

Building Impactful Community-University Partnerships Through a Shared Power Approach

Nadia Anderson, Guy Cousins, Thomas Farrow,
Cindy Fox, Rickey Hall, Colleen Hammelman, Chrystal Joy,
Ryan Kilmer, Isabelle Nilsson, Elizabeth Racine,
Debra Terrell, and Byron White

Abstract

Literature on participatory research methods emphasizes the importance of cocreating knowledge with community partners and academics in pursuit of social change. This article provides a case study reflection on a project that brought together academics from multiple disciplines and community leaders who have been working to address complex social challenges for decades. With a shared power foundation, the collaborative leveraged deep community leader expertise and experience alongside multi-institutional and multidisciplinary academic research to design an innovative solution to food access challenges rife with opportunity for investment from multiple stakeholders. This case study shares reflections from this community-university partnership grounded in shared power and seeking tangible solutions to a complex and long-standing challenge. Lessons learned demonstrate the importance of continued and transparent attention to power sharing and the collective pursuit of holistic change. This paper contributes to literature on participatory action research and community-university partnerships by providing a reflective case study on an innovative and effective power-sharing model.

In late 2020, community leaders addressing complex societal challenges joined with academic researchers from multiple disciplines to collaboratively envision a food ecosystem anchored by a food cooperative in Charlotte, NC. With a shared power foundation, the collaborative (dubbed a Community Innovation Incubator) leveraged deep community leader expertise and engaged research methods to design a tangible solution to a long-standing challenge.¹

This article examines this project as a community-university partnership (CUP) case study. We review our strategies for enabling cocreation, power sharing, and collective pursuit of tangible solutions. This partnership was formed to address long-standing disinvestment in the food system for residents living in marginalized neighborhoods of West Charlotte. While this project focused on a food cooperative, the lessons learned from this approach could be applied to collaborative efforts addressing other complex, long-standing societal challenges.²

Lessons learned demonstrate the effectiveness of operating from a shared power perspective,

which means prioritizing community leadership and tangible solutions, harnessing academic expertise and shared learning objectives, and pursuing a transparent, honest, and relational process. As more universities ask researchers to pursue community-engaged scholarship and contribute to their local communities, it is important to share case studies of cocreation. This article contributes to literature on participatory research and CUPs by reflecting on an innovative and impactful model of shared power and knowledge production.

In this article, we (a) ground our effort in literature on participatory action research (PAR) and CUPs addressing complex societal challenges; (b) provide details about the formation and implementation of our project; and (c) share reflections to illustrate how we diverged from more traditional CUPs by emphasizing shared power and tangible change. We conclude with a discussion of lessons learned to support more effective cocreated, community-engaged, and action-oriented research.

¹ In continuing the collaborative ethos of this project, the authors for this paper are listed in alphabetical order. The corresponding author is Colleen Hammelman, colleen.hammelman@charlotte.edu. ² Note: This paper employs a reflective approach to identify lessons learned from our CUP. As such, a deep discussion of the project's implications for food systems research is beyond its scope.

Participatory Research Through Community-University Partnerships

This collaborative project proceeded from a PAR approach emphasizing the coproduction of knowledge and utilizing action, reflection, theory, and practice to pursue tangible solutions to critical community concerns (Bradbury, 2015). Action research definitions, terminology, and approaches take many shapes and forms (Blythe et al., 2008; Fals-Borda, 1991; Pynch, 2007). Most are grounded in valuing the capacity, competency, and perspectives of multiple knowledge producers (see, e.g., B. A. Israel et al., 1998; Kilmer et al., 2021; Ochocka et al., 2010; Stern, 2019; Viswanathan et al., 2004). They involve simultaneous processes of taking action, conducting research, and critical reflection (Schouten et al., 2020). As partner-oriented approaches, action research values the expertise and insights of community partners and nonacademic ways of knowing, including understandings of history, culture, and local contexts (Baum et al., 2006; Kilmer et al., 2021). Action research is grounded in relationships and transparent reflection on the relationships (and power hierarchies) embedded in research (Bradbury & Divecha, 2020). This disrupts more typical academic and professional methods in which knowledge is produced by disciplinary experts and then delivered to a passive public (Anderson, 2014). In addition, it disrupts urban decision-making processes by doing what Cruz and Forman (2020) describe as “infiltrating institutional protocols . . . to transform top-down urban policy and economy” (p. 191).

