



Georgia Tech

Center for Sustainable Communities
Research and Education

Principles for Engaging in Equitable Research Partnerships with Communities

Introduction

These Community-Engaged Research (CER) principles have been designed to foster open, honest, and trusting relationships between community groups and researchers at Georgia Tech. They are specifically intended to guide partnerships between Georgia Tech faculty, staff, and students and historically marginalized communities. The principles were developed over the course of 2024 by the Center for Sustainable Communities Research and Education (SCoRE), with input from [SCoRE's External Advisory Council](#) and faculty partners. Additionally, these CER principles operationalize [SCoRE's partnership principles](#), which broadly envision research and education efforts that create a more sustainable, just future, beginning at the local scale.

These principles draw on a broad array of principles and literature related to university-community collaborations. Importantly, they are grounded in principles developed by communities and used widely in community/environmental justice organizing across the country (indicated with an * in the bibliography). They also draw on a long history of Participatory Action Research (PAR), a research orientation that engages local residents and community leaders as experts who generate valid and crucial knowledge about their own communities and experiences. This contrasts with traditional approaches that have academics, municipalities, large NGOs, and corporations leading the research as Principal Investigators. As such, PAR pays attention to power dynamics within the research itself and often seeks to change inequitable systems, policies, and practices. PAR trains residents, from youth to adults, to be researchers so that they can study equity issues that they want to influence and ensure that benefits from research flow to the community. PAR has been shown to have numerous positive outcomes, such as empowering marginalized groups to create change, improving individual and collective efficacy, and bolstering academic engagement and achievement (see Fine and Ozer et al. in bibliography).

Oftentimes, communities are asked for their involvement after the topics, research questions, and methodologies are already chosen. However, CER projects are most successful and most likely to deliver mutually beneficial outcomes when community members are actively involved from the very beginning - in the research ideation phase. This framework is therefore organized to show the principles that should be applied in each step of the research process to ensure the development of research projects with shared power and visioning.

Principles

A. PREPARE TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS

1. Power Dynamics: Understand personal and institutional biases and power dynamics and actively consider how they impact your partnerships.
2. History: Acknowledge historical harms related to structural injustices and institutional relationships and advance solutions toward reparative justice.
3. Participatory Research: Get some training in a participatory research methodology (e.g. Participatory Action Research, Community-Based Participatory Research, Asset-Based Community Development).

Take 1 Step: Working with partners based on their assets - or strengths - is a much more respectful, and ultimately successful, way to collaborate than starting with problems. Learn a bit about asset-based community development from [this SLS teaching tool](#) and the resources linked at the end of the tool, or explore [The ABCD Institute website](#).

Relevant Case Studies: #1

B. IDENTIFY SOURCES OF FUNDING TO FUND YOUR PARTNERS EVERY STEP OF THE WAY

1. Fair Compensation: Compensate community partners for their time and expertise for all activities that you ask them to engage in (e.g., guest speaking, hosting a site visit, advising a student team, contributing to proposals, etc.). They should not be the only people at the table or in the room who are not receiving pay or credit for their work.
2. Funding: Identify sources of funding to use to pay community partners to engage with you, from community partnership offices, internal and external grant opportunities, your own unit, etc. Whenever possible, extend this practice by sharing it with your collaborators at other institutions, since most still do not compensate partners for their time and expertise.
3. Transparency: Openly discuss funding, be transparent about all aspects of the budget, and work to funnel as much funding as possible to community partners.

Take 1 Step: Review the [SCoRE Compensation Guidelines](#) and begin to explore sources of funding to use to compensate partners in your work, such as your school or unit or other units/programs related to your work (including internal sources such as an [Interdisciplinary Research Institute](#), Sustainability Next seed grants, the [Atlanta Global Research & Education Collaborative](#), etc. and external opportunities such as the [Drawdown Georgia Climate Solutions and Equity Grant](#)).

Relevant Case Studies: #2, #8

C. BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS

1. Trust: Build long-term, mutually respectful relationships with community partners; show up for each other to build trust, meet people, and see where things lead. Be an octopus: grow your tentacles.
2. Learning Mindset: Work *with* community partners, not *for* them; be humble and learn from partners as experts and innovators.

3. *Speak Up*: Speak up for community representatives; advocate for them to be present and heard in spaces where they are either absent or marginalized.

Take 1 Step: See what this looks like outside a purely research context. Learn from your colleagues who teach with community partners and get acquainted with [strong examples](#) of long-term, mutually beneficial relationships.

