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Community Members' Interactions With UTK

How Can We Make It Better?

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About this Research

With funding from the 2019 ORE Engagement Seed Grant, Drs. Jon Shefner and Lisa East pursued a study of the engagement experiences that social change and community organizations have had with the University of Tennessee - Knoxville.

To better understand these experiences, we elected to use survey and interview methods with varied community members, all representing separate local to Knoxville organizations. The survey was fielded in the fall of 2019 and spring of 2020 and yielded 51 responses. We intended to follow up the survey with interviews, but that portion of data gathering was delayed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Concluding in September of 2020, we were able to conduct 18 interviews to complete the data gathering portion of this project.

Findings from both methods provided answers to our research questions, which focused both on the past experiences of organizational representatives as well as their aspirations for future collaborative work with UTK. This report details findings from both the survey and interviews and concludes with some best practices recommendations derived from both sections as well as wider literature and experiences on university-community collaboration.

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Survey Results

Organizational missions

The primary foci of the groups we reached out to included advocacy for economic and social justice, education, environmental issues, and concrete service delivery to marginalized populations. All fifty-one respondents said that their primary organization's mission statement was to advocate for economic and social justice for exploited, discriminated, and marginalized groups in society. Twenty-three out of the fifty-one (45.1%) respondents specifically used the word 'education' in their mission statement. An additional twenty three out of fifty-one (45.1%) respondents explicitly addressed economic change. Destruction to the environment and the unequal management of resources was a specific concern for a third of the respondents. The fourth most common theme in the mission statements of the respondents' primary organization was to provide concrete services to specific exploited, discriminated, and marginalized individuals.

Types of activity

Thirty-nine out of fifty-one (76.47%) respondents listed educating the public as the main tactic used to accomplish their primary organization's goals. Thirty-four out of fifty-one (66.67%) respondents said public education was best done through "public meetings," "workshops," and "conferences." Thirty-three out of fifty-one (64.71%) respondents noted "collaboration" with the "public" or "other groups" was the best way to enact the change described in their primary organization's mission.

Organizational needs

We were especially interested in respondents' perceptions regarding whether and how UTK could address their organizational needs. Respondents suggested they desired more collaboration with UTK. Respondents identified funding as a need, and thought UTK might aid with grantwriting. They additionally identified various kinds of unfulfilled educational and training needs as hindering their ability to accomplish their goals and limiting their primary organization's broader mission. Physical space to meet was also needed. Human resources were seen as especially important as this short answer response makes clear:

“The concept of collaborative partnerships is one of the best things that UTK can offer to the community and those local organizations. Most active organizations (that I am a part of) are held together by the glue of retired volunteer workers - many of whom are spread rather thin. Having a collaborative partnership provides these organizations with the information, advice, and strategic planning that they do not have the resources to perform (and quite frankly, may not know how to perform).”

”

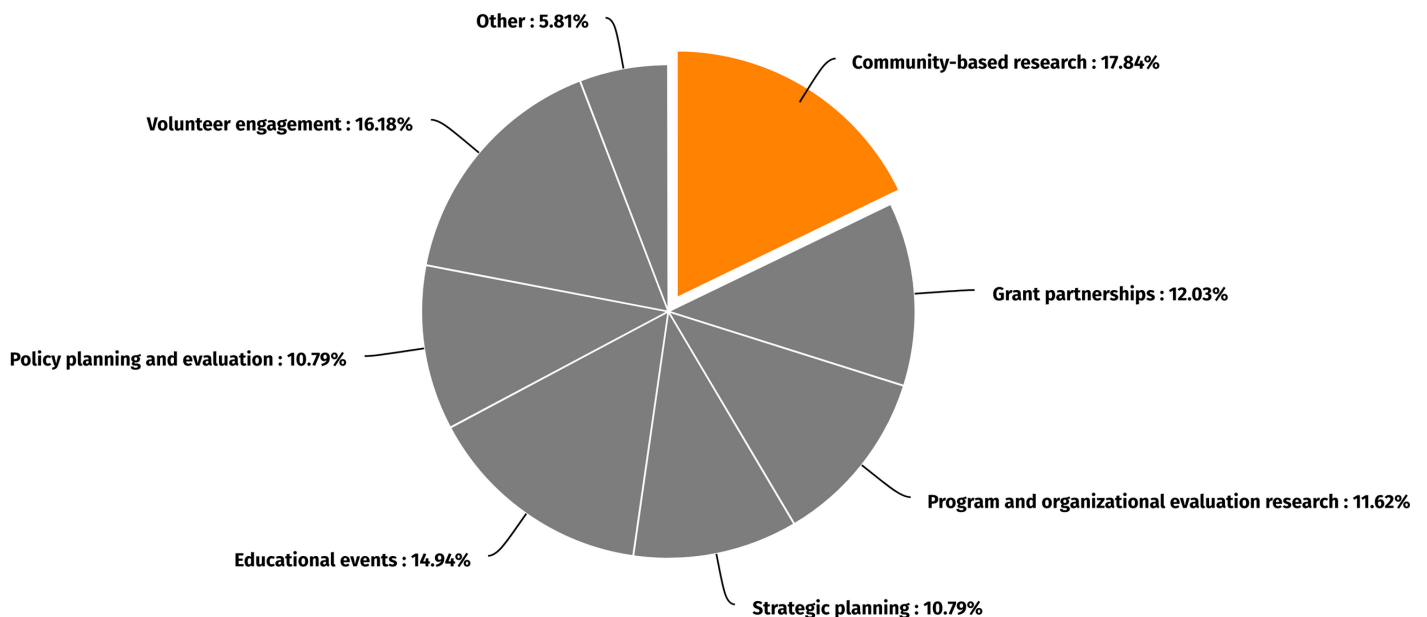
Collaboration with UTK

Despite the perceived attractiveness of working with UTK, **only about half of all respondents (45.31%) say they have collaborated with The University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK) on a project.** Of those who have collaborated on projects with UTK, almost half (48.8%) did not know how many times. There is some consistent collaboration between UTK and certain groups in the community, but a significant number of other groups are either excluded, or collaboration is inconsistent.

The pie graph below displays the types of collaborations with UTK that respondents feel would be most beneficial to their primary organizations. The evenness in the responses seems to indicate that these organizations are largely open to a variety of different partnerships with UTK. The most significant three answers were "community-based research," "volunteer engagement," and "educational events." These top three categories make up nearly half (48.96%) of all responses. However, if both "research" categories and both "planning" categories were combined, which mainly consist of similar methods of strategy and evaluation, this would make up over half of all responses (51.04%). Therefore, collaborative research partnerships and help with strategic organizational planning are the most beneficial way to support these organizations, according to the respondents.

What type of collaborative work with UT partners would be beneficial to your primary organization?

