**Creating Healthier Partnerships in Community Service-Learning: Centering CBO Perspectives**

**Introduction**

Community Service-Learning (CSL) is an experiential and high-impact teaching strategy that has been widely adopted across higher education in the United States and throughout the world (*Trending Topic: High-Impact Practices*, n.d.). CSL's core tenants require that experiences maintain high academic rigor, include intentional reflection strategies and that the relationship between the university and the community partner are reciprocal (Procario-Foley & Van Cleave, 2016). While there has been a dearth of academic research into both student academic success and reflection strategies through CSL, the literature has arguably neglected exploring best practices for fostering and maintaining healthy relationships between the stakeholders, mainly a college or university and a community-based organization (CBO). There are many writings on best practices for university stakeholders to engage with CBOs, though they are generally grounded in very theoretical ideas of relationships and relationship-building (Cress et al., 2013, 2023; Donahue & Plaxton-Moore, 2018; Yamamura & Koth, 2018). The objective of this paper is to bridge the gap between academic theory, and the reality of working in the nonprofit sector–along with the challenges and triumphs associated with those realities–by bringing the voices of community partners to the forefront. In doing this, this research project attempts to recalibrate the power differential between partners, decentering the university as the ultimate knowledgebearer and recognizing and uplifting the expertise of the community outside the proverbial "Ivory Tower." I aim to use the frameworks of CSL theory, organizational and nonprofit communication theory, as well as the overall structure of healthy relationships and trust-building to interpret the feedback from interviews conducted with local volunteer managers and executives to develop a clear guide for what makes a healthy relationship from a CBO's perspective.

**Process**

This project investigates the role of a small, Oregon-based, urban liberal arts university in creating and sustaining relationships with CBOs while furthering the missions of these organizations. . On campus I worked with the university's civic engagement office and CSL program in collaboration with nonprofits based in the surrounding city. Using the professional resources I had access to, such as connections within the department, I met with CBO professionals in the area that provide essential services across the region to create a path forward for how this university as well as other educational institutions can more accurately come together with them to meet their goals. Cress et al., (2013) an authority in the field for CSL, defines community partners as "members of the community in businesses, government agencies, and social service organizations that agree to work with students individually or collectively in order to meet community needs" (p. 20). The university/student perspective is emphasized here, as it tends to be amongst CSL scholarship. Universities should consider themselves as community partners. One must not disregard the fact that a university is situated within a particular context and community, and therefore has inextricable ties to that community. The university is just one organization amongst many with resources, strengths, and values that they bring to the table. Therefore, universities have a certain responsibility to other organizations

within the community context that they work within. When I asked one interviewee about his engagement work, he described a more equal relationship: "I'm engaging in community partnerships, community presentations, trying to find a way to tell our story in a way that invites others in the world to come alongside us in the work that we're doing" (Ethan, Personal Interview, 22 January 2024). There are a few key points here in the framing of partnerships, one being the concept of being "invited in" to the CBO's work – an invitation into a relationship. Universities are not entitled to their partnership or resources. Also, the discussion of working "alongside" an organization's mission is a much more equitable way of discussing partner relationships rather than framing universities as working in service to organizational or community "needs," which can erase the value that communities and CBOs bring to the table. Relations with these organizations need to be grounded in mutual trust and respect, beginning with the language that structures those relationships.This paper further delves into best practices from the viewpoint of CBOs.

  In my initial research, I set out to assess the health of this college's current organizational relationships by having conversations with volunteer managers and other nonprofit professionals, who often help facilitate such collaborations, about what they are experiencing with other institutions in their engagement programs. The initial goals of this research were to provide a set of suggestions for how this small liberal arts college can become a better community partner. As I continued with this research, it became larger than just the singular liberal arts school; it grew into an analysis of the power in community partner relationships, and what CBOs are looking for to create more effective and healthy relationships with the universities they work with. In this essay I outline a structure that colleges and universities, as well as other CBOs, might find useful in reexamining existing relationships and finding new, more equal approaches to partnership.

