Building an Authentic and Sustained Partnership: Critical Reflections from a Community Partner and Faculty Member

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Abstract

The field of community-engaged learning continues to evolve, particularly as we focus on learning from the community partners involved in course-based partnerships. Traditional measures, such as surveys and interviews, are often used to gather insights from community partners; yet many argue that these partners remain the 'unheard voices' within the field. This study highlights the critical reflections of a community partner engaged in a multi-course, multi-year collaboration, revealing key findings on the importance of trust, sustained communication, and shared decision-making in fostering authentic partnerships. Additionally, insights from both the community partner and faculty member demonstrate that centering the partner's needs enhances engagement, mitigates power imbalances, and strengthens long-term collaboration. Based on these findings, this article offers practical recommendations for building sustainable, community-driven partnerships that prioritize the active involvement of community partners in co-creating meaningful learning experiences.

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The benefits and learning gained by students through community-engaged learning (CEL) have been well documented across various studies, highlighting improvements in students' civic engagement, critical thinking, and real-world problem-solving skills (Conway, Amel & Gerwien, 2009; Jacoby, 2015; Lake, Lowen, Moretto & Youker, 2021; Lim, 2018; Solomon & Tan, 2021). For example, Conway et al. (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of service-learning programs, demonstrating that students involved in CEL not only show increased academic engagement but also develop a stronger sense of social responsibility. Similarly, Jacoby (2015) emphasizes the role of CEL in fostering student agency by allowing learners to apply theoretical knowledge to community-based challenges, enhancing both their academic and professional preparedness. More recent studies, such as those by Lake et al. (2021) and Solomon and Tan (2021), further validate these claims, showing that students engaged with community partners report greater awareness of community needs, communication skills, and cultural competence.

Beyond student benefits, scholars argue that the sustainability and effectiveness of CEL depend on the establishment of mutually beneficial relationships with community partners. Best practices in CEL highlight the necessity of moving beyond transactional engagements toward partnerships characterized by reciprocity, trust, and shared decision-making (Jacoby, 2015; Karasik & Wallingford, 2007). Jacoby (2015) contends that CEL programs often fall short when they prioritize institutional needs over community impact, emphasizing that authentic engagement must position community voices at the center of program development.

A key theme in CEL literature is the incorporation of community partners' voices throughout the collaborative process. Numerous scholars argue that while instructors often aim for reciprocity, community partners frequently remain marginalized within the partnership, leading to an imbalance in the co-educational process (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Bucher, 2012; Darby, Ward-Johnson & Cobb, 2016; Doran,

Rhinesmith, & Arena, 2021; Goldberg & Atkins, 2020; Hicks Peterson, 2009; Trebil-Smith, 2019; Williams, 2018; Worrall, 2007). Blouin and Perry (2009) critique the tendency of some faculty members to prioritize student learning outcomes over community impact, arguing that genuine reciprocity requires a shift in instructional practices to elevate community needs. Similarly, Hicks Peterson (2009) highlights the need for reflexivity in CEL, encouraging faculty and students to critically examine their roles within partnerships to mitigate power imbalances. More recent work by Doran, Rhinesmith, and Arena (2021) explores innovative co-creation models where community partners actively shape the learning agenda, demonstrating that when community expertise is valued, partnerships yield stronger and more sustainable outcomes.

Collectively, these studies underscore a central tension within CEL: while its potential for transformative learning is widely recognized, achieving true reciprocity remains a persistent challenge. The literature suggests that future CEL initiatives must move beyond tokenistic inclusion of community voices and instead adopt participatory frameworks that position community partners as co-educators and co-creators of knowledge. Addressing these challenges requires intentional institutional commitment, long-term relationship-building, and a re-examination of power dynamics to ensure that CEL fulfills its promise of mutual benefit.

As Williams (2018) highlights though, community partners are frequently regarded as "the unheard voices" within the field, with their experiences and insights underrepresented in scholarly discourse. The perspectives of community partners are often overlooked or captured only through indirect methods like surveys or interviews. However, as the field continues to evolve, it becomes increasingly important to elevate these voices. By centering the perspectives of community partners, we can deepen our understanding of best practices and refine the approach to CEL.

