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Community-Engaged Research for Economic Justice: Reflections on Concepts and Practices

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Abstract: The growing practice of community-engaged research (CER) creates new opportunities for practitioners, both to affirm the importance of critical approaches to CER and to strengthen our work by reflecting on the concepts and practices of our research. We offer reflections on the meanings of "community," "engagement," and "research" in the context of on-the-ground community–university collaborations conducted by the Blum Center on Poverty, Social Enterprise, and Participatory Governance, a campus-based research center at the University of California, Santa Cruz. This account is provided in the spirit of sharing observations, insights, and lessons learned about CER, generated through its practice in a range of community-based research projects.

Keywords: community-engaged research; economic justice; inequality; food insecurity; housing insecurity; basic needs

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1. Introduction

Community-engaged research (CER) is receiving growing attention across a range of academic disciplines and institutions, reflected not only in edited volumes and special issues of academic journals, but also in new professional training opportunities (e.g., the American Political Science Association's annual Institute for Civically Engaged Research), expanding networks of CER scholars (e.g., the Urban Research Based Action Network, URBAN), and national conferences of researchers and practitioners (e.g., the All-In Conference at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in October 2022).

CER's meaning has been variously described and sometimes hotly debated within and across these different venues. Broadly understood, community-engaged scholarship involves "collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity." Among its purposes are "to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity" and "to address critical societal issues" (American Council on Education, Carnegie Classification 2023). Many practitioners go further to argue (correctly, we believe) for the importance of maintaining a critical approach to CER. At its core, this means collaborating with community partners in research that is animated by an understanding of—and commitment to challenge—systemic inequities rooted in unequal power relations and their local manifestations (McKay 2022; Fine and Torre 2019).

A critical approach also requires a stance that is consciously self-reflective, both in assessing the alignment between CER's purposes and its practices, and in drawing on direct experiences in community-engaged research to (re)consider its meanings and contributions. There may be value, in short, in reflecting back on the terms that have come to define this type of scholarship from the standpoint of the practice itself: What is the meaning of "community", "engagement", and "research" in the context of on-the-ground collaborations and projects? And how do these concepts and practices distinguish CER (in its many forms) from other types of research and scholarship?

Of course, there are many ways to approach these questions. The purpose of this paper is to offer reflections and insights from the vantage point of a small campus-based research center at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Sparked by a joint panel discussion at the 2022 All-In Conference on CER, these reflections are offered in the spirit of sharing observations, insights, and lessons learned, and to inform and advance the growing body of scholarship on and about CER generated through the practice and process of carrying it out.

UCSC's Blum Center on Poverty, Social Enterprise, and Participatory Governance works to alleviate poverty, reduce economic inequality, and advance economic justice through a program of community-engaged research that brings together local community partners and UCSC students and faculty. The vast majority of our projects are initiated by community organizations and campus units that request our research expertise and partnership. Student researchers assist with all aspects of the research process, from design to data collection and analysis.

The Blum Center partners with local nonprofit organizations and campus basic needs programs on projects addressing issues related to economic insecurity, including income, housing, and food insecurity. Currently, we are partnering with community organizations on seven active projects. With Habitat for Humanity Monterey Bay, we are (1) investigating the impacts of affordable homeownership on low-income families' multi-generational economic security, civic engagement, and well-being. We are (2) assessing a guaranteed income pilot program for low-income Latina farmworkers and survivors of domestic violence with Ventures and Monarch Family Services. With the Community Action Board of Santa Cruz County (CAB), we are (3) collaborating on a community needs assessment of low-income county residents, as well as (4) working on a separate in-depth study of the impact of COVID on undocumented individuals and families in the county. In partnership with the Homeless Garden Project, we are (5) producing a comprehensive manual that documents the operations and outcomes of their innovative transitional employment program for people experiencing homelessness so that their program can be adapted for use in other localities. Two other projects recently moved beyond the data collection phase; results and findings are now being compiled and analyzed. One is a project (6) examining and recommending actions to address the relationship between housing and food insecurity, in collaboration with the Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Cruz County. The other (7) investigates students' experiences with California's CalFresh food assistance program, including barriers to accessing the program and benefits of participation, conducted in partnership with UCSC's Basic Needs Programs. All projects involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of California at Santa Cruz, and participants gave consent as required to take part in the research.