**Structure and Methods**

  I interviewed 9 nonprofit professionals from 8 different organizations over the course of three months (November 2023 to January 2024) after receiving approval by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). These interviewees consist of volunteer managers and other nonprofit professionals that routinely interact with community partners, including a variety of colleges and universities, since these tend to be the people that CSL programs interact with the most. Interviewees were selected based on their established connections to the liberal arts university, as well as inclusion by suggestion of a fellow interviewee. The organizations included via suggestion of another interviewee all had experience working with colleges and universities, and tended to have some experience working with the liberal arts college, and, occasionally, the civic engagement office, but not to the degree of the other interviewees. They provide essential and varied perspectives beyond that of those with close connections to the college.

  All interviews were scheduled for thirty minute sessions, and were based on the interviewees' availability. Interviews were recorded and held either in person or on zoom, except for one interview exchange that occurred via email due to extenuating circumstances. All who participated signed an informed consent letter. The welfare of those being interviewed is of the utmost priority, and in alignment with this, no personal information is shared without the explicit consent of the interviewee, and they have had the opportunity to request to see how their story and information will be shared before, during, and after the interview process to edit or amend statements. Due to my connection to the university office at the time of these interviews, and potential perceived risk of damaging organizations' relationships with the university, names of

the nonprofits who opted to participate are not included in this work and pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of interviewees.

**Review of Community Service-Learning Literature on Community Partnerships**
In order to ground myself in the work of previous scholars in community dynamics, CSL, and civic engagement I conducted a review of popular literature on CSL and community partnerships.

*Defining Community Service-Learning*

In my research and review of theoretical frameworks of CSL, the purposes of interaction and relationship-building can often get lost or muddled, so returning to the definition of the practice is essential in keeping in line with organizational goals and understanding the nature of the relationship. I found that the *Faculty Service-Learning Guidebook* provides a comprehensive definition of service-learning, describing it as the "intentional integration of community service experiences through critical preparation, engaged praxis, and analytical reflection, which extend academic learning and provide meaningful assistance to communities" (Cress et al., 2023, p. 32). In other words, CSL is putting the knowledge of volunteers to work to fill a community-identified goal with critical points of reflection. But what does it mean to provide "meaningful assistance?" How do you go about getting to that point in a partnership where you (either a nonprofit or a university) are able to both provide and receive "meaningful assistance?" These questions and more will be addressed later on in this study.

*Acknowledging Unequal Power Dynamics: Towards Solidarity and Critical Reciprocity*

Conceptions of charity in volunteerism have created a "server" vs. "served" mentality, often going hand in hand with settler colonialism and white saviorism. The idea of the "us" vs. "them," "have" vs. "have-not" furthers systemic inequities, ultimately harming fellow community members. Cress et al. (2015) asserts that the key to addressing this dynamic is moving towards "engaging students in service as a form of solidarity that seeks social justice through collaborative empowerment of individuals and communities" (p.41). Similarly, Eckerle et al. (2011) presents CSL as being in opposition to what they term "passive charity model[s]" in favor of "genuine, collaborative, community engagement benefiting students, faculty, and community" (p.16). Extending these ideas into the implementation of partnerships, Cress offers "critical reciprocity" as a guiding relationship principle. This term refers to the evaluation and elimination of institutional inequities, emphasizing the need to be "power neutral" and to "realize mutual benefits within the context of long term relationships." While Cress et al. (2015) acknowledges this to be a "utopian notion" (p.42), the authors see it as something necessary to consistently strive for and move towards.

CSL is a necessarily reflective practice. In order to understand the background for the community relationships that currently exist and those that are yet to be built, we need to employ some of that reflection so that we may understand our community context. That means zooming out from our own projects and initiatives we may have in mind and taking the time to understand the background to why those "power imbalances," as suggested above, may exist. Santiago-Ortiz (2019) asserts that the "acknowledgment of settler colonialism also means engaging in an analysis of the process of colonialism itself, its impact in the academy and broader society and

institutions, and how it affects community–university partnerships" (p. 49). We need to look at the history of our own academic institutions' relationship within the community it is situated in. It also means acknowledging the "why" of entering into a partnership.

