

Academia's Community Impact Gap

By Anthony Poon (Cornell Tech)

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In academia, it is increasingly in vogue to describe research as “community-engaged.” This label refers to research programs that work collaboratively with communities outside of academia on issues relevant to their interests and wellbeing. Academic institutions have created centers to promote community-engaged research, such as Cornell's own Office of Engagement Initiatives (OEI). Just this year, the OEI merged with Cornell's Public Service Center, an organizational manifestation of the claim that academic research can be in service of communities and lead to public good.

However, the excitement over community-engaged research glosses over the fact that research and service are not the same thing. The infrastructures and incentives of the academic system are not aligned with creating sustainable community impact. Though community-engaged researchers, such as I, claim to work in partnership with and in service of outside communities, our misaligned incentives often create breakages that leave those very same communities in a lurch. I call these breakages the academy's “community impact gap.”

What causes this gap and what can the academy do to address it? In the worst case, the impact gap leads to direct harm to groups of marginalized research subjects from the actions of researchers. But even the most well-designed and well-intentioned research can result in a trail of abandoned projects and disappointed community partners. Creating sustainable impact from community-engaged research is not a problem that can be solved by good intentions alone.

Falling into the Impact Gap

One of my past research projects involved high school students in Cameroon. There, students must pass a standardized exit examination to receive their diploma. Failing this test means repeated years of high school or dropping out altogether, and the pass rate was only 47% in 2020. I've met students in their 20s, still trying to get their diploma, repeating their senior year three or four times. But even if they pass, students face a crowded job market with a high degree of under-employment. To study how Cameroonian students manage this transition to the workforce, our research team received a two-year grant to track the progress of students as they leave high school, their economic outcomes, and their attitudes towards education, having children, and goals and aspirations.

We also worked with local NGOs and youth centers to develop and test different programs to help students plan for and meet the challenges of their future. These programs included study aids for students' upcoming exit exams, hands-on programs to introduce students to potential careers in a variety of fields, and career and life-planning sessions. Some of these programs are still ongoing, but it has been a constant struggle to retain funding, staff, and expertise to turn research-driven experiments into community-owned programs. Despite promising findings, some of this work has never made the transition from proof-of-concept to something more sustainable.

This struggle to find sustainability from research projects is not an isolated problem. In fields that do community-engaged research, it is not uncommon for projects to fizzle out after the funding is gone, researchers graduate and move on, or interest is lost. The academic community derides such projects as "helicopter research," an approach that is reminiscent of a colonial relationship, but instead of extracting material resources, we treat partner communities like guinea pigs for the extraction of data that primarily benefits well-off academics. This lack of commitment to community partners is especially galling when the research site is home to populations that are already underserved and marginalized.

But while this critique invokes images of researchers designing projects with the ability to just drop in and, as quickly, pull out, it glosses over the many structural issues that make it difficult for research in the academy to sustain longer term engagement. It closes us to ways in which research is conceived, funded, executed, and rewarded in the current academic system that can cause projects to be dropped even when there is potential for sustained impact. Fundamentally, without broader changes to its incentive structure, the academy is not well suited to conducting community-engaged research.

What the Academy Values versus What Communities Need

In the social sciences, it is well accepted that people are biased. A participant might be eager to please, and a researcher might gravitate to certain conclusions. Well-designed research might account for these biases, but the structure of academia creates its own biases as well. For example, researchers work at universities and may only be able to visit rural or distant sites during summer breaks, resulting in an incomplete picture of those areas and their problems. Similar structural disincentives create the impact gap by influencing what research is pursued by researchers, funded by granters, and how research is conducted to maintain partnerships.

Academics are heavily incentivized to publish their work in order to sustain their careers or graduate, a phenomenon popularly known as "publish or perish." To publish, researchers must

create work that the academic community believes is a contribution to the field. This work must be novel, either in context, perspective, approach, or design. It is the academy's focus on producing novelty that causes the incentives of academic research to be misaligned with the goals of our community partners.

Certain types of work are more likely to produce better returns on an academic's time. This includes exploratory work, on understanding and designing for needs of a community, or critical work, which approaches a context or problem from a new perspective. Interview studies, prototyping, and pilot deployments may require a year, but this is still a smaller commitment for a higher chance of publication than running and evaluating a program over the course of several years. Yet longer-term projects create a deeper engagement that are more likely to create impacts beyond the direct involvement of the researcher.

