

FULL-LENGTH ARTICLES

A Call for U.S. Universities to Appropriately Compensate Their Community Partners

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Community-engaged research (CEnR) can be highly effective when used to create partnerships, challenge the power structures that underly health inequities, and produce community health benefits. Yet even as universities have rolled out initiatives that aim to spotlight and stimulate CEnR, there remain significant institutional and bureaucratic disincentives to seeing CEnR projects to completion. This commentary focuses on institutional barriers to appropriate compensation of community partners. Using our own experiences with CEnR, insights from previous literature, and toolkits from multiple sources, we provide recommendations to universities to help them simplify and clarify the processes they use to finance CEnR and community partnerships.

A call for U.S. universities to appropriately compensate their community partners

Community-engaged research (CEnR) — or the conduct of research that shares power with community members, engages community partners in the research process, and benefits the community directly — is crucial to health equity-focused research and policymaking. CEnR has risen in popularity in recent decades as a response to the neglect of marginalized populations by traditional positivist research practices, which focus on the researcher as an “objective” outsider and fail to recognize the value that community partnerships add to the research process. In contrast to these traditional approaches, formation of community partnerships through CEnR leads to more effective knowledge production, sharing, and translation. It also increases the longevity and feasibility of research projects and interventions (London et al., 2020). Community partnerships improve research and interventions by deconstructing racist and colonialist approaches to research to create solutions that genuinely benefit all parties (LeBrón et al., 2025; Raphael & Matsuoka, 2024, p. 43). Because it is based in long-term community-academic partnerships, CEnR requires that all parties feel “trusted, valued, and empowered” (Bilheimer et al., 2025).

As a whole, CEnR can be highly effective when used to create partnerships, challenge the power structures that underly health inequities, and produce community health benefits (Ortiz et al., 2020). Yet even as universities have rolled out initiatives that aim to spotlight and stimulate CEnR, there remain significant institutional and bureaucratic disincentives to seeing CEnR

projects to completion. CEnR is often deemed “neither as scholarly nor as rigorous as more traditional forms of scholarship” (Vuong et al., 2017); as a result, institutions fail to allocate proper resources for or reduce bureaucratic obstacles to conducting CEnR (Nyden, 2003). In this commentary, we focus on institutional barriers to appropriate compensation of community partners, which — from the perspective of scholars — disincentivize CEnR.

Financing CEnR: Stories from our university

Historically, academic institutions and funding agencies in the U.S. have made conducting CEnR difficult for scholars, often through a lack of proper incentives. Even in the rare case that scholars can gain prestige and/or financial recognition by the university for CEnR, they face another, possibly greater, barrier: the complexities of paying community partners through existing university financial systems, which often lack the infrastructure to accommodate diverse forms of research (Renick et al., 2025). As essential stakeholders and knowledge producers in the research process, community partners must be compensated appropriately. Compensation is key to community partners’ trust of the research process and perceptions that they are valued by the academic institution, and without compensation, ongoing relationships will be difficult for all parties to maintain (Skinner et al., 2018).

It was facing barriers to compensating community partners at my (first author’s) university that prompted me to explore the lack of resources for scholars who conduct CEnR and to write this commentary. My story began with a small grant (less than \$20,000) to conduct research on workplace violence with two organizers at a worker center with whom I had built relationships through years of advocacy- and health-related projects. The research was conceptualized and carried out in conjunction with the organizers, and much of the budget was dedicated to paying these two organizers, as well as workers who participated in the project, a research assistant at the university, and myself as the research coordinator. At the outset of the project, my faculty advisor (second author) noted that at our university, one must follow the same process to bring on as vendors these two individual community members as one would for a large corporation or a small grassroots organization.

Even though I was warned about the onerous process, nothing could have prepared me for the sheer duration, staff burden, and anguish for me and my community partners. It quickly became clear that it would not be possible to hire a research assistant due to reasons that were simply expressed to me as interdepartmental relationship complexities. When it came to paying the two organizers, it took more than six months of back-and-forth emails, Zoom meetings, phone calls, and in-person meetings between multiple departments — as well as countless forms — for me to disburse fewer than three thousand dollars from the grant. I was consistently told about new forms and steps without any more information about the procurement process, as the departments responsible for procurement were not in communication with one another. Even when the process for that one payment was finished, it

took almost two months for the organizers to receive their payments, and one of them did not receive payment via their chosen method. In the end, the process of working with and compensating community partners became so onerous that it was a deterrent for conducting CEnR in the future.

Experiences like mine are not rare occurrences (Irby et al., 2021; Rodriguez Espinosa et al., 2025). After conversations with professors and researchers at various universities, as well as an exploration of the literature, it has become clear that many academic institutions are not set up for working with community partners — an essential tenet of CEnR (Kim et al., 2023). For one, academic workers are not trained to navigate the financial systems of the university. Information on purchase orders, quotes, setting up community partners as contractors, and submitting invoices is either unintentionally difficult to find or intentionally obscured. The institutional knowledge required to understand these processes is often communicated piecemeal and by word of mouth. Because universities, like other institutions, have some employee turnover, this knowledge is often lost when employees leave. In addition, the systems used to pay community partners can change at a moment's notice and without notification to the researchers conducting CEnR.

