

Accelerating University-Community Partnerships: Deconstructing Power Dynamics

By Cynthia Medina



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Introduction

This essay addresses the importance of accelerating equitable community-university partnerships to combat climate change in underserved communities. By deconstructing power dynamics between higher education institutions and surrounding marginalized communities, opportunities can emerge that benefit students, youth and the community as a whole.

Environmental Justice and Injustice

After more than a hundred of years of burning fossil fuels, we are experiencing shifts in weather patterns and temperatures across the globe that are causing extreme floods, droughts, fires, rising sea levels and biodiversity loss. These environmental alterations are creating unprecedented risks to low-income and marginalized populations, whose lack of access to resources intensifies their vulnerability to climate change (Levy & Patz, 2015). As a result, climate change disproportionately impacts historically marginalized communities and populations that include Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC).

The same communities that are historically segregated within cities (through housing policies like redlining for example) suffer disproportionately from the urban heat island effect and typically have among the highest temperatures in cities (Hoffman et al, 2020). These areas also tend to have less green spaces and access to parks than wealthier, predominantly white neighborhoods (Cusick, 2020). Green spaces, trees, and bodies of water have a cooling effect on urban landscapes and mitigate heat impacts. In addition to less green spaces, communities of color are often located near environmentally harmful infrastructures, including major roadways, landfills, toxic waste sites, industrial facilities, and chemical plants. These risks can be categorized as environmental injustices and they result in inequitable and disproportionate exposure to toxic chemicals, contaminated air and water, unsafe workplaces and homes, and other environmental hazards experienced among low-income, BIPOC populations.



Environmental injustices, caused by decades of discriminatory practices and policies, have cascading effects on health at the individual and community level (Kaufman & Hajat, 2021). Due to disinvestment in the community and limited access to resources caused by racist policies, “vulnerable populations are more susceptible to disease, have preexisting conditions, and live in communities that do not promote good health and well-being” (McGill, 2016). This includes inadequate access to medical care, lack of job security, lack of green spaces for children to play, lack of access to healthy food, and lack of safety within the neighborhood due to crime and violence. These injustices have denied low-income, BIPOC communities the right to clean air, water and an economic environment in which to thrive. Continuous inequities have caused health disparities in asthma, obesity, lung cancer, mental health and developmental problems (Landrigan et al., 2010). Underserved, low-income and BIPOC communities that have contributed the least to climate change continue to be most affected by the climate crisis. It is, therefore, important to recognize the interconnectedness of climate change and racial injustice plaguing underserved BIPOC communities.

Higher education is uniquely positioned to leverage resources and expertise to advance community needs and co-develop climate solutions. Indeed, it is difficult to sustain systematic success in reimagining their communities without cooperation from institutions and organizations (White, 2009). As a result, environmental justice organizations have been trying to partner with colleges and universities to help address these environmental injustices and lead innovative climate solutions for decades.

“At the macro level, the institutions’ dominance appears overwhelming and the community feels vulnerable. However, at the micro level—that is, within the context of specific partnerships—there is opportunity for the community to exercise its will through personal interaction.”

- Byron White, *Navigating the power dynamics between institutions and their communities* (2009)

However, communities often find university research and/or engagement efforts to be extractive in nature (Wilmsen, 2008). While their stated missions typically emphasize community engagement and working for the betterment of society, universities are often viewed as being inequitable in their approaches to work with communities and even within their own capital development efforts. It is important to acknowledge that engagement with marginalized communities has often not been beneficial for communities. Common challenges in such engagement include: failing to establish long-term, sustainable relationships; leaving barriers in accessing resources unquestioned; and not responding to community recommended changes to research agendas. Integration and advancement of climate justice work within higher education requires community partners’ collaboration and input to collectively build resilient, sustainable communities and campuses, and improve health for all.

Community-University Partnerships

Extractive

Community partners are not given decision-making power within projects

The university fails to establish long-term relationships. Partnerships are only sustained for the duration of the project.

There is a lack of transparency and accessibility of projects and resources.

Once a project is completed, there is no dissemination process. The data retrieved from the community is often no longer accessible.

Non-extractive

Equitable compensation for partners' expertise and participation

Long-term, mutually beneficial partnerships are developed and sustained.

There is equal decision-making power before a project is launched and throughout its implementation.

Project findings are disseminated to the community and can be accessed and utilized with ease.

The 2021 essay from this series, [Change comes from the margins: Sustainability efforts in community-campus partnerships](#), acknowledges the importance of higher education's role in cultivating resilient community collaborations and the impacts of deep listening (Jovanovic & Kinefuchi, 2021). This essay builds upon these insights. In order to create sustainable change, universities and colleges must deconstruct power dynamics and create campus-wide frameworks to facilitate just partnerships.



