution and the community, the Steans Center recognises the expertise and resources that exist within the communities it serves and works collaboratively with community partners to support their initiatives.

By intentionally engaging with organisations and community members through an asset-based approach, the Steans Center supports local residents to take an active role in addressing critical issues affecting their neighbourhoods when partnering with faculty and their students via community-based service-learning partnerships that the centre facilitates.

In the reflection-based discussion with Amalia Nieto Gomez, Executive Director of Alliance of the SouthEast (ASE), we gathered several insights as she shared her experience of academic course partnerships supported by the Steans Center. Since 2016, ASE has connected with DePaul students through a CbSL project-based course partnership with Professor Heather Smith's geography course: GEO 200-Sustainable Urban Development. GEO 200 is an intermediate geography course designed to explore aspects of sustainable urban development, for which many students choose to conduct real-world projects for Alliance of the Southeast.

Amalia Nieto Gomez has served as Executive Director of ASE for more than ten years. Nieto Gomez, a neighbourhood resident and previous longstanding board member of ASE, has been with the organisation since operating under its previous name, Alianza, and through the Alianza/ASE transition. Nieto Gomez shares her experience in connecting with DePaul University through course-based service-learning projects.

AMALIA NIETO GOMEZ

Alliance of the Southeast (ASE) organizes around community-initiated agendas and movements, mobilizing community members, businesses, schools, churches, and community organizations to address challenges facing southeast Chicago neighborhoods. We develop grassroots leaders to carry out community and social change, impact decision-makers, and win real improvements in our neighborhoods. We (ASE) appreciate our partnership with DePaul University, and the Irwin W. Steans Center for Community-based Service, in our work fighting for social justice.

ASE has been a long-standing Steans Center community partner and has participated in a service-learning course partnership, including advocacy, solidarity, and project-based opportunities to collaborate. The research and documents that DePaul students have created are valuable resources that we continue to use, as we advocate for equitable development and environmental justice.

Through one course partnership, students created maps of pollution and City investments (Tax Increment Financing - TIF) in Chicago and handouts showing the need for equitable development. We have used maps and research done by students, including an air pollution map of Cook County, showing the southeast side to be oversaturated, with 3 of the top 5 air polluting companies in Cook County. We continue to share these findings with City, state, and federal officials, as we advocate for resources for our community and fight against development that harms our air, land, and water quality.

I believe it is so important for ASE and the DePaul partnership to continue to create asset and impact maps of our neighborhoods. The insights revealed have supported our ability to educate our community about the environmental and health impacts in our communities, so that we can mobilize even more community residents and allies. Our work ranges from community meetings, to holding rallies and public events, to advocating for city, state, and national policies.

In addition to course partnerships, DePaul has exhibited solidarity with ASE by including us in other events, like the DePaul Placemaking Summit, and through presentations with a graduate course with the Asset-Based Community Development Institute at the Steans Center.

We are excited about this partnership, and are interested in expanding our relationship. We have encouraged students to show up in solidarity at some of the events, which they have. We really appreciate the support and enthusiasm of DePaul students. Connecting with students has been rewarding. We listen and learn from each other, and that's the best part ([Nieto Gomez 2023](#)).

ABCD helps position community participants as peer 'experts', sharing power and authority collaboratively with their academic partner, the faculty. As this case suggests, when a community partner takes an asset-based approach to lifting up what is working and raising up relationships in the urban community, the foundation has been laid to build the work collaboratively within an asset-based framework. Related to the first and second challenges we described pertaining to faculty development and securing institutional support for long-term relationships, the academic institution can (1) co-create new programming and service-learning courses that are community driven and based on existing relationships with, and strengths of, students, faculty and community members; (2) sustain long-term relationships while leveraging the content knowledge of university and community partners in ways that co-create results; and (3) utilise findings and shared research for funding and additional support of the community and faculty research. In doing so, the community's self-identified needs and opportunities will be met.