Our varied experiences with these projects, among many others, have led us to appreciate the multiple, layered, and evolving meanings of *community*, *engagement*, and *research* in this work. We have seen that meanings of community are defined less by geographic boundaries than by shared experiences, for example, and that effective engagement may be guided by a fairly consistent set of principles, but varies in practice and procedure, depending on the priorities and capacities of community partners, researchers, participants, and other stakeholders. In this paper, we offer reflections on each of these three terms, based on our partnerships and experiences as community-engaged researchers. The overarching goal of our account is to help deepen the practice of CER by illustrating facets of community-engaged research through a critical lens, making connections with the broader literature, and highlighting how we have approached this work. As such, our focus is not on reporting findings from our research projects, but on analyzing how we conduct CER in the context of the larger purposes of this research practice.

2. Community

Who or what is the "community" in community-engaged research? A clear understanding of the specific socioeconomic and political context of a given community is critical to the success of CER projects, with community partners often bringing "insider" knowledge of local needs, assets, and adaptive strategies for responding to the changing dynamics of on-the-ground work (London et al. 2020). The Blum Center's research on poverty and economic justice is defined first and foremost by two local contexts that ground the concept of community. One is the economic and social terrain of Santa Cruz County; the other is the UCSC campus. Our work is informed by the particular experiences of economic insecurity and inequality in these communities; though locally grounded, the research addresses issues with national and international implications, and is scalable.

Santa Cruz County is located on the Central Coast of California on the Monterey Bay, an hour and a half south of San Francisco, and 45 min west of San Jose. It has just over 264,000 residents with two main population centers: the city of Santa Cruz (61,950) in the north of the county and the city of Watsonville (52,067) in the south (U.S. Census Bureau 2022).

The county as a whole has an extremely high cost of living. In 2022, the Santa Cruz–Watsonville Metropolitan Statistical Area was ranked as the second most expensive jurisdiction for housing in the country (National Low Income Housing Coalition 2022). The median value of owner-occupied housing units is USD 826,500, compared to USD 573,200 for California as a whole, and USD 244,900 for the United States. The median gross rent in the county is USD 1925, compared to USD 1698 for California and USD 1163 nationwide. The county has a large Latinx population, 34.2 percent compared to 18.9 percent in the U.S. Additionally, 32.9 percent report speaking a language other than English at home, compared to 21.7 percent nationally (U.S. Census Bureau 2022).

Deep disparities exist within the county, particularly between north and south. There are stark differences in demographic composition, educational attainment, and income levels. In Santa Cruz city, for example, 21.1 percent of residents are Latinx; 56.6 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher (compared to 35.3 percent in California and 33.7 percent nationwide); and the per capita income is USD 46,720. In Watsonville, 84.3 percent of residents are Latinx, 10.7 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher, and per capita income is USD 23,983, just over half what it is in Santa Cruz city (U.S. Census Bureau 2022). The county's official poverty rate is 10.6 percent (U.S. Census Bureau 2021); the poverty rate for Latinx residents is 57.1 percent higher than for White residents (U.S. Census Bureau 2022).

Economic inequities reflect the occupational distribution within the county, among other things. Located in the northern part of the county, the University of California is a major employer, as is the tourism industry. Some find employment in the technology sector, either locally, remotely, or by commuting to nearby Silicon Valley. At the same time, a sizable percentage of the county's population (more than twice the national level) works directly on a farm (California Employment Development Department 2023; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2023). Agricultural workers are concentrated on farms and orchards growing strawberries, apples, cauliflower, broccoli, artichokes, and fresh flowers in the area around Watsonville in South County, with a smaller number on ranches, farms, and vineyards scattered around the county, including on the North Coast near the town of Davenport (City of Watsonville 2023). Much of the agricultural sector comprises migrant workers, and many are undocumented immigrants (Migration Policy Institute 2023).

