RESEARCH ARTICLE

How to Sustain Public Humanities Partnerships

Helen H. Cho[1], Ruth Curry[1] and Ashley Cheyemi McNeil[2]

[1]Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, USA and [2]Full Spectrum Features, Chicago, IL, USA
Corresponding author: Helen H. Cho; Email: hcho@northwestern.edu

Abstract

This article explores the concept of partnerships in public humanities as both a process and a vital outcome. Drawing from experiences within a classroom environment, where university students and community members learned and engaged together, we identify three key precepts for sustaining effective community-university partnerships: centering human relationships, leveraging institutionalization, and redistributing risk. These strategies do not aim to avoid the challenges inherent in collaboration but rather use complexities as opportunities for deeper engagement. We argue that community-university partnerships should themselves be viewed as a valuable and meaningful form of public humanities.

Keywords: collaboration; community-engaged teaching; public humanities; university-community partnerships

1. Introduction

In this article, we – a visiting assistant professor, a university staff member, and a social justice nonprofit director, who have committed to jointly exploring humanities in public life – argue that community-university partnerships are not only a means to achieve public humanities goals but are themselves a significant and meaningful form of public humanities. Our partnership most often took shape within a classroom and instructional setting where university students and community members came together to learn and engage; however, we offer three precepts for sustaining partnerships that are applicable beyond the classroom context across various sectors. These strategies are not about avoiding or quieting the messiness of collaboration but rather about using it as an opportunity for growth and deeper engagement. We offer readers humble honesty through our stories and insights, hoping to reassure others navigating this complex work that they are not alone.

Public humanities partnerships require ongoing, deliberate action. This present-focused approach to partnerships in public humanities challenges the traditional, more static conceptions of highly individualistic and privately guarded academic work.[1] This essay champions the field's ethos of (re)connecting: dissolving the boundaries between institutions and

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[1] This is a key conclusion in Jay 2010. See also Burton et al. 2024, 68.

communities, between theory and practice, and between different ways and places of knowing. As Fisher-Livne and May-Curry observe, such collaborations require a commitment by partners to "the slow work of deep listening and building interpersonal relationships without a firm agenda" and "the muddy and often painstaking work of navigating institutional bureaucracies together."[2] In what follows, we aim to more specifically address the complex and often challenging nature of maintaining and nourishing such partnerships – especially when both academic and community partners face constraints like resource scarcity, heavy workloads, and conflicting demands from their respective institutions.

Our work emerges from and contributes to a long tradition of community engagement, especially present in Black, Indigenous, and feminist thinking, which laid the groundwork of public humanities before it was conceptualized as such.[3] This tradition often works best going from praxis to theory, beginning with the who, where, and when of lived experiences to inform broader conceptual frameworks and even muddying those distinctions. Anchored in Susan Smulyan's articulation of public humanities as "a process of discovery undertaken by collaborative groups – including university faculty, staff, and students – with communities outside the campus," we are less interested in the production of scholarly outcomes alone but rather in the reintegration of knowledge creation across diverse spaces and communities.[4] The key activator for us is the way that the public humanities connect thinkers, searchers, and nodes of knowledge – bridging the academic, the community-based, and the personal to create a richer, integrated understanding of how knowledge is made and shared. This is why readers will recognize echoes and familiar refrains among the precepts detailed in this article; we make our case as a stacked assemblage of experience, sensemaking, and connection.

2. Partnership context

Community-university partnerships are always unique to the people and institutions that partner. While we offer strategies we hope can function as a "how to" for cultivating and sustaining partnerships in multiple contexts, it is important to acknowledge the particularities of our own partnership. Below is a summary of the players and projects our partnership encompasses.

Helen is a visiting assistant professor at a private R1 university's Asian American Studies program, where she focuses her teaching on the role of mass media in reinforcing inequity, shaping narratives of socio-political difference, and influencing the way people navigate their racial and ethnic identities. Ashley is the director of education and research at Full Spectrum Features, a Chicago-based social justice nonprofit that uses cinematic storytelling to educate the public on social and cultural issues. Helen and Ashley met through their shared commitment to community engagement and Asian American Studies frameworks that center learner agency and approaches teaching as a form of social change.[5]

In more human terms, in Ashley and Helen's respective growing up – as both people and scholars, through exposure to popular media and academic monographs – they did not see