**Why Enter Into a Partnership?**

Reasons for entering into a partnership can and do vary widely based on the type of the relationship and the organizational and community context of CBOs, but some scholars have put forward possible reasons for engagement. Dempsey (2010) outlines a few reasons why a CBO or nonprofit may be interested in engaging in a partnership with a college or university, emphasizing the acquisition of "social and economic capital" and "increased perceptions of legitimacy" (p. 363). This idea was echoed in one of the interviews conducted where a volunteer manager discussed how she depended on the university for funding stipends for internships with students from the school. In this case, the organization is reliant on the university to provide capital for the purpose of such capacity building. In addition to this, Cress (2015) states that for some, considering entering into partnerships with higher education institutions is necessary to increase volunteer pools and support, saying that "quite frankly, some community organizations simply have no choice [but to do so]" (p. 4). Virtually all interviewees acknowledged the importance of volunteers to their work, with one interviewee going as far to say "our events literally cannot happen without volunteer support, like honestly, they can't happen…," and another stating that the "extended family, the extended community a college can have to help bring a bunch of people who would never normally hear about our mission is super, super helpful" (Lorrie, Personal Interview, 22 November 2023; Ross, Personal Interview, 19 December, 2023).

This is not to say that universities are *fonts of otherwise unattainable knowledge and limitless resources* that are here to *save all CBOs* but rather to acknowledge the significant funding differences and very real challenges to creating more equal relationships. Universities generally have (or are perceived to have) greater funding, staff, and connections to key populations with the campus community. This can lead to vastly unequal partnerships where university officials and their associated priorities set the standards for and means of engagement. This not only sets the tone for an unhealthy, domineering partner relationship, but also has a high potential of hurting community organizations in their work towards their mission and goals.

So how do universities avoid the scenario above? How do they acknowledge these resource differentials and still create meaningful exchanges? How do they build better, more equal partnerships? In other words, how do universities build healthy community relationships? The findings of this research show that the basis of healthy relationships is the acknowledgement of the other partner, and the recognition of their goals and opportunities for development. This goes both ways. For example, during my time with the liberal arts college's civic engagement office I organized and networked with local CBOs, and I learned more about the unique situatedness of each organization, their goals, what was working and what was not, and where and what they wanted to grow in these thirty minute or so conversations than I did in that entire semester. What I have learned, and what I would like to share here, is listening and exchange, and the power of making space for learning together in highlighting the voices of these individuals and their significant experience and stories in an effort to answer these questions.

**Creating the CBO-University Healthy Relationships Matrix**

Throughout the course of the interview process, I asked interviewees to describe their position and organization, what they see as potential challenges to their work, as well as questions regarding student engagement experiences in the past and what they would like those to look like in the future. From this pool of experiences, I coded responses based on the framework of facilitating an environment for successful, healthy partnerships. These responses were then broken down into the categories shown in the CBO-University Healthy Relationship Matrix in Figure 1 below.

**Fig. 1: CBO-University Healthy Relationships Matrix**
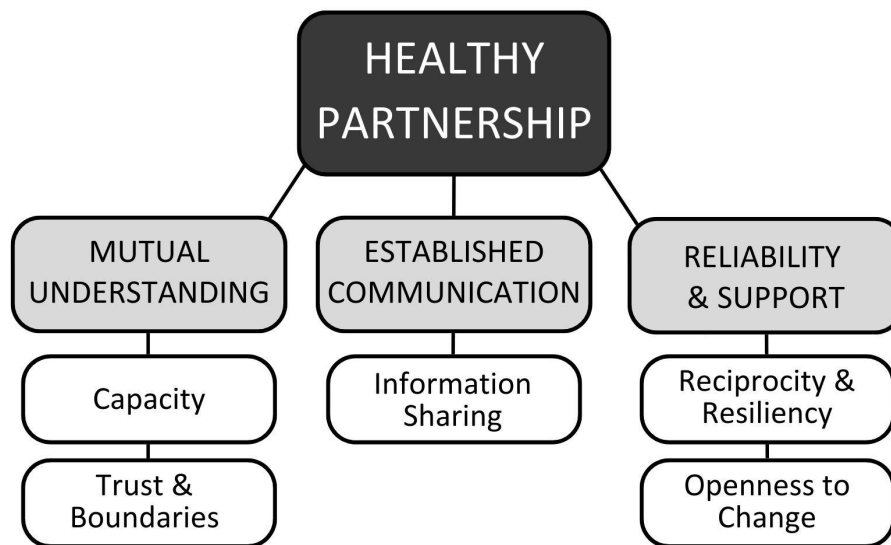


These categories are:

1. **Mutual Understanding**: *Capacity, Trust and Boundaries*
2. **Established Communication**: *Information Sharing*
3. **Reliability and Support:** *Reciprocity and Resiliency, Openness to Change*

In the following sections, engagement professionals offer insight into what they see as pressing challenges in their organizations, as well as how partner relationships might be improved.