Some approaches to PAR, including ours, develop research questions and processes collectively rather than starting with a researcher-posed question (Blyth et al., 2008; Fals-Borda, 1991). PAR is characterized by coarticulation of research aims, collaborative problem-solving, and cocreation of actions and solutions (Greenwood & Levin, 2007). Such attempts at coproduction are particularly effective as an iterative process that advances community control, joint decision-making, and shared ownership of processes and products (Bengle et al., 2021; Viswanathan et al., 2004; White, 2009). Iterative action-reflection cycles, the complex nature of coproducing projects with diverse stakeholders, and the drive toward tangible solutions can make it difficult to identify a priori the methodology and specific outcomes of action research projects (Schouten et al., 2020). In this regard, our collective found that the

process-oriented, iterative, and reflective approach to coproducing research was critical for developing deep relationships and creating a context of shared power.

An orientation toward action sets PAR apart from more traditional CUPs, as it contests the idea that participation is sufficient. PAR scholars have pointed to the ways in which simple participation can prove tokenistic, extractive, and harmful (Askins, 2018). Instead, PAR seeks to put solutions and the ability to act on them in the hands of community leaders and knowledge holders (Arnstein, 2019; Stern, 2019). PAR holds promise for addressing complex challenges with “messy” solutions built on the democratization of knowledge and a wide plurality of stakeholders (Ney & Verweij, 2015). Engaging in CUPs with this action orientation can contribute to sustainable community transformation by bringing research (grounded in theory and data) together with tangible practices, policy solutions, appreciation of history and culture, and knowledge of place. Critically, PAR provides opportunities for improving community and student learning outcomes through its place-based grounding (Gamboa et al., 2023).

Given PAR’s action focus, the approach is well suited for improving the potential of community-engaged scholarship to be a high-impact practice and to motivate community participation (Almjed et al., 2022). Indeed, action research stands out as an effective approach for addressing complex social challenges, such as food insecurity, that require systematic, holistic, and dynamic engagement among differently situated experts bringing diverse knowledge, skills, and resources (Lasker & Weiss, 2003). Food security and access is a complex challenge that requires engagement with multiple sectors, activities, scales, and policy domains (Candel, 2014; Sonnino et al., 2016). Scholars have argued that it is critical to engage diverse knowledge sources to create innovative solutions to multifaceted, multilayered problems. This case study contributes to these areas of study by presenting a CUP that sought to create a tangible solution (a food cooperative) to a complex challenge (decades of food system disinvestment).

Background and Approach

Building the Partnership

In this section, we describe the context of our work and the processes we undertook to develop the partnership and identify our objectives,

approach, and learnings. The project collaborative was formed in late 2020 in response to long-standing food access challenges for neighborhoods in West Charlotte, NC. We also sought to demonstrate the potential of PAR projects to address complex community-driven challenges and bring about systemic change. While many researchers at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNC Charlotte) practice PAR, the scope of their efforts is frequently limited to researchers from a specific academic discipline and confined to a targeted community initiative that affects a relatively limited number of residents. While these outcomes are mutually beneficial to campus and community, they are often perceived as linked to a specialized and even marginalized research methodology rather than reflecting a practice essential for the university to achieve its strategic priority of “co-producing transformative solutions to societal issues and challenges” (UNC Charlotte, 2021, p. 23). In this project, two principles of PAR arose as most critical to achieving our goals: (a) the ability to foster shared power between academic researchers and community partners and (b) the pursuit of tangible solutions that were relevant to community residents and had potential to create systemic community change.

To elevate this perception, UNC Charlotte’s urbanCORE, a newly formed office in the Division of Academic Affairs (CORE is an acronym for Community-Oriented Research and Engagement), sought to advance a prominent demonstration of PAR. Since the integrity of such an initiative required that it be truly community-driven rather than manufactured by the university, urbanCORE sought to identify a critical initiative around which community leaders had already mobilized and advanced but had struggled to bring to fruition. For such an endeavor to be successful, it also needed to be a focus area where the university possessed relevant research expertise. One goal was for the university to play the role of what McKnight (2022) calls the “precipitant,” where an institution enables citizen action without defining for residents what should be done, how it should be done, and who should do it. At the same time, for the project to produce meaningful results, there had to be an opportunity for civic investment that could fund the research and, potentially, the implementation of its outcome. The search

for the right opportunity gravitated toward a decades-long battle by leaders in West Charlotte to build neighborhood food systems grounded in health, wealth building, and social equity.

Charlotte, one of the fastest growing U.S. cities, has a long history of racial segregation and discrimination that has produced uneven life outcomes and opportunities for residents of different racial groups and geographic locations (Chetty et al., 2014; Hanchett, 2020). Today, Charlotte is characterized by economic growth and significant population expansion alongside consistently low rates of socioeconomic mobility. Neighborhoods in West Charlotte have experienced decades of disinvestment but are increasingly facing gentrification pressures. Residents in that area, the majority of whom are Black and from low-income backgrounds, are more likely to face food insecurity, health challenges, limited access to basic needs, and constrained socioeconomic mobility.