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[2] Fisher-Livne and May-Curry 2024, 6.
[3] Roopika Risam's forthcoming book, *Insurgent Academics: A Radical Account of Public Humanities*, aims to catalogue how academics of color have long been doing this work; see Risam 2019. See also Jajuan Johnson 2024. For the broader intellectual history of the field, see Ayers 2009; Beaulieu et al. 2018; Fisher 2020; Gelmon et al. 1998; Meringolo et al. 2022; Smulyan 2022.
[4] Smulyan 2022, 125.
[5] For more on Asian American Studies frameworks, see Chan 2000; Yep 2018; Yep & Mitchell 2017.

themselves reflected as belonging to a particular institutional formation or learning community. What brought them together was how they questioned this institutional absence through their professional lives, and made sure to ground their inquiry in their communities. Over their years-long ongoing partnership, Helen and Ashley co-designed and collaborated on several community-engaged courses in different institutional contexts (at different universities and in different states) as their careers continued to grow.

In the Fall of 2022, new to her position, Helen reached out to the Center for Civic Engagement to learn about resources for supporting community-engaged coursework. Ruth, who had been affiliated with the university for 10 years as a student and then post-doc, ultimately answered the call. Ruth's intellectual background is steeped in the (canonical) Western literary tradition; she had never taken an Ethnic Studies class. Despite disciplinary background differences, Ruth and Helen connected over their shared interest in fostering experiential learning within the humanities, which led to Helen, Ruth, and Ashley joining forces in Winter 2023 to offer "Making Community Media," a course where undergraduate students supported the pre-production of Full Spectrum Features' cinematic digital history project on the Japanese American Redress Movement.

The course engaged students in researching potential advisory board members and researching the redress movement in the context of HR 40 and Black American reparations, which was directly related to a recently passed local reparations bill. The partnership focused on exploring community media, ethical storytelling, and the intersection of entertainment and historical narratives. Student reactions to the course and the partnership underwent massive fluctuations – from excitement to ennui, from awe to anger, from effusive praise to charges of "exploitation" – over the course of the quarter. Processing these fluctuations, responding to them, and buttressing each other's confidence and courage in the face of student ambivalence became a major component of our partnership. We are still processing, as this essay and a variety of other writing projects attest. While we are untangling the lessons of this complex partnership, what is clear is its enduring impact – not just on our students and communities but on us as collaborators.

3. Precept 1: Center relationships

A story from Ashley, a non-profit director:

When Helen and I were on a panel together at the Association of American Colleges and Universities conference a few years ago, she brought me a pecan pie from her hometown in Texas. Helen was coming from Houston, and I was coming from Seattle, where I was spending a few weeks helping my mom and stepdad through some health struggles. Helen knew that a really good pie could be a miracle balm for pie lovers like my stepdad, so she decided to bring a pie all the way from Houston to San Francisco and then had me fly it back to my family in Seattle. This was one of the clearest expressions of care I've ever received. For Helen and me, community care has always been a core value in our work. We usually find ways to care for our communities in our official capacities as a university professor and non-profit director, whether that is undergraduate learners or Asian Americans in Chicago. But with the pie, Helen was recognizing and caring for a part of my community that she did not directly share with me. It was important for her to show up for them, and for me, nevertheless. This act of kindness was not about the pie itself but about the thoughtfulness and care that it represented – a gesture that went beyond our professional collaboration to touch our personal lives.

This anecdote owes much of its legibility to Kathleen Fitzpatrick's concept of "generous thinking," which provides a vital framework for understanding how strong, relationship-

centered partnerships in public humanities can be cultivated. In her sustained examination of the impact and purpose of formal scholarship, Fitzpatrick defines generous thinking as a mode of engagement that "emphasizes listening over speaking, community over individualism, collaboration over competition, and lingering with the ideas that are in front of us rather than continually pressing forward."[6] We strive to practice this mode of engagement as a critical disposition in the learning we design for and with both students and community members.

When we practice generous thinking and catalyze our collaborative projects through an ethos of care, listening, and community, a different kind of partnership emerges – one with deep roots grounded in those values and nourished by multiple sources. Building strong partnerships in public humanities requires balancing short-term interests with the cultivation of long-term relationships and shared purpose. By prioritizing generosity in our relationships, we create spaces where collaboration is not identified as a series of tasks and transactions but rather as a transformational capacity for reciprocal support and learning.[7]

We recognize that connecting through pie gifting is a rare example of how to nourish a relationship. What is possible, though, regardless of industry or organization, is making a sustained effort to actively connect your collaborators to new opportunities that align with their goals and values. Acts of mutual support are not just professional courtesies; they are ways to deepen trust, demonstrate respect, and reaffirm our shared commitment to public humanities that diversifies and extends how humanistic work is engaged and recognized. They allow each partner to grow within their own roles while also contributing to the broader goals of the collaboration.