Beyond a lack of understanding of institutional financial processes, academics may also face barriers to paying community partners that involve a lack of cultural competence on the part of the university. For example, after my latest attempt to send another payment to the community organizers, I was informed that the new process to pay them would require information about their citizenship status and visa number. Given the current surge in ICE raids, as well as some university partnerships with ICE, the requirement to provide this information for community partner payment is inappropriate and even dangerous. There should not be forms circulating through email and to multiple departments that contain such sensitive information. It is not the scholar's right or responsibility to know if the community partner has the documentation required by these forms.

Furthermore, even if the institution assumes that community partners can navigate these processes on their own without needing the scholar to assist, it also assumes that community partners can communicate in English. Given the number of phone calls and emails that likely will be necessary to facilitate the payment, it is probable that the scholar will need to be involved in the process. This may serve as yet another barrier associated with CEnR and community compensation.

In order to avoid the complexities of the process, including delays in payment akin to wage theft, as well as the provision of sensitive information and translation, scholars may choose to resort to “under the table” forms of payment to community partners. This type of payment not only interferes with the university's accounting processes, but it also undermines the legitimacy of the research and the relationship with the community partner. It eliminates any paper trail connecting the partner to the project, thus

depriving them of credit and accountability in rare cases of conflict between university and partner. It feeds a perception of universities as colonial entities engaging in unequal relationships on whatever terms they see fit, imposing and bending rules at their own whims. While these perceptions can be overcome in trusted relationships, they nevertheless add further to the cost of building partnerships.

Recommendations

To properly compensate collaborators, universities must simplify and clarify the processes they use to finance CEnR and community partnerships. The authors of this commentary recognize that various stakeholders are involved in the disbursement of funds from the university to community partners. Thus, as practitioners of CEnR ourselves, we plan to extend this commentary by conducting a study of the barriers to community compensation at our university and presenting the results to our administration (Rodriguez Espinosa et al., 2025). We also recommend that the university conduct a gap analysis to identify ways in which community partnerships fall through financial cracks (National Institutes of Health, 2025). In the meantime, based on scalable studies at other universities (Bilheimer et al., 2025; Rodriguez Espinosa et al., 2025) and toolkits provided by multiple institutes (Langness et al., 2023; National Institutes of Health, 2025), we have several recommendations for our university.

For one, we recommend that our university standardize the process for financial compensation of community partners in a way that reduces the burden on partners and shortens time from invoice to payment (National Institutes of Health, 2025). The university can base such a process on other standard processes (National Institutes of Health, 2025), such as those used to pay graduate student researchers or teaching assistants, but the process should be developed in collaboration with and be open to ongoing feedback from community partners. The process should include a vendor sign-up form specific to community collaborators, which must be available in multiple languages and at an appropriate reading level (Bilheimer et al., 2025). Furthermore, the process should prioritize speed and ease, and take moderate risks on the presumption that community partners will prove to be a worthy investment. One widely-recommended solution is to establish departmental escrow accounts to prevent delays in community partner compensation, thereby enhancing trust and reducing the risk of entering a situation akin to wage theft (National Institutes of Health, 2025).

Second, transparency and reproducibility are needed. Processes for compensating partners should be kept in written form in an easily updatable handbook that includes document checklists, estimated pay timelines, and pay scales for community partners for a variety of types of grants (Langness et al., 2023). This handbook should be distributed to finance office workers in each university department and members of ongoing community

partnerships for optimal transparency (Billheimer et al., 2025). Finance specialists at the university should share information with scholars and community partners via the handbook, rather than through word of mouth.

Third, universities should base the financial processes they use on the size of the grant. While some multimillion-dollar grants may need oversight by multiple financial specialists and will be subject to bureaucratic requirements for disbursement, smaller grants may require less oversight for paying community partners. For example, if a scholar is paid for their research using a \$10,000 grant, the amount of work the scholar does to ensure that community partners are paid may exceed 30% of the grant. If the scholar does this work unpaid, the size of the grant may not justify the amount of work required for CEnR, thus disincentivizing CEnR. If the scholar does this work with grant-funded compensation, the size of the grant does not allow for much research to be conducted or for community partners to be properly compensated. Thus, universities must find more efficient ways of disbursing funds associated with small grants.

Finally, beyond changing and optimizing its operations, the university should invest in strengthening its personnel. For example, the university should hire more university-wide financial officers who can answer questions by department-specific finance officers should the department-specific officers encounter an unconventional grant or scholarship. These university-wide officers can ensure that the disbursement process is standardized across departments, and they can note when the process does not appropriately serve certain departments or community. Additionally, the university should hire an ombudsperson who can bridge communication gaps between community partners, academic workers, and university finance offices (National Institutes of Health, 2025). For large universities with broad community reach, a more comprehensive solution would involve establishing a distinct external research cooperative that can communicate with new and existing partners regarding financial compensation. In regions with multiple research universities with CEnR programs, an independent cooperative could bridge the universities, thereby building broader community-university solidarity.

These recommended changes are crucial to reducing barriers to proper compensation of community partners, thus incentivizing scholars and partners alike to engage in CEnR. Although our recommendations focus on processes and communications regarding finances, these organizational changes should ultimately go beyond financial relationships to build on and reinforce mechanisms for sharing authorship, data, and intellectual property. The more universities are able to establish and maintain healthy relationships with community partners, the easier it will become to conduct future CEnR, benefit communities, and improve population health. As universities across the U.S. face devastating funding cuts, the need for CEnR, community

collaboration, and mutual aid only increases. *We must appropriately, efficiently compensate our community partners not only to keep communities healthy, but to keep science alive.*

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Supplementary Materials

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