Figure 1



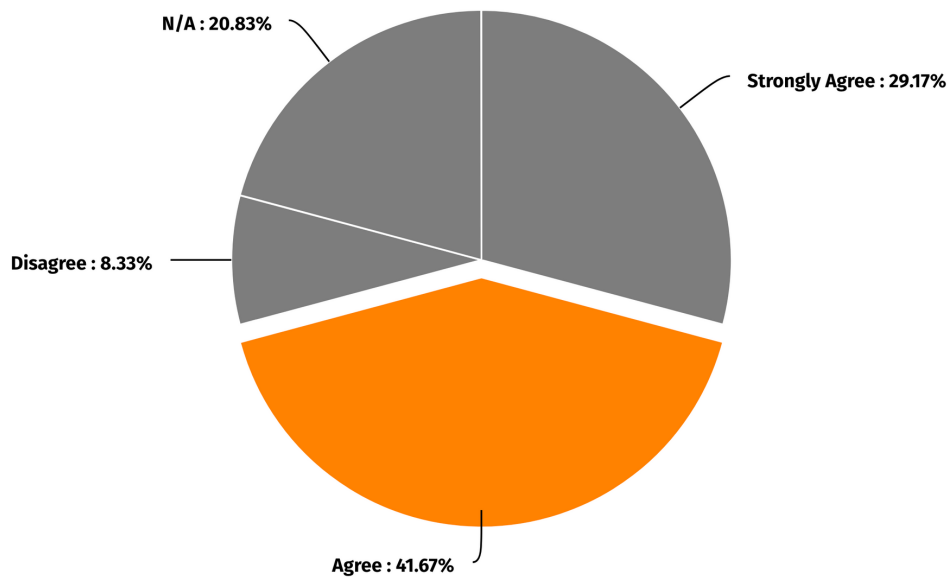
Many short answer responses specified the kinds of help they might receive through collaborations with UTK. The bulleted points below provide just some of those imaginative responses, many of which are already well-formulated research questions and ideas for collaborative work with UTK:

- Research on black poverty in Knoxville
- More interviewing members and understanding needs, more engagement with more employees, more collecting and distributing of members' life stories and challenges
- Support from organizations or persons with skills in energy policy
- Survey design, data organization, and analysis - Program and policy analysis - Strategic planning - Leadership development - Fundraising
- Maintaining a community-based arts space that could hold all arts mediums (dance, visual, theatre, music, etc) and be a resource for the community
- We have MANY research projects we do not have the capacity to carry out and some of which might be well-suited for a collaboration with university-based researchers
- Housing scarcity in Knoxville
- Data on the refugee community in Knoxville
- Train more people to be researchers and analysts. Such research can be very powerful in affecting public policy, but most such research is done at national or state levels, not community levels
- Research on barriers to other types of reproductive care as well as data on health-seeking behaviors'
- More info on energy burden in Tennessee, and which communities want more access to renewables. Would be helpful to know if various communities would participate in renewables job training if they had access
- What are best practices for harm reduction and outreach models, and how to best capture the data around efficacy and self esteem?
- How to better reach the community to get our message across, what impacts climate change will have on the community, especially the most vulnerable populations, if comprehensive climate action planning isn't undertaken soon
- Big data analysis and reporting on inequity issues. Research on the history of African Americans in Knoxville. Research on the current racist perspectives - Whiteness, colorblind ideology - and how it impacts public policy.

Most respondents who had worked with UTK (70%) agreed or strongly agreed that the project with UTK benefitted their organization, while only a small amount (8%) felt it did not (Figure 2). But, curiously, almost a quarter of the respondents (20%) listed "N/A" as their response. To complicate this finding further, only 25% of respondents agree they were approached by UTK, while 40% disagreed and 37% could not answer. This suggests that UTK may not be taking sufficient initiative to reach out to these community organizations for collaborative projects (Figure 3).

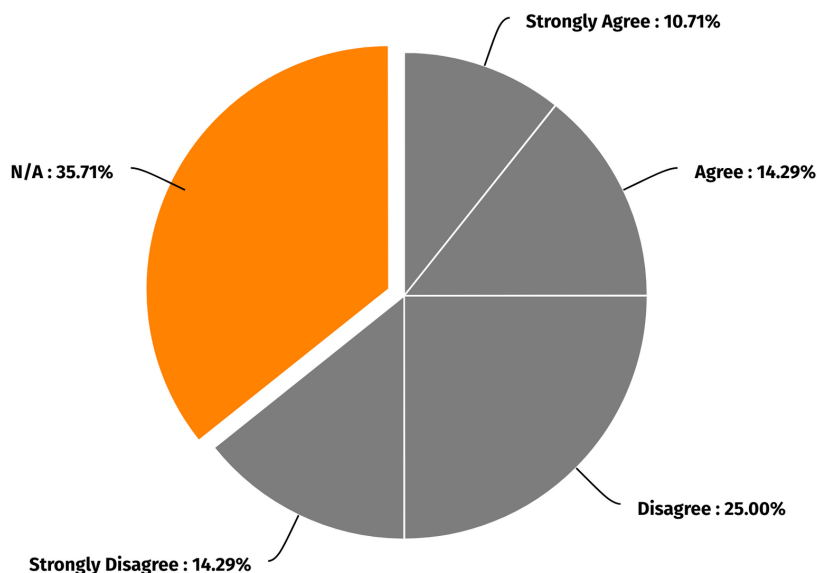
The project benefitted my organization as intended

Figure 2



My organization was approached by our UT partner for collaboration after the collaboration was designed

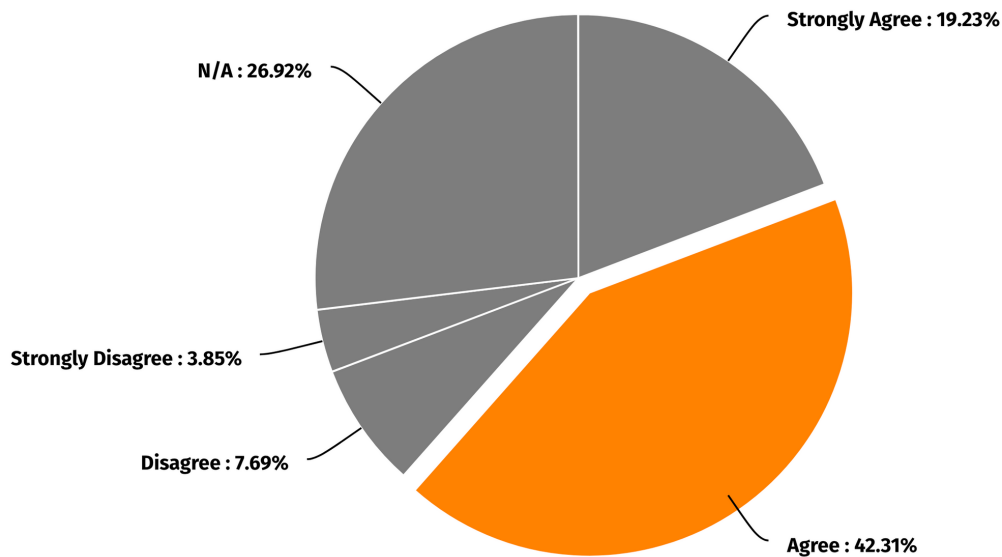
Figure 3



Although collaborative projects with UTK are viewed overall as positive experiences with 61% agreeing or strongly agreeing, while only 11% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing it was positive. However, again, 26% listed "N/A" as their response (Figure 4).

Projects with UT, overall, have been positive experiences for my organization

Figure 4



The short answer responses reflected the overall positive perception shown in survey questions regarding collaboration with UTK. There also appears to be an inconsistent method for how collaboration with UTK comes about, with organizational volunteers mostly reaching out to UTK, not UTK reaching out to community organizations. Also, the results of projects appear to be mixed to many respondents:

“ We generally enjoy our collaborations with UTK, but projects agreed upon with instructors often lack follow-through by students and require more work to keep going than the benefit they bring to our organization. ”

Other respondents focused on the time-commitment and component of their projects and the desire for longer term partnerships for collaboration to be effective.