Case 3: Public land-grant institution

The University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service (UADA-Extension) grounds its community, workforce and economic development work in a shared vision for building the capacity of individuals, associations and institutions in ways that strengthen local communities and predominantly rural counties in Arkansas. Cooperative Extension is a unique model in higher education grounded in the belief that research-centric information strengthens local community leadership. The land grant model of higher education focuses on strengthening each state through a local lens. It has four primary areas of focus: agriculture, family and consumer sciences, 4H and youth development, and community and economic development.

It is important to understand the context of the Cooperative Extension Service within the land grant university system. In 1862, the US Congress passed the Morrill Act, which designated a university be constructed in each state. They were known as land grant colleges. In 1914, with passage of the Smith-Lever Act, the Cooperative Extension Service was created to 'extend' research best practice beyond the university classroom and into the community ([OSU Extension 2023](#)).

The University of Arkansas's System Division of Agriculture Cooperative Extension's mission is to 'strengthen agriculture, communities, and families by connecting trusted research to the adoption of best practices' ([UADA 2023](#)). As part of the Extension approach in Arkansas, UADA-Extension serves 75 counties, with full-time professionals serving each county. The agents are trust brokers and connectors with a deep understanding of their community. Support is provided to county agents and community members by Extension staff and faculty, with the goal of supporting community organisations and empowering them as leaders through capacity building support.

In Cleveland County, the UADA-Extension Community and Economic Development faculty works in partnership with county agents to support the local vision for vibrant growth. Cleveland County Extension has a focus on community, workforce and economic development that addresses quality of life. Alicya Danielle Watson is the county family and consumer sciences extension agent and staff chair of the county, where she oversees the administrative leadership of the agent team and serves as a trusted expert in family and consumer sciences for her County. She works closely alongside County leadership, Mayors and County Judges to create a county where residents want to stay, raise their family and be a vibrant part of the

community. Alicia Danielle Watson reflects below on both ways ABCD is utilised: as a practice lens in her community and as a lens for the faculty and agent relationship.

ALICIA DANIELLE WATSON

When I look at our community, I see a glass half full approach. Our county has so many positives. We have a strong group of volunteers who want to focus on the strength of our county. When our community comes together, we understand our opportunities to address challenges. Along with Extension volunteers in the community, we can partner to create something bigger.

While it is easy to look at the negatives, in our county, the local committees who advise Extension look at challenges in the communities and then focus on the top five priorities. They leave it up to us to provide focus for the needs in the community.

We use ABCD more than anything else because with the asset-based community approach, doing it together as a community is more effective with our community partners than just doing it by ourselves.

Our community has relationships! We're not so focused so much on what we need but how we can serve and support each other, so ABCD has been a great one for us. Things in the county are different than they are in other parts of the state, so it is important to understand the challenges of the rural community in Southern Arkansas. It is also important to understand the diversity of the county, so everyone has a voice to make a difference. As we build on assets, our county is a special place and I want others to know it like I do. We have many retirees, and a few people do a lot for all. As we grow and keep our community vibrant for future generations, we want to engage all people and celebrate their view in what we do. It is important. (Watson 2023)

Using an ABCD lens, Watson has developed a workforce development committee of partners across a multi-county region and has supported the county's focus on making broadband internet more accessible to all in the community. To address the issues identified in both the second and third challenges, related to institutional support and unequal power, land grant institutions can take an asset-oriented approach to collaborating with community members. When they do, there is an opportunity for engagement that acknowledges the rural context, culture and economic realities while centring the strengths of communities. Thereby, the community building vision and actions are fundamentally grounded in the deep knowledge, gifts and vision of communities and their members.

Emerging themes

The discussions with community partners explored ABCD in each of those three contexts: a public four-year research institution (Georgia Tech's Center for Serve-Learn-Sustain), a private four-year institution of higher education with a focus on the service-learning centre (DePaul University's Steans Center) and a public land-grant institution, Cooperative Extension, with a state-wide emphasis (University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service). In every conversation, the aim was to gather both the benefits of ABCD approaches and the challenges that accompany infusing ABCD into these diverse higher education settings.

After analysing the synopses of interviews designed to gather insight into the impact of higher education partnerships using an ABCD driven community development approach, authors noted the following themes that emerged across their institutions.

'IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME' VERSUS CO-CREATING PARTNERSHIPS BASED ON THE ASSETS OF THE COMMUNITY

Service-learning and community engagement centres have benefited from a maturing discourse on how universities can better support community partners, rather than partners struggling to find a footing within

institutions that don't engineer opportunities with partners in mind. At their worst, service-learning and community-university research relationships are extractive – drawing on the time, talent and resources of community partners to provide an educational experience for students that reinforces their understanding of expertise as located within higher education institutions rather than communities ([Mitchell 2008](#), [2013](#); [Tryon & Stoecker 2008](#)). When higher education institutions adopt asset-based approaches, especially in conjunction with community partners who also engage ABCD in their work, the co-creation of partnerships is possible. An ABCD focus on mobilising gifts and strengths can often lead university collaborators to shift their focus to the intellectual, cultural and social richness that partners bring to each engagement, rather than remaining lodged in a framework that is focused on the services or expertise that faculty and students can provide.

Additionally, a key theme energising partner discussions was the importance of centring the lived experience and expertise of the partner and the communities the partner supports. Partnerships that acknowledge and honour partners as experts, who are not only closely connected to local efforts, but oftentimes lead, have been more impactful and better received by the community. Institutional partnerships become less effective in short- and long-term impact, when driven by the institution's perceived goal of the community. Institutional partnerships are more impactful when they engage the community as peer collaborators with expertise needed to actualise sustainable efforts.

Community partners emphasised the importance of building on existing relationships as well as forging new relationships. Particularly in rural communities where ABCD is used in partnership with higher education, it is crucial for higher education to recognise the deep linkages that already exist in the community through associations and networks. Community members connect with ABCD practices most deeply when they uplift their relationships as a way to better leverage local assets.

CO-CREATING PARTNERSHIPS WITH A FOCUS ON IDENTIFYING, AMPLIFYING AND BUILDING UP ASSETS

When it comes to supporting the expertise of partners, higher education institutions can play a critical role in connecting Black entrepreneurs – or any social innovators traditionally excluded from funding opportunities – to resource networks. It is thus best for institutions to strive to take a 'build together' approach to developing programs and other resources that can be instrumental for partners, especially bootstrap entrepreneurs led by people of colour. Developing wrap-around systems and services that support and expose them to skills and networks they deem necessary, in collaboration with partners, leverages partner expertise while also providing a safe space for them to be proactive with requests for support. This also helps combat deficit thinking and the systems of oppression and inequality that exist within the landscape of funding sources for organisational development efforts. In the end, partners gain necessary skills and build their capacity to participate in partnerships as co-creators with institutional constituents. One partner emphasised the importance of ensuring there were more Black and Brown leaders at the table of community conversation.

While community discussion and decisions are mostly voiced by white people in the community, one potential benefit of ABCD is the ability to uplift traditionally marginalised voices to the table.

Students also benefit from this, in that these partnerships often result in a call to action for all to self-reflect on privilege, assess assets, and expose opportunities to deepen their own impact. Students engaging with entrepreneurs, especially people of colour and women, and who share both the challenges they meet in racist funding ecosystems and the triumphs they experience by insisting on the importance of their contributions, perspectives and lived experience, have lasting effects on student learning and their activism.

INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL SUPPORT: ADVOCACY, SOLIDARITY AND MOBILISING

Mutually beneficial relationships are a baseline for developing authentic partnerships. Partners noted the importance of having the institution publicly acknowledge their privilege when supporting local efforts. This can take shape in many ways. For example, writing letters of support to policy makers and funders, utilising university space to host meetings, press conferences, etc. on campus, mobilising students on buses to support lobby efforts, and much more. When institutions don't lean into their privilege in these ways, it can harm the impact and efforts made by the community and create mistrust amongst partners and residents.

Partners also noted a need for commitment to utilising ABCD as a sustained approach by the institution, alongside community partners, to achieve long-term results. Given ABCD places an emphasis on community-driven, people-led change, it is easy to say there have been no identifiable results over a short time frame. Yet, an ABCD lens on community partnership and engagement, especially when utilised in a shared walk between the institution and the community partner, yields long-term, sustainable results that can be evidenced over time.

