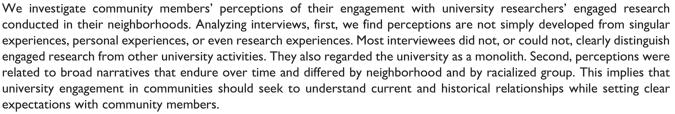# Neighbors' Perceptions of University Engaged "Research"

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Abstract

We investigate community members' perceptions of their engagement with university researchers' engaged research conducted in their neighborhoods. Analyzing interviews, first, we find perceptions are not simply developed from singular experiences, personal experiences, or even research experiences. Most interviewees did not, or could not, clearly distinguish engaged research from other university activities. They also regarded the university as a monolith. Second, perceptions were related to broad narratives that endure over time and differed by neighborhood and by racialized group. This implies that university engagement in communities should seek to understand current and historical relationships while setting clear expectations with community members.

Keywords

engaged scholarship, engaged research, community-based participatory research, community perception, university-community

Introduction

In the United States, universities are taking on greater community development roles and community engagement practices, increasing their footprint and influence in nearby neighborhoods. These footprints span across various areas, including local employment and procurement, affordable housing development, business incubation, community capacity building, youth education, crime and safety, and public health (Dubb, McKinley, and Howard 2013; Hodges and Dubb 2012). Communities interact more with universities and their researchers through a variety of channels, such as extension, engaged research, service-learning, online education, and urban development, resulting in a wide range of experiences (see chapters in Fitzgerald, Burack, and Seifer (2010) for discussions about each channel). Within this context, there are calls for scholars to conduct engaged research to tackle complex societal problems, including problems in their own backyards (e.g., Gavazzi and Gee 2018; Van Zandt et al. 2022). Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is one such practice, where university researchers involve community members in the research process so that the research addresses community's needs and demands (Israel et al. 2005). To conduct sustainable and reciprocal engaged research, understanding community members' experiences and perceptions of the university and its researchers is key to building better engaged research for future partnerships. However, scant research in the social sciences includes community member experiences and perceptions in university-community partnerships and community-engaged research (Lee et al. 2024).

Our purpose is to address this gap using a multi-site case study approach. We interviewed community leaders, neighborhood leaders, and community members with past experiences with engaged research, asking about their experiences, feelings, and perceptions regarding engaged research. By documenting voices from the community, we build upon the previous conversations about the inclusion of community voices (Bose 2015; Bruning, McGrew, and Cooper 2006; Etienne 2012; Wang et al. 2017; Weerts and Sandmann 2008). We add two novel and important findings to this small body of scholarship. First, perceptions are not simply developed from singular experiences, personal experiences, or even research experiences; most interviewees did not, or could not, clearly distinguish engaged research from other university activities. Second, and related, perceptions were related to broad narratives that endure over time. Distinct

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differences in perceptions and broader narratives are found across neighborhoods and racialized groups.

The Evolution of the University and Its Researcher as Neighbors

Changes in University Roles in Community and Economic Development of Urban Neighborhoods

Universities and their researchers have emerged as key actors in community and local economic development by taking on roles that were traditionally under the purview of government (Cisneros 1996; Ehlenz 2019; Fulbright-Anderson, Auspos, and Anderson 2001; Maurrasse 2001). Historically, the federal government mainly dealt with urban poverty and urban decline issues, for example, through the War on Poverty in the 1960s (Boyle and Silver 2005). However, the federal government's neoliberal turn in the 1980s passed community and local economic development onto local non-governmental institutions (Birch, Perry, and Taylor 2013; Boyle and Silver 2005), including universities (Boyer 1996; Taylor and Luter 2013).

University engagement in society is not new; universities have been perceived as having a social responsibility to serve society and their communities (Benson and Harkavy 2000; Boyer 1996; Maurrasse 2001). The establishment of land-grant universities in the late nineteenth century and the service-learning and outreach practices after the 1960s illustrate universities' social mission (Ehlenz 2018).

More recently, as universities struggled with decreased financial support from the government (Christopherson, Gertler, and Gray 2014), they needed to demonstrate their contribution to society. Furthermore, universities understood that their reputation is critical to attracting excellent faculty, staff, and students (Etienne 2012; Maurrasse 2001) and that their backyards reflected on the university. Universities started to pay attention to community issues, such as high crime rates or dilapidated housing, developing university-community partnerships to address "real or perceived threats" in and around the campus (Reardon 2006, 106). In this phase, university engagement shifted from one-way outreach to two-way "engaged" outreach (Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities 2001). This change can be related to the epistemological turn from peer science to the appreciation of local knowledge (Reardon 2006). For example, in addressing wicked planning problems that cannot be defined and solved solely by experts and university researchers (Rittel and Webber 1973; Weerts and Sandmann 2008), experts advocate and call for cherishing and valuing local knowledge in the planning research and process (Corburn 2003; Van Herzele 2004; Van Zandt et al. 2022). Indeed, the field of planning has become more involved in engaged research and community-based research, traditionally regarded as a practice-based field (Alexander 2022; Friedmann 1987), while awarding more PhD degrees

in recent years (Ganning 2024). With the aspirations and potential that universities use doctoral education as a discipline for engagement (Austin and Beck 2010), it is likely that the culture of engaged scholarship is being diffused into planning research.