University of Illinois Chicago E2S Climate Hub: Open forum on paths toward sustainable and just engagement

Higher Education & Community Partnerships for Climate Justice

As climate change poses a threat to everyone worldwide, it presents an important opportunity to co-create solutions to address injustices together. Recently, higher education has taken a leadership role in climate mitigation - reducing its emissions of heat-trapping greenhouse gasses (Dyer & Andrews, 2011). As universities and colleges develop climate solutions for their respective campuses, the impacts of climate change should be considered in the context of the communities which surround them. To support climate resilience, higher education institutions should endeavor to co-develop climate solutions with these communities. Partnerships between higher education and communities can mitigate the impacts of climate change, advance climate resilience and build sustainable communities. However, outdated university practices that continue to produce extractive and episodic engagements with communities have resulted in a hesitancy to partner with higher education among community organizations. Communities are often sought out specifically for their input but, too often, they are given minimal to no decision-making power in developing, designing or implementing research projects and plans.

Universities and colleges need to take responsibility for building sustainable partnerships to support community-based organizations engaging in climate work through a lens of racial and social equity, and for ensuring that such engagements are non-extractive toward people or the environment. Although university research practices involve rigorous human subjects reviews, too many communities have been left without the power to control how their information will be used, and without seeing any real and lasting improvements in community wellbeing. Climate resilience cannot be achieved without equitable community collaboration and input.



University of Illinois Chicago E2S Climate Hub: Open forum on paths toward sustainable and just engagement

UIC-Urban Growers Collective Partnership

The emerging collaboration between University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) and the Urban Growers Collective (UGC) demonstrates some of the tools and resources that were applied to partner with communities for impactful change and just transitions.

University of Illinois Chicago's Office of Planning, Sustainability and Project Management (PSPM) received funding from the Institute for Policy and Civic Engagement (IPCE) to organize an event called *Creating a Circular Economy for Just Climate Action* in April 2021. The event highlighted the barriers to creating sustainable and mutually beneficial university-community partnerships. As a result of this event, a long-term partnership between the UIC Climate Justice Partnerships team, within PSPM, and Urban Growers Collective (UGC), a Black and women-led non-profit farm located on Chicago's South side, was catalyzed. UGC's mission is to address inequity and structural racism in food systems through urban agriculture. Recognition of the urgency of the climate crisis aligned with the goals of both organizations. In response to the 2021 event, UGC and UIC began working collaboratively to create a mutually beneficial and non-extractive alternative to traditional university-community partnerships.

In the 2021-22 academic year, the Accelerating University-Community Partnerships for Climate Justice project was formally launched by the UIC Climate Justice Partnerships (CJP) team in partnership with UGC. A female and BIPOC graduate research assistant from a local underserved Chicago community co-led the project and provided personal insights about the inequities and institutional hierarchies that limit POC from accessing university resources and expertise. Monthly meetings focused on supporting UGC efforts, partnering on funding opportunities, and engaging the UIC academic network and UGC community partners in collaborative, community-led work. The project sought to reduce challenges of initiating and sustaining university-community partnerships by increasing transparency through the development of an asset map of community and university resources and implementation of best practices to facilitate equitable and reciprocal partnerships. The list of the best practices was drafted based on literature searches, practices observed from the UIC and UGC partnership, and interviews held with community and university folks who had conducted climate or environmental justice work in the past two years. Though these best practices were created specifically to support community-university partnerships to combat climate and environmental injustices, they can be broadly applied to any partnership focusing on addressing injustices.

Partnership Timeline & Summary:

April 2021 - First UIC forum: *Creating a Circular Economy for Just Climate Action*

Summer 2021 - Partnership formed between UIC Sustainability team and Urban Growers Collective

2021-2022 - Formal launch of the *Accelerating University-Community Partnerships for Climate Justice project*. Interviews held with community and university partners to gain information on climate and environmental justice projects and challenges

April 2022 - Second UIC forum: *E2S (Energy, Environment and Sustainability) Climate Hub: Paths Towards Just and Sustainable Community Engagement*. Discussion started on barriers in creating a community centric MOU

May 2022 - Best practices and asset map of climate and environmental justice work in the community and UIC finalized, guided by community feedback through interviews and second UIC forum.

Best practices for non-extractive, equitable partnerships

Build thoughtful inclusivity - Intentionally build partnerships with marginalized communities; create an inclusive environment to work collectively in addressing community needs.