If the economic and social realities of the Santa Cruz community shape the Blum Center's CER work on economic justice, so too do the particular conditions of a second community, the UCSC campus. UCSC is a public university, part of the ten-campus University of California system. The student body comprises 17,502 undergraduate and 1976 graduate students. For academic year 2021–22, 30.5 percent self-identified as part of an "underrepresented group," including Hispanic/Latinx, African-American/Black, and/or American Indian/Alaskan Native (UCSC Institutional Research, Assessment, and Policy Studies (IRAPS) 2023). UCSC is designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution, a recognition

of the fact that more than a third of students (36 percent) identify as Latinx. The student body also includes a significant percentage of students whose families face current economic hardships, or have experienced fewer opportunities historically. A full 29.4 percent are Pell grant recipients (including 62.7 percent of underrepresented students), meaning that their family's annual household income is below approximately USD 45,000. Additionally, 43 percent of undergraduates are first-generation students (including a majority, 55.5 percent, of those from underrepresented groups) (UCSC Institutional Research, Assessment, and Policy Studies (IRAPS) 2023).

The high cost of living in Santa Cruz County is a source of significant hardship for many UCSC students. In 2022, nearly half of undergraduate students (48 percent) reported experiencing food insecurity ("can't afford to eat balanced meals") at some point in the previous twelve months. Additionally, reports of food insecurity on our campus were particularly high among specific groups of students: 61 percent of first-generation students, 61 percent of Latinx students, 62 percent of Pell grant recipients, and 64 percent of African-American students. All told, UCSC students reported the third highest level of food insecurity across the UC system (only UC Riverside, 50 percent, and UC Merced, 59 percent, were higher) (University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES) 2022). By comparison, some 29 percent of students at four-year institutions nationwide report experiencing food insecurity (The Hope Center, Temple University 2021). In addition, more than 6 in 10 UCSC students (63 percent) reported worrying that they would not be able to afford the costs of their housing, the second highest percentage of students reporting those worries in the UC system. Furthermore, more than 1 in 10 (11 percent) reported they have lacked a safe, regular place to sleep at some point over the previous 12 months (University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES) 2022).

"Community" in Blum's work is thus defined in fundamental ways by the specific local contexts of our county and campus. Our projects are aimed at developing a deeper understanding of the scope, impact, and sources of the economic insecurity and inequities experienced by county residents and UCSC students, and at providing research that can be used to advocate for resources to address these issues. Yet for us, as for many CER practitioners, community is also an *active* concept. Dictionary definitions may root "community" in the fact of holding something "in common" (geography, demography, interests), but cultural scholars go further, to locate "community" equally in the direct social relationships and interactions through which its constituent members create common purposes (Williams 1985). It is this more active sense that animates the claim that effective community-engaged scholarship "insists that communities are sites of knowledge and cultural production as well as spaces whose meanings derive from the lived experiences of the inhabitants as they engage in acts of placemaking" (Modern Language Association 2022, p. 5).

From the standpoint of critical CER, any conception of community is limited (or even misleading) without paying attention to embedded hierarchies and inequities, and to community-led struggles to challenge them. Community-based collaborations between university researchers and community partners therefore aim not just to develop "knowledge in support of the public good," but more specifically, knowledge that "explicitly seeks to dismantle structural inequity and build a more just democracy" (Gordon da Cruz 2018, p. 162; Dobbs et al. 2021).

What does this mean, concretely and in practice? For the Blum Center, the communities we engage with are at once affected by shared conditions and circumstances, and active in shaping an understanding of and response to those circumstances. This richer conception of community—rooted in the dual contexts of our campus and county, and in the agendas and actions of community members themselves—informs our work in three ways.

First, it informs our partnerships. In our research within Santa Cruz County, we partner with organizations that are in and of these communities: they are not only committed to addressing local economic needs and inequities, but are also active and trusted leaders in shaping the character and direction of their communities. They become our guides to the communities they know well and whose confidence they have earned, often through

decades of work in the community. In our research on student basic needs in our campus community, our guides are the students themselves, as well as campus programs that have served them over time.