Deepened relationships and engagement invoked scholarly discussion. In 1994, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development implemented the Community Outreach Partnerships Center (COPC) Program, where universities and their members (i.e., leadership, faculty, staff, and students) partnered with local communities and addressed economic, public health, and crime and safety issues (Feld 1998). During this time, planning scholars highlighted challenges and tensions in partnerships given differences in economic status, race, or gender between the university members and the community residents (Dewar and Isaac 1998; LeGates and Robinson 1998). Others were concerned about imbalances in power and resources that may recreate or reinforce existing social hierarchies (Cherry and Shefner 2004).

At the beginning of the 2000s, the concept of anchor institutions resulted in more discussions about universities' roles in urban areas (Fulbright-Anderson, Auspos, and Anderson 2001). Anchor institutions are defined as "large, spatially immobile, mostly non-profit organizations that play integral role in the local economy" (Taylor and Luter 2013, 8), and the discussion was largely about local economic development, including real estate, retail, and public space developments (Porter 2010; Smith, Pelco, and Rooke 2017).

Societal Changes, Engaged Scholars, and Perceptions of University Research

While the roles of universities as neighbors were being redefined, university faculty and staff conducted individual-level engagement through service-learning, community-based research, professional service, or civic service (Demb and Wade 2012). The rise of engaged scholarship is associated with societal demands, society-university relationships, changes in university roles, and scholars' recognition of universities' civic missions.

As Bok (1982) explained, in the early twentieth century, universities and professors chose to stay neutral, remaining isolated from political and social interests and arguing for academic freedom. The isolation of universities from the U.S. society changed to interdependence after the rapid growth of universities through the 1944 G.I. Bill, when universities needed financial support from the government and society needed expert knowledge. In this context, the civil rights movement that affected the federal government in the 1960s also put pressure on universities to pursue social goals and respond to societal concerns about social injustice.

Furthermore, universities are generally exempt from property taxes, and local governments and residents have demanded that universities make contributions in lieu of taxes (Bok 1982). To address this moral debt, universities

have mainly provided services to the community by sharing their facilities, offering professional and clinical services to the community, and providing community-based research and consulting activities. However, university researchers' research for general knowledge production has often been detached from such real-world issues as poverty, child development, and public education problems (Boyer 1996).

Engaged scholarship (Boyer 1996) urges university researchers to apply their knowledge to solve real-world issues, while resurrecting the civil mission (e.g., practicality, serviceability) of their research and orienting themselves toward reflective practitioners. Reflective practitioners sought to understand the perspectives of community-based research partners, which led to some research including community perspectives (Bose 2015; Bruning, McGrew, and Cooper 2006; Etienne 2012; Wang et al. 2017; Weerts and Sandmann 2008). Still, a recent literature review of peer-reviewed research demonstrates that very few peer-reviewed articles on CBPR in the social sciences have this focus (Lee et al. 2024). The articles that include community perspectives focus on singular projects or collaborations rather than taking a place-based approach, leaving unanswered the question of what community members in the backyards of universities think about university research. As such, this research aims to answer the following question: What are community members' perceptions of engaged research of a large land-grant university?

The Case: The Ohio State University and Its Neighbors

Located in the state capital of Columbus, Ohio, The Ohio State University (OSU) was founded as a land-grant university in 1870 and then placed on farmland on the city's near north side (Columbus Dispatch 2012). Both the city and the university would see dramatic growth in the following century. The city grew from the forty-second largest city in the United States in 1870 to the fourteenth largest in 2022, with over 900,000 residents; OSU grew to become the third largest university in the United States, with more than 67,000 students currently across its main and branch campuses. The main campus alone has more than 61,000 students learning on a 1,600-acre urban campus.

Similar to other urban universities, many of the urban neighborhoods near OSU experienced population loss and growing racial and economic segregation in the latter half of the twentieth century. Due to concerns related to safety and continued disinvestment in surrounding neighborhoods, OSU became engaged in real estate and community development in nearby neighborhoods beginning in the 1990s (Campus Partners 2022). Campus Partners, OSU's development arm, received national recognition for its initial development efforts near campus, and it eventually joined and led the Weinland Park Collaborative, a neighborhood revitalization effort over the past two decades in the adjacent Weinland Park neighborhood (Holley, Martin, and Sterrett 2020).

Since the 2008 housing crisis, Columbus urban neighborhoods have experienced significant reinvestment and population growth, creating new concerns in university-adjacent neighborhoods related to gentrification and displacement of lower income and long-term residents (Young 2018). For example, OSU-led neighborhood redevelopment efforts expanded to the Near East Side neighborhood, where university-owned hospital buildings are located, in 2010 (Travis 2021). The university's neighborhood redevelopment efforts are complex and have both counteracted and facilitated gentrification pressures. While the university has helped preserve and expand affordable housing, other investments have contributed to rising housing values and prices in nearby neighborhoods. The history and context of OSU-led urban redevelopment in these neighborhoods are critical elements of this case study.