1. **Mutual Understanding**

*Capacity*

Capacity as Organizational Structure and Ability

Understanding organizational structure and capacity is essential to relationship building. It is knowing your own limitations, and being aware of when the people you are working with

are reaching their capacity limit as well. One of the most immediate and universal experiences affecting capacity was the COVID-19 pandemic and shut-downs, which greatly affected nonprofits' means of interacting with people and engaging them in their missions. Many interviewees mentioned the strain of the pandemic on their engagement levels, whether that be with volunteers, interns, or donors. In reflecting on the effect that the pandemic has had, Lorrie shared her involvement in a volunteer manager's association and referenced an ongoing recovery process with her peers where they "lost a lot of volunteer engagement…but are starting to see that excitement again, to revamp their volunteer programs" (Lorrie, Personal Interview, 22 November 2023).

<div align="center">"Communicating the Realities" of Time and Engagement</div>

Both capacity and desire for different types of engagement vary across organizations. For example, in the course of interviews, some nonprofits described simply not having the staff or infrastructure to be able to train and manage interns, while others are actively hosting or recruiting interns. Being aware of mutual capacity and having those conversations when capacity levels change can help avoid conflict. This includes the greater picture of an organization's abilities and availability, down to an individual's engagement and commitment. For example, Dawn, who works at a small nonprofit that focuses on serving people in the surrounding urban area, stated:

> "One thing that ends up happening with [Name of Liberal Arts College] Students is that you all are overachievers, and as such you always overcommit (laughs)...At the front of the semester the energy is really high..and then you know, you get about a month in, it's like 'oh, you know, my reading list is up to here.' Whatever it might be. And so I think we could do better in communicating the realities, the limitations, of how much time a student can put into projects" (Dawn, Personal Interview, 14 November 2023).

It is important not only for the people coordinating relationships to have a clear understanding of parameters and expectations, but also for those participating in them to do so as well. Students are offered an entry point of participation in a partnership, and must do their part to take care of it for those to come in the future.

<div align="center">Identifying "Ideal" Areas of Engagement</div>

Mutual understanding in healthy relationships involves having a clear picture of each others' goals and missions. For universities and colleges, mission alignment would look like meeting goals for education, whereas for nonprofits it would be achieving goals related to their individual mission. Sometimes organizations' missions can come into competition with each other, or the act of engagement itself may move people away from working towards their intended mission. Michelle, who works at an urban small to mid-sized nonprofit, discusses this tension in working with other partners and funding organizations:

> "I think [it's like] threading the needle a little bit on doing projects and applying for funding and looking at sustainable solutions that allow us to work within our own vision of how we want to serve people…[but] threading that needle can be really tricky because

there's times where opportunities have come up and it's like, well, we could do this, but this would take us away from some of our core focus[es]...a lot of the work and the challenge is thinking about, like, how do we stay grounded in who we are while partnering with lots of different people to make it work" (Michelle, Personal Interview, 2 February 2024).

When projects begin to stray from "core focuses," having the power and ability to change course is key. Jaqueline, a volunteer manager at a mid-sized nonprofit organization, surprised me with a few questions as we were discussing engagement theory: "How do you say no without burning that bridge? How do you create a better relationship from the start?" (Jaqueline, Personal Interview, 29 November 2023). These questions guide the construction of the following section on trust and boundaries.

*Trust & Boundaries*

As Michelle noted, being able to retain a sense of self within partnerships is needed in order to create mutually beneficial outcomes. But to answer Jaqueline's question requires going beyond understanding each others' goals, and into respect and boundary-building. In community partner relationships, similar to other relationships, consent is a necessarily ongoing process. Encouragement of healthy boundary-setting from the outset of a community partner relationship, and mutual respect for those boundaries, has the potential to minimize future organizational damage and promote healthier exchanges.