“ Longer projects, relationships with students, projects that last more than a semester, the student gets around to understanding what we do and it's time for them to move on. ”

“ We rarely have enough time to build the relationship we need before UTK changes direction to something else. ”

Another respondent also felt the best way to serve the wider Knoxville better community was simply and succinctly:

“ Just do it. Long-term relationship. Stop doing the one and done models. ”

Short answer responses also saw insufficient follow through as a barrier to a successful collaboration:

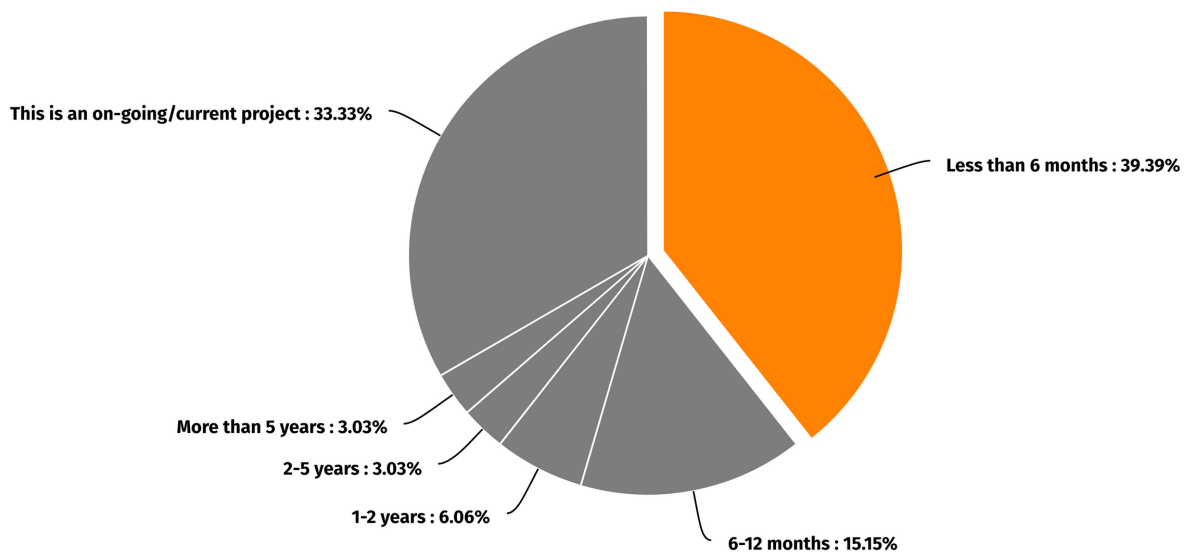
“ The projects always start out as a good idea and by the end, the projects many times take so much time and effort from our very overworked limited staff time that the benefit isn't as good as initially expected. ”

“ Often the burden of work is on us to keep up the relationship. We could better use UT resources if the projects were more autonomous. ”

This is confirmed by survey results which point out the relatively short timeframe of UTK-community collaborations. Nearly 40% of those respondents who had collaborated with UTK said their collaborations lasted 6 months or less, while only 12% say collaborative projects last longer than a year (Figure 5).

What was/is the duration of your most recent project with UT?

Figure 5



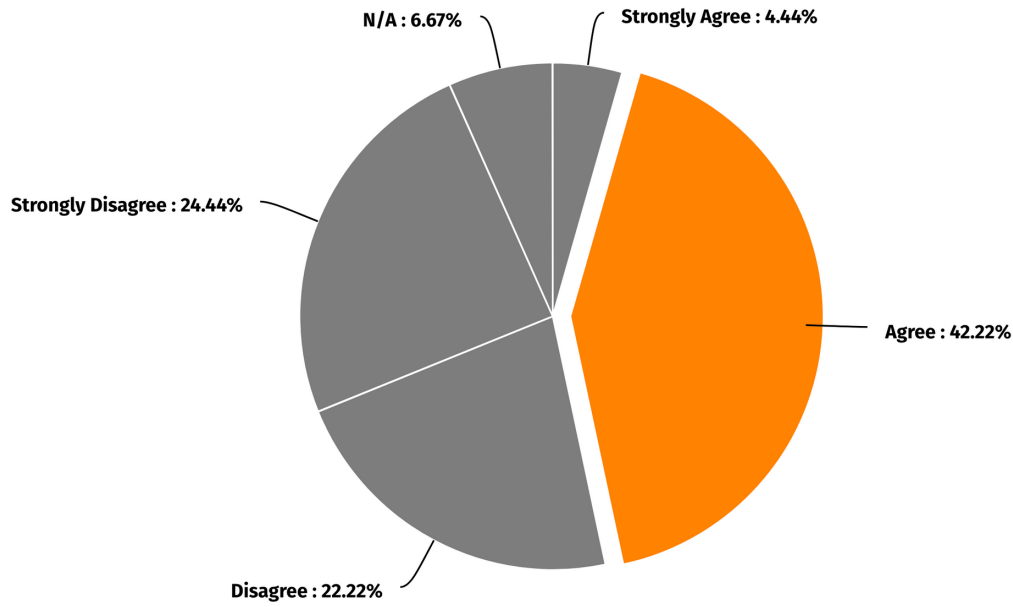
The often ambiguous result of the collaborated project could be partly why "N/A" has such a high percentage of all previous responses, even though the collaborated project is still seen as overall "positive" and "beneficial" to the organization. Moreover, the short time frame of the collaborative project could partly account for this finding as well.

Insufficient contact/knowledge

Despite the desire for collaboration, many (46%) community leaders responding said they don't know who to approach for collaborative projects (Figure 6).

My organization knows who to approach for my ideas for collaborative work with UT

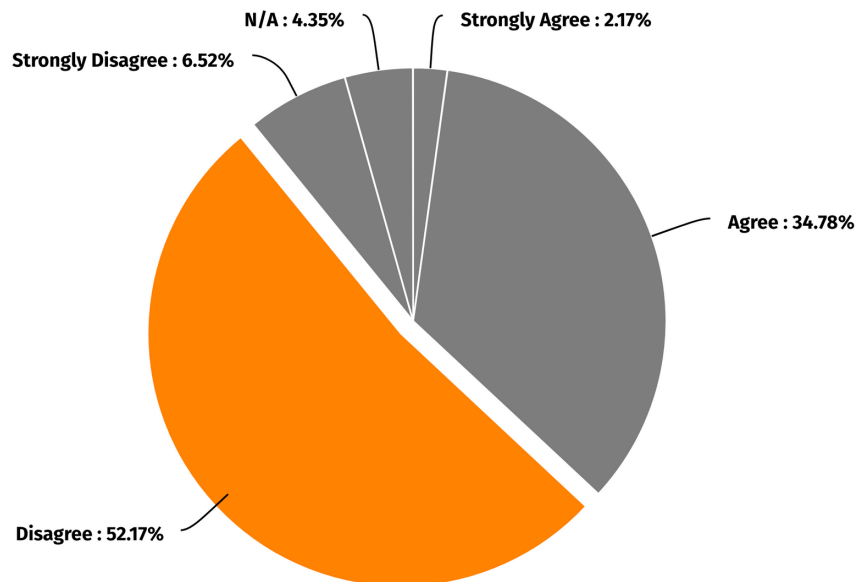
Figure 6



And nearly 60% (combining "Disagree and Strongly Disagree" responses) say they don't have time to search for those at UTK who may want to collaborate, which suggests the need for UTK to reach out with greater energy (Figure 7).

My organization has the time to search for future collaborative partnerships with UT

Figure 7



Despite the time crunch and lack of knowledge about UTK resources, **87% of respondents believe collaborating with UTK would be beneficial to their organization, and over 90% were interested in future collaborative work.** The fact that these organizations mentioned that they relied heavily on volunteer numbers suggests a further need for help from UTK. Short answer responses further demonstrated that a significant amount of the connections with UTK is in an unofficial capacity, involving mostly UTK students and/or previous and current employees who were already volunteering with the organization in their "free time". As one respondent explains,

"I am sure there are many people [at UTK] with great expertise who would benefit our work. The problem is connecting us to them. I wish I knew how to access them."

This is echoed by other respondents:

"I think the League's positions touch on so many policy areas that we do not know who to contact for help on every topic. The Office of Community Engagement and Outreach might be the first place I'd start when looking for student involvement, but I don't know how to reach the best faculty or other experts for each area of interest."

"I'm not sure how to work directly with UT! But, I think the foundation and community engagement effort should provide funding for local organizations. I also think that the university should encourage and incentivize its staff and faculty to participate in community organizations."