Research Design and Methods

To answer our research question of "What are community members' perceptions of engaged research of a large, land-grant university," we used a multi-site case study research design. Our site selection included elements of critical and theory-based case selection approaches (Yin 2018). Critical cases are important cases that are likely to yield large amounts of information (Yin 2018). Our first criterion was to draw on cases from past engaged research projects led by researchers of OSU that involved Columbus community members in neighborhoods in which the university had a high density of activities.[1] We limited research experience to projects outside of the medical field. Next, we acknowledged the important role that power dynamics have in this work and that these dynamics are often embedded in communities and relationships between communities and outsiders (e.g., universities). Power differences are often related to wealth and the perceived or real ability to influence decision-makers. Historical disenfranchisement of a community can also lead to distrust of outside institutions. Thus, the second main criterion was to focus on communities that have experienced wealth inequities (measured through indicators of income, economic status, and homeownership) and have been historically disenfranchised. Given these criteria, study sites included Franklinton, Near East Side, Linden, South Side, and Weinland Park (see Figure 1). Interviews with community leaders confirmed our selection in terms of the high density of activities led by OSU and its researchers in these neighborhoods. The Engaged Scholars archive of OSU's Knowledge Bank (OSU 2023), a self-reported catalog of partnerships involving engaged research, teaching, and service from 2013 to 2019, also shows university researchers' engaged research and activities in the selected study sites (see Table S1 for the names and properties of the activities).

Figure 1. Five study sites in Columbus, Ohio (grayed area).
Source: Clark et al. (2021).

We collected data via interviews, using a stratified purposeful sampling approach that resulted in two different groups of informants. Group 1 interviewees included community leaders who have experience with OSU research across several neighborhoods, helping us gain a global understanding and confirm site selection. The eleven interviewees included people who hold leadership positions in local foundations, nonprofits, and local government departments and engage with OSU via their professional positions. Our semi-structured questions generally covered the perceived success of OSU engagement in the past and their role in that engagement, thoughts on the level of OSU engagement in neighborhoods, and, if applicable, questions about specific research project experiences.

Group 2 interviewees included neighborhood leaders and residents who have experience with OSU researchers' engaged research, but unlike group 1, that focuses on one neighborhood within which the live (or previously lived). We sought an even distribution across neighborhoods, using four main approaches to identify fifteen interviewees: people known by our team and OSU leadership; names given by group 1 interviewees; names provided by OSU colleagues during an engaged scholar community of practice meeting; and names found in a review of all abstracts from OSU community engagement conferences between 2013 and 2019. In addition, we used a snowball approach with group 2 interviewees, asking them to suggest names. Our semi-structured interview questions covered a specific research experience,

including their role, OSU and their researchers' roles, level of engagement, resources OSU brought, perceived success of that project and its impact, how the interviewee evaluated the partnership and expectations, and general feelings about OSU in their neighborhood. We compensated each of these participants with a $40 Visa gift card.

We conducted all the forty-five- to sixty-minute interviews via Zoom. As we transcribed the data, all team members read the interviews. We frequently met to discuss themes that emerged in relation to the research question. After twenty-seven interviews, we collectively determined that we had reached saturation and did not need to collect any more data. We then engaged in a half-day retreat to develop a consensus on some of the main findings, particularly the cross-cutting narratives that community and neighborhood leaders have regarding OSU's engaged research in their neighborhoods. With these initial findings, one of the PIs and one research assistant coded the data. The first approach to coding was descriptive, using structural coding from interview questions (Saldaña 2016). The second approach used axial coding to categorize the codes from the structural coding into themes (Saldaña 2016). It focused on the emergent narrative themes that the team had discussed earlier. We coded the data using these themes, followed by a round of initial, or open, coding to capture any new themes (Saldaña 2016).

The coding process resulted in four sets of themes, which will be described in the Findings section. Within each set, we described each theme and provided an illustrative quote for it (see Tables S2–S5 in the Supplementary Material). We noted any differences by group of interviewees, neighborhood, or demographics (namely between white and black interviewees). Furthermore, while this study is not specifically concerned with counting the number of times each theme is mentioned, we did include an "intensity" score of low, medium, and high relative to each set.

All the authors of this article have an interest in, and employ, community-based and participatory research methods with varying degrees of involvement in the neighborhoods of interest. As such, while we piloted the interviews, an experienced graduate student and non-research team member conducted most of the interviews. Because we knew many of the research participants, we felt interviewees might be more comfortable sharing negative experiences with an unknown interviewer.

Findings

Analysis of the data resulted in four sets of findings. The first two sets follow questions asked in the interviews: positive aspects of engaging in engaged research led by OSU researchers and negative aspects of engaging in OSU researchers' engaged research. The third set of findings are participants' own perceptions of engaged research led by OSU researchers. The fourth set of findings are participants' perceptions of the university that they consider to be shared with other community members. The themes within each category tend to be interrelated; thus, when interpreted collectively, they produce an overarching narrative. Table 1 provides an overview of the themes. For further information on the themes, Tables S2–S5 in the Supplementary Material contain definitions, quotes from participants, the intensity score, and noted group differences.