Jaqueline mentioned the ability to say "no" to projects that move the organization away from their mission in her relationship with the liberal arts college as being an essential part to their partnership, and feeling more comfortable in that relationship because of it. But how do you even have the discussion of "we need the ability to say no to proposed programming?" Unfortunately, as Jaqueline alludes to later on in our interview discussion, it is often hard for other people and organizations, who may not have the same established boundaries with their community partners, to receive that "no" gracefully, and for it not to harm the relationship. Also, in Jaqueline's case with the liberal arts college, there was emphasis from the university in their relationship-building process about the creation of boundaries and the need for both parties to "have an out," so to speak, so that either can let the other know if projects are diverting from their missions. Jaqueline describes the difficulty of having that kind of healthy boundary with this particular organization, but not so much with others in the community. As it stands, universities have the ability to empower nonprofit organizations and set the tone towards healthy boundaries where some nonprofits may not feel they have the ability to do so due to the need to preserve existing relationships and resources.

Identifying Ideal Areas of Engagement: What Is, or Would Be, "Meaningful" and "Appropriate?"

In working towards having a mutually beneficial relationship, one should not assume that a type of engagement is ideal for a community partner. In fact, when discussing engagement opportunities and involvement of students across these eight CBOs, they all had a wide variety of existing programs, as well as differing ideas of what service looks like and what types of engagement they would like to see at their organizations.

Alicia, who works at a mid-sized nonprofit in an urban area, describes a robust training and engagement program for volunteers working within their office, or remotely answering their hotline, as well as student participation in service days. Other organizations describe event support as what is most appreciated, and still others mention interns as being an ideal engagement strategy for them. Ethan, who works at a small to mid-sized nonprofit organization, describes internships as being particularly "meaningful" for them because of the benefits of "on site learning where there's a clear and identifiable objective for the student and the way they're engaging" coupled with "a longer term timeline that they can actually start to make sense of those objectives" (Ethan, Personal Interview, 22 January 2024). When I asked about what ideal engagement strategies with students might look like for his organization, Ross, who works at a small nonprofit serving urban and rural areas, reframes the word "ideal" as appropriateness: "For our volunteers and for people who get involved, we want to find a place where it's appropriate for them to be involved, where they can do it in a way that's comfortable for both them and the people we serve" (Ross, Personal Interview, 19 December 2023). I think we can learn from Ross's statement in that, whether it be programmatic or more infrequent service, internships or service days, universities must understand that the type of programming offered by nonprofits is grounded in the protection of the wellbeing of those they serve. For some this might look like in-depth background checks, or volunteering opportunities that may, on the surface, seem adjacent to their mission or purpose. The bottom line here is acknowledging the various priorities of nonprofits in the formulation of "appropriate" engagement. Based on the varying types and lengths of engagement preferred by those interviewed, using the prompting questions of what is/would be "meaningful" and "appropriate" is a great way to puzzle through evaluating current programming, as well as looking towards future opportunities. One may find it helpful to think through these questions individually to identify goals, and then reference it once again in proposing engagement strategies in conversation with community partners.

## 2. Established Communication

When I discussed struggles or successes with these nonprofit organizations, often what made or broke those experiences was communication, or the lack thereof. Therefore, it is essential to have established means of communication between parties. What that looks like and how that is determined can vary across organizations and partnerships, but some key ideas stood out for these professionals during interviews, including information sharing.

### *Information Sharing*

The importance of information sharing to trust building and overall relationship health is critical. A University of Minnesota (UMN) Extension article, Hoelting (2022) defined this idea as "communication trust" where "'community members need to know that they'll be told what they need to know when they need to know it'" (para. 6). Openness in information sharing can be used as a tool by universities to better level the playing field and create more equal partnerships. Erica, who works at a mid-sized nonprofit serving counties across the state, emphasized the importance of communication trust when she works with volunteers: "What I try to do really, really well is give a full description of what's going to happen. What is going on? What is expected of you? Is this something you can do?...If you get rid of all those blocks ahead of time, then people know exactly what they're walking into and there aren't going to be

surprises" (Erica, Personal Interview, 30 November 2023). Erica's strategy for established communication and transparency is something partnerships should strive for. In the next sections, we will review what interviewees described as important to them in building communication in community partner relationships.

Pathways for Communication: "I Want Everyone to Have That Mindset and the Relationship"

Dawn, who has worked in her position and with colleges and universities for a number of years, mentions having a great overall experience working with the liberal arts college. She did comment on the organization of the communication and interaction methods with the office as being limiting at times, and not knowing how to get information about her organization's events on the radar of the university.