Space and Personnel

Respondents were overwhelmingly consistent in one specific way UTK could better support the needs of various community organizations and how UTK could better serve the wider Knoxville community. As simply stated by one respondent, **"Being able to use UT premises."** While many of the respondents did list more people (paid and unpaid), more funds, and more time as primary needs to better accomplish their organizations goals, the number of respondents that listed a need for "free" access to "space" was significant.

Short-answer responses also revealed frustration about the absence of a clearly designated place to collaborate with UTK in an official manner. This frustration was articulated in responses such as:

“ There does not seem like a centralized source to approach for a collaboration resource. We only have the resources we are already connected with. ”

“ UT could make it easier for us to work together. A single place to go to at the University to find partnerships would be helpful. ”

Respondents even suggested UT should designate "liaisons" meant to reach out to various organizations formally. But space is also linked to intention for respondents:

“ I think the University as an institution needs to be more intentional in its partnerships. It's great to have professors engaged or students passionate about the work the nonprofits in the community, but UT could make it easier for us to work together. A single place to go to at the University to find partnerships would be helpful. ”

Another respondent had many suggestions:

“ Allow area nonprofits to request free or reduced-cost meeting space (small or large) through some kind of reservation portal that is likely to already exist within UTK; Establish a liaison to reach out to area nonprofits with information on internships, volunteers, on-campus groups, university grants, etc.; Profile an area nonprofit every week or month to students somehow so they can connect with their community and hopefully call Knoxville their permanent home; free-tuition programs (or reduced graduate studies) for employees of nonprofits who want to learn but have no money to do so (!!!!!). ”

When community visitors do come to UTK, parking poses a problem. As one respondent states,

“ One of the main reasons we hesitate to host an event on campus is because of parking. :) The distance most people need to travel or walk and the lack of available low-cost or no-cost parking for events makes them inaccessible to many attendees. ”

How might UTK better serve the Knoxville community?

Short answer responses to how UTK could better serve the wider Knoxville community mainly focused on either educating the public on how to increase their political engagement or directing more of UTK's resources toward marginalized and low-income communities. One example:

“ Education on civic engagement generally - how to register to vote, how to get involved in local government, how the local government is set up (i.e. city vs. county). ”

Another respondent stated that:

“ UT needs to have resources that are more accessible to community organizations based in low income communities.” ”

Many respondents felt UTK needs to take more of an initiative to actively support and engage community organizations focused on issues of social justice in the wider Knoxville area. As one long term organizer commented:

“ A collaborative project should look at the needs of the community, the organized constituencies that address those needs (not just as service providers which tends to be how social justice often gets redefined), and then meet face-to-face to frame a common project that has a mutual benefit. ”

This could be accomplished in a number of ways, as the survey results demonstrate above, including research, funding, aid with grants, etc. Students were also seen as a resource: "Using the community for student projects. In other words, giving students the opportunity to learn and serve at the same time." "Students could benefit from working on practical projects with "real live" people rather than theoretical projects."

Another extended comment bears highlighting:

“

UT is in a unique strong position as a central focal point of our region. Not only physically, being centrally located in the eastern region of the state, but culturally, economically, and educationally. UT could use this in being more present and working with community groups throughout the region, especially those that reach out into our many rural counties that are impoverished and lack many resources. In a way to educate and empower communities across the region to take control of their own circumstances.

Back in 2013 there was a community forum put on called "Let's Grow Knoxville's Green Economy" that I attended. I thought it was a great success and still have a copy of the report that came from it. More than that, however, was how it connected different community groups in the area. One in particular that was there was a fledgling organization called SEED. This group was started by members of the community with the unique goal of creating positive work opportunities, green energy education, and work training for Knoxville's poorest, minority-heavy areas. Specifically for young people that are "high-risk" and routinely left behind by other organizations. Stan Johnson, the founding executive director, points to that forum as a key moment in their success because of the people he met and connections he made there.

More of this would be very beneficial.”

”

In general, the survey results demonstrate community organizations' and social change groups' interest and willingness to work with UTK in collaborative ways.

However, some respondents were consistently critical about the perceived role of UTK in the community:

“*There is a perception that UT is aloof and transactional in its dealings with the community, the long public fight to take over property from private citizens who didn't want to sell looms large, as are very cozy relationships with big money interests. Increasing collaboration on various positive projects can be vital in this fight, by working with, and being a part of the community we live in. Such projects can go much further in showing the worth and importance of the work of the social sciences, humanities, and other areas that don't generate huge dollars.*”

“*Too often I have seen campus-defined research seeking community involvement after the priorities were already defined.*”

“*Academic research is valuable; expertise is valuable; I think often academics worry too much about being too pushy in communities. As long as research or expertise isn't used as a weapon it can be so helpful to just have ideas put out there in accessible ways. Our campaigns move faster and need more immediate assistance than peer review can provide, so find ways to contribute that don't rely on that. We don't need ideas to be absolutely perfect or to have survived 7 layers of criticism. We also don't want *even more meetings.* Come to our meetings and spaces and bring your ideas. Help develop others' ideas, too. Participate and see what comes of it! Which the people writing this survey already do :) But that's my soapbox on many of the hand-wringing well-meaning academics I encounter throughout my work.*”

Interview Results

We begin this section with an extended, but very eloquent comment from a community organizer who has worked with marginalized communities in Knoxville for over 45 years:

“

If on one occasion, UT would throw its weight behind urban renewal and the problems in the inner city in Knoxville, not (even) a whole year, just (like the effort made for) one (football) game. If they throw the whole weight behind one game, like it's done, you know, behind the needs in the community in terms of what we just talked about. Then there would be an avalanche of change.”

We should be at a juncture now with all this money and intelligence and all the rest that we should be helping each other... that's what I'm saying more than anything else. Is that the University of Tennessee should have this open door policy, where the people in it, aren't people who say you can't do that. It's (instead), how can we do it? You know? And if you get to a point where you have to modify it, then you got it. ... And I think to see that, you know, and this may be just grandiose to a certain degree, but see everybody (and) how they benefit in it. You know, how UT seeing how it benefits. It's not like a handout. It's not charity. It's not this underserved community always coming in begging.

No, it's just people haven't had opportunities to connect with other people who can make things happen.”

”

Respondents who were interviewed were often more openly critical of the university's role in the community. To be clear, it was almost entirely those who had already responded to the surveys who were interviewed, and they were not asked questions that were designed to lead only to criticism. It is often the case that interviews elicit a greater range and depth of responses; interviews are designed to do exactly that.

Below are just a few of the many important insights the interviews elicited. Respondents agreed to let their names be used, but we felt it more powerful to let the comments speak for themselves. Our sample selection process sought out more people of color as respondents than was represented in the survey. We organize this section by the questions we asked, summarizing comments at times, and using direct quotes where noted.

What are the biggest problems in Knoxville?

Responses largely addressed issues of inequality. Specific issues identified include: **homelessness and lack of affordable housing, lack of funding to social services, poor access to healthcare, low wages, the bail system, and the high rate of poverty.** Many respondents addressed **the racialized manifestations of these inequalities**, and how they especially hurt people of color:

“The culture of Knoxville has been and continues to be one of not being supportive of primarily African American organizations and African American well-being.”

“I think in serving the immigrant population we see the barriers that seem to be put in place to not just integrating but celebrating that population and seeing the wealth and knowledge and, you know, resilience of that population, how it can bring to our region as a source of strength and not just seen as a threat or a burden on our local economy or on our local community structures and social structures... we have to fight a lot harder to look for opportunities for actually well-paying careers or jobs with benefits for our community. So making sure that people are employed, not just in those menial labor, but also seen as, you know, potential professionals in a lot of different industries.”