Establish expectations - Have a clear understanding of roles and goals of the partnership. Establish expectations and any limitations.

Commit to long-term sustainability - Begin building relationships with the community before launching any project. Commit to and sustain partnership long after project completion.

Prioritize partnerships - Coordinate regular, scheduled meetings to share resources and opportunities to continuously prioritize partnerships.

Equitable funding distribution - Create equitable funding distribution by authorizing communities to allocate funding to directly support their needs.

Leverage Resources - Recognize positionality, as a research-academic institution, and leverage resources to be more accessible, applicable, and transparent to power community needs.

Source: Elizabeth Kócs, et al., 2022



UIC staff and students volunteering on campus.

The partners found that creation of an asset map and list of best practices were important first steps, but these steps were not enough to correct decades of oppressive systems imposed by higher education institutions, and others within the university thought similarly. In response to this realization, the project team has had additional conversations with other UIC faculty, staff and departments who shared similar goals in creating transformative frameworks for engagements with our surrounding communities. These conversations have unified once-siloed units into synergistic collaborators, and helped determine next steps in 2022.



UIC E2S Climate Hub: Open forum on paths toward sustainable and just engagement

In April 2022, UIC held a second annual forum, the *E2S (Energy, Environment and Sustainability) Climate Hub: Paths Towards Just and Sustainable Community Engagement*, where community and university representatives convened in the Auburn Gresham neighborhood. The project team's internal partnership with UIC-PACT (Partnerships for Antiracist Campus Transformation), a collaboration of members from across campus that strive to identify various community needs and organize the university's expertise and response, was initiated based on our common goals in eliminating institutional roadblocks to equitable engagements. During the open forum, our team disseminated findings from the project and garnered community input through several methodologies. The forum worked to establish a standard framework to support equitable community engagement. This was accomplished through group activities and discussions of challenges in creating a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that was facilitated by UIC-PACT. In this way, the forum served as a crucial step in building partnerships between communities and UIC. The MOU discussion portion of the event prompted community-centric solutions to barriers of community engagement that includes:

- The need to build relationships before the creation of an MOU.
- Creating a structured process for the community to identify problems they want researched by the university.
- Demonstrating that the community is valued and compensated within a budget.
- Acknowledging equal and equitable ownership of data and projects between university-community partners.
- Centering youth voices in the community to create opportunities for youth input and engagement
- Intentionally being transparent, communicating without jargon (acronyms).

Equitable Partnerships for Student Opportunities

As early career professionals and decision-makers, students are poised to lead equitable and just transitions and transform traditional, outdated systems of oppression. Inviting and equitably compensating community members - true experts in situ - to share knowledge with university students produces an enriching learning environment and prepares students with the skills needed to achieve climate justice goals. Students can be engaged through volunteer programs, internship programs, research assistantships, and enriched learning environments such as experiential learning courses. Organizing sustainable volunteer programs within community-university partnerships can enhance connections and opportunities.

Internship programs in particular can be conduits for students in the community to access university opportunities and resources and catalyze academic and career goals, which continue to be gatekept. For example, the University of Illinois Energy Resource Center (ERC) STEM Scholars program hosts high school students from around Chicago in six-week programs with hands-on learning related to STEM twice a year. A subset of the participants are offered a paid summer internship to expose students to a professional work environment and furthering their interests in clean energy, environmental conservation, climate and energy justice and STEM. As higher education establishes equitable partnerships with community-based organizations, an integral part is developing internship programs that create a channel for students within the community to access university resources and activate careers.



IUPUI students volunteering during the IUPUI Day of Caring. Photo credit: Liz Kaye, IU Studios

Closing

As a sector with resources and expertise, higher education has an obligation to intentionally and equitably collaborate with BIPOC marginalized communities to catalyze climate solutions and generate opportunities for university and community students to transform oppressive systems.

The traditional hierarchy of higher education research practices perpetuates inequitable authority, influence, and access to resources. Too often, the disadvantaged communities upon which researchers rely for their data and research efforts have little input into the research and derive very little benefit from it. These kinds of power imbalances have led communities and higher education to work in silos, making only modest success in addressing the climate crisis. Deconstructing power dynamics through equitable higher education and community partnerships is foundational to co-creating collaborative climate solutions while fostering opportunities for students, both in the community and in higher education.

By implementing non-extractive, collaborative, and racial justice approaches, institutions of higher education can begin to deconstruct the power dynamics creating a divide between them and surrounding communities, and reimagine new pathways for partnerships that foster reciprocal, equitable, and sustainable relationships.



Convocation for the Consortium for Hispanic-Serving Institutions at University of Illinois Chicago.

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