Second, it informs our projects, which arise directly out of the conditions and circumstances of these communities and the strategic response of our partners. In contrast to "typical academic research that looks to the canon of scholarship to define social problems worthy of analysis" (Gordon da Cruz 2018, p. 155), our research questions emerge out of very specific interstices and interactions between these local community needs. How does the crisis of affordable housing on the Central Coast affect the experience of food insecurity among farmworkers? How does stigma—on a campus with students from varying economic backgrounds—affect low-income students' willingness to seek and use CalFresh (California's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program)? The primary aim of our research projects—in line with the framework for conducting effective community-based participatory research identified by Jonathan London et al. (2020)—is to meet community needs and interests, as defined in and by the communities themselves.

Particular and fine-grained meanings of community often arise within the context of the Blum Center's partnerships and projects. Some of our work focuses on the experiences of low-income residents across the county. Many projects focus on specific segments of the community who share a set of experiences, by addressing a particular population or issue. Our current project assessing a guaranteed income initiative, for example, focuses in depth and in detail on communities served by two nonprofit organizations; Ventures works with rural low-income Latinx women and families, including farmworkers, on the Central Coast, and Monarch Family Services works with survivors of domestic violence and their families. In this project, it is the particular experiences and circumstances of these groups of women that determine the boundaries and meaning of "community." And because our projects are above all shaped by shared experiences and the response to them, our research does not strictly stop at the county line; more than one of our projects has crossed into neighboring Monterey or San Benito counties.

Finally, this locally grounded notion of community guides the process and pedagogy of our community-engaged research. Our engagement with both the students we work with as researchers and the community partners and members who drive that research is informed by the economic and social realities of both UCSC and Santa Cruz County, as described below.

3. Engagement

"Engagement" is a studiously vague term: it conveys little about the nature, terms, or conditions of the interactions between researchers and the communities with which they work. Community engagement has been construed to encompass virtually any form of research, service, or teaching carried out within a community, from service learning to studies conducted by academic researchers with little or no generative role for community members (Gordon da Cruz 2018). CER scholars have taken steps to define the types of practices and terms of engagement that mark effective and ethical CER collaborations. They have affirmed, for example, that such scholarship "recognizes community partners as fellow creators of knowledge, not sites of extraction," and "requires incorporating the voices of community partners into project design at all stages (research questions, methods, execution, and analysis) and crediting their contributions" (Modern Language Association 2022, p. 5). Critically engaged scholars often call, more pointedly, for research that "radically challenges who is an expert, what counts as knowledge, and therefore by whom research questions and design should be crafted" (Fine and Torre 2019, p. 435). The research must center, not just incorporate, those in the community; there should be, in the words of Fine and Torre, "no research on us without us"(Fine and Torre 2019, p. 435). Moreover, effective community engagement "does not always *maximize* the extent of community involvement but instead *optimizes* that involvement based on the alignment between the collaborators' interests, capacities, and sociopolitical contexts," as London et al. observe (2020, p. 1189).

This is particularly important given significant power and resource disparities between academic institutions and low-income communities (London et al. 2020).

But what does this look like in practice? It is a compelling if daunting aspiration for practitioners. For a small research center such as the Blum Center, getting "engagement" right is a work in progress, with lessons learned one project at a time. Because our projects involve students, engagement for us is three-sided, requiring attention to our interactions (1) with community partners, (2) with the community members who participate in the research itself, and (3) with the students who assist with the research.

Engaging Community Partners and Members: Engagement with our community partners is typically initiated by the partners themselves, who reach out to us for research support to meet an organizational goal. Our engagement begins in each case with a conversation about the partner's purposes and priorities, in which we (as researchers) do more listening than speaking. Partners' organizational goals may be related to assessing local issues, identifying community assets, evaluating or strengthening the programs or services they provide, or reforming government policies or practices. One community partner wanted to know, for example, how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the lives of low-income families who are excluded from most government assistance programs because of their immigration status. Another partner organization wanted evidence-based information about whether and how their transitional employment program for homeless individuals affected those who complete the program months or years later. And a third partner wanted to understand and demonstrate the value of and need for guaranteed income policies for the poorest families in our community, particularly those headed by women.

