

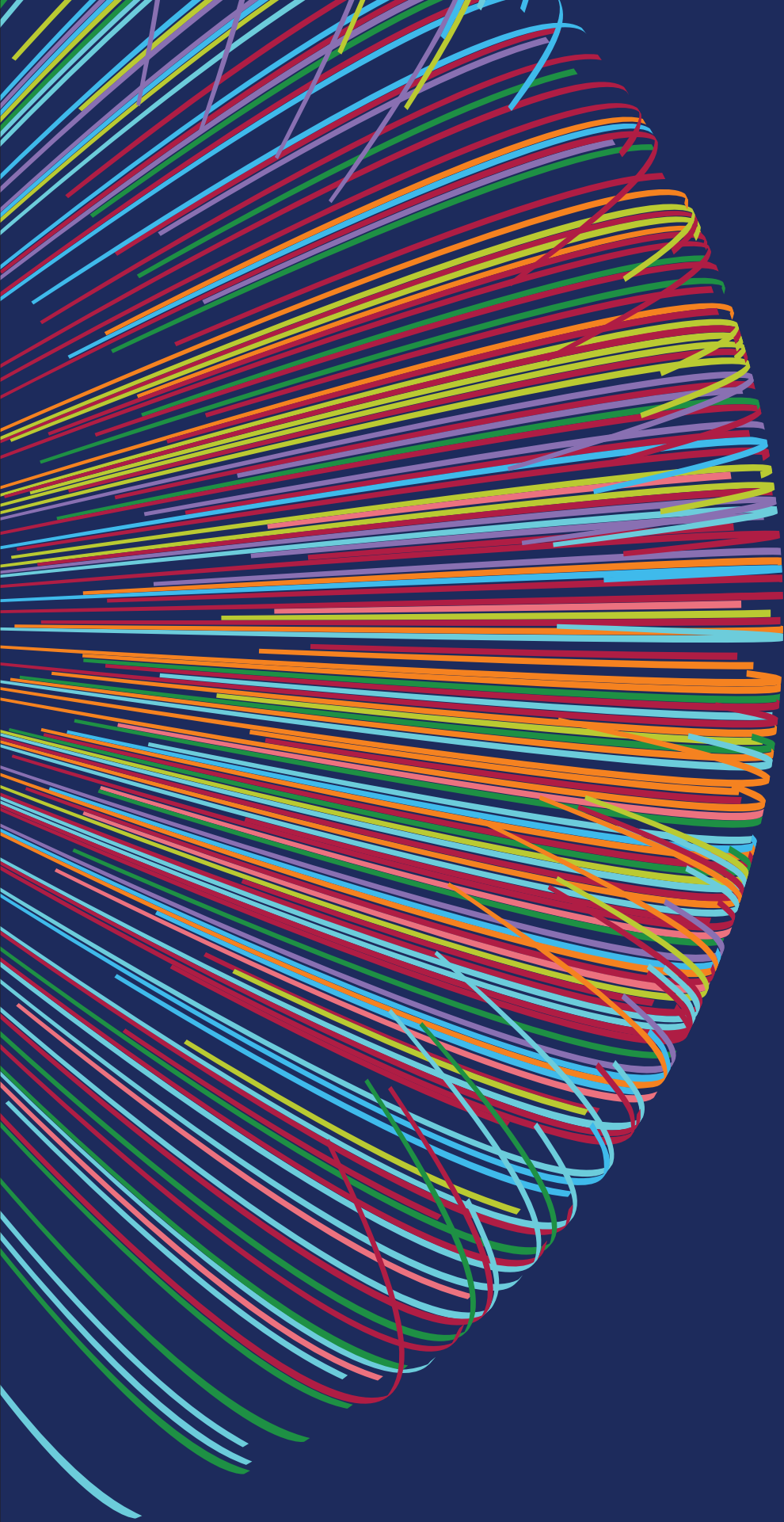


Piloting a Theory-Driven, Applied Measure of Community Partner Participation and Impact

Wendy Maxian // Xavier University

As community-engaged pedagogy becomes more popular, ensuring meaningful community partner impact should be a priority. As higher education foundations ask universities to report their community impact (i.e. Campus Compact, Carnegie Foundation), current gaps in assessing community impact take on new significance.

In its 2015 classification and reclassification letters, the Carnegie Foundation recognized the need to better measure community empowerment. They urged universities to continue developing assessments that capture *community perceptions* of university engagement; how community engagement affects students, faculty, the community, and the university; and provides ongoing



feedback mechanisms for partnerships (“Reclassification letter”, 2015). The Foundation’s advice was not surprising given their definition of “community engagement.” Specifically, they define community engagement as “collaboration between higher education institutions 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” (Carnegie Community Engagement Classification, 2016). Their definition clearly corresponds to recent academic research about community-university partnerships. Jacoby (2015) and Reardon (2006) emphasize the need for empowering, reciprocal partnerships. That is, partnerships cannot be one-sided or only student-focused; they must also be meaningful for the community.