“ I also think financial wellbeing is really really big for us. How do we break the vicious cycle of poverty, how do we help break that in our community? Through homeownership, through business development, so yeah, those are some of the areas that I would add. ”

“ I'm just going to say the word racism that stems into the criminal justice system, housing, economics, education, health; it goes into all of those. ”

“ The social economic (situation) of the African American communities, communities of color. I think the statistics bear out that high poverty rate, low welfare rate, and that affects housing. It affects housing and is affected by housing and zoning. That affects education and is affected by education. That affects crime and is affected by crime. And it's not new. The other thing, and it's in the same type of area but different, is the way that communities are maintained, I would say. And that is not just gentrification, but it stems from what they call urban renewal of the Sixties. ”

Do you see UTK as an institution confronting or addressing these problems?

Many respondents simply did not see UTK playing a role in addressing the social problems they identified. We separated out the university as an institution from faculty and student participation, **which we return to later in the report.**

But as an institution, many of our respondents did not see the university active in the community in ways that addressed perceived problems and needs.

Do you see UTK as an institution confronting or addressing these problems?

“ I don't think it does as an institution. I think people at the university do, but as an institution, it doesn't throw its full weight behind it... Individuals, like the two of you, and other people that we know have, you know, thought about it, worked on, it, worked with nonprofits and that kind of thing, but the full weight of the university is not, is not come forward at this time. ”

“ I wouldn't say that UT is an institution that's leading in finding solutions to those problems per se... I've never thought of UT as like one of the partners at the table to solve problems. ”

“ My answer would be not a systematic way. ”

“ UT doesn't really do much in the community anyway in my opinion. Or at least not in my community. ”

“ As far as like UTK showing up in the community in these areas like that I am directly involved in. I don't really see it much. ”

“ I think it (the university) touches on it, but I think it definitely can be intentional, more impactful in every situation and in education, educating the people that come through the university... As a university, you can be intentional about making and being part of the systemic change and not being part of the systemic problem... I haven't been able to find that through the university here ”

Some respondents expressed more of a positive reflection on changes:

“ So we've got a lot of great tools. Um, uh, I'm not sure that we're all quite ready to use them yet. We'll see. I mean, people are getting in touch with each other more ”

Others reflected on their long history in Knoxville, and a point in which UTK was more intentional about working with community groups:

“ (In the past) there was an organization... called the Community Partnership Center CPC [1], and that organization was set up to assist community based organizations, not only in the African American community, but the community. And that's actually where I met Madeline Rogero because she was the first director of the CPC. It did help us in organizing and developing our recycling and public housing when we started that in 1989. And then other organizations I'm sure have benefited from that partnership center because of its mission was to provide those colleges to assist nonprofits... (But) it lost its energy. It may have been because it was funded I guess, through grants. And if the grants didn't continue and UT didn't make it a real important part of the University. Then quite naturally is going to fizzle out. But what the CPC center did was had a door open to come into. It was there to invite. It was an open door to bring people in to discuss these things we're talking about now. ”

Others reflected on how the University's actions had harmed it in the eyes of community members:

“ UT takes a lick in, or hit, in Mechanicsville for some advocates with the purchase of the Foundation building and the Professional Services building located there in Mechanicsville intersection of College Street and University. And part of that is not necessarily UT's fault... And they've been a good neighbor to us. They've tried to reach out to the community and those kinds of things, but what's lingering is that that was Title VI money, I believe, that redid College Homes... So the UT building, from my understanding, was that that building and the subsequent building that was built across the street next to Maynard School, they were supposed to be built for businesses. It was supposed to be like a business incubator. So the thought process was even if UT purchased the buildings, why could they not come in and put something in that would, you know, bless and build up the community? So, you know, what they did blessed UT and not blessed the Mechanicsville community. ”

[1] The CPC was founded by Fran Ansley, College of Law, and John Gaventa, Department of Sociology. We have interviewed Fran Ansley, and there is a great deal to be learned from that experience.

In general, and in contrast to the survey results, many of those interviewed did not see the university contributing to resolve the needs of the greater Knoxville community.

What organizational needs do you have, and how might working with the university resolve those needs?

As expected, the kinds of organizations we researched have a number of needs. Research and training topped those needs, followed by funding and finding funding, and space [2]. Volunteers and volunteer coordination was also emphasized. Respondents also highlighted their needs for more personnel, and how the legitimacy of UTK could contribute to their organizational efforts. That status of the university could serve to make connections across the state, to convene important conversations about community needs. Others focused on how UTK could also connect organizations to other universities. In addition to material resources, many respondents focused on the research needs of their organizations, and how that could be resolved in partnership with UTK. Certain respondents addressed specific expertise needed, including helping small businesses form and build, and addressing precise environmental questions.

Many expressed more general research needs. The research needed included answering the following questions:

“We need to address, how do we help our members in our community meet their basic needs of life, living wage, you know, having a living wage? How do we address making sure that families are healthy and vibrant? How do we make sure that our children are educated?”

“So our data and data management, research... But also technology now, you know, technology now is a major issue, just what we're doing right now... you know, just communicating to members, communicating to the general public.

“We definitely need the manpower for research. We need accessibility to resources, and support and, you know, obtaining and maintaining those resources, whether that's legal advice, equipment funding, but we do, we definitely need access and, support with resources.

[2] We don't devote much attention to space here given its prominence in the survey section earlier in this report

The weight of the university to play a role in legitimizing community needs was commonly mentioned, sometimes in forthright political language and sometimes less so:

“ I want to continue to see institutions that have that power just unabashedly stand up for justice issues (and against stigma associated with marginalized populations)... I would like to see the community as a whole better be able to have better conversations about these tough issues... we can't have a conversation about anything without having to talk about abortion because it is the thing that is most heavily stigmatized. You know, we can't talk about what pregnant people actually need or want or how to raise families because you have, you make us keep talking about abortion and defending it all the time. ”

One respondent brought many of these needs together in an extended comment:

“ It's always capacity because there's more work than there is bodies to hold the work, you know? So funding, it's always like a matter of funds and capacity. And the amplification, I think the more that things are amplified by just people, organizations, everyone in general, the more that we get the word out. What does it look like for UT to actually show up in some of these mutual aid spaces? Or providing courses about like actually being the space where people meet to learn these skills, these mutual aid skills, you know? Maybe it's even like UT hosting that conversation? Do you know, about what do we need to be doing in this moment? What are the community concerns? Maybe it is something about accessibility that, you know, UT can help with during these conversations. Like, you know, being a large platform, offering the services of the Zooms or like, you know, conferencing things for people to use. ”

What have your collaborations been like with UTK?

This question elicited, again, a fair amount of positive comments about specific interactions with certain faculty and departments. But much of the response was quite critical.

“ I hate working with UT... my experience has been terrible in probably seven projects I've worked with UT. I mean all sorts of departments and all different places, consistently I have felt that (my organization) has been used as a diversity token, as an experience for students to feel like they are getting a taste of something different, helping the university look like they have a reach in the community and a relationship in the community they do not have. And I have had terrible products from UT as far as reports, as far as communication... So I've come to the point where I no longer say yes to hardly any project with UT. And it's unfortunate because there's a lot of great work that could be done with UT. ”

This interviewee also commented on a sense of exploitation they felt from their interactions with the University:

“ I started keeping track of every single time either I was asked or someone in my organization was asked to speak at something come from UT. So I said, you know, I can't. Especially when they're in person, you spend an hour getting there, you park, you spend an hour, an hour and a half in the classroom, you get back, you've wasted, not wasted, you've spent 3 to 4 hours of work time doing something community, right? So I started asking for contribution... I remember (one Sociology faculty member) saying, you know, the knowledge that our community has value and we cannot take that for granted. So here I am working with marketing people, Haslam people, and we all know that their departments have way more money than your department does, we know this. And yet a couple of months ago, they wanted me at a conference. They had no diversity. So I asked them for \$300 - they wanted me there the entire day. They said no. They said we can't give you any, we can't give you any money because if we give you money, we're gonna have to give everybody else money. I said oh I'm so sorry, I can't be there, because I wasn't brave enough to tell them I can't do this for free. But I'm just really exhausted with UT. I'm just really really exhausted with being asked over and over and over again to give give give as a professional, as a Latina, as an organization, and really not getting too much commitment or benefit; it's not a reciprocal relationship, is what I feel. [3] ”

[3] This interviewee did comment that things were changing under the leadership of Tyvi Small.