Positive Experiences of Engaging in OSU Research

The themes related to positive experiences (from most intense to least intense, which is relative within this section and related to the number of respondents expressing each theme) are Enhanced Expertise; Reciprocal Process; Honest, Open, Respectful, and Accessible Communication; Consistent, Collaborative Engagement; Increased Organizational Status; and New or Improved Networks (see Table S2 in the Supplementary Material).

Positive aspects of engaged research refer to aspects of outcomes or processes. Of these two, process-focused themes were more common, many related to meaningful relationships. The nature of communications with participants was especially important among the process-oriented aspects. The research process was more enjoyable when researchers clearly communicated time and outcome expectations, used language that was simple to understand, involved key community leaders and members, treated participants with a sense of respect and equality, and, hence, valued and incorporated their feedback (Honest, Open, Respectful, and Accessible Communication). To this latter point, one interviewee said,

> But I also appreciated while there was the research piece . . . We didn't let that totally drive the project when we got to points in the project, as you remember, where we were like, "Oh, we need to pause and revisit and restructure." (G1_I9)

In addition, university researchers earned trust and legitimacy by engaging with communities before research began (Consistent, Collaborative Engagement), involving key community leaders and residents early in and throughout the research process (Consistent, Collaborative Engagement; Honest, Open, Respectful, and Accessible Communication), and ensuring reciprocation, such as by providing gift cards and/or tangible assets or funding conference attendance (Reciprocal Process). The first of these practices helped align engaged research efforts to address the practical challenges of the research context, whereas the latter two demonstrated regard and value for participants. This notion of valuing participants was summarized well by one participant, who said that gift cards and other financial compensation were "kind of like valuing people's time," while project-concluding presentations and follow-through were akin to "valuing people's experiences."[2]

Table 1. An Overview of Themes.

Category	Theme	Theme definition
Positive Experiences of Engaging in OSU Research	Enhanced Expertise	Researchers offered an alternative perspective that broadened understanding, or data was contextual, insightful, or useful.
	Reciprocal Process	Researchers offered some kind of exchange for organizational or participant involvement, such as gift cards, tangible assets, or opportunities to learn to improve.
	Honest, Open, Respectful, and Accessible Communication	Researchers were clear about time and outcome expectations, involved key community members up-front, and treated organizations with a sense of equality, valuing their feedback.
	Consistent, Collaborative Engagement	Researchers were engaged before processes began to gather context, during to build buy-in, and after to ensure impacts. Known, consistent entities have a greater sense of trust and legitimacy, which makes projects better overall.
	Increased Organizational Status	Researcher involvement lent value and legitimacy to organizations.
	New or Improved Networks	Research efforts facilitated the growth of relationships that may have improved regional capacity.
Negative Experiences of Engaging in OSU Research	Lack of Personal or Material Continuity	Researchers or students sometimes dropped in, conducted research, presented, and left, especially when research was funded by grants. Post-project abandonment led participants to feel used, fatigued, and betrayed, particularly when results were controversial or there was no benefit to the organization or community of focus beyond a report.
	Power Imbalances	Researchers tended to assume ownership or took over processes, resulting in implicit pressure to defer to the will of the university.
	Out of Touch and Lacking Empathy	Researchers demonstrated cultural incompetency, used big words that their audience did not understand, shoehorned or ignored respondent concerns, and presented unrealistically long surveys and unimplementable recommendations.
	Treating Participants Like Lab Rats	Participants felt prodded by researchers, when there was no follow-up, clear benefits to organizations or communities of focus, or collaboration before or during the research process.
	Student Quality Issues	Participants or their organizations felt frustrated and in the dark when students lacked poor writing skills or didn't consistently communicate.
	Research Fatigue	Participants stated there is a feeling that the university asks about participating in projects too frequently, which has led to "OSU fatigue."
	Difficulty Recruiting and Improper Engagement	Researchers had a difficult time securing participation, sometimes because they didn't listen to guidance about how to engage (e.g., they showed up inappropriately at peoples' homes and community events).
Participants' Perceptions of OSU Research	Research Ambiguity	Participants either provided an example that is service- or teaching-related when asked about research or stated they cannot separate the research experience from the rest of their university experiences.
	Elephant, Gorilla, or Beast-Like Institution	Participants described the university as an elephant, gorilla, or beast with outsized influence (for good or for ill).
	Real Estate Interest	Participants thought that the university's actions were motivated by real estate interests.
	Deep Pockets (Though Not Spending)	Participants thought that the university tended to contribute few dollars to projects.
	Institutionally Decentralized	Participants considered that the university is diffuse, which makes effective community relations more difficult.
Participants' Perceptions of OSU That They Consider to Be Shared with Other Community Members	White, Elitist, and Oppressive Institution	There's a broad narrative, and some personal experiences, noting instances of disrespect or outright oppression.
	Control Tendencies	Participants think the university sees itself at the top of a hierarchy or as the expert in the room and may share little responsibility or authority.
	Variable Expertise	Participants think that researchers (faculty and students) from the university have varying levels of efficaciousness and expertise in their areas of interest.
	Distant, Complex, Other	Community members and participants think the university and those affiliated with it are foreign inaccessible, and unlike themselves. When they think of the university, they think of only the football team and High Street.
	Financial Burden	Community members and participants think that the costs associated with working with the university are too high.