One key community challenge often raised in public fora is residents’ limited access to an affordable full-service grocery store. The last full-service grocery store along the West Boulevard Corridor closed in 1989 (Moore, 2021). Community leaders recognized that grocery stores’ systemic disinvestment in the area over many decades (what some call food apartheid or supermarket redlining; see Reese, 2019) produced negative health and economic outcomes for residents. In response, community leaders have been building assets from the ground up and seeking opportunities to establish new neighborhood resources that promote resident success rooted in principles of food sovereignty. The CUP approach described here addressed this topic but could be applied to similar complex challenges in other sectors and places.³

As urbanCORE staff began to take notice of this movement in West Charlotte, they identified a small group of university researchers with PAR experience as well as expertise and partnerships in community and academia related to West Charlotte and food systems, affirming the university’s capacity to contribute to the community’s existing efforts. Separately, public health administrators and elected officials from the local government (Mecklenburg County) had expressed to coauthor White a desire to invest public funds in a strategy

³ Indeed, a second Community Innovation Incubator launched in 2023 in partnership with stakeholders in a different neighborhood seeking to remake the use of public space (Israel, 2024).

that could address issues of food security in West Charlotte. While the county had worked with community leaders around food access solutions, none had received significant funding, creating frustration among all parties.

With these conditions for a meaningful PAR collaborative aligning, coauthor White met in the fall of 2020 with numerous community stakeholders to determine their interest in considering how the university might partner and support their efforts. Following those conversations, White discussed the potential partnership with coauthors Hammelman and Joy, who both had relevant expertise and partnership experiences in or related to West Charlotte and food systems. These three facilitators then organized interest meetings with community partners and faculty researchers (identified through existing networks and snowballing) to gauge interest, expertise, and feedback on an approach to developing a CUP.

In identifying participants, the facilitators sought community leaders who had established credibility among community residents, who had effectively mobilized community support and resources to advance food security and economic development, and whose experience working with institutions had equipped them to engage with university researchers from a position of shared power. The facilitators also solicited recommendations from community leaders regarding who needed to be involved. The leaders in the project represented community-based development corporations, a resident association, a church, and a nonprofit that works with youth. All had lived or worked in West Charlotte neighborhoods for many years.

The facilitators enlisted a cohort of multidisciplinary faculty with expertise in community-engaged research, or those who expressed a willingness to participate in such an approach, whose areas of research would contribute to the design of a food retail innovation in an economically distressed community. In addition to UNC Charlotte faculty, a faculty researcher (Terrell) was recruited from Johnson C. Smith University, an HBCU located in West Charlotte. Faculty expertise included food systems,

public health, urban design, business marketing, psychology, geography, and economics.

Project Implementation

In total, the collaborative brought together 15 community leaders and academic researchers. The collaborative synthesized local expertise of place, culture, and history; food system and retail case studies; and relevant economic and business data in order to design a tangible solution to long-standing food inequities. The partnership gained support from the local government (Mecklenburg County), which agreed to fund the work over a 10-month period. The grant provided a stipend to support participants' involvement (stipends were the same for community and faculty participants), a graduate research assistant, consultants in facilitation and report design, and logistics for organizing meetings. A key grant deliverable was an actionable report with recommendations for improving food access in West Charlotte.

To ensure a truly creative and open-ended exploratory process, which was a requirement for the county's grant, all participants agreed to suspend at the outset their advocacy for specific solutions that they might favor and to allow the research work to guide the group toward an ultimate solution. This included community leaders who had actively been pursuing a cooperative model and faculty who had promoted specific solutions in their research findings. A broad "sandbox"⁴ approach was created to honor this open exploration.

Our objective was to identify a food retail solution that would address West Charlotte's food access challenges. The collaborative considered six possibilities: recruiting an existing chain supermarket, recruiting an existing independent grocer, establishing a nonprofit grocery store, enlisting a regional health care system to establish a grocery store, creating a nonprofit cooperative grocery store, and creating a for-profit cooperative grocery store. In the end, the for-profit cooperative model prevailed, although it was enhanced with features beyond what community leaders had initially considered and undergirded with new data gained through the collaborative process.

⁴ The sandbox analogy was envisioned as a device to articulate boundaries (such as the walls of a sandbox) that affirmed the community-defined direction of the incubator work while asserting the expectation that creative design would emerge (similar to play within a sandbox) through the shared expertise of all participants. ⁵ While pandemic restrictions mandated engagement via Zoom, holding the meetings via Zoom also served to improve access for a large group of participants. All partners were better able to join conversations when they could access them from work (including an urban farm), home, or while in transit.