> "We are constantly doing programming, and if there's an opportunity to do a service day project and get it on [the civic engagement office's] calendar, it'd be nice to hear. Or, like to have a sheet…or some resource that says if you need this, this is how you access it. We have the relationship, so I can often just make the call, but it also helps it not to be just me, you know" (Dawn, Personal Interview, 14 November 2023).

Dawn goes on to mention how it would be nice for her colleagues in her organization to be able to have the same level of access: "it's like, we all want that. I want everyone to have that mindset and the relationship" (Dawn, Personal Interview, 14 November 2023). Given the context of this situation being set at a small liberal arts college, there can be a tendency for relationship-building to be done on a "handshake" basis, which can, in some cases, silo off other organizational contacts. It is important to have established pathways for communication available to be able to both expand the partnerships one might have, and to offer inroads for other organizational connections. This can be as simple as having a dedicated section of the engagement office's or college's website dedicated to resources for community partners, how to get in contact with administrators, and how to get events and programming in newsletters or other student outreach materials.

Data as a Vehicle for Promoting Engagement Sustainability

During our interview, Jacqueline asked if the civic engagement office at the college keeps data or other sorts of analytics, if we had returning volunteers, or more one-time attendance at events. I found that I could not answer that question well, other than what I could remember from sign-up forms. This highlighted a point of improvement for our office and the college in analyzing volunteer data, but also emphasizes the importance of knowledge sharing. Service events are not just created to fill a need for student engagement event planning at the university level, but also to build a nonprofit's volunteer base and to get students involved in a longer term capacity beyond those few hours. As Jaqueline put it:

> "We want [engagement] to be sustainable…I think a lot of the time volunteerism is based a lot on that feeling of like 'I want to feel like I'm making a difference' and once that kind of like goes away, you're kinda just not as engaged and it's not as important. And it's like, we want it to be, like, at the forefront for people to, like, really always

understand like whatever, even if it's one hour or thirty minutes like you're making a huge difference, you know. And I think that's really hard sometimes for some people to believe…yeah, so, keeping track and being able to kinda like look at the consistencies [is important]" (Jaqueline, Personal Interview, 29 November 2023).

In other words, organizations want to be able to evaluate these collaborative experiences too so that they may better recruit and retain a dedicated and reliable volunteer base. Data sharing encompasses the acknowledgement of a fellow partner's goals, and the part that the organization you are representing plays in achieving them. It also sets the groundwork for longer term exchanges versus what one interviewee described as "one off, get a task done" situations (Lorrie, Personal Interview, 22 November 2023).

### 3. Reliability and Support

What does it mean to be reliable in the context of a partnership? What can instances of support look like? In this section I would like to introduce the idea of "resiliency" as an aspect of healthy partner relationships, and its connection to reliability and support.

#### Importance of Reliability and "Contractual Trust"

Reliability is vital to a healthy and continual partner relationship. One might think of it as "follow through." Hoelting (2022) at UMN goes slightly deeper, describing the notion of "contractual trust" which is "whether promises are kept, expectations are clear, and community members believe that they can depend on one another" (para. 5). A relationship can be deeply damaged when promises are made and not kept, and can greatly impact the other organization. Examples of this might include when volunteers show up to a service site with no one to be found to facilitate the planned project, or when a university makes a promise of aid for an upcoming fundraising event, but cancels at the last minute, leaving the event short-staffed. These are not theoretical, but based on real events I have witnessed. Putting fellow organizations in these types of situations does not bode well for the possibility of a long lasting, healthy relationship together.

#### *Reciprocity and Resiliency*

In addition to the importance of contractual trust and fulfillment of obligations, I want to highlight the concept of resilience and instances of resiliency of partnerships that were brought up in community partner interviews.

Taylor et al. (2023) note that "Building resilient partnerships: How businesses and nonprofits create the capacity for responsiveness" defines resiliency as "the substantial duration of collaboration, in the face of inevitable environmental and organization-specific changes" (p.4) Often in CSL literature relationship-building is described as a "reciprocal" process, meaning that there is a relational cycle of give and take and support within partnerships. Support begets willingness for future support. I offer that these ideas of resiliency and reciprocality are intertwined – that over time, reciprocality in the form of instances of organizational support for each other, is built on a relationship's resiliency, and vice versa.