The aim in these early meetings is to discern and clarify the partner's objectives, and then to consider with them the research options that might best meet those purposes. Blum researchers discuss with partners various research tools that might be used—including surveys, focus groups, interviews, and analysis of quantitative data—and the requirements, limitations, and advantages of each. In considering quantitative analysis, for example, we might explore its value in providing a clearer picture of the extent of food insecurity in the community, or the levels of participation in programs like CalFresh—but also its limitations in answering questions about the circumstances or life experiences that produced those hardships, or the barriers to program participation. We also discuss and weigh issues of scale and capacity, informed by the need to produce results on a timeline that makes the research useful for the partners' purposes. Equally important is understanding our partners' strengths, capacity, and desired level of project engagement (London et al. 2020). The project's research questions and design emerge from these initial conversations.

Once a project is underway, effective engagement means close and regular contact with our partners to discuss problems or challenges in the research process, share preliminary findings, and make adjustments in the research plan as needed. In our current projects, such adjustments have included refining interview questions, recruiting additional participants, and revising project timelines. Further along in the projects, meetings with community partners focus on how the data will be analyzed, presented, and disseminated. In some cases, Blum researchers provide data and/or reports that partners use and distribute on their own. In many cases, we collaborate with partners in preparing (and sometimes co-presenting) the results of project findings in public forums organized by our partners.

Another critical site of engagement with the community is the interactions between our researchers and the individual community members who participate in the research itself. Our partners take the lead in this process by providing a trusted point of entry to the communities they serve, to ensure that participants understand that the information they are providing is intended to advance the organization's and community's goals. Community members' engagement may involve describing in detail their needs, priorities, or experiences on a survey or questionnaire, joining in-depth conversations on a specific issue among members of a particular community in a focus group or "listening circle," or participating in structured or semi-structured interviews conducted by Blum Center

researchers. Participants in interviews and focus groups are typically compensated for their time. Ethical research principles and protocols are followed to protect confidentiality and ensure that participants understand that they may decline to answer any specific question or end their participation at any time with no cost to them.

Throughout the research process, critical engagement demands that our researchers engage with community members as co-equal producers of knowledge, as experts on their own lives and the communities we are studying (Lopez et al. 2022). Because students are at the center of our community research teams, this has led us to adopt a detailed and deliberate process for training and engaging students.

Engaging Students: Students are involved in virtually all of the Blum Center's community-engaged research. It is an example of what Miriam Greenberg, Rebecca London, and Steve McKay call Community-Initiated Student-Engaged Research (CISER) (Greenberg et al. 2020). In our case, students are based in a research center rather than a classroom setting or honors program (Santana et al. 2022). A small number of the Blum Center's projects are carried out primarily by graduate students with advanced research and writing skills, faculty members, and community partners. One graduate student researcher refined and calculated an innovative "food insecurity index" to measure food insecurity in the county, in collaboration with our county food bank (Amaral and Bullock 2019, 2021; Amaral et al. 2022a; 2022b). The index estimates county-wide "missed meals" by calculating the gap between meals purchased and total meals required. Another graduate student is in the process of drafting a manual on the methods and outcomes of the Homeless Garden Project, described above. The manual will provide practical information about best practices for developing a transitional employment program for people experiencing homelessness. The majority of our projects, however, are conducted with teams of trained undergraduates—ranging in size from three to ten students each—facilitated by experienced graduate student researchers alongside faculty members.

The steps involved in developing effective community-engaged student research teams begin with the recruitment and selection process. A majority of our student researchers, like much of the campus community, are Latinx, first-generation, and/or on financial aid; many have had few opportunities to engage in research due to financial constraints. These students have the capacity to bring to our research what T.J. Yosso calls "community cultural wealth"—distinct forms of cultural capital (aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital) that students of color bring to the classroom from their communities and homes (Yosso 2005, pp. 70, 77–81). Our experience shows that these assets are equally valuable outside of the classroom, in our research in and with low-income communities of color. Our experience also confirms that for students with marginalized and minoritized backgrounds (including undocumented immigration status), this work provides "one of the rare instances where students are encouraged to see themselves and their lived experience as valuable knowledge" (Syeed et al. 2022, p. 5).