For many academics, the timelines for academic findings and the timelines for community impact don't match up. Community partners have little use for novelty, yet academics fear that, at the end of long-term projects, such research would no longer be considered novel for publication. And as most research is conducted by graduate students and pre-tenure faculty who are under time constraints to publish, those researchers may judge that the effort and risk are not commensurate to the potential for publications despite the value to the community partner. This makes doing longer-term work focused on community engagement a lower priority for an academic who is under constant pressure to be productive.

Researchers are also under time constraints from their funders, as grants have specific deliverables and timelines attached. Timelines are appropriate to enable auditing, but they don't consider the need to build and maintain relationships that make community-engaged research possible. Funding research in chunks makes it difficult to sustain community relationships. A seasoned researcher will always be applying for grants so that work with a partner can continue via some patchwork of funding. But this is akin to paving a road as you walk it, and if a grant application falls through, there is often no choice but to put projects on hold.

Other challenges to maintaining relationships with a community partner come from who participates in those relations on a day-to-day basis. Even if a faculty member has a decades-long working relationship with a partner, much research is conducted by graduate students who leave after they completed their degree. This means that work with a community partner needs to be handed off between students, and new students must spend time re-establishing a rapport with partners and an understanding of the community context. These logistical costs and complexities

are additional potential points of breakage and are further barriers to long-term research engagement.

The biases of academia, in terms of what it values and how it funds and conducts research, are thus arrayed against longer-term impact and instead towards creating many smaller projects which never make it past the stage of prototype. In that fast pace, little time is left to figure out how to turn an initial prototype into a sustained program. The primacy of creating novel research contributions encourages academics to abandon prototypes and shift gears. This is a disservice to our community partners.

Filling the Gap is a Multi-Pronged Approach

Today, we rely on the good intentions of researchers to create sustainable and impactful community-engaged work, but this is not enough. Addressing the impact gap goes beyond admonishing individual researchers to do better. It must include structural changes to academia to encourage community-engaged research. These changes include recognizing the effort and labor that must be done to maintain community relationships even if this doesn't immediately produce publications. And these structural changes must happen at multiple levels, within academic institutions, academic fields, and in the training of new academics.

At institutions such as universities, some structural changes might include adding community impact to the criteria that faculty are evaluated on in their tenure case. For example, at Cornell Tech, faculty applicants must have "a strong interest in activities that reach beyond academia for external engagement and impact". Another change may be to engage activists and community members more directly in academia. In the past two decades, Cornell has appointed several faculty to the relatively new title of "Professor of the Practice" to provide non-traditional academics a more equal seat at the table. Finally, the academy may pursue community engagement not through research but instead through teaching and curriculum, for example using work study or internship programs. These could provide community partners with access to labor and expertise without an obligation to produce research findings.

Within academic fields, we need to change structures which influence what is valued in the publication and review process. For example, conferences and journals can introduce registered report processes, where researchers describe their intended research methods and procedure in advance. If approved, the future paper is conditionally accepted for publication. This method has already been used by some prominent journals to tackle a different metascience problem, the replication crisis, but may also help encourage researchers to commit to longer-term research

projects. Having a review process around research protocols may also be an opportunity for publication venues to create explicit rules and consistent norms for how to evaluate community-engaged research beyond findings on how positively that engagement was received.

Finally, in research labs where we are training graduate students to be the next generation of researchers, we should create good processes for how to conduct community-engaged work. Research labs are also the most immediate place where researchers can change norms around what the academy values, such as by shifting graduation expectations away from publications and enabling alternative ways to evaluate a students' work. For labs that conduct sustained work with a partner, researchers may wish to create an "understudy" model, where a first-year student learns in the practice of research and gains familiarity with a community partner while working on a project alongside a more senior student. This model may ease the transition when the senior student graduates, but if smooth transitions are not possible, all projects with a community partner should have defined plans of exit to ensure that expertise is not entirely lost when there's no money or people to continue the research. Researchers and ethics review boards should start considering plans of exit and potential community harms as a standard part of an ethical approach to community-engaged research.

These suggestions are merely the tip of the iceberg. Because the structural biases and disincentives are present in multiple levels of academic institutions, it will take more than a few changes to create the structural transformation necessary for the academy to live up to its lofty claims of community impact.

The academy and academics benefit from such claims, and creating research from the environment, states, personal information, and labor of our community partners is a privilege. In turn, we should work in a way that fully respects the responsibilities and obligations we have to our partners. We need to address the structures of academia that lead to the community impact gap, a gap between what we claim and what we do. This gap is dishonest and harmful, and however the difficult the efforts, we should be working to fill it, or we should quit our lofty claims to community impact when so many of our projects only scratch the surface.



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