

## Community Engagement in Practice

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### Research Question

How is “Community Engagement” described and operationalized in practice?

### Bottom Line

While the theoretical literature describes community engagement with richness and depth, the empirical literature did not reflect a consistent meaning of the term, or the activities associated with it.

### Background

Cornell Cooperative Extension’s (CCE) Community and Economic Vitality program area uses “community engagement” to describe an essential component of the process for sharing expertise to solve local problems. Further, CCE is interested in positioning its work in a university-community framework. To explore the research base for this work, we conducted a Systematic Translational Review (see [Systematic Translation Review Description](http://www.bctr.cornell.edu/?attachment_id=3965) at www.bctr.cornell.edu/?attachment\_id=3965) of the literature to collect descriptions of “community engagement” and its essential components, and to gain an understanding of how this concept is operationalized in practice.

### Methods

Search parameters were guided by consultation with university and extension practitioners and by an examination of both grey literature and published theoretical background papers. Using terms and concepts identified from these sources, the research team then located (see **Appendix 1**) and abstracted 114 empirical articles to synthesize the way community engagement has been described and operationalized in practice. It is important to note that literature discussing community engagement was not included, only articles that used or applied community engagement principles in a research design were included.

### Findings

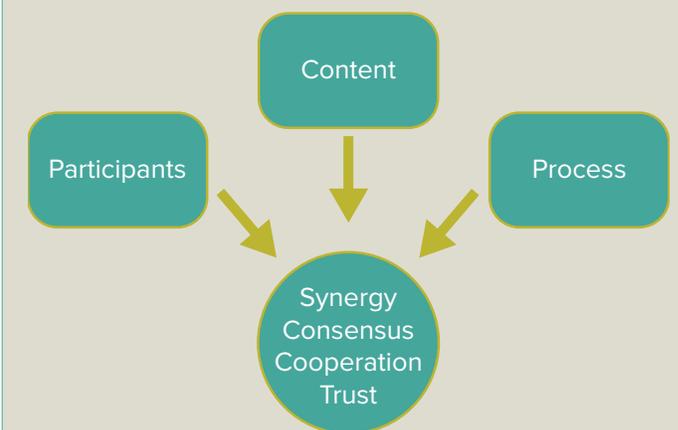
Descriptions of community engagement in the theoretical literature (Cornwall, 2008; Jones & Wells, 2007; Lasker & Weiss, 2003; Wolff, 2001) provide a rich portrayal of a process that includes broad and deep participation in information sharing and decision making. **Figure 1** illustrates the components of community engagement as described in theory.

The desired outcomes from a process of community engagement cited in the theoretical literature were: (1)

increased civic vitality and representation, and (2) capacity to address future problems successfully.

While the term “community engagement” was also used in the empirical literature, a consistently used definition or set of activities was not identified in this review. Instead, a broad range of both concepts and specific activities were mentioned as part of “community engagement.” **Table 1** illustrates the types of language used to describe the models, the fields of study represented, participants, methods, and stated goals of community engagement.

**Figure 1. Components of Community Engagement**



**Content:** Shared expertise rather than passive, one-way information transfer from experts to citizens

**Participants:** Stakeholders, citizens, researchers, extension educators, planners, policy-makers, technical experts

**Process:** Listening, problem-solving, conflict management, collaboration, power sharing, partnership, empowerment

**Findings - continued**

Many of the projects were self-described as community-based participatory research or a related variant. Most research was conducted from the perspective of public health, medicine, city and regional planning, or political science. Topics of study included health, economic development, and the natural environment. We abstracted the targets or participants of engagement activities, described by authors as stakeholders, interest groups, diverse community members, faith communities, underserved and/or underrepresented groups, representative leaders, and community members affected by the project.