EQUITY AND JUSTICE

A final key common thread is the need to address equity and justice in our work and in partnerships with higher education institutions. ABCD approaches that underscore the specific gifts of culture, identity and history within partner organisations and the people within the organisation are an excellent lever for highlighting equity and justice because they are tools for exposing structural and historical forces that must be named. Partners spoke to the importance of foregrounding equity, both personally and structurally.

Interpersonal relationships – mentoring, teaching and intellectual collaboration – must keep equity in the foreground, and building strong partnerships should acknowledge historical power imbalances in resources too often cordoned off by universities, such as funding opportunities and networks, intellectual property and physical meeting spaces. When the explicit aim of university partners is to centre equity, it becomes possible to build equitable relationships; when that aim is left implicit, or when only partner organisations name it as a partnership priority, there is far less opportunity to truly 'build with' and hold universities accountable when power is not shared.

ABCD, at its core, strengthens and uplifts leadership that includes all members of the community at the decision-making table. Just as one partner noted, it is not enough for a community to have diversity of involvement. There must be diversity, and in turn equitable relationships within engagement and decision making. This shift from community members being informed versus being engaged and honoured for their thoughts, views and ideas in an accessible way is a critical component of an ABCD approach.

Conclusion

Through a case-study approach, utilising a public four-year research institution, a private religious university and a land-grant university, through the Cooperative Extension Service, this discussion explored the use of ABCD in all three US contexts. By looking at three diverse higher education settings, the benefits and challenges of ABCD utilisation were better understood.

The opportunity to co-authorship and weave together perspectives from three academic–community partnered teams yielded results that reflect our shared ABCD orientation. As ABCD practitioners, we carry with us the lesson that individual gifts are at the centre of every ABCD success story, and so in the co-learning of this writing journey, we were able to enjoy how the individual wisdom, storytelling and insights of each author could impact our writing practice and our perspectives on our partnerships and programs. Learning more about the unique structure and impact of extension services, the approaches of a highly successful academic service-learning model and an internship program that prioritises lifting

up the expertise of partners provided a key chance to absorb very different models for ‘doing’ ABCD in higher education, and allowed us to contemplate, in our own work, what the lessons of our writing partners’ experiences might catalyse if unleashed in our own institutional contexts. As Nieto Gomez reminds us, ‘We listen and learn from each other, and that’s the best part’.

Together, we explored the questions: How can ABCD approaches be utilised most effectively in higher education contexts to address challenges and improve outcomes? And, as called out as a key exploration of this issue, can an asset-based orientation help position community participants as peer ‘experts’ alongside their academic partners, and share power and authority in the collaboration? If so, how? If not, why not?

Building on robust community partner conversations with leaders who work alongside all three institutions, the cases, combined with the resulting themes that uplift community partners’ perspectives, provide insight into guiding principles for utilising ABCD in higher education.

A few key challenges are explored in this article, specifically, the need to build durable infrastructure for partnerships; the importance of placing partner relationships ahead of material outcomes and taking these relationships *off* an institutionally prescribed timeline, transparently foregrounding issues of power and unequal resources in the development of service-learning courses and co-curricular activities, and in the remuneration of partners for their labour. Finally, the role of strong service-learning courses with committed faculty members is also highlighted, as are the powerful results that are realised when an asset-oriented approach guides the development of course projects and faculty-partner relationships. The cases and resulting analysis found that, indeed, an asset-based orientation helps position community partners and participants as peer ‘experts’ and co-creators within their academic partnerships. Power and authority can be successfully shared, though it is a collaborative journey, not a destination, that takes continual work and shared understanding to achieve sustained results.