Measuring Ongoing Perceptions and Effects of Partnerships

The Carnegie Foundation’s (2015) classification letter identified three critical factors missing from partnership assessment: community partner perceptions, effect on communities, and ongoing evaluation. Conceptually, these factors parallel Miron and Moely’s (2006) definitions of “agency benefit” and “agency voice.” Agency benefit, or the economic and social gains the community partner (agency) makes through university partnerships, corresponds to community effects. Agency voice, or level of community partner involvement in a project’s planning and implementation, is compatible with community partner perceptions. Additionally, effective interpersonal relationships contribute to increased agency voice.

The current preliminary pilot study focuses on reliably and validly measuring agency voice by comparing faculty and community partner attitudes toward community-engaged projects. If university-community partnerships are mutually beneficial and empowering, reported faculty and community partner attitudes should be positive (above the scale’s midpoint) and aligned (not statistically different from one another). Developing a measure of agency voice is a first step toward establishing a longitudinal survey that will include measures related to agency benefit and student learning outcomes. The ultimate goal is to measure the university-community partnership outcomes requested by the Carnegie Foundation

by providing a concise, effective tool for university administrators charged with assessing community-engaged projects and enhancing community engagement programs.

Why measure attitudes?

Psychologically speaking, perceptions are sensory intake related to environmental stimuli. Individuals constantly perceive their surroundings and their interactions with those surroundings. Therefore, measuring perceptions requires tapping into individuals' responses about different objects or experiences in their social and environmental interactions. One fundamental social-psychological measure attitude, or the overall, conscious evaluation of a stimulus, is comprised of smaller evaluations related to stimulus characteristics (Eagly & Chaiken, 1998; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). While the final evaluation may be good or bad, stimulus characteristics contribute to the evaluation. In the university-community partnership context, the partnership functions as the stimulus that produces partners' attitudes. Those involved in a partnership evaluate it by reporting how good or bad the partnership was based upon different characteristics of their experiences.

Capturing partners' attitudes toward their partnership can be achieved by using semantic differentials, or bipolar sets of adjectives (i.e., fun—boring, exciting—dull) that align with characteristics of the university-community partnership. Semantic differentials are frequently and reliably used to measure attitudes and their underlying components (Ajzen, 2005; Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957). Comparing attitudes toward a community-engaged project from different constituent groups (community partners and faculty) provides insights into strengths and weaknesses of community-engaged programs at a university.

Method

Study Design and Procedures

Using a posttest, repeated-measure survey design, faculty member and community partner attitudes were obtained. During final exam week at a midwestern university, faculty and community partner participants in known community-

engaged partnerships (N = 12) were recruited to complete a questionnaire administered via the Qualtrics online survey platform (Qualtrics, 2016). IRB-approved human subjects protocols were followed. Participants were emailed the questionnaire's hyperlink along with a letter of instruction asking them to complete the questionnaire within 10 days. Participation was voluntary and responses were kept anonymous and confidential. Other data were collected and will be reported elsewhere.

Measures

Building upon Miron & Moely's (2006) conceptualization of agency voice, faculty member and community organization reported their attitudes toward three characteristics of participating in mutually beneficial, empowered community-engaged projects. Using 7-point semantic differentials, faculty and community partners evaluated community partner contribution, project goal achievement, and project benefit. Community partners reported their attitudes toward their participation, whether the project met their organization's goals, and whether the project benefitted the organization. Faculty reported their attitudes toward the community partner's participation, whether the project met their pedagogical goals, and whether the project benefitted their class (see Appendix A.)

Data Reduction and Analysis

Responses from community partners (n = 8) and faculty members (n = 4) along each of the characteristics were averaged. Some items were reverse scored so that a 1 indicated the most negative response (i.e., exclusive, empty, burdened) and a 7 indicated the most positive response (i.e., inclusive, full, freed). The larger the score, the more positive the participants' attitude is for an item or a scale. Internal consistency of all scales (partner contribution, $\alpha = .84$; goal achievement, $\alpha = .84$; project benefit, $\alpha = .88$) was acceptable. Item scores for each factor were averaged to create a scale for each factor. Because of the small sample size, differences between faculty and community partners were not statistically tested and only descriptive statistics were calculated.

Results

Although response rates for community partners (75%) and faculty (33%) are reasonable, the final sample size is admittedly low, which makes conducting statistical analyses inappropriate. However, the descriptive statistics reveal an initial understanding of differences between community partner and faculty attitudes toward partner contribution, project goal achievement, and project benefit.

Table 1.
Mean response to semantic differential items.