This article, co-authored by both a community partner and a faculty member, places

the community partner's voice at the forefront, positioning them as a co-educator within these collaborations. Through a reflective analysis of a partnership that has spanned multiple semesters, involving both introductory and senior-level capstone courses, and evolving over time to incorporate both in-person and virtual engagements, we explore how such collaborations can be nurtured. The partnership, which has persisted through challenges such as a global pandemic, serves as a case study for building and sustaining an authentic, mutually beneficial relationship. The insights shared offer a practical model for cultivating these partnerships across various contexts, with an emphasis on adaptability and co-education.

The article is organized into three sections: (1) the community partner's critical reflection on how the partnership has evolved throughout the multi-year collaboration, (2) shared insights from the community partner and the faculty member to assist those interested in pursuing this type of collaborative partnership for their own community-engaged courses, and (3) suggestions for moving the field of community-engaged learning forward.

Setting the Context

Over the course of four years, we collaborated on six courses, which spanned both introductory-level and senior-level capstone courses. This partnership brought together a staff member from a domestic violence shelter and a faculty member from a medium-sized private university, both located in the Midwest. The student participants varied depending on the course; the senior-level capstone course was exclusively for criminal justice majors, while the introductory-level course was open to all undergraduate students from diverse academic backgrounds.

Drawing on Morley's (2008) and Hickson's (2016) work on critical reflection as a research methodology, we co-constructed the meaning of our shared experiences through the analysis of our reflective dialogues and written texts. This methodological approach was particularly valuable in examining the intricacies of our partnership. Throughout the

collaboration, we engaged in regular conversations—both structured and informal—to discuss the effectiveness of the partnership, identify areas for improvement, and explore how the collaboration aligned with the needs of the community organization. The faculty member maintained detailed notes on these discussions to document key insights and observations.

Additionally, both authors independently composed written reflections capturing their personal experiences, perspectives, and evolving thoughts about the partnership. These individual reflections were later analyzed collaboratively to identify recurring themes and areas of divergence, ensuring that multiple viewpoints were considered in the interpretation process. Through a comparison of our reflections, we were able to critically examine our assumptions and refine our understanding of the partnership's impact.

Employing this method also ensured that the community partner's voice was not merely included but actively centered in the research process. By structuring our analysis around the community partner's lived experiences and professional insights, we upheld the principle of reciprocity in community-engaged research. Furthermore, the iterative nature of critical reflection provided opportunities for real-time adjustments in our partnership, reinforcing the commitment to mutual growth and responsiveness to community needs.

Using critical reflection as a research methodology emphasizes the significance of shared power and collaborative knowledge creation in community-engaged scholarship. In the following section, we center the community partner's voice, beginning with their critical reflection, as our primary goal is to amplify the insights and experiences of the staff member directly involved in this collaboration.

Community Partner's Critical Reflection

Beginning the partnership

Women's Advocates (www.advocates.org) is a non-profit organization based in St. Paul,

Minnesota, dedicated to supporting victim-survivors and working with the community to break the cycle of domestic violence. A key component of the organization's violence prevention and education program involves engaging with schools and fostering discussions about domestic violence and healthy relationships. The team at Women's Advocates understands that meaningful collaborations with schools can have a more profound impact when they extend beyond one-time classroom presentations to include immersive, on-site engagement opportunities.

When I joined Women's Advocates in April 2019 as part of the Education and Outreach Program, students in Hodge's Introduction to Criminal Justice class were already participating in a community engagement initiative focused on assisting with yard work and maintenance at the residence where victim-survivors lived. However, since these types of hands-on projects were not an ongoing need, Hodge and I sought to develop a more sustainable and mutually beneficial collaboration that would allow students to engage meaningfully with the organization over an entire semester while balancing their other academic responsibilities in the course.

To design an effective partnership, we carefully considered several factors, including the course's learning objectives, the scope and feasibility of potential projects, students' skill levels and time commitments, my capacity as the primary contact for the community organization, and the overarching mission of Women's Advocates. Through this process, we reflected on key guiding questions to ensure that the collaboration aligned with both educational goals and the organization's needs. Specifically, we reflected on the following questions:

What are the key learning objectives of this course? How do these objectives relate to Women's Advocates as an organization and uplift its mission?

How does the prevention curriculum provided by Women's Advocates complement or support the course curriculum? When would be an appropriate time to introduce the community partner within the larger context of the course calendar and syllabus?

How much time in class and outside of class can students reasonably be expected to work on the community engagement project?

How much time can the community partner representative spend inside and outside of the classroom supporting this project? How many class visits with the community partner would be beneficial and increase investment in the project while also honoring their time?