In selecting student researchers, we seek out and prioritize a close alignment between the substantive focus of the research project, study participants, and the interests, concerns, and lived experiences of students. Applications for these paid positions as research assistants do not ask students for their GPAs or academic transcripts. They are asked to describe their skills and capacities, and any life and/or work experiences that they believe might prepare them for the positions. This helps us to evaluate their capacity to understand and interpret the experiences of community participants. Student applicants have detailed, for example, the ways their past experiences with homelessness or hunger, or their current experiences as undocumented students or full-time working students, drew them to the research. Invariably, their knowledge and experiences (and often language skills) deepen their understanding and insight as researchers on our projects. The lived experiences our students share with community members are often important in fostering trusting relationships in the research. Given long histories of exclusion, surveillance, and stigmatization, low-income community members are unlikely to convey their experiences

honestly or fully if they do not trust or feel a sense of commitment from the researchers they are speaking with (Dodson and Schmalzbauer 2005).

The Blum Center builds our student research teams using a cohort model. Teams meet weekly, first for training and mentoring, and then to conduct the research. The process starts with a focus on providing substantive background on the issues and community partners involved in the project, as a foundation for the work. The students read, study, and comment on research reports, scholarly articles, and media coverage, as well as annual reports, videos, and websites of partner organizations. In many cases, we arrange for presentations by faculty and/or community partners on the substantive issues (housing, guaranteed income experiments, etc.) and/or the organization's strategy for addressing them. In some cases, students work in groups within their teams to develop short presentations for the rest of the team on particular subject areas. Students preparing to work on our current housing project, for example, divided up responsibilities for identifying resources and presenting to the entire team reports on state/federal housing policies and programs, the micro- and macro-impacts of affordable/unaffordable housing, and statistics and experiences related to housing insecurity and rent burden in Santa Cruz County. The aim of these "knowledge-shares" is not simply to inform the students of the relevant background material, but also to help them integrate their own ideas and experiences with existing scholarship and empirical data. The process is designed to help students begin to "think like researchers" about what we know and what we need to learn or demonstrate; about how to pose questions, and where to look for answers.

As they acquire a base of empirical knowledge on the relevant issues, students also learn basic research principles. Most of the Blum Center's projects involve "human subjects" research regulated by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB); student researchers are required to complete relevant multi-hour online trainings designed by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI), which convey the principles and appropriate practices of such research. Students also receive an introduction to research design and the principles of equitable research, with an emphasis on practices to respect the strengths and support the needs of community members, to monitor and challenge power differences, and to legitimize cultural knowledge and social change goals (Fassinger and Morrow 2013).

Students work together in their teams to develop specific skills relevant to the research they will conduct. One current research team, for example, is focused on translating, coding, and analyzing intake survey responses from clients of a community partner's emergency income assistance programs. The students' training for this task began with reviewing academic articles and an hour-long video lecture detailing the purposes and process of the type of coding and thematic analysis the students would be doing. They then practiced coding on segments of the data they would be analyzing, with review, refinement, and feedback from the graduate student team leader and Blum faculty. Teams working on our guaranteed income and housing projects, meanwhile, were conducting interviews with program participants, after receiving training in interviewing techniques and empathetic listening. These skills were developed through multiple rounds of practice, in which students interviewed each other using the protocols developed for community participants. The practice sessions culminated in mock interviews of their graduate student team leaders which were conducted and recorded over Zoom, allowing the team to review, critique, and learn from each other's interview experiences. Once the research phase began, undergraduate students were paired with graduate students to conduct interviews with community members.

Student research cohorts meet weekly to discuss where they are in their work, the trajectory of the project overall, and plans for the week(s) ahead. They also spend time reflecting not only on how the work is going (sharing tips and strategies with each other), but also on what they are encountering through their research. It can be difficult, for example, to hear detailed stories from community members about the economic hardships and sometimes painful circumstances or experiences that members of the community are living through, and some of those experiences resonate very personally for the students.