A strong partnership also relies on investing time in each other whenever possible. Like most forms of scholarship, relationships need nurturing, a need to "slow – things – down," as Alison Mountz and her colleagues say, that "represents both a commitment to good scholarship and a feminist politics of resistance to the accelerated timelines of the neoliberal university" and, we add, to the pervasive hustle culture of the nonprofit world.[8] We make it a priority to connect regularly, discuss our shared goals, and understand each other's challenges and successes. These ongoing efforts build a foundation of trust and a reservoir of support that we can draw upon when, inevitably, the path forward for our work is not clear and the outcomes seem unpredictable. This kind of relational care is not ancillary to public humanities work; it *is* public humanities. By centering relationships, community-university partnerships can model how the values of reciprocity, care, and generosity can themselves enact the transformative goals of the public humanities.

In other words...

- **Focus on the long game.** Gear toward a lasting relationship, not just a quick win.

- **Be the shoulders your partner can stand on**. Advocate, nominate, and create opportunities for your partner's growth.

- **Do not be absent in the quiet times.** Use downtime to occasionally connect and better understand each other's work and values.

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[6] Fitzpatrick 2019, 4.
[7] For more on the distinction between transaction and transformation in university-community partnerships, see Stewart and Alrutz 2012, 45–7.
[8] Mountz et al. 2015, 1238. Also see Bailey 2021.

4. Precept 2: Leverage institutionalization

A story from Helen, a visiting assistant professor:

As I returned to my undergraduate alma mater to take on a temporary faculty role, I showed up with an already-formed partnership in hand, excited to collaborate with Ashley on an Asian American Studies course that combined our shared values and interests around community-engaged methods of storytelling. It felt like an organic move, as Full Spectrum Features was locally based and their educational projects worked to uplift complex Asian American histories.

This proved to be more difficult than imagined, based on an erroneous assumption about existing institutional support for public humanities partnerships. Initially, I was bewildered by the lack of formal processes of support and funding for community partnerships, questions from administrators about the fitness of an outside organization to co-create knowledge in the classroom, and logistical barriers, such as a lengthy process to get Ashley affiliate status so she could access library resources. Then came having to contend with low enrollment, which meant spending long hours emailing folks I did not know to ask them to advertise the class, followed by student resistance to combining modes of praxis-based learning with traditional classroom approaches to theory and text.

In a moment of hopefulness, I emailed the Center for Civic Engagement to inquire about resources to support the partnership. Although they were not initially sure where to direct me, I (thankfully) was eventually directed to Ruth, who became my institutional whisperer. Ruth quickly brought me up-to-speed on the hidden curriculum and even though working in undergraduate classrooms was outside of her purview, she offered not just a listening ear, but practical advice and material support. To name one example, Ruth knew that student demand was often generated through the veneer of prestige, so she helped me create an application for the next iteration of Ashley and I's community-engaged class to boost enrollment. The end result? Enrollment doubled.

Sara Ahmed describes the physical and emotional labor required to engage in diversity work as akin to "banging your head against a brick wall," arguing that "only the practical labor of 'coming up against' the institution *allows [the brick wall] to become apparent.*"[9] We build on Ahmed's argument here with our own experience of presupposing knowledge about institutional commitments without experiential knowledge. Having worked together in other institutional contexts, Ashley and I mapped our prior experience with a resource-rich institution's support of our public humanities partnership onto how we thought a resource-richer institution would provide support. It was only through experience (both Ruth's years of accumulated experience and our collective head-banging) that we "acquire[d] a critical orientation to institutions in the process of coming up against them."[10] Similarly, Bell and Lewis argue that we need "a nuanced understanding of a range of institutional pressure that together result in logistical and professional impediments" in order to begin the work of removing those barriers.[11]

While institutionalization may appear to be antithetical to relational ways of thinking and knowing, we propose that public humanists can enact relationality and reciprocity by sharing specific knowledge about their institutional contexts. This knowledge is foundational to "turning the tangible object of institutional resistance into a tangible platform for

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[9] Ahmed 2012, 174.
[10] Ahmed 2012, 174.
[11] Bell and Lewis 2022, 2.

institutional action."[12] One of the clearest articulations of collaboration as *being* public humanities is when we acted on Fitzpatrick's idea that "our common presence in a space, an institution, a community, obligates us to one another."[13] When no formal processes or channels of support existed for our community-engaged classroom, the act of collaborating brought those channels into being.