To achieve this outcome, the collaborative met regularly between October 2020 and August 2021, primarily via Zoom⁵ due to pandemic-related health restrictions, in three distinct phases (followed in 2021–2024 by a fourth dissemination and implementation phase; see Figure 1).

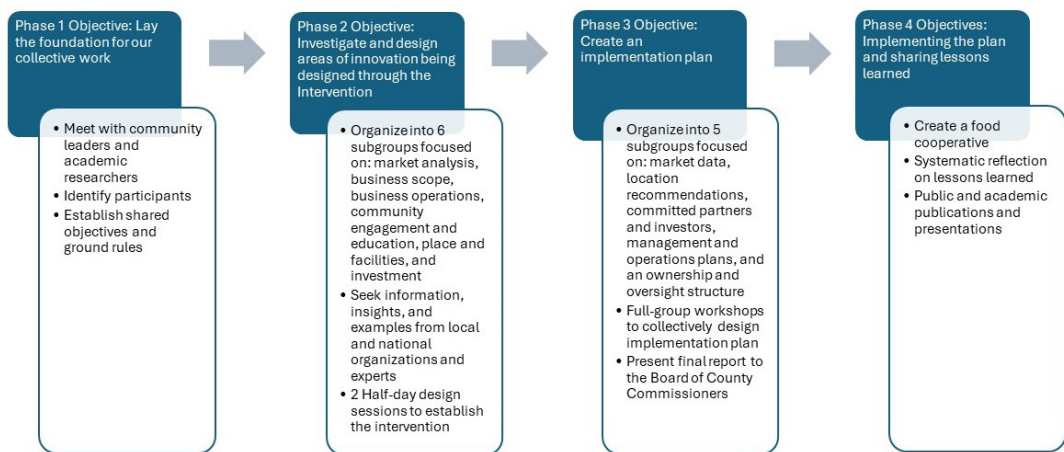
The first phase focused on laying a foundation for our collective work. This included regular meetings in which all project partners shared their insights and experiences, scanned existing food retail initiatives that could serve as examples, and met with topic experts beyond the working group to gain insights about conditions needed for retail success. Importantly, during this first phase, the group also established a set of “ground rules” to govern our interactions (e.g., committing to operate with honesty, transparency, candor, and authenticity in our exchanges with one another and to acknowledge, value, and utilize work and data already available). These were codified in a formal memorandum of understanding (MOU) outlining members’ commitment and responsibilities as well as directives regarding ownership of the knowledge produced and the process for representing the collective work to outside audiences (see Figure 2). In Phase 2, the collective designed an intervention. The objective for Phase 2 was to identify opportunities, best practices, and barriers within specific innovations designed for the planned intervention in consultation with experts across multiple sectors. Phase 2 built on earlier work by organizing the collaborative into subgroups based on six areas of investigation identified in Phase 1: market analysis, business scope, business operations, community engagement and education, place and facilities, and

investment. Each subgroup included at least one community leader and one academic researcher from the collaborative. The subgroups also sought information, insights, or examples from more than 40 local and national organizations and experts. Phase 2 ended with two half-day sessions in which each group shared its learnings and collectively designed a food retail intervention. The half-day sessions were coordinated by the three facilitators (Hammelman, Joy, and White) with contributions from each working group; they were recorded and comprehensive notes were taken.

Phase 3 focused on building a plan to implement the food retail intervention. The objective of Phase 3 was to create an implementation plan encompassing market data, location recommendations, committed partners and investors, management and operations plans, and an ownership and oversight structure. The larger group broke into several subgroups to focus on designing specific elements of the intervention. Subgroups, each again including at least one community partner and one academic researcher, focused on specific aspects of the intervention (such as fresh produce supply chains or marketing and branding). Phase 3 also included full-group workshops, designed and led by the facilitators, in which a detailed implementation plan was developed. The implementation plan with recommendations was finalized with input from all collaborative participants and shared with the county through a presentation to the Board of County Commissioners.

Following this work in 2021, time-bound by grant provisions, a fourth (ongoing) phase moved toward enacting the implementation plan’s