Note: Please refer to Tables S2 through S5 in the Supplementary Material for exemplary quotes, intensity, and group differences.

The most positive engaged research outcomes were those that transformed a participant's context (Enhanced Expertise). Some participants used engaged research data to develop a greater understanding of the challenges they sought to address, helping them adjust operations and enhance their effectiveness. For example, one interviewee said, "I liked it because I think oftentimes . . . I will say from [my organization's] perspective, we don't have that research base. And so I often felt like we had the hands-on experience with helping to develop a number of programs (G1_I9)." Another participant said, "Being a neighborhood-oriented initiative, basically aiming to address poverty, the whole product that OSU produced was much richer than I think we might've gotten in other scenarios where we just get a list of indicators . . . (G2_I2)." Other, more secondary outcomes included the relationships developed during the research process (New or Improved Networks) and increased organizational value and legitimacy gained by working with OSU and its researchers (Increased Organizational Status), which could be leveraged for other resources.

When looking across groups of respondents, group 2 interviewees mentioned the themes Enhanced Expertise; Reciprocal Process; Honest, Open, Respectful, and Accessible Communication; and New or Improved Networks. Black interviewees were more likely to mention Honest, Open, Respectful, and Accessible Communication and New or Improved Networks, while white respondents were more likely to mention Enhanced Expertise.

Overall, positive perceptions appear to be stronger for people with closer/more involved partnerships with an individual university researcher, compared to those who were involved in more general advisory groups. Alternatively, while interview participant G2_I5 was involved with OSU research as a "partner," they did not describe a specific relationship with an individual researcher, instead holding negative perceptions about how the research process was conducted and the involvement of community members. Notably, this description came from a person in Weinland Park, a neighborhood, as described by another participant (G2_I9), being subjected to a "haphazard" array of OSU research/involvement. Part of this description may be because there is a lot of university researchers involved to varying degrees in Weinland Park, and people in the community are not necessarily able to keep track of who is who.

Negative Experiences of Engaging in OSU Research

The themes related to negative experiences are (in order of most intense to least intense) Lack of Personal or Material Continuity, Power Imbalances, Out of Touch and Lacking Empathy, Treating Participants Like Lab Rats, Student Quality Issues, Research Fatigue, and Difficulty Recruiting and Improper Engagement (see Table S3 in the Supplementary Material).

Negative themes arose when OSU researchers (including students) acted in ways that were antithetical to positive research experiences. Some researchers treated participants as subjects rather than collaborators, did not seem to consider how processes might affect participants, and showed disregard for reciprocation or outcomes (Lack of Personal or Material Continuity). For example, one interviewee described an "egregious situation" in which students came to his neighborhood and set unrealistic and potentially harmful expectations among children in a nearby neighborhood, all just for a class project. He said, "People getting their hopes up about something, and then nothing materializes (G2_I10)." Participants sometimes felt objectified by university researchers, particularly when the community does not see collaborations during the research or follow-up after research or see any clear benefits to them (Treating Participants like Lab Rats). When these experiences repeat too frequently, as multiple engaged research projects come into communities, participants express research fatigue (Research Fatigue).

Treating participants as subjects of a study suggests a more traditional research framework, whereby university researchers develop questions in isolation, identify a target population, study it, and leave. It assumes university researchers' ownership or control over research and overlooks the value of mutuality (Power Imbalances), which can result in participants feeling used, exhausted, and distrustful (Research Fatigue). One respondent said,

> Yeah, the benefits of the relationship between OSU and the reach in the community that surround it relates to research? The reason I say it's one side(d) is that the benefactor of that work is usually the researcher and their team. Seldomly is the benefactor the subjects, the research subjects, or the research environment even, right? (G1_I11)

These results are compounded by further characteristics that express a disregard for the perspectives of participants, namely, cultural incompetency, use of overly complicated language, and unrealistically long surveys and unimplementable recommendations (Out of Reach and Lacking Empathy). University researchers were criticized for ignoring guidance about where and how to recruit participants and thus failing to retain community members' participation (Difficulty Recruiting and Improper Engagement).

Other negative experiences were less dispositional and more related to aptitude and logistics. Working with students can be difficult because they sometimes communicate irregularly or ineffectively, the research process can strain organizational capacity, recruitment can be especially challenging when research participants have low incomes and tumultuous life conditions, and the quality of products is variable (Student Quality Issues). To this last point, one respondent said,

> What happens, and that happens with everything, is sometimes if somebody's using a bunch of graduate students, sometimes you don't get quite the quality work that you had

hoped. But it's a different kind of thing. It's not the same power dynamic. It's just understanding kind of who it is actually doing the work you're expecting and making sure that there's quality control over that. And timelines are met. (G1_I8)

Looking across groups, group 2 interviewees were more likely to discuss the themes Lack of Personal or Material Continuity, Out of Touch and Lacking Empathy, and Difficulty Recruiting and Improper Engagement.