References

- Alliance of the Southeast 2023. <https://asechicago.org/>
- Asset-Based Community Development Institute at DePaul University 2023. <https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/Pages/default.aspx>
- Brown, E & Jones, B 2013, ‘Exploring asset-based community development: Reflections on the use of ABCD in higher education’, *Teaching in Higher Education*, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 283–294.
- Bureau, US Census 2023, *County population totals and components of change: 2020–2022*, 13 June. www.census.gov/data/datasets/time-series/demo/popest/2020s-counties-total.html
- ‘Capacity building beyond Community Services’, Video Interview with John McKnight. <https://mn.gov/mnddc/mcKnight/johnMcKnight01.html>
- Coady Institute 2023. <https://coady.stfx.ca/>
- Cormier, S & Cormier, L 2012, ‘An exploration of asset-based community development in higher education: An emergent framework’, *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 39–60.
- Dekom, R & Harper, M 2023, Interview by Hunter Goodman, Miranda Standberry-Wallace & Ruthie Yow [Zoom].
- Delgado, M 2016, ‘Asset-based community development and capacity building’, *Journal of Community Practice*, vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 170–186.
- Dolle-Samuel, C & Metzger, D 2016, ‘Asset-based community development: A review of the literature and implications for higher education’, *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 1–18.
- Frantz, J & Middaugh, E 2016, ‘Asset-based community development: A guide for engagement in Higher Education’, *Community Development: Journal of the Community Development Society*, vol. 47, no. 4, pp. 447–459.

- Harper, M 2023, Interview by Ruthie Yow [Zoom], 4 May.
- Hirsch, J, Yow R & Wu Yi-Chin 2023, 'Teaching students to collaborate with communities: Expanding engineering education to create a sustainable future', *Engineering Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 30–49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19378629.2023.2176767>
- Holland, B 2012, 'Connecting the academy, community, and workplace: Service earning and civic engagement in Higher Education', *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 43–52.
- Jackson, P 2014, 'Asset-based community development: A tool for higher education', in P Jackson (ed.), *Asset-Based Community Development: Theory and Practice* (pp. 79–93). Routledge, London, pp. 79–93.
- Jeder Institute 2023. <https://www.jeder.com.au/>
- Kretzmann, J & McKnight, J 1993, *Building communities from the inside out: A path toward finding and mobilizing a community's Assets*, ACTA Publications.
- Lasker, J & Weiss, E 2003, 'Broadening participation in community problem solving: A multidisciplinary model to support collaborative practice and research'. *Journal of Urban Health*, vol. 80, no. 1, pp. 14–47. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jurban/jtg014>
- Mathie, A & Cunningham, G 2003, 'From clients to citizens: Asset-based Community Development as a strategy for community-driven development', *Development in Practice*, vol. 13, no. 5, pp. 474–86. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0961452032000125857>
- McKnight, J & Block, P 2010, *The abundant community: Awakening the power of families and neighborhoods*.
- Mitchell, TD 2008, 'Traditional vs. critical service-learning: Engaging the literature to differentiate two models', *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 50–65.
- Mitchell, TD 2013, 'Critical service-learning as a philosophy for deepening community engagement', in A Hoy (Ed), *Deepening community engagement in higher education: Forging new pathways*, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 263–269.
- MN Disability Minnesota 2023, 'Professor John McKnight: Capacity building beyond community services', The Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities. <https://mn.gov/mnddc/mcKnight/johnMcKnight01.html>
- Newton, T & Tregaskis, O 2013, 'Asset-based community development in higher education: Towards an understanding of the potentials and limits', *International Journal of Community Development*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 40–51.
- Nieto Gomez, A 2023, June, Interview by Miranda Standberry-Wallace. [Zoom]
- OSU Extension 2023, *A brief history of extension*. <https://extension.osu.edu/about/mission-vision-values/osu-extension-brief-history>
- Serve-Learn-Sustain 2019, SLS Partnership Strategy, viewed 20 June 2023. https://serve-learn-sustain.gatech.edu/sites/default/files/2022-11/2022_Partnership_Strategy.pdf
- Tamarack Institute 2023. <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/>
- Tregaskis, O & Newton, T 2013, *Asset-Based Community Development in Higher Education: A guide for practitioners*, Routledge, London.
- Tryon, E & Stoecker, R 2008, 'The unheard voices: Community organizations and Service Learning', *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, vol. 3, no. 12, pp. 47–59.
- UADA 2023, Mission of the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service. <https://www.uaex.uada.edu/about-extension/mission-statement.aspx>
- Watson, D 2023, May, Interview by Hunter Goodman. [Zoom].