Figure 1. Flow Chart of Project Phases



Section	Topics covered
Objectives and Scope of the Collaboration	Timeline Goals of the MOU Value proposition
Illustrative example: “All of the Parties to this MOU bring expertise, experience, and resources that must be recognized and valued throughout Project development and implementation. [Community partners, COPs] bring content expertise derived from many collective years of interaction with community stakeholders that must be valued as foundational for this work and university goals, recognized (through citation and representation), and lifted up in all results, reports, and other deliverables. [University partners, UPs] bring research methods, content expertise and capacity derived from their academic positions that should be devoted to contributing to tangible outcomes as described above, building the knowledge base on topics related to this Project, and lifting up COP’s work in support of community resident needs.”	
Commitment	Management parity Funding equity Legal leverage of data and research results for action Shared authorship of written reports and publications Shared public presentations, interviews, conferences, workshops, etc
Illustrative example: “All Project Team members will be invited to co-present Project outputs in relevant venues (interviews, conferences, workshops, etc). In the spirit of ensuring appropriate representation, presentations reporting on the explicit lived experience and expertise of residents will be carried out by COPs wherever possible. When UPs are contacted for or plan to present information about our collective work, they should notify relevant Project Team Members to determine if the UP is the best representative or if a different approach should be taken. Regardless of hourly contribution or work effort for a specific presentation, all expertise contributions (including COP content expertise) must be cited.”	
Ground Rules	Outlines rules of engagement developed by the collective, including (among others): The intent to build on existing knowledge and work, Operating with honesty, transparency, and authenticity and Pursuing bold, new potential solutions for building food sovereignty
Principles of co-creation, co-owners, and action	Codifies that principles of co-creation and co-ownership are the foundation to the collective. “This means all Parties commit to contributing information and ideas in good faith, fully participating in discussions and events, respecting all perspectives, and not sharing data created together without express permission.”

Figure 2. Key Provisions in the Project MOU

recommendations (i.e., creating a food cooperative) and sharing lessons learned. First, an official board was formed for the cooperative, including community leaders, relevant stakeholders, and two academic members from the collaborative. That board worked to legally establish the cooperative business, hire a general manager, and secure resources and land to build it. That effort is ongoing.

Reflecting on Lessons Learned

In the second effort of Phase 4, we sought to reflect on CUPs and share our learnings (including through this paper). To accomplish this, we collaboratively developed and agreed on a set of reflection questions related to the collaborative and the broader effort. An undergraduate research assistant recorded conversations with nearly all members of the original team in which participants answered the reflection questions. These conversations were transcribed and analyzed. We also coded all meeting notes, reports, and field notes generated during the project. In total, 43 documents were analyzed.

Utilizing an iterative grounded theory approach (Charmez, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), codes were developed based on participant experiences and recollections of what was important, relevant literature, and feedback from team members. Analysis also attended to when themes arose most often in community partner reflections, academic researcher reflections, meeting notes, or reports. In keeping with the spirit of multidisciplinary approaches that guided the entirety of this project, and to validate the coding results, the text from the meeting notes and reflection transcripts was also analyzed using natural language processing (NLP) and text mining techniques. This approach enabled calculating what terms and concepts were most frequently used during the different phases of the project and by which groups of stakeholders.⁶ Given the coproduced, flexible, and iterative nature of this project (and similar PAR approaches, see Schouten et al., 2020), these analysis methods were not determined a priori but took shape in response to sentiments that this PAR project was disrupting typical CUP approaches and needed to be analyzed as such. Key themes that arose

during both the qualitative data analysis and text mining analysis included: pursuing a shared power perspective (recognizing the role of anchor institutions, interdisciplinary and action research approaches, and valuing diverse knowledge sources such as community leader expertise, academic sources, and students); key elements of the process (partnership development, timelines, MOU creation), and collaborative and individual project objectives (tangible solutions, contributing to broader knowledge, student teaching). The next section describes our learnings

Lessons Learned

While there were many lessons learned from our approach to action research in this project, two key ideas stood out: (a) operating through a shared power perspective characterized by intentionally relational processes and (b) seeking tangible solutions. This section describes those learnings that could be informative for other CUPs addressing complex social challenges.

Shared Power Perspective

From the outset, the team pursued its objectives from a shared power perspective. This approach included more horizontal decision-making and steps to ensure that all stakeholders' expertise was valued and all participants had a voice in discussions, decisions, and representations. To prevent voices of community leaders and residents from being overshadowed by those of academics positioned as experts, a conscious effort was made to acknowledge community knowledge and look to community expertise first. This notion is evident in this quote from a report describing Phase 2 activities:

As we examined local and national food access efforts, we found tension between authority and capacity. Community-based efforts often were rich in social capital but lacked the institutional assets needed for them to scale at a significant level. At the same time, institutional efforts—whether driven by private, nonprofit or government interests—often left out community voices and authority and seldom allowed opportunities for the community to benefit economically.

⁶ As part of the natural language processing, names of all participants were removed from the documents to make sure that the results reflected the discussed topics and issues rather than who said what. All stop-words (e.g., 'the', 'as', 'is', 'in', etc.) were also removed. This is standard practice in NLP as these words have high frequency but low informational value.

Our initiative recognizes and aggressively seeks to reconcile this tension.