Participants' Own Perceptions of OSU Research

This set of findings represents themes of perceptions held only by participants. The five main themes represented in this set of findings are (in order of intensity) Research Ambiguity; Elephant, Gorilla, or Beast-like Institution; Real Estate Interest; Deep Pockets (Though Not Spending); and Institutionally Decentralized (see Table S4 in the Supplementary Material). It is important to note here that interviewees had a difficult time distinguishing engaged research from service or teaching-related projects, much less from general outreach by faculty, staff, and/or students at OSU, across all groups (Research Ambiguity). One interviewee remarked, "It's hard to disentangle it (OSU research) from 10 years of all different facets of OSU being involved (G2_I5)."

Participants described OSU as a grand, decentralized institution with a lot of sometimes not well-executed potential to build effective community relations (Institutionally Decentralized). Some of the most positive comments about working with the university, including bringing partners, credibility, and financial backing to projects, were qualified with the critiques that OSU was not spending enough money itself (Deep Pockets). One respondent said, "I look at Ohio State like a big, awesome bundle of wonderful great resources that I don't feel like we've fully, as a city, been able to capitalize on (G1_I2)." This ability to deliver resources entails a significant amount of power, weight, or status. Hence, OSU is often deemed a big gorilla, elephant, or beast, and one of the worst parts about working with such a beast is that it can exert inordinate influence (Elephant, Gorilla, or Beast-like Institution). Outside of negotiating tables, the perception is that the size of the university could impact whole neighborhoods. One interviewee said about their neighborhood, "I think, overall, there's still a wariness, that just like, 'We're not sure like what this big behemoth is going to do because the neighborhood could shift depending on what the whims of the university are' (G2_I9)."

Furthermore, the motivations of the university and its researchers are sometimes questioned. People stated that economic development projects are only pursued because the university wants the area around it to be vibrant out of self-interest (Real Estate Interest). This desire to preserve organizational image was also discussed in relation to past

crime incidents in which students were victims followed by the creation of Campus Partners. It was said that only then did the university begin taking interest in nearby neighborhoods, suggesting that negative narratives endure in certain communities. As one participant stated in regard to a past event, it is "a unique challenge for the university to have to grapple with something that's not entirely in their control, but is certainly part of their effect in a community (G2_I3)."

As expected, Real Estate Interests, or the theme that participants think most motivates the university's actions, was predominantly mentioned by respondents in Weinland Park and the Near East Side. Group 1 and white respondents were more likely to talk about how the university is institutionally decentralized, making effective community relations more difficult.

Participants' Perceptions of the University That They Consider to Be Shared with Other Community Members

This set of findings includes themes related to both participants' own perceptions of the university and how they described how others in the community perceive the university. The themes include (from most intense to least intense) White, Elitist, and Oppressive Institution; Control Tendencies; Variable Expertise; Distant, Complex, Other; and Financial Burden (see Table S5 in the Supplementary Material).

Two aspects of this category are less relevant to the central narrative described so far. First, the level of quality that research experiences demonstrate is inconsistent (Variable Expertise). Researchers from universities show varying levels of efficaciousness and expertise in their areas of interest. Second, some believe that the university charges too much (Financial Burden) when, as a land grant institution, perhaps it should not charge at all. Participants thought that the costs associated with working with OSU were too high. As one interviewee said about a community member's response to them talking about an OSU research project, "'Oh, it's nice that OSU is funding this research.' And I'm like, 'No they're not. We are paying them' (G1_I1)."

More important are the themes that pertain to notions of obscurity, inaccessibility, control tendencies, and historically "problematic" culture. Participants thought OSU sees itself at the top of a hierarchy in engaged research or as the expert in the room, sharing little responsibility or authority (Control Tendencies).

Along with the preceding negative themes, in conjunction with remarks about OSU being a "beast" and holding disproportionate power or weight at meetings, respondents described an image of a traditionally elite institution (White, Elite, and Oppressive Institution). The institution is decentralized, resulting in variable individual experiences with it, but it generally conveys a sense of imposition. This imposing

nature manifests in varying levels of overtness, including the implicit pressure that the university researcher could walk away at any time. At a higher level, one might consider the financial investments the university makes or attempt unilateral determinations of how an engaged research project should progress.

About three-quarters of black interviewees and one-third of white interviewees discussed OSU as a white, elitist, and oppressive institution. One respondent stated quite clearly that OSU as an institution is lumped together with other white, elitist, and oppressive institutions as part of the broader "system" that has caused generational trauma (G1_I10). A few interviewees had very specific and personal experiences with OSU and racism. One interviewee recounted their time as a student, saying that

> The level of blatant, patriarchy and systems of white supremacy in the [department] at that time was like . . . I kept stopping literally and saying to people, I'm sorry, is this a joke right now what you just said to me? Are you kidding? You're not kidding. (G2_I4)

This same interviewee discussed a recent negative experience when trying to partner with OSU on a small grant program, saying,

> . . . so what you need to understand is that this is how systems of White supremacy are perpetuated. It doesn't require a vicious intent. It doesn't require the use of the clan. You don't have to lynch anybody. You give just enough money to be able to say we funded some Black people, but not enough money for anything significant to happen. (G2_I4)