What is the aptitude of the students in the class? How do the expectations shift for an introductory level class with primarily first-year students compared to a senior capstone course? How does this inform the details of the project?

Setting realistic parameters for the nature of the partnership was essential, and I regularly checked in with Hodge to ensure that we remained aligned with the project's intended scope and avoided setting overly ambitious expectations for its outcomes. It was important to the agency to stay rooted in the organization-wide mission to walk with victim-survivors and our community to break the cycle of domestic violence; yet at the same time, we aimed to ensure that the community-engagement projects were aligned with our program-specific goal of educating the community to raise awareness about domestic violence and to help create pathways for safety and healing for victim-survivors.

Nurturing the partnership

Dr. Hodge and I nurtured our partnership through intentionality, thoughtful planning, and ongoing communication. We identified multiple avenues for engagement that extended beyond the classroom, including organizing donation drives, participating in fundraising efforts, attending public outreach events, and distributing safety resources both on and off campus. These activities enriched our connection with one another and demonstrated a meaningful commitment to the organization. Witnessing this level of investment and preparation was crucial for me as a community

partner. Knowing that Hodge would follow through on the project ideas we co-developed and integrate our partnership into the syllabus and course schedule early on fostered a relationship grounded in trust.

A pivotal best practice that emerged was scheduling an introductory class visit, where I could formally introduce Women's Advocates and contextualize the issue of domestic violence for the students. This initial interaction set the stage for the semester, established a personal connection with the students, and reinforced the significance of their involvement from the outset. Associating a real person with the organization strengthened their investment in the work. Beyond these introductory visits, Hodge and I maintained ongoing check-ins – not only after project completion to reflect and refine future collaborations, but also throughout the semester to allow for real-time adjustments. This iterative approach enabled us to address unforeseen challenges, optimize the learning experience, and enhance the impact of students' contributions.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted many school-based partnerships, yet our collaboration endured due to Hodge's commitment to facilitating every phase of the process, from project conceptualization to final presentations. To adapt to new safety constraints, we reimagined engagement activities to ensure the well-being of students and the individuals who lived and worked at Women's Advocates. Despite these challenges, the partnership remained beneficial, particularly for our education program, as young adults represent both a population disproportionately affected by abuse and a critical demographic for primary prevention efforts – stopping violence before it starts.

Over time, we refined our approach to align student projects more closely with the organization's evolving needs. Senior capstone students, in particular, brought a depth of expertise that allowed them to engage in projects with greater complexity and direct impact. Examples included developing and delivering a "Domestic Violence 101" presentation to an Alcoholics Anonymous group, compiling a comprehensive digital resource guide for victim-survivors and their advocates, and directly engaging with landlords and housing agencies to consider working with our Housing Stability Advocates. These projects leveraged students' advanced academic preparation and understanding of the criminal justice system, allowing them to critically analyze its intersections with domestic violence – from law enforcement responses to judicial decision-making.

Beyond individual projects, our collaboration yielded tangible benefits for Women's Advocates as an organization. Students contributed to communication strategies, assisted in developing social media content, conducted literature reviews that informed our core training curriculum, and created community-facing resource materials. One particularly effective strategy was implementing a structured application process for group projects. Students were required to submit an explanation detailing their interest in and qualifications for a particular project, which ensured they selected tasks that were aligned with their skills and interests. This approach increased student engagement, strengthened project outcomes, and provided a more meaningful experience for all involved.

As the depth of these projects expanded, so did my role as a community partner. Increased opportunities for student interaction over the course of the semester fostered deeper investment, as students were able to ask questions, seek clarification, and refine their contributions in real time. Additionally, integrating multiple class connections allowed us to be more creative in shaping the curriculum. For example, in a recent semester, I coordinated a panel discussion featuring three different community organization representatives. This event exposed students to diverse perspectives, provided additional resources, and allowed them to engage with experts from various areas within the field. Hodge incorporated this panel into the course syllabus, giving me the space to facilitate the discussion while drawing on my expertise in

the domestic violence field.

These opportunities positioned me as an authentic co-creator and co-educator within the partnership. Being uplifted in this way strengthened the projects and final deliverables that the students produced for Women's Advocates, while also strengthening the purpose of our partnership.

