



Case Study #2

# Building on long-lived partnerships to develop a collaborative learning ecosystem

## IDENTIFY SOURCES OF FUNDING TO FUND YOUR PARTNERS EVERY STEP OF THE WAY & BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS

***This case study focuses on fostering long-term community-academic partnerships to address environmental and climate justice issues, building on over a decade of collaboration and trust to co-develop equitable research and solutions that benefit both academic and community partners.***

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Since 2012, the Department of Geosciences at Georgia State University (GSU) has been an active partner with community-based organizations in the City of Atlanta to address issues surrounding environmental, social, and climate justice plaguing historically marginalized communities. The TIRED (Tire Initiative to Reduce and Eliminate Dumping) project, a collaborative effort between GSU and Environmental Community Action (ECO-Action), and other community organizations – where over 2,000 illegally dumped tires were located and removed from historically black neighborhoods- was just the beginning of an ongoing relationship between



Group photo of members of the CSAW Learning Ecosystem at a monthly Formative Friday event. At this event, community and grad fellows gave lightning talks related to their organizing experience or research interests.

academia and the community grounded in trust-building, commitment, and accountability. Since then, similar initiatives would continue to shape this relationship, eventually integrating an additional community partner, West Atlanta Watershed Alliance (WAWA), greatly expanding the community impact generated from these collaborations.

### LESSON LEARNED

“Don’t rush the trust-building process. Building the level of trust necessary to conduct meaningful and informed community-centered research takes time, often well past the duration of academic research grants. As mentioned above, CSAW is the result of more than a decade of ongoing partnerships (including several grants) surrounding environmental and climate justice in Atlanta. Trust-building can often be an undervalued aspect of these relationships for academic institutions who wish to engage with the community. Value and prioritize opportunities to build “community” and trust - this involves showing up. For example, CSAW formative Fridays are monthly meetings where members of the ecosystem get together for programming, and can range from informal, casual gatherings, to more structured and formalized planning events and activities. In either case, attendance in these events demonstrates commitment and dedication from those involved, and aids in building comfort and trust with one another.”

The Community-Soil-Air-Water (CSAW) Learning Ecosystem is the accumulation of these long-lasting, established partnerships, and aims to transform

geosciences both through practice and application by asking "who does geosciences" and "what geosciences does for communities". Thanks to funding and support from NSF-CTGC (Cultural Transformation in the Geoscience Community) Implementation grant, CSAW is, as of 2024, in its third year of implementation and encompasses a growing and diverse array of partners including faculty, students, and staff across four academic institutions, two community-based organizations, and community leaders with a long history of organizing around socio-environmental issues in the city. Ultimately, it is the goal of CSAW to answer the question "How can Geosciences learn from, contribute to, and find solutions with communities facing fundamental problems related to Earth systems?"

## Principles in Action

- » **B1 – 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.
- » **C1 – 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.

### LESSON LEARNED

Give community partners a platform to share their knowledge and experiences. This helps to elevate members of the community within the research program and can also translate to the commitment of academic partners in valuing their roles in the community and their contributions to help in making the research more inclusive.

The CSAW Learning Ecosystem is grounded in conducting informed and equitable community-based participatory research. This is done by valuing the roles of community leaders as experienced organizers and prioritizing these experiences through expectations to co-develop research projects informed by their knowledge and expertise, all to ensure research goals are aligned with community priorities. One way this value is communicated is by explicitly outlining the participation of community partners within the research grant. As such, community partners have weekly expectations pertinent to their roles in the ecosystem and are compensated for their time and commitment to the program, similar to faculty and graduate students. Along with being supported by grant funds, community partners are encouraged to participate in all facets of CSAW programming, this includes attending conferences, meetings, and workshops advertised throughout the ecosystem.

Building meaningful, long-term relationships requires both accountability and transparency. As such, a crucial programmatic element within CSAW includes the frequent (monthly to bi-monthly) gathering of members of the ecosystem through formal and informal events (see attached picture). In addition to openly discussing and building on programmatic elements related to the functioning of the ecosystem (e.g., co-developing a covenant/contract to guide our discussions and collectively establish our priorities), such events create space for members to spend time in each other's company, thereby growing in both familiarity and comfort, and in turn allowing for meaningful dialogue where members are allowed to be personal and vulnerable within these shared spaces. This also allows for transparency of the priorities between members from



Group photo of CSAW grad and community fellows at one of the primary research locations within the learning ecosystem, the Tift Site within the South River Watershed.

both academia and community, allows for members of the community to be integrated in all stages of the research and development process, and helps to minimize the occurrence of extractionist research practices. Another important application of this principle that aids in our ability to continually foster long-term, respectful relationships is from the matriculation of students through GSU's Department of Geosciences (or other academic partners) who would later go on to work with our community-based partners after graduation. For example, Darryl Haddock, WAWA's special projects

director, received his MS degree in GSU's Department of Geosciences under the advisement of CSAW co-PI. Dr. Katherine Hankins. Similarly, one of our current CSAW post-baccalaureate fellows was formerly a student of Dr. Na'Taki Osbourne Jelks, WAWA co-founder & executive director. Examples such as these are prevalent throughout the learning ecosystem and help emphasize the long-term commitment of its members in continuing to engage and collaborate with this community-centered work.

**Related Resources:**

- [CSAW Projects](#)
- [Principles of Community Engagement](#)
- [Building capacity for societally engaged climate science by transforming science training](#)