This interviewee certainly voiced the most forthright and consistent criticism of their experiences with UTK. Although this criticism is notable in its language, it is not anomalous. Other experiences were also viewed critically. We excerpt one notably favorable comment:

“ We worked with UT Psychology Department. I think they had the grant and what they did was they reached out to pastors. The grant that they were working on was how to strengthen marriages and prevent divorces. They would sit down with the couple who were planning on getting married or a couple who was married... And it was very helpful because there's a great deal of time that people bring things into a marriage that a pastor is not equipped to address. And it may need more work than what we can offer. The other thing, quite honestly, is that a lot of Black folk just don't believe in therapy. And we're saying, hey we gotta break that wall down. ”

In discussing their organizational needs, several respondents noted potential collaborations that have yet to come to fruition. This comment, although pointed at a specific project, is consistent with others expressing collaborative hopes:

“ Also what I'm very interested in is that... when I visit most of these campuses, I don't see the depth of reality because recycling is a multibillion dollar business. They can help us formulate, the University of Tennessee, can formulate the strategy for what we want to do in the inner city. We actually want to use recycling in the inner city as a way to remediate poverty... So to have somebody at the University of Tennessee be assigned to work with us on making this happen based on the fact that it is truly a win-win situation for both the university, for the things that we talked about, about mitigating poverty and also having wealth management and those kinds of things (in poor communities). So, yeah, definitely UT could be a great assistance to our environmental aspirations and are environmental stewardship. ”

Some noted, in addition to our earlier question about UTK addressing Knoxville's problems, that UTK fails to reach out into the community:

*“Honestly some professors haven't even reached out to me. It's the students that reach out; professors don't make any contact. I've had a couple of professors that have made contact. They seemed very promising at the beginning, and at the end... *shrugs shoulders*.”*

“UT has just not been there, period... And as a platform to do that, they just haven't, it just hasn't been there.”

Others expressed misgivings working with UTK because of the culture of expertise:

“That's always, my biggest fear is that they come in and they remove agency for people, and they tell people how to, or they tell us how we should behave, how we should act, how we should represent. It's just like, nah, that's not conducive to us. That actually causes a lot more harm because then it's like, then we're operating in fear of losing this relationship.”

“And then I think there is this idea, Jon, that the university is doing us a favor, right? There's this overall idea that the university is out here saving all of our organizations. Improving our visibility in the community, adding capacity to us, you know, building systems so that when their intern leaves, everything is running smoothly. That doesn't happen, let's be realistic. And professors know that isn't happening. But the story we're telling is the university is out here giving all this value.”

“ I also think about like major organizations or like entities trying to take control. So it immediately gives me fear. Like, you know, it was just like, no, we still need autonomy.

So I would love like just to have that input, but also a fear is that whole, um, I know more than you. I feel like somebody's always gonna try and tell me how to do my job better than me, because they feel like they can... That's a fear... removing agency and autonomy from the organization. And then from the people... That's always, my biggest fear is that they come in and they remove agency for people, and they tell people how we should behave, how we should act, how we should represent.

”

Others articulated their misgivings based in both historical and recent racist events:

“ I can't imagine being a student on campus right now and not having my university, all of it, the whole university as a whole, not just individuals stand up for me and my right to be, to live free from violence.

”

“ Well, it's most of the culture all the time... It's is racial activities for sure. It's class. It's all the things that are ingrained in the society that tries to keep out the other, whatever the other may be. And so the university, they, you know, have all the books and all the knowledge and all the rest, and some (people) they believe evidently, and some they don't. It's just human interaction that can be transferred and transformed with us being just honest with each other, you know, really spending time to get to know each other and then not seeing each other in any kind of way as a threat. . . But, but yeah, those are the things that are barriers, you know, more than anything else.

”

Student participation with these community organizations came in for both praise and critique, and some suggestions:

“ Uh, we find some gems. My pause is we find some gems. So we find some outstanding students that shine who are - I've now employed, you know. And so they then become benefits to the organization, but that requires an investment of time with a whole lot of students that don't give back ”

“ We were just not as an organization prepared to fully utilize the intern as well as we would want to. The intern ended up doing a lot of administrative assistant type of work versus social work. And so one of the things that we said was is that as we look to utilize intern more, we need to be prepared, and maybe by UTK to say, okay this is how the intern program can work in making sure that we fully (use their skills). ”

“ Students need to take it down a notch... sometimes you got to help them learn, like this is a professional thing that you're doing. Like we need to communicate. And like you know, you have clear expectations, like where's the ball getting dropped? ”

“ So they feel like they can just voice whatever they want to voice and not realizing that the damage or hurt they may be causing. So, I'm not really quick to let students come into the meetings, but like to do like work on the outside of the meetings. That's okay. So I've learned that and then just, um, learning to put in a plan of follow through. ”

“ It doesn't make my job easier to have those students half the time, you know, or it helps some, but half the time it's a pain in the ass. But I also see it as part of my mission, it's going to help my community in the end if they have some context for what they're doing. ”

“ I've told every professor I worked with, there needs to be a code of ethics for students. Like, this is how you communicate with an organization; this is how you... I've had times where I have 6 different people sending me requests for 6 different things with no timeline, with no deadline... the big thing that I have, the biggest issue is that these students have passed with the most lame-ass projects that reflect none of what we've said or done; they don't get the scope of what we're doing. And they get a grade and they pass. I've never received the final report from, maybe one of the 6 projects. I've never been invited to the presentations in the classrooms to hear what they're saying. ”

These critiques are not meant to drown out the contributions, real and potential, that students can make. As one interviewee said:

“ I really value that experience for students and for young people, like getting to actually apply the things that, that they're learning in the classroom or seeing how things play out... and y'all being able to continue to connect them into additional learning opportunities where they're learning and feeling connected to the Knoxville community. I'm so grateful for that. ”

Despite criticism and suspicion voiced by community leaders, certain departments and schools were singled out as consistently working well with the community. These included the Colleges of Social Work and Law, and the Departments of Sociology and Psychology. And again, despite the criticisms voiced, many expressed hope and offered important suggestions when we asked them how they might envision a better working relationship with UTK as it works in community groups.

How might you envision a relationship with UTK that contributes to your organization?

When we asked how community members might envision a relationship with UTK that contributes to their organization, we had a flood of responses, ranging from creating a relationship that was more extensive over the lives of projects, to being able to tap into specific expertise, to including an evaluation component, to creating civic space through research and training. Embedded in all the comments is the need for any UTK participants to value the community, to spend the time sufficient to ask questions and not impose answers, and to make sure that expressions of community needs come from the community itself, and not be imposed out of an academic sense of expertise.

“ UT is richer of an experience for students because my organization exists. So I would like to be seen and respected as such. As an organization that’s adding value not only to the community, but is enriching the university’s ecosystem. ”

In addition to this basic and important starting point, interviewees offered many important insights:

“ It would be a holistic process where we work with each other from the beginning. It’s not something that, you know, we just pull y’all into. Because I believe in buy in, and you get buy in from the beginning, like when people are there from the jump, we sit down and we actually develop a plan together about what does this (issue) look like?... Whatever that collaborative collaboration is, it would be together from jump. It wouldn’t be something that we pull y’all in just to flank this certain portion. And then from that, it will just be like having the support and then just being really clear about what UT can and can’t do. ”

“

So, ground up, it would be, for faculty knowing about the organization. I think being able to offer credits. Having the space for our organizations to come in and educate the students, collaborate with the students, collaborate with faculty. If we have something we need to know, being able to go to this person in particular and say, this is a research need we have. And then being able to collaborate and come up with how we're gonna get those results...