It is important for them to be able to share and discuss these reactions and thoughts with their cohort and graduate student team leader.

Throughout the process, finally, we seek opportunities for the students to engage directly with our community partners. This may include meetings with the partners early in the project, and occasional meetings with research teams during the research. These interactions build confidence on both sides: community partners develop a better understanding of who the students are and how they are conducting their research, and students develop confidence in their own capacities and contributions to the goals of the research and the partner organizations.

4. Research

How does the context of community engagement shape the character of research itself, and what is distinctive about the production of knowledge in this context? Calls for more socially relevant and engaged scholarship have long confronted debates over the merits of "pure" versus "applied" research. In arguing for more and better "public social science," Craig Calhoun, former President of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), called on scholars to finally abandon the dichotomy as arbitrary and distracting (ASA Task Force 2005, p. 7). By involving communities themselves in the production of knowledge, community-engaged scholarship poses a more fundamental challenge to the traditional boundaries of research. "CES is not simply 'applied research' where knowledge is generated within the college or university and applied externally to a community," C.A. Hurd writes. Rather, it "brings together academic knowledge and community-based knowledge to generate new knowledge and address social issues in communities" (Hurd 2022). Critical CER goes further to challenge and reconceive the very character of research conducted within communities. Rebecca London et al. remind us that "research is not an inherent social good"; it can reflect and reproduce multiple inequities within "the research, policy, and funding worlds," depending on how new knowledge is produced (London et al. 2022, p. 32).

But what does this mean in practice? What is distinctive about research conducted in CER projects? Our experiences point to two initial observations, about the *research process* and *research products*.

First, a core principle of effective engagement—elevating the voice and vision of community partners and members—transforms the research process in concrete ways. It means in practice that research methods are not derived solely through a focus on the research questions themselves and a determination of the most effective methods for addressing them. This is an important starting point, central to our initial engagement with community partners, as described earlier. Research methods in our projects, however, are also driven by the various imperatives of our partners—and more generally by the constraints and opportunities created by their organizational capacities, as well as the realities on the ground in the community where the research will be conducted.

These constraints can be wide-ranging and are often predictable. Community organizations frequently lack time, staff resources, and infrastructure. This may make it difficult to gather the level or quality of data desired or to conduct the number or type of interviews or focus groups that would be ideal to address their core research questions (London et al. 2022, pp. 30–31). Issues of capacity, or the scale and duration of research, may also change midstream, as partner organizations are forced to turn their attention and resources to other pressing work. Equally important, conditions in the community can pose constraints, such as language or cultural barriers to certain research methods, or limitations on the time that community members have available to participate in studies, due to their family or work obligations.

If constraints can be expected, opportunities are less predictable. Yet responding to them can be equally important in community-engaged research. One of the Blum Center's community partners, as described earlier, sought concrete data on the needs and conditions facing low-income undocumented residents in south Santa Cruz County, a

population on which there are little available data. When the organization launched a time-limited program of emergency financial assistance for this population during the COVID-19 pandemic, our partner sought our help in seizing the opportunity to anonymize and then analyze the data they had gathered through short surveys of hundreds of individuals in this community who had contacted the agency for emergency assistance; the data are now being used as the basis for a collaborative research project. Preliminary conclusions point to the multiple hardships and dearth of public resources available to undocumented families and individuals; they will enable our partner to develop and advocate for services targeted and appropriate to a profoundly underserved and often overlooked population in the county. Likewise, the two partners conducting a guaranteed income program seized the opportunity to go beyond gathering basic data on program results, to collaborate with us on a deeper, longitudinal study of how this pilot program affects participants' day-to-day decision making about work, family, time and money; their short- and long-term thinking and planning about their financial futures; and a range of measures of individual and family well-being. This ongoing study is expected to yield new insights regarding the impact of guaranteed income programs on farm-working and other low-income women.

Second, the Blum Center's community-engaged research also shapes the content and character of the research products generated by our projects. Community-engaged research, as Hurd says, strives "for impact beyond publication in specialized academic journals." Instead, CER "aims for the advancement and utilization of knowledge with societally relevant outcomes and therefore is inclusive of a range of products that have value and relevance to public audiences" (Hurd 2022).