This was confirmed by the NLP analysis in which participants' most commonly used one-word (unigrams) and two-word (bigrams) phrases in the meeting notes and reflections contained the word "community," including "community wealth" and "community ownership."

Another example of work to disrupt traditional hierarchies was our effort to go beyond Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements governing research ethics. Early in the project, faculty researchers began preparing the traditional IRB protocol but found that it was not well suited for this project because it removed agency from community partners. IRBs traditionally divide researchers and research participants into separate categories, with researchers holding expertise and decision-making power and participants conceived as "subjects" from whom data are collected and who require protection. This approach created power hierarchies that did not align with the power-sharing model we were pursuing.

In response, we developed a protocol focused on participant observation and shared learnings instead of a traditional project design in which we would obtain "data" from community partners. Then, we went beyond that protocol to create the MOU codifying how team members would participate; who owns the report, materials, and information created and shared in the project; and who has authority to represent the project (see Figure 2). Several team members reflected on how these ground rules set the stage for horizontal power sharing. A community leader illustrated this sentiment:

If you look in hindsight, I really appreciate the fact that when we started off as a part of the food innovation group that we created some ground rules and we created some expectations that were mutual, to the university's effort, and its role with this contract with the county, but it also respected the valuable input of community that were actually impacted.

The details of the MOU and what shared power "looked like" in practice were not always straightforward. The team had to engage with questions about what it meant to co-own the work. How does that enable and constrain sharing project results? How will we know if someone has

violated the partnership conditions? We worked through these questions in Phase 1 meetings that focused on setting the foundation for the partnership and our collective work. We also brought these topics up for discussion among the group when opportunities arose to publicize our work (including through local media).

As a result of our conversations about shared ownership, representation, and power, more opportunities arose for different participants to share their expertise and the project activities publicly. For example, two team members (one from the university and one community leader) were able to jointly present at a conference about this topic. The "Civic Studies: The University as Civic Catalyst" international conference was hosted by the Minnesota Humanities Center in Saint Paul, MN, and funded by the American Educational Research Association, which covered participants' expenses. Case studies outlining CUPs were submitted ahead of time primarily by university participants. The Charlotte case study was a compilation of stories about our project that had been written by a local scribe. The Charlotte community leader was the only conference participant who attended primarily as a community representative.

The shared power perspective was further facilitated through meeting formats and expectations of transparency and accountability. Overall, we sought to disrupt traditional community-university role dynamics that position university-located scholars as researchers and community activists as research participants. Collaborative members reflected that a success of our project was its relational process that emphasized shared learning, listening to and valuing different expertise, and operating with transparency and honesty. This was achieved by opening and closing meetings with opportunities to reflect on where we were and how the project was going and ensuring that community leaders were called upon first to share their perspectives and expertise. Many of the community leaders had previously worked with academic institutions and expressed hesitancy and distrust due to the extractive nature of many of those relationships. To alleviate those concerns, the project facilitators operated through a process that centered community leaders' voices and asked the academic researchers to reorient themselves to be true collaborators (including learning to step back and listen). It was critical to the project's success to recognize community leaders' capacity and

expertise and to prioritize their voices and goals, particularly because they were going to be most impacted by the resulting product(s).

Many team members reflected that a key characteristic of this project was the opportunity for open communication. Often, stakeholders in these partnerships enter them with varying agendas and objectives (representing community needs, seeking tangible change, contributing to broader knowledge, publishing). If these differing objectives are not clearly articulated in the beginning, they can create tensions in partnerships. In this case, partners' transparency as to their goals and the expertise that they committed to contributing was critical to the partnership's success. Pursuing a shared power approach, manifested in the work of setting the ground rules, building relationships, and implementing the project, underscored that the collaborative effort and final solution needed to be community driven and community owned.

Tangible Solutions

Another key aspect of our action research model was the collective pursuit of tangible solutions. All participants highlighted at the beginning and throughout the project that, while there was opportunity to contribute to broader knowledge about food injustices, CUPs, and action research, the priority was pursuing a tangible solution to food access challenges in West Charlotte. This represented an ambitious goal that was not possible to fully accomplish in the initial 10-month timeline dictated by project funding. As such, we looked to incremental successes (such as designing an implementation plan ready for investment) and how they contributed to this longer-term goal.

In the majority of team member reflections and meeting notes, stakeholders emphasized that the pursuit of a tangible solution was important for the project's success. That solution was a driving motivation for many participants to join this effort, and all participants valued the collective intention to go beyond writing a report that would sit on a shelf. Notes of early meetings, accessible to the entire group, reflected this critical goal:

- Another study, report or examination that is not what our desire is—is this going to be an extractive or community sharing relationship?
- How is this moving the needle in solving some of the most pressing community problems?
- If it doesn't lead to long-term solutions of sys-

temic problems then it isn't good—if we can craft it around this goal, then there won't be problems.