So it would look like we would have a goal. So that would look like telling our goal what we want to know and then collaborating with whoever could get that information, whether that's a whole department or a certain class or whatever, enjoying being involved during that process. But also being able to check in, like, weekly or however often, but being part of that process, not just saying, 'Okay, this is what we want' and letting it go. Because during that process, they may learn some things that could have, that we could have more questions about or go a different direction and say, 'Hey, we need to make adjustments here'. Or, 'okay. We need to find something different'.

So, being a part of that process, having that data collected, having UT to be able to say we back these, this is a study that we did and it's backed by us. Because that holds weight. When you can say you a study done by the University of Tennessee, you know?

”

Others commented on their vision from the specific needs of their populations:

“*Having someone to help put it (data) in a format that we can understand and relate to (in housing and zoning commission actions. So having someone, whoever that expertise is, at UT, an urban planner or whoever that would be, to help us as advocates, to help us as a community to understand how is this (to be understood?)... So training, community training, how the systems work locally... And so having someone to study how the city made a decision or how the county made a decision, and what was the process. And quite frankly, how does the process benefit the people that it was supposed to benefit. . . . Who are they are they serving, who's looking and seeing, what is the population that they're serving? I think that's the other thing in terms of training is that how the system works and where do we plug into the system so we can be decision makers and not complain after decision is made. How do we get to the table. And I'm talking about prior to it being decided by the city council, county commissions, or school boards, you know. How we get on those planning committees? How do we get on those task forces? And when I say we, I mean the people because - and how do we influence them to have the meetings when people are available?*”

In addition to being a part of a process from the beginning, interviewers emphasized commitment:

“*But what is needed by busy people is commitment and showing up. Like, if you want to know what people are saying, I need you to come to this library at six o'clock and talk to other parents with me, you know? And having students that were willing to do that and having faculty to understand that that's the work and that's what it takes to actually do good research, you know?*”

That commitment might come from creating a stand-alone course, as one interviewee suggested [4]:

“ So I think my dream would be create a course, based around some community organizing, or organization or something where people can take a course for a semester because you're not going to get something done. You're not going to get something done in a few weeks, you know, for like an assignment. You know, I think like it goes beyond that, just like the assignment, giving an assignment to say, okay, for this, for your final, for the last month of class, for your final, you have to go and get involved with this. I think like a whole semester class or even a yearlong where you have to have like so many credits would really push people to be able to see what is going on in the community and actually be able to bring it into the classroom where kids get credit, where students get credit. It's one less stressor for them and it's accessible. And for them to be able to provide that privilege of higher education, of the resources that they have to put that back into this organization that they're helping with credit. ”

In addition to being a part of a process from the beginning, interviewees emphasized commitment:

“ I've seen a huge difference when working with classes, not individuals, if the professor needs to meet with the organization, I mean, ideally has a long-standing relationship with the organization, it's not just a one-time thing. But must, even if they have a long-standing organization, meet with leaders from the organization or whoever's gonna be directly responsible for coordinating the effort at the organization before the semester begins. So that the goals for the project are very clear and you both agree on them, both sides agree on them. It's not just the professor putting in place their goals, presenting it as a class project, and then week 3 or 4, getting in touch with the organization, and tell them this is the project we plan to do. Because that may or may not be something that we want done or can be needed or may have been done two semesters ago. The other big thing is because of that meeting with the professor, at least one ahead of the semester, you then have a face, I have a face of a professor who is responsible. I have a read on them. I know how to communicate with them, is it by email, is it by text, is it by telephone. Because if you're a professor in a class and you sent me one email and then you start sending me students. And then, you know, there's not really any accountability to the professor. I can work with the students, I can take care of your students, but the professor needs to be the one that's accountable. ”

[4] Some departments do have such stand alone classes.

That contact with the professor, however, is not sufficient, as one interviewee mentioned:

“*And I think there needs to be some sort of training with professors – good luck on this – about cultural sensitivity.*”

As important as a structure to carry through the work is a process devoted to evaluation:

“*There needs to be an evaluation for the group and the professor from the nonprofit that worked with them. And that can't go back to the professor. It has to go to the Diversity and Equity or whatever office or whoever you want it to go to. (About) communication, what was it like? Deliverables, what was it like? Overall professionalism, what was it like? What was the relationship with the professor? Did the professor contact you? All of that. I think a standard document for everyone that works with community organizations so you can measure apples to apples... So when I say improve it, it means that school needs to sit down and really evaluate how they're adding value to the community and how they're not being a burden on the community. Which is what they are right now in many cases. Honestly another thing that would be really really valuable is for – if you're going to work with a nonprofit, there should be a symbolic contribution to that organization – \$500. I'm not going to make it or break with \$500, Jon. I don't care. But that is saying we value you and your time in your community and the information you're providing.*”

In conclusion to this section, we feel one respondent makes the case for the need for UTK's presence more eloquently than we ever could:

“

I'm glad there's an effort being made by the university to be more community involved. I would just say maybe being more intentional about making the effort in the low income communities (is important)

... I was talking to a group of young men, aging from 18 to 31. And you know, I was just asking him, 'what would it take, you know, for you all not to be out here?' And overwhelmingly it was education and a decent paying job. These are men who have dreams.

It's just, it's a simple answer. It's a simple answer. And I don't know why we can't offer that... And it's going to take some years. My worry is that none of them get killed during that time. So whatever the university can do to help that situation would be priority over anything.

”

Best practices and suggestions: from Respondents and Research

The expert role is not simply an individual expression of attitudes, but also a structural relationship. Expertise is rooted in different status and class location... Some of the dangers of that perceived expertise include university assumptions that their institutional knowledge surpasses that of the community, even regarding community needs. This perception may lead universities to dominate problem-solving efforts, to prioritize university interests over those of the community, and to “treat the community as deficient”... University faculty and staff are defined by expertise based on educational experiences; expertise provides the foundation of our legitimacy in our research, teaching, and service activities. Further, the perception of expertise is reinforced by our organizational affiliations. University workers remain entrenched in relationships where they are the dominant actors – they teach students rather than learning with them, and they conduct research on subjects more often than collaborating with them

Cherry and Shefner 2004, 227

There is clear interest in creating and sustaining university-community relationships that are equitable and sustainable, with partnerships that are based on mutual respect and an understanding of what all partners can bring to the table. Knoxville itself has clear needs that could be addressed through university-community partnerships. While respondents expressed wariness of working with university partners, we believe that with the right resources, UTK can address both the needs identified throughout this report and elevate the university-community partnerships we establish in the future.

We end this report with some reflections from our respondents, research, and from our own perspectives about best practices for university-community engagement, immediate next steps that have been funded for Fall of 2020 and Spring of 2021, and on possibility of a physical space to strengthen and sustain partnerships in the Knoxville community.

Best Practices Recommendations

Themes on best practices began to emerge quickly through our research and are further reinforced through examining models for community-university engagement. We identify the following as best practices for community-university relationships.

Partnerships thrive on personal connections.

- The personal relationships that develop between university and organization probably have more impact on the continuation of a partnership than any other factor.

Widen knowledge of the university for the community, and of the community for the university.

- Create tools and relationship-building opportunities
- Channel resources to create explicit staff positions to manage, maintain, and grow community partnerships in Knoxville itself with underrepresented organizations.

Research must be done *with* the community, and not *to* it.

- Prioritize democratic participation in defining the problems to be studied, setting research priorities, and in determining the ends to which research results are to be used.
- Projects should emerge from conversations between principal actors from UTK and the community. The expertise of community members in identifying problems and suggesting resolutions must be valued at least as highly as the expertise of faculty members.
- Planning and visioning of the partnership dynamics and process should be as collaborative as possible which includes topic, work plan, schedule, outcomes, evaluation process, etc.

Time frames of commitments must be explicit.