Sustaining the partnership

From a violence prevention and education perspective, collaborating with schools – particularly with college students – has provided numerous benefits that align with the mission and goals of Women's Advocates. The Education and Outreach Program at Women's Advocates works to raise awareness about domestic violence and create pathways to safety and healing for victim-survivors, both within Minnesota and beyond. College students are a key audience in carrying out this mission, making strong partnerships with university and college educators an effective means of maintaining these connections and directly engaging students. Partnering with this university proved especially valuable due to its proximity to our organization. Since both the school and Women's Advocates are in the same county, students had direct access to our services – either for themselves or for someone they knew. It was common for students to stay after class to confide in me about personal experiences or to seek resources for someone they knew was experiencing abuse in a relationship.
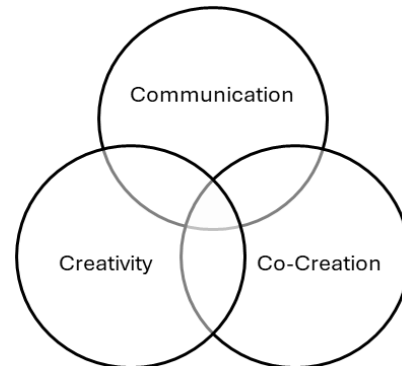
Additionally, violence prevention programs often struggle with funding and are not always prioritized by grant agencies. Many nonprofits, including Women's Advocates, operate with small teams – or in some cases, a single staff member – responsible for providing education and services across multiple counties. Given these constraints, preventionists like myself have limited capacity to continuously develop curriculum while also dedicating time to direct community engagement. The support provided by students – through literature reviews, research contributions, and assistance in

improving educational materials – has been an invaluable resource.

Lessons Learned

Through our partnership, we have identified three core lessons that are essential for success: the importance of communication, creativity, and co-creation. When these elements are effectively integrated, partnerships have a greater chance of being both authentic and sustainable. This aligns with the best practices in community-engaged learning and fosters a collaborative environment that benefits all stakeholders – community partners, students, and faculty members – by creating a more enriching and impactful experience for everyone involved.

Figure 1: Building authentic and sustainable partnerships

Lesson 1: Establishing clear and consistent communication structures is essential for maintaining a long-term, sustainable partnership.

Effective and consistent communication is fundamental to building and nurturing an authentic partnership. Community-engaged learning projects can place a significant burden on community partners if faculty members and students do not account for the additional workload these projects may impose on an

organization (e.g., answering student questions, providing materials or resources, etc.). To mitigate this, it was essential for us to develop a clear communication strategy that could preemptively address potential issues.

Establishing clear parameters for communication throughout the collaboration process is critical. This includes setting expectations at the outset of the partnership during the development phase, maintaining ongoing communication to address questions and concerns during the collaboration, and scheduling a debrief after the collaboration to reflect on successes and identify areas for improvement. Both email and in-person (or virtual) meetings are vital for effective communication and for strengthening the partnership. These communication parameters, such as frequency (e.g., weekly or monthly check-ins), mode (e.g., email, phone, or video calls), and scheduling (e.g., pre-scheduled meetings added to calendars), should be agreed upon by all parties involved – community partners and faculty members – ensuring alignment and preventing miscommunication.

Lesson 2: Creativity builds bridges to meet unique needs of students, organizations, and unexpected challenges.

Each new course brings a new group of students, each with varying skill sets, knowledge, experience, and levels of interest in engaging with community partners. As a result, creativity becomes essential in navigating the unpredictability of student reactions and engagement, as well as responding to external factors (e.g., a global pandemic). Creativity in community-engaged learning often means adapting the project to accommodate how students are engaging with the material and each other, as well as adjusting to the evolving needs of the community organization.

This creativity can also be demonstrated by offering students multiple options and choices that allow for a more personalized and meaningful experience. For instance, what initially began as students completing needed tasks at the facility evolved into more complex, multi-week projects, depending on the level of the course. When the global pandemic forced us to pivot, we found innovative ways to continue supporting the needs of the organization by adjusting our approach while staying mindful of safety concerns. Despite the challenges, we remained flexible and realistic about what could be accomplished, all while ensuring that the organization's mission remained central to our efforts.

Lesson 3: Co-creation approaches that value the organization's wisdom set the foundation for cultivating an authentic partnership.

As partnerships develop, it is important to create opportunities for the community partner to take on the role of a co-educator in the process. This depends on the community partner's capacity and willingness, but when they are open to being a co-creator throughout the collaboration, it can significantly strengthen the partnership and, in turn, enhance the quality of the final projects delivered to the community organization. By serving as a co-creator, the community partner's expertise and professional connections enrich the course curriculum, fostering a deeper sense of engagement and investment among students.