In some cases, an academic article results from Blum's research, at times coauthored with community partners. This was the case for our analysis of Latinx mothers' use of alternative (i.e., "predatory") and mainstream financial services (e.g., Bullock et al. 2020). But it is the organizational and operational needs of our community partners that determine the final products produced by our teams. Research products range from the "food insecurity index" produced for the Second Harvest Food Bank mentioned earlier to the manual in progress with the Homeless Garden Project. One research team recently compiled initial survey results for the Community Action Board to present in a community-wide Town Hall. Blum Center students analyzed the quantitative data, produced charts, and identified representative quotes from open-ended survey questions, all of which were used in presentation slides for the community forum. Two other projects for partner organizations will lead to reports on the results of interviews conducted with participants. In most cases, the findings from our research are publicly disseminated, through public forums or written reports (see, for example, Community Action Board of Santa Cruz County 2019).

How, finally, do we measure the impact of this research? We ask two questions. First, did the research results reach the audience and meet the purposes articulated by our partners, in their effort to address concrete community needs? Success by this metric requires attention not just to the quality of information produced, but also to how it is disseminated and used as part of a strategy for change. Second (and less tangibly), did the research produce "new knowledge"? What do we know or understand now that we did not before? Typically, projects shed light or deepen understanding as a direct result of the engagement with community members. After analyzing surveys of 377 low-income residents, for example, we know not only how many survey participants faced income or housing insecurity in 2022, but also what the most common reasons were (from the role of unpredictable work schedules to caregiving obligations that limit work hours) and what the main challenges were that participants faced in obtaining government or community services (from lack of information to language barriers). Based on our focus groups and interviews with graduate and undergraduate students from 2018 to 2022, we know the impact of housing and food insecurity on student academic performance and well-being on our campus (Singh et al. 2020, 2022a, 2022b; Ryan et al. 2020; Hentschke and Bullock 2021). After coordinating focus groups with more than 100 Santa Cruz residents for a project with

the local food bank, we understand some of the specific and granular obstacles low-income community members confront in accessing available food assistance, particularly if they live in more remote areas of the county. And as we conduct interviews of low-income homeowners in an ongoing project, we are learning what owning a home means—in terms of security, stability, and intergenerational impacts—for low-income families.

In each case, these findings enable our partners to use the research to meet community needs by strengthening programs or services and/or advocating for policy or program changes.

5. Conclusions

The growing practice of community-engaged research creates new opportunities for practitioners, both to affirm the importance of a critical approach to CER and to strengthen the work itself by reflecting on the concepts and practices of our own projects as well as those of others. The vantage point that has been the source of these reflections on CER is also the primary limitation of this account: our experiences are drawn from one research center, and are therefore limited by our particular context, located within a public university in a midsize county in central California. The Blum Center's CER projects are also limited by particular institutional constraints, some shared by other academic research centers, some specific to our setting. These include funding constraints (we are supported by donor and grant funds), competing demands on the time of our research teams and faculty, and the turnover inherent in a CER model that relies on student researchers.

These limitations suggest promising avenues for further studies. The expanding field of CER would be enriched by additional analyses that examine and reflect comparatively on multiple CER projects that employ varying strategies of engagement and research, with different communities, and in different contexts. Comparisons across contexts might allow us to assess, for example, whether and how involvement in CER projects strengthens the capacity of community groups to engage in their own ongoing research, analysis, and strategic use of the knowledge they produce—whether on their own, or in an evolving partnership with campus-based researchers.

Our research at the Blum Center has shown us that a deeper and more deliberate grounding of our work in local communities can enrich our research on questions of economic insecurity and inequality by informing the partnerships we create, the research questions we take on, and our recognition of our partners' role as guides to their communities. The practice of critical engagement, when conducted consciously and consistently, can serve as the basis for remaking power dynamics at the heart of the process of knowledge production. And when joined to the strategic purposes of effective community partners, both the methods and results of research can be turned to equity-driven ends.

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