Related to OSU as a white, elitist, oppressive institution is OSU as a distant and complex "other" (Distant, Complex, Other). For example, interviewees expressed how children in their neighborhoods do not see OSU as a place to go after high school. According to one,

> For kids in this neighborhood, Ohio State might as well be the London School of Economics. I mean, Ohio State is the place that you go if you play football or basketball, but that's, and that's not just in this neighborhood, there are a whole lot of people who consider themselves to be big fans of Ohio State. But if you gave them $10,000, they couldn't find one library on campus. They have no real connection to the institution. (G2_I4)

In sum, OSU is in an almost paradoxical position. It is highly credible and brimming with the potential to improve organizations and communities, and it has done much good, contributing to the real transformation of people's lives and the positive development of the regional economy. However, it possesses a seemingly indelible mark of historical oppression and exclusivity that may carry on today in more subtle forms of detachment. Whether OSU will continue to do good

seems to depend on the extent to which individuals with power value participants' feedback, share control in decision-making processes, and ensure that outcomes benefit more than just themselves.

Discussion

Through interviews with community leaders and community members with experience with the research led by OSU researchers, we documented voices from the community about the university's engaged research. While we find that many of the themes in our findings correlate with themes in other literature, we discuss two notable and distinguished findings regarding how community leaders and community members perceive engaged research and how perceptions and related narratives of the university endure over time. Finally, we suggest that planning pedagogy deliver our findings via planning studio courses.

Positive experiences in engaging in OSU research discussed in the interviews included expertise, reciprocity, communication, consistency, organizational statuses, and networks. The themes from the positive experiences were similar to what the two-way approach of engagement pursues (Weerts and Sandmann 2008). In the two-way approach of engagement, university researchers and staff work with community members by interacting at every phase, sharing each side's perspectives, and exchanging resources.

We also heard from research participants about some of the challenges, tensions, and conflicts also highlighted in the literature, many related to real or perceived inequities. Some literature emphasizes that sustainable relationships and engaged research relationships are important (Cantor, Englot, and Higgins 2013; LeGates and Robinson 1998). However, similar to Wang et al.'s (2017) findings, we found that community members have a skeptical view of continued engagement through research. For example, community members expressed that engaged research activities sometimes make them feel like lab rats, providing little benefit to the participants, with researchers deserting them once the research activities are done. This makes community members feel research fatigue and resentfulness, and it likely reduces the chance that they will participate in future engaged research opportunities. Research fatigue and related negative experiences were often attributed to students as university researchers. Participants in two neighborhoods characterized students in engaged research as being ineffective (not setting expectations), communicating poorly, and appearing irregularly. Without adequate training on effective communication, language use, and empathetic engagement and monitoring, student work may not be contributing to sustainable research relationships.

Another issue of inequity raised by participants relates to the distribution of costs and benefits in research relationships. As universities have relatively more human, political, and

financial resources, university researchers and community members are likely to be in hierarchical relationships rather than partnerships (Cherry and Shefner 2004; Weerts and Sandmann 2008). Universities tend to control relationships, or act like an Elephant, a Gorilla, or a Beast-like Institution. These behaviors deviate from the expectations of CBPR, in which university researchers recognize community members as their partners rather than research subjects (Winkler 2013). In this asymmetrical relationship, community members can feel exploited when they have not been debriefed or do now know what has been done (Holley and Harris 2018).

Despite the resource imbalance favoring the university, Baum (2000) pointed out that universities often do not allocate enough financial resources to community engagement. Our research participants mentioned that while universities bring external funds, they do not contribute enough university money. While this study does not discuss the real intent of universities' financial contributions, universities with fewer financial resources might engage in strategies to bring external funds instead of contributing their resources (Hodges and Dubb 2012), especially considering the financial struggle in the neoliberal era. Lacking financial resources from federal agencies and private foundations (Baum 2000; LeGates and Robinson 1998), participating in university's engaged research can place a financial burden on community members.

Inequity also results from the different societal positions of researchers and partners and other cultural differences that hinder mutual understanding (Weerts and Sandmann 2008) and, therefore, feelings of reciprocity in relationships. Challenges from cultural differences come from educational and economic status (LeGates and Robinson 1998), race, class, or gender differences (Dewar and Isaac 1998). These tensions were revealed in the interviews, and the participants described the universities as being Out of Touch and Lacking Empathy and Distant, Complex, and Other, as well as using the complicated language of university researchers.

We now turn our attention to two related and notable findings regarding how community leaders and community members perceive engaged research and how these perceptions, and related narratives of the university, endure over time. First, while we confirmed that all research participants had engaged in OSU research, most interviewees did not or could not clearly distinguish engaged research from other types of outreach and engagement, such as outreach services, service-learning, or professional services provided by OSU faculty, staff, and students. Most research participants had had multiple interactions with the university, and many had had formal relationships (e.g., as a student or employee) with the university in the past. To those participants, the university seemed to become a singular entity outside of specific experiences. This became clear when participants, except for black participants, made general statements about OSU research (e.g., "OSU is a beast") but had a difficult

time providing specific negative experiences with engaged research. As a result, while we intended to document voices from community leaders and community members about the perception of the university's engaged research, the university's institutional history and non-research-related issues have affected the perception of the university.