Moving the Field Forward

While this article provides valuable insights into building and sustaining meaningful community-engaged learning (CEL) partnerships, a few limitations should be noted with the goal of moving the field forward. First, the data informing this article primarily consists of critical reflections from one faculty member and one community partner. While these reflections provide depth and insight, they do not capture the perspectives of the students who participated in the CEL projects. In the future, including student voices in the form of critical reflections could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of these

partnerships. Second, while the partnership spanned multiple years and evolved over time, it was also influenced by external factors, most notably the COVID-19 pandemic. The necessity of adapting engagement strategies due to pandemic-related restrictions may mean that some aspects of the partnership's development were unique to this moment in time. Future studies could examine how community-engaged learning partnerships function and evolve in different contexts, particularly in post-pandemic settings. Finally, the effectiveness of CEL partnerships depends on various factors, including the commitment and availability of both faculty members and community partners. This partnership benefited from strong communication, shared goals, and a high level of investment from both parties; however, not all CEL partnerships may have the same level of institutional or organizational support, which could impact sustainability and overall success. Future research could explore how different levels of institutional commitment and resource allocation influence the long-term viability of CEL partnerships.

Despite these limitations, this article contributes to the growing discourse on community-engaged learning (CEL) by emphasizing the importance of centering community partners' voices and fostering reciprocal, sustainable relationships. The process of centering a community partner's voice begins with the initial connection made with the community organization. Faculty members must make a concerted effort to engage with a representative who is attuned to the needs of those they serve, understands the relevance of the organization's mission to the course's learning objectives, and has the capacity to engage fully throughout the partnership. Once this connection is established, it is also important for faculty members to acknowledge and take responsibility for the historical context in which academic or service projects have sometimes harmed, excluded, or dominated the very communities they aim to help – particularly those who have been systematically marginalized (for a deeper discussion of these issues, see Eby,

1998; Mitchell, 2008). By naming and taking ownership of these harmful practices, while also implementing collaborative and empowering strategies to avoid them, partnerships can be built on a foundation of authentic communication and connection.

Collaborating with the community partner to co-define what "community-engaged" truly means is also a key step toward creating a more meaningful partnership. Often, these collaborations can devolve into mere "community-involved" projects, where students have minimal interaction with the organization, rather than the community partner leading and informing the project. When the community partner takes a more central role in shaping the partnership and setting expectations for the students, power becomes more equally distributed, and the partnership tends to produce more relevant, supportive, effective, and meaningful outcomes for the community it aims to serve.

For far too long, community partners have been the "unheard voices" in the field of CEL. While traditional methods, such as interviews and surveys, remain essential tools for understanding community partners' experiences, the field must also seek innovative ways to amplify and center their voices. Critical reflections, such as the one presented here, serve as a meaningful platform for community partners to articulate their insights and experiences, helping others deepen their understanding of what community partners seek in these collaborations. We hope that paired reflections remain a vehicle for knowledge gathering and sharing as the field of community-engaged learning continues to evolve.

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Jessica Hodge is an accomplished educator and researcher dedicated to creating positive community impact through her academic work and community engagement. She currently serves as the Program Director and Associate Professor in the Department of Justice & Society Studies at the University of St. Thomas. As a professor, Hodge places strong emphasis on her students' academic achievement and professional readiness. She consistently encourages them to become change agents within their communities, inspiring the next generation to create meaningful social impact. Her teaching philosophy centers on preparing students not just for careers, but for lives of purpose and civic engagement. Community engagement forms a cornerstone of Hodge's professional approach. She routinely incorporates community-engaged learning experiences into her coursework through collaborative partnerships with local organizations. These mutually beneficial relationships allow students to gain practical experience while providing valuable services to community partners. Additionally, Hodge prioritizes community-based research with nonprofit organizations, helping advance their missions while addressing complex social challenges. Hodge previously served as the inaugural Faculty Director with the Center for the Common Good, where she focused on expanding community-engaged learning opportunities for students and faculty. In this role, she worked to develop authentic, sustainable relationships with community partners and advance best practices in community-engaged learning and research methodologies. Within the field of criminal justice, Hodge's primary research interests and publications focus on hate crimes and gender-motivated violence. Her scholarly work has appeared in various academic journals and other publications, including her book "Gendered Hate: Exploring Gender in Hate Crime Law," published by Northeastern University Press.