Lorrie, in describing a positive experience with the liberal arts college where she came to them in urgent need of volunteers, said "it is a huge thing for us, you know, to be able to come to people in a time of need and have it be received so well" (Personal Interview, 22 November 2023). Dawn also cited a positive experience a few years back with the same college where departmental funding that supported an internship program for students at her organization was not cut despite the harshness of the COVID-19 pandemic on the university budget (Personal Interview, 14 November 2023). Both of these instances support the commitment of universities to their community partners, really demonstrating their investment, and with that, helping to build trust and resilience within their respective relationships. Both Lorrie and Dawn spoke highly of the long-lasting relationships they have with the liberal arts college over the years.

*Openness to Change*

Finally, a key aspect of building and maintaining the aforementioned "resiliency" of partner relationships requires a willingness to change. Jaqueline discusses how the nature of her organization inherently requires a mindset of growth, saying that "it's very reciprocal…it really stunts our growth when other organizations kind of say 'we're not willing or we are unable to grow alongside you'" (Personal Interview, November 29 2023). A relationship is a living and breathing entity, and as situations and organizations change, it must react through growth in order to remain meaningful for both parties.

"Disrupting the Status Quo"

Change in and of itself requires openness to new opportunities. At times, striving to maintain a healthy and equal partnership means challenging what is as it relates to partner well-being and goal achievement. During interviews, multiple community partners specifically cited scheduling with college students as a point of tension. They said that universities would want to have service events on days that organizations are normally closed, like weekends or after standard business hours. Still others mentioned trying to balance organizational needs with university student engagement.

Dawn describes the issue of scheduling conflicts with universities, acknowledging how hard it is for colleges to get students engaged based on their schedules, but describes a lack of willingness to change. "There's a disconnect…it's not that they don't want to [have students engage with the organization], it's just that the priority is about trying to make it fit without disrupting the status quo too much" (Dawn, Personal Interview, 14 November 2023).

Candice, who works at a small nonprofit in an urban area, discussed how internships would be set up by the liberal arts college's students or their professors, either on a volunteer basis or for credit through the school. Candice described how it is "easier" with those simply "volunteering their time" due to restrictions of internship criteria, and how, in these cases, the organization can place interns "where the need is greatest" (Candice, Personal Interview, 14 January 2024).

Universities need to advocate for change and for setting the conditions that allow for engagement to be meaningful for fellow community partners in a manner that makes sense for both parties.

Lorrie describes a positive experience with the liberal arts college, emphasizing mutual open mindedness and excitement over talks for future initiatives and programming with the

college. In discussing bringing up ideas for engagement and advocacy between her organization and the university, she says "I just love that we are able to have that conversation" (Lorrie, Personal Interview, 22 November 2023).

These experiences represent a need for higher education institutions to commit to bridging what Dawn refers to as the "disconnect" between priorities (Personal Interview, 14 November 2023). Nonprofits should be centered in the type, manner, and planning of engagement. When that occurs, it has proven to lead to positive outcomes and a reassurance of open mindedness and trust from the viewpoint of CBOs.

**Conclusion**

Community-based partnerships between universities and CBOs have long been steeped in inequality and power differentials. Centering the voices of nonprofits and CBOs as being essential stakeholders and knowledgebearers, and emphasizing working alongside each other's missions, can lead to healthier relationships between the two. While internal structures, communication, priorities, and community context can vary greatly from place to place and organization to organization, my hope is that by amplifying the voices of nonprofit professionals, higher education institutions will reevaluate their roles in creating empowering, healthier relationships with their fellow community partners.

There are various avenues that I see as potential options for further work on creating healthy and more equitable partner relationships in CSL. I hope that future research may be able to achieve a wider scope of interviews that the time constraints for this project could not allow. Additionally, this work was conducted at a small liberal arts college within the backdrop of a relatively tight-knit nonprofit community in the surrounding area. I would be interested to see how insights from other nonprofit professionals in different areas might affirm or differ from the insight presented here based on place and university relations, historical background, etc. In this same vein, there is a great amount of potential in analyzing differences in organizational partnerships between more robust, formalized institutions and grass roots community movements and support. Lastly, the often well-meaning and all-encompassing idea of the "surrounding community" is not monolithic, though at times it may be presented as such. I hope that further research addresses how historical inequities impact the presence or absence of partner relationships between parties.

Finally, a special thank you to those that offered their valuable time and knowledge to contribute to this paper. I deeply appreciate their faith in me to accurately portray their experiences and present them here so that we all may learn from them and improve.

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