If centering relationships is the first step, then these deep, trust-based relationships make it possible to engage in the demanding labor of head-banging for institutional change. As "each new strategy or tactic for getting through the wall generate[d] knowledge of what does or does not get across," we created connections and changes that persisted beyond the partnership.[14] Our partnership evolved from individual commitment into material, institutional commitment as Helen nominated Ashley for a public humanities award (which she won), leading to Ashley becoming a trusted consultant on a public humanities initiative Ruth chairs. Ashley connected a local housing justice nonprofit, where Helen sits on the board, to a grant opportunity that has greatly enlarged their capacity for housing justice organizing. Ruth advocated for Helen to become a Center for Civic Engagement faculty fellow, enabling them to work closely on projects while benefiting from institutional support. This allowed the partnership to become part of the fascia of our institutions, to continue protecting and encouraging support of public humanities partnerships, while creating new nodes of connection between our respective silos. Advocating for "the continuity between will and habit" often means doing the painstaking work of banging your head against the proverbial wall to create tiny cracks, dents, and indelible marks that point others in the direction of progress.[15]

In other words,

- **Keep porous boundaries.** Partnerships can start small, but keeping your circle open leads to new knowledge and pathways for lasting change.

- **Share the "hidden curriculum."** Be an institutional guide or find one. Share insider knowledge that makes existing systems, pathways, and obstacles visible.

- **Make changes stick.** Sustainable change requires advocating for the institutionalization of your partners' work. Grow trust and buy-in from colleagues and advocate for formal recognition of informal labor.

5. Precept 3: Redistribute risk

A story from Ruth, a staff member of the Center for Civic Engagement:

"You know, you can still drop the course."

Given that my R1 academic institution neither requires nor incentivizes service-learning for under-graduates, the Center for Civic Engagement has to be especially good at attracting and retaining students: in no small part, our reputation, and our budget, depend on student enrollment. So, in the early weeks of the course, I was surprised to hear these words coming out of my mouth. Some students

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[12] Ahmed 2012, 175.
[13] Fitzpatrick 2019, 52.
[14] Ahmed 2012, 175.
[15] Ahmed 2012, 130.

were clamoring to dig into the work but others critiqued the work they were being asked to do. I reminded students that it was reasonable (and still possible) to withdraw from the course if it did not align with their values or expectations.

It was a small gesture that demonstrated a big shift: in my loyalty to a certain strain of student-centered (or perhaps "consumer-centered") education and in how I weighed the benefits of student enrollment against student commitment. In that moment, I was risking a key indicator of classroom "success" – student enrollment – in order to defend our vision for a course that centered solidarity over student satisfaction.

Would I have risked an adversarial encounter with a student if I were managing the course solo? I doubt it. Working alongside Ashley and Helen towards a common goal, knowing they shared the weight of its responsibility, made me feel safe enough – and brave enough – to risk it.

As Adam Kuban, Jennifer Purcell, and Brytnie Jones write in their refreshing piece on missteps and failure in community-engaged scholarship (CES):

> [T]hose who spearhead CES endeavors inevitably experience failure and disappointment at some point. However, faculty and professional staff are typically trained to circumvent failure. We are taught to execute a specific process in order to ensure we achieve the outcomes identified. We have become products of and contributors to a culture of perfectionism in academia that is increasingly risk averse.[16]

Risk-aversion not only limits the ambition of community-engaged or public humanities work (biasing us towards maintaining the status quo) but also obscures an important consideration in how we set up and sustain public humanities partnerships: acknowledging, managing, and redistributing risk.