- We have to make sure we get it right—must have more equity in terms of outcome.

This shared emphasis on tangible solutions was also validated through the NLP/text mining. To find what one-word and two-word phrases were more likely to be used during the early phases of the project (i.e., during meetings) as opposed to later stages of the project (i.e., in reflections), all one- and two-word phrases used in the meetings and the reflections were fed into a machine learning algorithm (a logistic regression with lasso regularization for variable selection; Hastie et al., 2023). Each one- and two-word phrase was tagged according to when it was said (1 for during meetings and 0 for during reflections) and used as a variable in the algorithm. The algorithm then identified the words that were more (largest coefficients) and less (smallest coefficients) likely to be mentioned during the meetings as opposed to during the reflections (see Figure 3). The focus on tangible solutions in meetings is reflected in the largest (most positive) coefficients resulting from the estimation of the machine learning algorithm. During meetings, participants were more focused on the “operational” aspects of the innovation, including the “model” of grocery store, the “brand,” the “ownership” structure, “profit[s],” and “economic” aspects (likely related to economic development in the corridor). Discussions regarding concrete solutions such as an “anchor” store and a secondary location are also reflected. This demonstrates the broad focus on the operational structure of a tangible solution as opposed to more traditional research projects that may focus more on assessing resident needs or perceptions so as to contribute to broader knowledge. While those topics were important in this project, especially as they informed the success of the innovation being designed, they were not centered as data to be collected and analyzed.

The focus on tangible solutions continued in the team's approach to the final report. Some team members emphasized the need to include steps for implementing the cooperative solution identified, action items for stakeholders, and a clear request to potential investors—instead of simply reporting on what our discussions and research identified. While including a specific request to stakeholders as part of the collaborative project may seem to go beyond the traditional research process, it was critical in order to achieve the tangible goals the

team sought.

In fact, this set of steps represented another way in which this model sought to disrupt traditional research processes. From the outset we did not seek to be “value free” or neutral researchers (which many feminist, action, partnership-oriented, or participatory methods-oriented researchers explain is not possible; Johnson & Madge, 2016;

Kilmer & Cook, 2021; Kloos et al., 2012; see also McKittrick, 2020, for a discussion on how Black feminists navigate privilege and bias in scientific research). Instead, we sought to use the power of community expertise and university research to ensure that the solutions sought and supported by the community would be the most impactful for addressing a complex challenge.

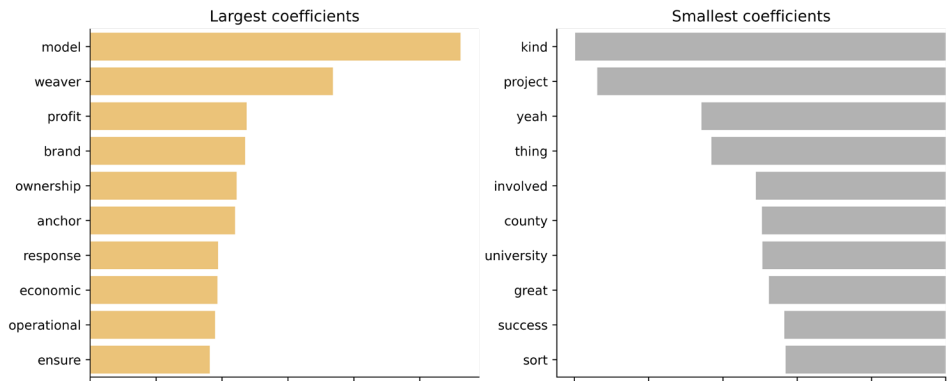


Figure 3. Most (Largest Coefficients) and Least (Smallest Coefficients) Distinguishing One- and Two-Word Phrases Used in Meetings as Opposed to During Reflections

Discussion and Conclusions

This action research project brought together community and university stakeholders to elevate the potential of PAR as critical for influencing systemic social change outcomes, fostering community relevance and commitment, and producing meaningful scholarship through cocreation processes that recognize and value the expertise of local leaders (Curry-Stevens et al., 2019; Meyer et al., 2022). We formed a team of community leaders and academic researchers to design a food retail innovation while also providing insights on successful CUPs. Through an iterative, relationship-focused, and transparent process, we achieved these goals. We employed an approach that sought to disrupt more traditional community-university research interactions by emphasizing shared power and the pursuit of tangible solutions. This was achieved through intentional processes that lifted up community expertise, valued multiple types of knowledge and knowledge production, raised discussions about who owned the data and was best positioned to represent the work, and capitalized on a collective desire to create a tangible solution. In reflecting on our experience, we argue that pursuing CUPs through shared power and in search of tangible solutions is critical for success and impact.