SCALE AND SEMANTIC DIFFERENTIAL	Community Partner		Faculty	
	M	SD	M	SD
Participation				
Included–excluded	5.88	.83	5.25	1.26
Relevant–irrelevant	5.88	.83	5.75	1.50
Purposeful–useless	5.75	.89	5.25	2.06
Beneficial–detrimental	5.75	.89	6.00	1.55
Full–empty	5.00	1.85	3.25	1.70
Valued–ignored	6.25	.89	6.25	.96
Goal achievement				
Full–empty	5.13	1.36	5.00	2.16
Helpful–harmful	5.75	.89	5.75	1.23
Easy–difficult	4.63	.60	4.50	2.38
Competent–incompetent	5.50	1.51	5.75	1.26
Efficient–inefficient	5.00	1.51	3.25	2.21
Inclusive–exclusive	5.25	1.39	4.25	2.50
Project benefit				
Helped–harmed	5.25	1.49	6.50	.58
Increased–decreased	5.25	.89	5.50	1.73
Empowered–weakened	5.38	1.19	6.50	.58
Productive–idle	5.00	1.07	6.50	.58
Excited–bored	5.50	1.31	6.75	.50
Freed–burdened	4.36	1.60	3.75	1.89
Participation scale mean	5.75	1.24	5.30	1.02
Goal achievement scale mean	5.20	1.24	4.75	1.31
Project benefit scale mean	5.13	1.11	5.92	.57

Understandably, because of the sample size, some items vary widely. Any conclusions drawn from this data are tenuous; however, some differences between community partners and faculty merit consideration. Among overall attitudes toward partner participation in a project and whether a project met each group's goals, community partners responded more positively than faculty. Conversely, community partners reported less positive attitudes than faculty in terms of project impact. Because scale means were above the scale's midpoint, it appears that community partners were satisfied that their voice was heard. Faculty did not report being less satisfied with community partner participation and project goal achievement, but their attitude was positive and scale averages were well above the midpoint.

As indicated by average responses to some scale items, faculty was dissatisfied with certain characteristics of each factor. Expectations about partner participation ($m = 3.25$), the efficiency with which goals were met ($m = 3.25$), and how freeing the project was ($m = 3.75$) were below or just above the item's midpoint. This suggests that faculty may find engaging partner voice difficult or a more time-intensive part of the project. When designing a class, faculty tends to have full autonomy. Working with a community partner may impinge on that autonomy.

One characteristic that faculty and community partners may report is how burdened they feel by a particular project. While the faculty's average response was just above the midpoint on the freed—burdened item, community partners' average response ($m = 4.38$) was the lowest of all the items. It appears both groups find project collaboration to be taxing. This could be the result of limited time and human resources, or unfamiliar projects and collaborations. Or, it could indicate the difficulty of developing projects that utilize faculty and partners' skillsets or expertise.

Regardless, future versions of the posttest need to be more widely distributed. The sample size must be larger so that more nuanced statistical analyses can be conducted. Differences between groups should be tested,

as well as possibly controlling for other mediating variables. Time spent on a project or number of previous projects a community partner or faculty member has participated in may impact their reported attitudes.

Next Steps

The current pilot study is a small step toward understanding community impact and engagement and how to overcome barriers to developing ideal university-community partnerships. By operationalizing practical, real-world assessment recommendations with theoretically and methodologically sound measures, several constituent groups can benefit from the measure. Community partners can enhance their voice by reporting about specific partnerships, while community-engaged scholars can assess their own or their university's partnerships. Administrators, too, can utilize data to improve such work and to report community impact more clearly to external agencies or foundations.

The most obvious next step is to recruit more participants to the study. The data reported here are preliminary and are clearly not generalizable. While they provide initial insights into community impact, it is difficult to extrapolate patterns of response or tests for significant differences between groups. The data's strength is its theoretical framework and development.

This pilot study attempted to ascertain whether capturing attitudes toward a community-university partnership would inform academic and applied understandings of community impact. Adding this measure to ongoing, longitudinal assessment efforts has the potential to provide all constituents groups with a snapshot of attitudes toward community-university partnerships along with specific criteria through which partnerships can be improved. Community partners, engaged faculty, and university administrators would benefit from refining their practices, aligning their vision and values, and increasing their understanding of incentives for and barriers to investing resources in a community-engaged project.

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Appendix A.

Semantic differential items

Factors of agency voice	Prompt	Semantic differentials
Community partner participation	How did you feel about your (community partner's) participation in this partnership?	Included—excluded Relevant—irrelevant Purposeful—useless Beneficial—detrimental Full—empty Valued—ignored
Project goals	My goals for this partnership were met in a ___ manner.	Full—partial Helpful—harmful Easy—difficult Competent—incompetent Inefficient—efficient Inclusive—exclusive
Project benefit for organization/class	My organization/class was ___ by this project.	Helped—harmed Increased—decreased Empowered—weakened Productive—idle Excited—bored Freed—burdened