The specific activities or components of research projects that corresponded to the principle of community engagement were often not explicitly named or linked. For example, a research project might have been described as using community-engaged principles, and go on to describe an

interactive website, focus groups, and community meetings, but the extent to which any of these activities related to or embodied the authors' definition of community engagement was not stated. A wide range of project activities described in these articles could be, and likely were, considered forms of community engagement (see column "Methods or Activities" in **Table 1**).

There were a wide range of goals of the research studies, with some studies stating primary or secondary goals, the attainment of which was thought to be accomplished by community engagement. For example, a research study might have an overarching goal of contributing to reducing health disparities by learning from affected populations, but link community engagement components of the study to specific goals, such as participant recruitment or cultural tailoring of an intervention. Few studies stated a primary goal of community engagement as an end in and of itself,

**Table 1. Community engagement as described in the empirical literature**

Model	Field or Topic	Participants	Methods or Activities	Goals
Community based participatory research (CBPR)	Environment, land use, energy, agriculture	Stakeholders Interest groups	Ongoing relationships, partnerships, collaboration	Community education / awareness
Community partnered participatory research (CPPR)	Public health, Medicine Policy	Broad or optimum representation	Provision of consultation, research, education, technical assistance, information	Capacity building Social capital Promote/ensure broad-based engagement, influence, and control
Community based participatory service (CBPS)	Research participation Economics, Business	Diverse community members	Supporting visioning, planning, strategy development	Productive group dynamics, synergy
Community engagement	Urban or community planning	Citizens Community volunteers	Power sharing, citizen control, delegated power, leadership facilitation	Community cohesion (partnerships, networks, consensus, trust)
Community coalition	Gerontology	Faith communities		Leadership development
Collaborative problem solving	Psychology	Underserved, underrepresented groups Representative leaders Gatekeepers Community members touched by the project	Lay leaders; "health promotores"; peer educators, mentors, and advocates Facilitation/coaching Problem solving, collaboration, group process, and conflict management Focus groups, interviews, surveys Social media Group meetings Town hall meeting, public forum	Citizenship Individual and/or Community empowerment Civic health (infrastructure, capacity, competence) Support the active contribution of local residents to community development Empower citizens to discover and use their own voice effectively

### Findings - continued

although several described processes that resulted in capacity building or collective empowerment of a group of people around a specific issue.

The role of universities in fostering local economic development through community engagement was the focus of a few articles. Two successful efforts were described, one in a land grant university and the other in a private university. Each project obtained the support of university leaders, faculty, and students, and aligned the university's mission with community development goals (Morris, Schindehitte, Edmonds and Watters, 2011; Stephenson 2011). Key components involved developing norms of mutuality and trust with local community members, reconfiguring the curriculum across schools within universities to integrate community development programs, and building the organizational capacity necessary for community programs to succeed (Morris, Schindehitte, Edmonds and Watters, 2011; Stephenson 2011).

### Conclusion

While the theoretical literature describes community engagement with richness and depth, the empirical

literature did not reflect a consistent meaning of the term, or the activities associated with it. This may suggest an imbalance between the development of theory of community engagement compared to the development of empirical research that examines or employs these theories in applied settings.

To better evaluate the value of community engagement, programs must clearly define their use of the term, including stating which specific activities were planned and conducted to support community engagement. In addition, the field would benefit from studies that describe or measure outcomes of community engagement (e.g. solutions to community problems that have been the result of a process that includes community engagement, changes in citizens' attitude or efficacy as a result of community engagement) in order to develop an evidence base that could support theoretical descriptions of the value of this approach.

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A full bibliography is available online at:  
[www.bctr.cornell.edu/?attachment\\_id=3968](http://www.bctr.cornell.edu/?attachment_id=3968)

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## Appendix 1

### Community Engagement in Practice Search Strategy

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We searched several databases from 1990-2014 for peer-reviewed articles with “community engagement” and “development” in the abstract or “community development” in the topic. We excluded articles outside the U.S., written pre-2000, and those focused on youth, service learning, editorials, theory, or not related to community engagement (CE).