- Consider making the rhythm of the work match the needs of the organizations, not semester long teaching considerations.

Approach working in community with a recognition of their knowledge, history, resourcefulness, and resiliency.

- Recognize that all research is political and has implications for power for both internal and external consumers of the research products.
- Confront unconscious assumptions and perspectives that may hinder the effectiveness of any collaborative work.
- Put university resources into cultural and community sensitivity trainings, with an emphasis on the history of Knoxville

Build in project accountability and evaluation of partnerships.

- This reinforces the need for research rigor and as much objectivity in research process and reporting as possible.
- Pay attention to translation processes - both community needs and researcher product must come in language accessible to both.
- Both academics and community members must be willing to accept criticism and respect the input of others for collaborations to succeed.

Student activity needs much more follow through by faculty.

- Create courses coupled with internship hours that frame community-university engagement through a lens of equity and relationship-building
- Seek out model courses that already do this and share best practices with others that are just starting.

Build in community compensation where possible.

- Valuing the time and expertise of partners should be a priority of the university.

Meet the community where they are physically.

- Linking the university to the community means that university representatives must be willing to meet in, and actively engage, pre-existing community organizations, institutions, and their preferred spaces. Campus is not always an accessible space for community members to meet for reasons like parking and concerns for safety.
- Obstacles such as transportation and childcare must also be considered.

Meet the community where they are organizationally and culturally.

- Meeting formats must be made explicit and allow everyone to participate. Participation in final decisions may also work better by voting than by consensus, as this may indicate an equal voice to all participants.
- People of different cultures may be reluctant to speak with strangers as well as need more time to process their thoughts.

Be sensitive and aware of community dynamics and what relationships with UTK and results may do to these.

- Communities do not always agree on their needs and interests, and factions may exist. Be aware of factions, and the possibilities that research results may contribute to factional conflict.

Be collaborative with the end process of individual projects and partnerships themselves.

- Ending the research project and writing up the results helps community partners.
- So too does working to disseminate the research to policymakers and other influential audiences.

Attracting academics to this work requires changes not only in culture of individual or hierarchically-based research, but in recognition of the work and subsequent compensation.

- Credit for cross-disciplinary activity, multiple authorship, and the time required to disseminate findings in outlets atypical to the discipline is important to academics, and should be recognized as research, not service.
- Incentives for community-based research could be created in tenure paths
- New university positions and units that focus on community-based research could be imagined and built into the university structure

Next steps

This research generated several reflections on university-community partnerships. Critique of past partnerships were coupled with hope for a more collaborative future. As we finish this phase of our research and results, we are beginning to address some of these hopes with concrete resources and relationships from the university side.

Fall 2020 and Spring 2020: Building a virtual, searchable database: the Engagement Portal

Throughout our respondents' responses, we saw a continued emphasis on wanting connection, but being unsure where to start. Community members know that there is expertise and resources located within the university that is different from their own. Creating a streamlined way for community members to access university resources would allow community members to funnel into the university and access resources AND provide guidance on other resources and expertise that they may not be aware of. Community members that are part of organizations also have much to offer to the university - valuing their knowledge, experiences, and their expertise should also be a part of steps forward with university-community collaboration.

A natural first step for these desires would be to host a community-university forum to share our research results and plan next steps together. However, given the COVID-19 pandemic, convening an in-person gathering was not possible or responsible. Because we were continuing research in the spring and summer of 2020, we had the opportunity to ask respondents directly about the creation of better virtual tools for them to connect to the university. Respondents answered favorably to the idea of a virtual, searchable database that allowed community members to know 1) who was available for collaborative research, 2) what types of skills different university faculty and staff could bring to a collaborative partnership, and 3) how to connect with interested faculty and units that were good fits for potential partnerships.

To begin to address this desire, we applied for funding through the Office of Diversity and Engagement to create a virtual, searchable database, which we are conceptualizing as the “Engagement Portal.” Following the lead of community members suggestions, we envision the final product of the portal to be composed of information not only of the university population, but also community members and organizations themselves. Phase 1 of the portal will focus on gathering information, skills, and research and engagement interests of UTK faculty and staff who have experience or want experience with community-university partnerships. We will also gather data on the faculty and staff side of university-community partnerships through survey questions and some interviews of interested faculty and staff. Data gathered through Phase 1 will create the foundation for the portal with the goal of having a ready-to-use product by Summer or Fall of 2021. Work to expand the portal will follow a convening (likely virtual due to COVID-19) to unveil the Phase 1 of the portal and plan next steps with university and community partners in the Summer or Fall of 2021.

More ideas and possible next steps will be explored in the Fall of 2020 and year of 2021, with a strong focus on what resources, conversations, and tools UTK can bring to table to build the university-community relationships that our respondents and university actors desire. We seek to continue to bring both community and university representatives together to build and actualize these visions.

One such idea is worth highlighting now. The focus on space (or lack of space rather) identified by community members suggests that Arts and Sciences Dean Lee’s idea of a physical space in the community that could serve as somewhat of an intake center or clearinghouse is one with buy-in from community members already. As one community member put it: **“A single place to go to at the University to find partnerships would be helpful.”**

While the Engagement Portal will better organize information about university resources and interested faculty and staff, **community members still desire a more interactive and relationship-oriented connector to the university.** UTK could provide a physical clearinghouse where community members might come to:

- use the Engagement Portal
- meet with a UTK liason who is familiar with the resources of the university and able to manage and monitor partnerships through a collaborative lens,
- and to meet among themselves or with UTK members.

This space could also serve many other needs, both for university-community collaborations and for the community itself, as defined and envisioned by community and university partners.

In closing, the possibilities for continued collaboration with the wider Knoxville community are promising. With intentional, collaborative design, partnerships can serve many functions and deliver outcomes that are widely beneficial and community-centered. As the opening quote in this section points out, however, these problems within university-community partnerships have structural roots, not individual ones. As the results of our research show, issues as well as opportunities must be addressed with structural and programmatic solutions that are centered by community concerns and needs and informed by their past experiences with the university. The needs for community-university partnerships in the Knoxville area is predominant; how we structure and maintain partnerships in addressing those needs is an essential part of research design and implementation.

The best way to ensure that the community-university partnerships are actually partnerships is to create and sustain partnerships and projects where community members and organizations not only have a seat at the table, but have a hand in setting the table as well.

References and Resources:

In addition to the suggestions offered from our survey and interview participants, this section of the report draws from sources such as:

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References and Resources:

Best Practices for Responsible Community Engagement – Case Western Reserve University

<https://case.edu/studentlife/civicingagement/resources/best-practices>

Embrace an Asset-based Perspective

- Recognize the wealth of resources, wisdom, and resilience that exists within communities.
- Focus on enhancing opportunities and resources in partnership with community members and organizations, rather than on "fixing" perceived issues or problems within communities.

Foster Reciprocal Partnerships

- Foster mutually beneficial partnerships that genuinely support the work of community partners and the development of students.
- Collaborate with community partners to develop, evaluate, and revise programs to ensure that programs are beneficial to their work and to the community.
- Recognize the value of sustained community involvement in promoting understanding, fostering mutually beneficial relationships, and creating lasting impact.

Value Diversity and Social Justice

- Explore your own identities and how they shape your experience in community. Seek to continuously identify and challenge assumptions, biases, judgments, and stereotypes about individuals and communities.
- Value and respect people of diverse identities and backgrounds, and work to create inclusive environments.
- Recognize and identify ways to address root causes of social injustice through a variety of forms of civic engagement.

Practice Humility

- Approach community engagement activities with an open mind and a listening and learning attitude.
- Critically examine how issues of power and privilege impact attitudes towards community and community engagement activities.

Engage in Education and Reflection

- Provide intentional opportunities for learning about partner organizations, community issues, and context before, during, and after community engagement activities.
- Process community engagement experiences through dialogue to deepen self-awareness and understanding of community and to inform future actions.