When we think of collaboration, we might first think of sharing and splitting tasks: Helen will write the syllabus; Ashley will supervise the project; and Ruth will support logistics. But if pursued in a way that genuinely breaks new ground, collaboration will push collaborators beyond their institutionally-sanctioned roles to accept new risks and responsibilities: Helen and Ruth took on responsibility for the achievement of Full Spectrum Features' goals; Ashley and Ruth took on, with Helen, the risk of an experimental course.[17]

Just as two people can carry more weight than each person alone, collaboration allows us to embrace more ambitious, complex goals – but only if we properly distribute the "weight." An equitable partnership will account for each member's positionality. Who, by virtue of their identity or precarity, is most vulnerable to attack or criticism? Who will feel the pinch of delayed reimbursement or payment?[18] Who shoulders the greatest risks – material, professional, reputational – and stands to benefit most? And, most importantly, how can we pool and redistribute these risks and rewards more equitably across our partnership?

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[16] Kuban et al. 2020, 125. Academia, of course, is not the only professional culture prone to perfectionism. Community organizations dependent on grant funding experience even more pressure to "achieve the outcomes identified" to secure their continued survival.

[17] For a useful tool community and university partners can use to divide decision-making authority and responsibilities, see Doberneck and Dann 2019.

[18] For a terrific "accounting" of how academic grant-making disadvantages community partners, as well as suggestions for redress, see Cole et al. 2018.

We must be cautious about risks in public humanities work and who bears them. Too often, community-engaged research and collaboration have placed the burden of risk on already vulnerable or marginalized communities while university faculty and staff remain most likely to reap the rewards.[19] However, a careful accounting of, and mutual accountability for, risk can make us more able to hazard novelty, discomfort, and failure – and therefore more capable of path-breaking work. It is precisely in this risk-taking, in the willingness to move beyond the safety of institutionally determined roles and expected outcomes, that we can generate more diverse and dynamic knowledge communities in which ideas, resources, and influence circulate in new ways.

In other words,

- **Share your pain points.** Each partner is going to struggle or stretch in some aspect of the partnership. Identify those areas to yourself and to each other.

- **Protect each other's flank**. Course enrollment or ticket sales or social media engagement might not matter to you, but they may be essential to your partner's ability to justify your collaboration. Take responsibility for each other's goals and protect each other's ability to keep doing the work.

- **Build stamina for risk**. The purpose of collaboration is not to eliminate risk – such that we stay confined to limited, institutionalized expectations of what "good work" or "good experience" looks like – but to build collective tolerance to novelty and uncertainty.

6. Conclusion

Most public humanities partnerships are fundamentally ventures into uncharted or over-looked spaces, requiring creativity, courage, and a willingness to challenge established norms. Our essay is not a "how to" in avoiding or attenuating the tensions, pressures, or misfires inevitable in public humanities work: rather, it is "how to" equip yourselves for the long haul. We chose these precepts – centering relationships, leveraging institutionalization, and redistributing risk – because they provide ballast to the internal and external pressures that urge us to care more about short-term outcomes than long-term possibilities, more about individual achievement than collective futures. If a central goal of the public humanities is to create more heterogeneous knowledge communities and address "systemic exclusions that restrict the potential publicness of knowledge," then we must build capacity for deep, enduring commitments to each other and this shared work despite the barriers and efforts of public and private institutions to locate knowledge-making in individuals alone.[20]

In this way, then, collaboration in public humanities is not just a means to an end but a vital outcome in itself. Engaging with the public, and in public, involves creating space for holistic collaboration, working through tensions, and unabashedly advocating for shared values. This work is messy, challenging, and transformative, pushing us into braver spaces where we become more comfortable with uncertainty and discomfort, adapting as we go. Partnership compels us to be more imaginative and often more transgressive in how we invest our time,

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[19] See, for example, Tuck 2009; Caswell et al. 2021; and Flicker 2008.
[20] The University of British Columbia Public Humanities Hub 2024.

live our values, and envision the broader landscape of humanistic work. In doing so, we move beyond traditional expectations of what "good work" looks like and build the resilience needed to persist, even when the rewards are not immediate or conventional. Collaboration and partnership thus become both the process and the outcome, expanding the possibilities of what public humanities can achieve. Our partnership, like the courses we have co-created, remains a living, evolving process that resists neat conclusions. As we continue to process what we have learned from these experiences, we invite others to consider the complex dynamics that underpin their own collaborations and to lean into the messiness with curiosity and care.

Author contribution. Writing – original draft: A.C.M., R.C., H.H.C.; Writing – review & editing: A.C.M., R.C., H.H.C.

Conflicts of interest. The authors declare none.

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