Relevant Case Studies: #2, #3, #4, #5, #6, #7, #10

D. EXPLORE POTENTIAL COLLABORATIONS

1. *Asset-Based Approach*: Start with community culture, assets, and goals rather than problems, and center the voices of people and groups who are marginalized within communities.
2. *Mutuality*: Listen to each other, come up with ideas together that build on mutual areas of interest and expertise - and then start planning.
3. *Balance Fundraising and Work*: Be judicious about chasing the money; choose carefully which funding opportunities to pursue, taking into consideration multiple factors (e.g., timing, funding available to pay partners to engage in proposal development, team well-being, amount of overhead, etc.).

Take 1 Step: Co-develop values and partnership principles that will guide your work: consider how often to meet, how decisions will be made, and how conflict will be handled. See [this research partnership checklist](#) from the University of Minnesota for ideas on how to start the conversation, and consider reflection questions about building relationships in [this tool](#) for community impact statements.

Relevant Case Studies: #8, #9

E. PLAN A PROJECT TOGETHER

1. *Equitable Governance*: Propose equitable governance structures that position community partners as decision-makers (e.g., co-Principle Investigators, Senior Personnel).
2. *Sustainable Outcomes*: Design project outcomes that will continue to support the community's vision for the future after the project ends.
3. *Accountability*: Co-create measures of success and accountability systems to ensure those outcomes deliver lasting community benefits.

Take 1 Step: Download SCoRE's [Collaboration Agreement and Scope of Work Template](#) to get a sense of the types of issues you will want to discuss and agree upon with partners as you begin to plan a project together.

Relevant Case Studies: #4, #8, #11

F. EXECUTE A PROJECT TOGETHER

1. *Formative Evaluation*: Implement a formative evaluation process: solicit input from community leaders and residents, assess data on a regular basis, and make project adjustments as needed.
2. *Precautionary Principle*: Apply the precautionary principle: continually assess potential harms and opportunities for risk mitigation to decide if or how a project should move forward.
3. *Capacity Building*: Provide technical assistance, technology, and infrastructure which should ultimately strengthen community relationships and power. Prioritize community preferences regarding the use and ownership of all data, tools, and resources.

Take 1 Step: Read about [community-based evaluation methods](#) and think creatively with partners about how you can incorporate some of these more qualitative evaluations into your iterative impact assessment for the project.

Relevant Case Studies: #4, #5, #11, #12

G. SUSTAIN YOUR PARTNERSHIPS

1. *Sustained Relationships*: Continue to show up: responsibilities and relationships should not end just because a project does. Maintain communication and connection to partners in between projects and funding cycles so as to build long-term, trusting relationships.
2. *Resourcefulness*: Once a proposal has been submitted - and also if a proposal is not funded - identify ways to work together to advance some of the project goals. What can you do now, without funding? What might you be able to do with a small amount of funding? What other funding opportunities might you be able to pursue?
3. *Internal Support*: Identify partner and project support from your own institution and networks (e.g., student assistants/interns, internal funding calls, other faculty or staff, event/meeting space, etc.).

Take 1 Step: Stay in touch with your partners through a shared [network](#), building on ongoing activities that advance your goals and theirs, beyond the timeline of a single proposal.

Relevant Case Studies: #5, #6, #13, #14

Case Studies

[The brief case studies included in this table](#) illustrate the practical application of the CER principles across various contexts. Each case study highlights how one or more of these principles can be effectively implemented to foster collaboration and achieve shared goals within diverse partnerships. The table organizes the case studies by the principles they illustrate. It serves as a summary and provides links to each case study report for further exploration.

Putting the Principles into Action

Principles are only meaningful if they're used. To put them into action in your own work, we recommend following these steps:

- 1) On your own - prepare to work with partners, especially if you are new to community-engaged research:
 - a) Review each principle and identify a few that you want to learn more about
 - b) Follow the Take 1 Step guidance for these principles
 - c) Review the Case Studies associated with those principles
 - d) Review the Bibliography and read a few of the resources that peak your curiosity
- 2) When you are exploring a collaboration with community partners - together with your partners:
 - a) Review the [Collaboration Agreement and Scope of Work Template](#).
 - b) Tailor these to your styles and needs and then complete them together to establish an open, honest, and transparent collaboration process and shared project goals. Note that these documents include a section on discussing and operationalizing the Community-Engaged Research Principles.

Importantly - recognize that you can only do what you can do. It would be virtually impossible for faculty and partners to deeply and authentically understand and operationalize every one of the principles above. So don't be overwhelmed! Rather, think of this as a journey and just keep moving forward, one step at a time.

Need Help?

Want some additional guidance or support? Contact Nicole Kennard, Assistant Director of Community-engaged Research in BBISS (kennard3@gatech.edu), or Ruthie Yow, Associate Director of SCoRE (ryow6@gatech.edu).

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**Indicates principles developed by communities and used widely in community/environmental justice organizing across the country. We recommend that faculty review these principles to gain a better understanding of community-based priorities regarding collaborative research.*