Second, the lens through which participants view the university, university researchers' engaged research, and associated narratives endure over time. The narratives of our participants were influenced by generic stories passed down and around, from specific past personal and familial experiences (sometimes decades old), such as a time when a former president made a comment during a meeting in the 1990s or when a family member was denied student housing because of their race. They were also affected by the ever-present physical legacy of development, demolition, and investment in nearby neighborhoods. Narratives, whether built from what is passed on to someone or experienced personally, are difficult to change and must be understood and navigated by future researchers, as their importance in planning research and practice was emphasized by previous studies (Redden et al. 2022; Sandercock 2011). This adds to the previous studies that studied how race, power, and privilege affect the current relationship (Wang et al. 2017) and how past individual and institutional relationships shape the ways the relationships are built in the future (Wiewel and Lieber 1998). It should be noted that narratives are not always negative. For example, a participant said that community members feel pride in being affiliated with the university for non-research-related reasons (e.g., OSU football team's achievements).

When discussing how the perceptions of the university are shaped and endure, however, we cannot ignore that experiences and perceptions are not universal across all participants. The main sources of differences in perceptions were race and neighborhood. First, race played a critical role in differences in negative perceptions. White participants described negative perceptions of the university in generic terms with little or no specificity about where those perceptions come from or why they have them. On the contrary, most black participants often described how their negative perceptions are firmly rooted in specific historical reasons for distrust associated with the university's history of racism. This difference confirms the influence of race (Wang et al. 2017) and history (Wiewel and Lieber 1998) on current relationships.

Second, participants in different neighborhoods have different experiences and, thus, different perceptions, especially with regard to real estate–related investments. Participants from Weinland Park and the Near East Side, where OSU has made major real estate–related investments, thought that the main motivation for the university's engagement was real estate interests. These two neighborhoods were heavily affected by the university's real estate development roles in delivering public safety solutions and pursuing self-interest (whether enlightened or not). Conversely, participants from

South Side, Franklinton, and Linden, where no major real estate investments have been made, rarely questioned the university's motivation. This difference implies that when a university's roles are mainly focused on real estate development, as discussed in scholarly articles about anchor institutions (e.g., Porter 2010; Smith, Pelco, and Rooke 2017), community members may have a biased view of the university's engagement, regardless of its original intention. It also implies that university researchers themselves need to critically examine whether their engaged research would further university administrators' interests, such as real estate development.

These findings raise important questions about what qualifies as engaged research compared to other types of outreach and engagement. How should university researchers articulate their engaged research to community leaders, members, and the public? Importantly, does any of this differentiation matter in the end? Community members likely do not care about distinctions between engaged research, service, teaching, and other university activities. What they likely care more about is how the research fits into the broader ecosystem of OSU and their historical understanding of the university.

The findings from the university and its researchers' engaged research have relevance for planning education. The field of planning emphasizes engaged learning and participatory research and action (Thering and Chanse 2011; Vasudevan and Novoa E. 2022), and planning research, teaching, and service directly intersect with engaged scholarship in urban neighborhoods. For example, the Engaged Scholars archive (OSU 2023) has thirty-one projects conducted in the five study sites of this research (Table S1). Of the thirty-one projects, eight (26 percent) focused on community development and planning, and another sixteen (51 percent) on food security and public health, which are deeply related to planning. Along with the academic discussions and practices, we suggest planning courses to address our findings to better understand the community perceptions of the university and its engaged research, particularly in the studio model. We emphasize the studio model because the studio model and service learning, among many planning pedagogy methods, feature engaged teaching as its foundational element (Bose et al. 2014; Long 2012; Schuman 2006). Also, the studio model is a common pedagogical technique to engage urban neighborhood redevelopment needs (Kim 2024; Tamminga and De Ciantis 2012) and cultivate unique local knowledge (Barry et al. 2023).

Conclusion

In this research, we gathered and analyzed perspectives on the university's engaged research through the voices of community leaders and community members, documenting their language and identifying key themes about their perceptions of the university and its researchers' engaged research in nearby neighborhoods. We found that university researchers' engaged research and associated relationships have both positive and negative impacts on perceptions of the university, as discussed in previous studies. However, perceptions are not simply developed from singular experiences, personal experiences, or even research experiences.

Our unique contribution is the finding that the current perception of the university's engaged research among community leaders and community members is intertwined with narratives about non-research-related issues and past experiences or relationships. In the neoliberal era, in which the role of nongovernmental institutions has become more and more important in community development, it is critical that universities and their researchers understand how their engaged research and other activities in neighborhood communities are perceived and continuously revise the ways they build relationships with them. We hope that our findings emphasized above provide insights into reaching out to community members and building research relationships for planning scholars and university-affiliated faculty and staff. Naturally, this research poses questions about how the university could overcome the enduring narratives of extractive and oppressive institutions and how to build a constructive research relationship, which is assumed to benefit communities.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. For this study, "community" is understood as a place-based community (rather than a community of interest, for example).
2. It should be noted that one interviewee questioned the value of gift cards, suggesting that collaboration was more indicative of valuing someone's time and that reciprocity was more than a gift card.

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