Lessons From a Shared Power Approach

It was critical to build the project from its outset around an initiative that was community-led and had already garnered momentum and mobilization before the university became engaged. By doing so, community leadership was asserted and community expertise was affirmed. University faculty who agreed to participate understood that their expertise had value only in the context of its application to the community’s stated objective. Forefronting community leader expertise fostered trust and participation and increased the relevance of project outcomes for residents.

Moreover, there was value in prescribing time at the beginning of the process to establish practices that demonstrated our intent to conduct our work within a framework of shared power and authority. Our experience demonstrates that PAR approaches, which center coproduction and action toward social justice, are enhanced through intentional processes that disrupt knowledge hierarchies and emphasize transparency and relationship building (see, e.g., Bradbury, 2015). For example, starting the project with shared ground rules produced more holistic solutions and opportunities for sustained partnerships.

Finally, in regard to shared power, even though participants were asked to consider a broader set of possibilities than the ones they may have favored entering the process, we did not ask participants

to leave their values or advocacy at the door. The goal was not to create a “neutral” environment or convey a kind of false objectivity. In fact, lived experience was elevated as being as essential as data obtained through scientific research methods. This positioning proved invaluable in creating a climate of innovation and creativity.

Lessons From a Tangible Solutions Approach

Creating a “sandbox” statement at the beginning of the process kept the work focused on action. As the months passed, the ongoing reminders of our commitment to tangible community change reinforced that this was not simply an academic exercise that would produce recommendations without concrete results. The statement kept some faculty motivated beyond a level of contribution that they would typically find sufficient and appropriate. The focus on a tangible solution also provided some guidelines for determining what university expertise and assets best aligned with the work and which were unnecessary. For example, when a faculty member offered to introduce to the working group innovative ideas that her students had come up with as part of a class assignment, the group determined that it would skew their collective efforts. Rather, the students reviewed the innovations that emerged from the working group and provided relevant background and discovered national models for those ideas to help inform the deliberations.

Challenges

Despite these successes, this project did not progress without challenges. In hindsight, participants reflected that we may have more efficiently gained support for the cooperative if we had more intentionally involved other stakeholders (such as the local government) throughout the project. Additionally, while there was collective support for designing the food cooperative, all participants brought their own concerns (and those of their constituencies) to the project such that difficult conversations about how the retail model would take shape, where the cooperative would be located, and whom it would serve had to be navigated. One academic team member with expertise in psychology reflected,

We were malleable and flexible and adjustable. And all of that is true. But that is very difficult. And I think that should be expressed—the difficulty. But if your project is important, and you

are passionate about it, you make the necessary adjustments. But in no way should anyone who embarked on this kind of endeavor think that it is easy. It's a challenge, it is difficult. You have to be open minded, flexible, and you have to be working for the good of the project.

In our discussions, we were often reminded of why we were coming together and that the end goal was to represent and respond to the needs of residents who were struggling to access healthy food. We regularly contended with questions about whether we were building something for which the communities being impacted had authority to determine what happens and an opportunity to gain economically and socially from its success. In answering these questions, we also had to recognize that we were working within long-standing systems of racial inequity that are difficult to change.

Going forward, we see potential for improved science, communities, and CUPs through pursuing PAR projects grounded in shared power and a commitment to tangible solutions. Being transparent, honest, and respectful from the beginning and throughout is important for forming relationships that can navigate challenging questions. We offer this case study to the literature on PAR and CUPs as one example of a successful collaboration in an era of increased push for authentic university engagement with community partners. We also take these learnings forward in ongoing efforts to improve PAR science and practice.

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About the Authors

Nadia Anderson is an associate professor in architecture and urban design in the College of Arts and Architecture at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Guy Cousins is president for Three Sisters Market. Thomas Farrow is the senior pastor at Reeder Memorial Baptist Church. Cindy Fox is a senior lecturer in marketing in the Belk College of Business at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Rickey Hall is chair of the West Boulevard Neighborhood Coalition. Colleen Hammelman is an associate professor in the Department of Earth, Environmental, and Geographical Sciences and director of the Charlotte Action Research Project at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Chrystal Joy is the managing director at the Lee Institute. Ryan Kilmer is a professor in and chair of the Department of Psychological Science at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Isabelle Nilsson is an associate professor in the Department of Earth, Environmental, and Geographical Sciences at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Elizabeth F. Racine serves as director of the Texas A&M AgriLife Research Center at El Paso and is a professor in the Department of Nutrition at Texas A&M University. Debra Terrell is an associate professor of psychology at Johnson C. Smith University. Byron White is the associate provost for Urban Research and Community Engagement at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte.