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Valuing the Aspirations of the Community: The Origins of a Community–University Partnership

Jake D. Winfield, Sara Fiorot, Catherine Pressimone Beckowski, and James Earl Davis

Abstract

Universities are increasingly prioritizing engagement and collaboration with their local communities. While such partnerships can be mutually beneficial, they can often perpetuate and exacerbate power differentials, particularly when the community partners belong to racially minoritized groups. This qualitative paper examines the founding of a community–university partnership between a Black, low-income community and a predominantly White university. Through the theoretical framework of aspirational capital, we find that valuing the experiences and aspirations of the community helped establish a more equitable partnership forged to support a community-led, culturally relevant after-school program. Centering the aspirations of Black community members and the epistemologies of the Black women on the program staff also served to acknowledge and address power imbalances at the founding stages of the partnership. Recognizing and valuing the aspirational capital of community members also positively impacted the university-based staff's ability to function as boundary spanners between the university and community who could adequately articulate the desires and needs of program staff. We argue that by recognizing and valuing the aspirational capital already present in low-income Black communities, universities can create more equitable partnerships for positive social change.

Higher education in the United States has long been entwined with local communities. Institutions like land-grant, normal, and historically Black colleges were established explicitly to address local needs through training and research (Anderson, 1988; Labaree, 2017), and colleges were later key sites of social progress, including during the Civil Rights Movement (Cole, 2020). Higher education's commitment to community engagement has grown in prominence since the 1990s because of urban renewal movements that placed universities at the core of community improvement efforts (Baldwin, 2021; Boyle & Silver, 2005). Since then, community engagement models have shifted from those that emphasize institutional expertise to collaborative community–university partnerships intended to benefit both institutions and the communities they serve (Fitzgerald et al., 2012). Yet institutions and their nearby communities do not always enter these partnerships on equal footing due to differences in power and incentives (Miller & Hafner, 2008). These differences can impede partnerships initiated to improve the local community even when a university and community agree to collaborate, especially when universities partner with racially minoritized communities.

Centering the knowledge of community members can facilitate more equitable partnerships

between institutions and communities, as this local knowledge represents community members' shared experiences and provides insight into their interests (Brown & Lambert, 2015). Critical community-engaged scholarship (CES) is a useful frame for partnerships seeking to authentically locate, utilize, and center the expertise of marginalized community members (Gordon da Cruz, 2017). Universities that recognize community members' expertise and knowledge are more apt to establish an equitable balance of power. However, recognition alone is insufficient to eliminate power differences (Eubanks, 2009). Centering Black feminist epistemologies can enrich critical CES efforts to expand conceptions of what counts as knowledge and how knowledge is created (P.H. Collins, 2014; Dillard, 2000). Through these epistemologies rooted in lived experiences, Black women understand the convergence of and can act against oppressive forces that threaten to devalue their identities as Black women (P. H. Collins, 2014; hooks, 2015). When universities prioritize the epistemologies of community partners, university staff must adjust their operations to ensure they honor and prioritize community members' experiences. Partnerships grounded in the unique lived experiences and knowledge of community partners may be more successful than

those that lack this intentional approach (Brown & Lambert, 2015; P.H. Collins, 2014; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2000).

This paper explores one community–university partnership that valued the critical raced-gendered epistemologies (Delgado Bernal, 2002) of community partners. The university collaborators acknowledged and embraced systems of knowledge born out of the insights and lived experiences of Black women, who exist at the intersection of race- and gender-based systems of oppression. The systems of knowledge created by Black women challenge the dominance of the Eurocentric White male perspective, thereby bolstering resistance against systems of oppression (P. H. Collins, 2014; Delgado Bernal, 2002).

The community–university partnership was established to support an after-school program for local youth developed by a predominantly Black community near Temple University. Most of the program's staff were Black women. As part of the support and research team affiliated with the partner university, we treasured our partners' expertise, especially at the founding of our partnership. This article explores the founding and development of this partnership through our research question: How can university-based collaborators advance equitable partnerships between universities and Black communities? Central to our partnership's framework was Yosso's (2005) aspirational capital—that is, community members' ability to remain hopeful about goals and dreams despite obstacles. We found that by valuing the experiences and aspirations of the predominantly Black community, university-based collaborators were able to forge an equitable partnership that supported a culturally relevant after-school program (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014). We argue that when university staff value the aspirational capital and expertise of low-income Black communities, it can lead to more equitable partnerships.

Literature Review

Our literature review examines community-university partnerships and after-school programming that center culturally relevant pedagogies. Because the experiences of Black women “have been routinely distorted within or excluded from what counts as knowledge” (P.H. Collins, 2014, p. 251), we consider this literature through a Black feminist lens to center the experiences and epistemologies of the Black women staff and to elevate their expertise.

Community–University Partnerships

Universities have become complex organizations with multiple purposes, one of which is community engagement (Kerr, 1963). Research that examines universities' role in their local environments provides context for community–university partnerships. This research commonly examines higher education institutions as anchor institutions—that is, as locally embedded institutions with ties to the surrounding community (Goddard et al., 2014; Harris & Holley, 2016). Anchor institutions help provide economic stability in their regions because they are unlikely to fail (Goddard et al., 2014; Parrillo & de Socio, 2014). They can also improve their neighborhoods and promote social growth (Ehlenz, 2016; Harris & Holley, 2016). However, anchor institutions' self-interested motivations can negatively affect local communities (Baldwin, 2021; Breznitz & Feldman, 2012; Holley & Harris, 2018; Taylor & Luter, 2013; Winfield & Davis, 2020). Common negative impacts of anchor institutions include lowering property values, decreasing property tax bases, and increasing expenditures for services (Baker-Minkel et al., 2004; Gumprecht, 2008).

Anchor institutions can serve their communities through research, school support, and neighborhood initiatives (Breznitz, 2007; Breznitz & Feldman, 2012; Maurrasse, 2001). Such community engagement efforts are most effective when they are scholarly, address multiple parts of the university's mission, benefit the university and partner, and embrace democratic values (Fitzgerald et al., 2012). Successful partnerships address changing community needs, consider local dynamics and histories, provide a rationale for faculty involvement, and develop structures to link the campus and community (Denner et al., 2019; Ostrander, 2004). Institutional mission and type may also influence partnerships' structure and effectiveness (Maurrasse, 2001; Ostrander, 2004; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008).

Cultural shifts in and beyond the academy have further shaped community–university partnerships. In the 1990s, urban renewal led to increased investment in U.S. cities, spurring their redevelopment and repopulation (Baldwin, 2021). Simultaneously, the developing knowledge-based economy changed how colleges defined their social role and interacted with local regions (Boyle & Silver, 2005; Breznitz & Feldman, 2012). Community-based research approaches emphasizing various aspects of partnerships, including research agendas shaped by community

priorities, have since developed (Maurrasse, 2001). These approaches facilitate a more holistic approach to solving social problems that honors the experiences and needs of local communities (Brown & Lambert, 2015).

Centering the needs of partners from marginalized communities in ways that honor their epistemologies and lived experiences is especially important, as members of these communities have often been discounted (P.H. Collins, 2014; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Gordon da Cruz, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2000). Partnerships that take this approach can better advance the goals of both the community and the university. When addressing Black communities' concerns, partnerships have prioritized Black residents' insights in unique ways. For example, collaborations with Black youth have created digital tools highlighting the impacts of local gentrification (S.G. Collins et al., 2020) and developed program priorities in a partnership centered on addressing their trauma (Mance et al., 2020).

Power differentials often complicate community–university partnerships; race, class, and/or formal positions within a university can create inequitable power dynamics between university staff and community members (Miller & Hafner, 2008; Smith et al., 2010). While participation is a form of power (Eubanks, 2009), inclusion is not enough to address long-standing power differences between universities and communities. To address this gap, universities can empower local citizens through training and can ensure that all participants have a shared understanding of each other's responsibilities and goals at the beginning of a partnership (Nelson et al., 2015; Reardon, 2000). University staff can address power differences by maximizing their individual accountability to community partners and by increasing transparency (Catlett et al., 2019; Eubanks, 2009; Winfield & Davis, 2020). Power differences should be carefully examined to unearth previous instances of exclusion and disappointment (Strier, 2014). This work is key to facilitating more equitable partnerships.

People who connect the community to the university are central to community–university partnerships. Often called *boundary spanners*, these individuals may operate as technical experts, provide site-based support, build external support, or expand capacity on campus for engagement (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). Who fills boundary-spanning roles varies among institutions; while some institutions, particularly those where

community engagement is institutionalized, may staff professionals in roles dedicated to boundary-spanning work, faculty and other institutional stakeholders often fulfill these roles (Dostilio, 2017; Van Schyndel et al., 2019). Boundary spanners perceived as trustworthy and respectful can leverage their professional knowledge to present multiple potential partnership structures to the community (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). While boundary spanners aim to neutrally translate between the university and the community (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008, 2010), sometimes their responsibilities or roles require them to advocate for one side or the other (Gauntner & Hansman, 2017). Colleges can facilitate the complex work of boundary spanning by institutionalizing support systems, especially for faculty working in boundary-spanning roles (Farner, 2019; Purcell et al., 2020).

The robust literature on boundary spanners and issues of power in community–university partnerships explores possible solutions to common concerns in partnerships with marginalized communities. Explicitly recognizing and honoring the experiences and epistemologies of community partners may further equalize power dynamics and increase the success of individuals in boundary-spanning roles. This paper explores how university-affiliated individuals can address community–university power differences by valuing the aspirational capital of community partners.

The critical CES framework for research-based partnerships—an approach to community engagement informed by critical race theory that seeks to make society more socially and racially just (Gordon da Cruz, 2017)—centers the community's priorities and the critical raced-gendered epistemologies of partners. Community–university partnerships informed by critical CES are rooted in mutual, authentic collaboration that can benefit both parties and create a more equitable balance of power (Gordon da Cruz, 2017). By centering race, racism, and authentic expertise, this framework honors the epistemologies of partners and can facilitate meaningful partnerships that address local concerns (P.H. Collins, 2014).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and After-School Programming

Universities often partner with communities to provide after-school programming for local students. These partnerships may be developed collaboratively (Matusov & Smith, 2011), by the

university (Faude et al., 2017), or by community members (Anyon & Fernández, 2007). These partnerships are best sustained when long, trusting relationships exist between the community and university (Matusov & Smith, 2011; Ostrander, 2004). Partnerships may go beyond programming; for instance, some support the professional development of program staff to improve program quality (Mahoney et al., 2010). After-school programs developed by the local community alleviate concerns about university self-interest (Anyon & Fernández, 2007). Programs for racially minoritized youth are often holistic, providing spaces for academic, social, and emotional support that aim to foster critical consciousness that can disrupt inequality in schools and communities (Baldrige et al., 2017).

The commitment to centering community members' expertise in race-conscious, asset-oriented research and practice is further informed by culturally relevant pedagogy. The theory of culturally relevant pedagogy emerged to challenge existing deficit-based perceptions of Black students by creating a language of academic success that could be observed, understood, and applied through classroom practices (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014). Scholars have advocated for the extension of culturally relevant pedagogy beyond the classroom, including to after-school programs, as a way of engaging families and creating change within communities (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Murray & Milner, 2015; Simpkins & Riggs, 2014). By cultivating an environment that responds to and reflects the diverse cultural and racial experiences found within a community, after-school programs can help promote a sense of belonging, engagement, and resilience in participants (Simpkins & Riggs, 2014; Woodland, 2016). Participation in a culturally relevant after-school program can also increase self-esteem, social skills, and leadership competencies in elementary school students (Mason & Chuang, 2001). Culturally relevant outcomes can be particularly impactful for youth from low-income households and Communities of Color (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). Programs that leverage the culture and unique circumstances of Black youth while acknowledging potential barriers may benefit participants beyond the program's original intentions. When program staff are fully aware of the cultural diversity within the community they serve, they are better equipped to acknowledge the aspirations and prioritize the goals of students and their families (Baldrige, 2018; Simpkins & Riggs, 2014).

This paper builds on the literature by demonstrating an approach to a community–university partnership that centered the expertise and aspirations of community staff to support the development of a culturally relevant after-school program responsive to the community's needs.

Theoretical Framework

In considering this community–university partnership, we turn to Yosso's (2005) framework of community cultural wealth (CCW). CCW articulates forms of capital present in Communities of Color and emerged in response to deficit-based interpretations of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital (Yosso, 2005). Through CCW, Yosso advocated for empowerment of Communities of Color through the strengths, skills, and forms of capital they already possess. This mirrors the call to recognize and value the lived experiences and knowledge of Black women (P.H. Collins, 2014; Delgado Bernal, 2002).

Yosso (2005) identified six forms of capital possessed by Communities of Color: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant. Aspirational capital, our focus in this analysis, is "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (p. 77). Notably, this type of capital includes valuing education as a driver of upward social mobility, and it has accordingly been examined in educational contexts of various minoritized communities, including Black communities. For example, Black youth exposed to college or science disciplines through summer programs have shown increased educational aspirations (Brooms, 2019; Lane & Id-Deen, 2020). Black mothers also utilize aspirational capital when discussing their high, but pragmatic, educational expectations for their sons (Allen & White-Smith, 2018). We consider choices made in the founding and development of a community–university partnership through the lens of aspirational capital to better understand how an empowered community developed a program that may not have flourished if the partnership was structured differently. Additionally, this approach helps us to center the knowledge of our Black women partners (P.H. Collins, 2014).

Case Description

The close-knit Evergreen community (pseudonym), a public housing complex, is made up of over 300 predominantly Black,

low-income families, including about 100 elementary school-aged youth. The community has a proud history of mutual support and celebration. In 2013, Ms. Brown (pseudonym) and other Black residents founded an after-school program for young students in their neighborhood because previous programs provided by external agencies had not been culturally relevant. Evergreen's program serves 40 K–8 students on average during the school year. Both full-time staff are Black women, and two of the five part-time staff are Black women. As the community's program grew, Evergreen sought grant funding from local organizations and governments to expand the program to more local children without charging families.

Temple University, a historically White, urban research institution that enrolls 37,000 undergraduate and graduate students, neighbors Evergreen. Evergreen has long mistrusted Temple because of university decisions that have impacted community members without their consent or input, including campus expansion projects and neighborhood safety initiatives prioritizing university students. As faculty, students, and community engagement professionals (Dostilio, 2017; Van Schyndel et al., 2019) affiliated with Temple, our team reached out when Evergreen sought funding to expand its program. Through our subsequent agreement, our team of university-based collaborators provided logistical support, professional development, and program evaluations, while Temple's reputation provided additional credibility with the grantor. The university-based collaborative team, as shown in Figure 1, worked with Ms. Brown and staff to grow the program and acted as institutional boundary spanners (Van Schyndel et al., 2019; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010).

Team members' varied backgrounds informed the partnership and research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). James, as a professor, principal investigator, and Blackman, acted as a boundary spanner between the community, other university-based program staff, and external researchers. The university-based collaborators, M. Meghan Raisch (a White woman and staff member) and Juwan Z. Bennett (a Black man and graduate student), managed relationships with the community partners. Near the conclusion of the grant-funded partnership, three White doctoral students joined the team to analyze the data and author this manuscript in collaboration with James. As outsiders, Jake, Sara, and Catherine could analyze the data and

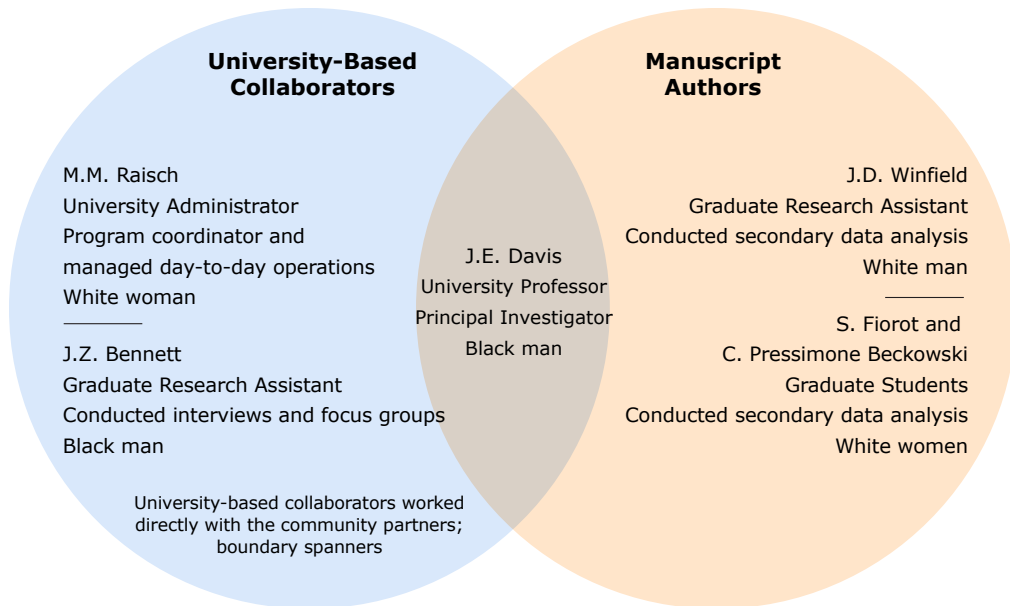
examine the partnership's founding with a fresh perspective. We recognized our Whiteness and, in doing so, intentionally approached this research through an asset-based framework (Bourke, 2014; Valencia, 1997), finding value in the knowledge of our Black community partners (P. H. Collins, 2014; Delgado Bernal, 2002; hooks, 2015). This process thus combined insider and outsider perspectives to examine the data and the partnership writ large.

This community–university partnership exemplified critical CES because it sought to combat structural inequity and racial injustice by fostering a community-led after-school program designed by Black community members for Black youth (Gordon da Cruz, 2017). Viewing the community from an asset-based perspective (Gordon da Cruz, 2017; Valencia, 1997) and acknowledging the community's aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005), the university-based collaborators supported the community's development and promotion of new approaches to after-school experiences in low-income Black communities. The resulting program embraced a culturally relevant pedagogy and focused on the whole child to meet the needs of underserved students. Because both culturally relevant pedagogy and critical CES explicitly address social justice issues, utilizing this framework helped support the program's goal of providing a culturally relevant program that drew on the community's strengths.

Methods

To better understand program staff's perspectives on the partnership, we collected qualitative data using focus groups and interviews, which allowed us to gather community partners' extant knowledge (Nadar, 2014). We sought to center the voices of Black women, as they offer legitimate insights about their communities but have often been excluded from the epistemological frameworks underlying educational research and practice (Dillard, 2000).

From 2016 through 2018, we conducted five focus groups with program leadership and staff and three semistructured interviews with the program director, Ms. Brown. We used focus groups and interviews because these means of formal data collection allowed participants to freely express their perceptions and thoughts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Focus groups also allowed staff members to share their insights, build off each other's responses, and discuss the complexities of the program in ways that other methods may not have permitted (Parker & Tritter, 2006). The program

Figure 1. Positionality and Relationship of Research Team to Evergreen's After-School Program

staff preferred focus groups to other forms of data collection, so utilizing focus groups allowed us to show respect for and build trust with our partners (Denner et al., 2019). Focus groups and interviews also allowed dialogue to serve as a method for evaluating claims, a tenet of Black feminist epistemologies (P.H. Collins, 2014). Juwan Z. Bennett, a Black man, conducted the focus groups and interviews.

In our interviews with Ms. Brown, we asked questions specific to her role as program director and community boundary spanner and discussed the founding and history of the program. Ms. Brown also described the advantages and disadvantages of having control over the development of the program as well as her perception of the university's involvement.

All program staff identified as Black/African American and lived in Evergreen; their positions and the duration of their involvement in the program varied. Across the five focus groups, four women and two men participated, most of whom participated in more than one focus group. Focus groups included a range of three to five participants each and were conducted at Evergreen's community center. Participants answered specific questions about day-to-day operations, program activities, and their perceptions of the partnership with the university. Beyond this formal data collection, we reviewed field notes and documents generated during the project, such as budgets, interim reports,

and news articles, as a form of triangulation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The research process itself aimed to empower community voices. Throughout the collaboration, we sought feedback from program leadership and staff, recognizing that their experiences as community members and Black mothers and fathers in a marginalized community are forms of expertise often decentered and excluded in research (Dillard, 2000; Gordon da Cruz, 2017). We encouraged participants to give their honest assessments of the partnership, and the university-based collaborators were receptive to constructive criticism and made changes based on this feedback. This reciprocal communication and genuine listening broke down barriers between the research team and community members (Dillard, 2008). These conversations also reduced power imbalances by giving community members voice to represent their reality (Denner et al., 2019).

Transcripts from interviews and focus groups were shared with participants as a form of member checking (Birt et al., 2016). Once the data were transcribed, we used line-by-line coding to discern emergent themes regarding staff members' perceived interactions with the research team throughout the program's history. After axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and verifying preliminary findings with university-based collaborators who were not involved in the coding process, at least two authors coded each transcript

to increase reliability. When coding discrepancies arose, all authors conferred to resolve them. We also compared our findings to field notes and documents to confirm the trustworthiness of our analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Findings

After examining the data through the lens of aspirational capital, our findings revealed that the success of the partnership hinged upon the following conditions:

1. The university partner was receptive to the community's ideas and goals.
2. The university partner played a supportive, not dominant, role.
3. The university partner provided tangible resources based on the expressed need of the community partner.
4. Boundary spanners mediated the relationship between community and university partners.

During the establishment of the partnership, the university-based collaborators listened to community members who founded the after-school program and prioritized their ideas for its continued development. After the formation of the partnership, the university-based team provided tangible resources and support for the program based on requests articulated by program leadership and staff. Additionally, the university-based collaborators (i.e., boundary spanners) facilitated a clear channel of communication between partners, often advocating for the community members to the university at large.

Search for a Receptive Partner

The after-school program initially offered in the community was run by an outside organization. Ms. Brown described how this program did not educate the children and that “someone was getting a profit from our kids being left behind.” Frustrated with the situation, Ms. Brown ran for and was elected to the neighborhood's community board and ended the contract with the previous provider. To continue to support students, Evergreen began its own after-school program using donated supplies and the staff's own money. Staff relied on their knowledge of raising children in the neighborhood to make decisions rooted in the needs and interests of the community's children. The program explicitly supported the whole child by providing academic support to students and needed resources such as food, clothing, and emotional support to parents. Community members—not the university-based

team—developed this holistic approach. Thus, community members and staff rejected outsiders' narrowly focused view of the role of educational programs; instead, they leveraged their aspirational capital and experiences to work toward community-specific goals (P. H. Collins, 2014; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Gordon da Cruz, 2017; Yosso, 2005).

Ms. Brown and her staff saw potential in their budding program and sought and procured funding to enhance it. Additional grant funding allowed Ms. Brown to seek collaborative partners that could authentically advance the after-school program's goals and pay the staff. Ms. Brown recounted her frustrations as possible partners offered support; she described feeling that “nobody hears” community concerns or ideas and that “nobody is talking about what these children are saying.” In meetings with potential partners, Ms. Brown reported that the staff's ideas were not genuinely valued. Rather, she believed that most of the potential partners were only interested in procuring grant money and not in developing the program in alignment with the vision of its leadership and staff. According to Ms. Brown:

When this grant came, everybody came out from everywhere trying to grab a piece. It was grabbing a piece of us but putting us in places they think we should be in, not in places that we know we should be, or we would like to be. It was all about what they thought.

At first, Ms. Brown was hesitant to meet with representatives of the university because of the long-standing mistrust between Temple and Evergreen. But after she and her staff left their first meeting with university representatives, they felt “shocked to be heard for the very first time” and believed that university-based collaborators could be “trusted.” This foundation of trust allowed program staff to expand their culturally relevant program suited to the needs of Evergreen's youth with resources from the university.

Playing a Supportive Role

In contrast to the partnerships proposed by other organizations, when the collaborative team from Temple offered a partnership, it prioritized the community's ideas, offering funding and support to, as Ms. Brown said, “a bunch of residents of public housing.” The partnership offer highlighted the program staff's knowledge of the

community; one staff member recalled how the research team's proposal "wasn't taking away what we had already going—they wanted to add to it and they actually asked what our ideas were." The community members valued that the university-based collaborators prioritized their ideas for the after-school program instead of imposing a vision onto the partnership. This approach reflected the critical CES objective of embracing community strengths (Gordon da Cruz, 2017) and fostered a meaningful start to the collaboration and expansion of the program.

Ms. Brown's feeling that the university-based team heard and valued community members' perspectives indicated that the university representatives did not approach the partnership through a deficit framework. Instead, they valued Ms. Brown's expertise and committed to playing a supportive role so that the program developed by the community could continue. In doing so, the university-based collaborators bolstered community members' hopes and dreams for the future of the program and its positive effects on children and families despite previous issues finding suitable partners. Thus, the university-based team supported the community members in developing and maximizing their own aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005) while centering community knowledge and expertise (P. H. Collins, 2014).

Tangible Support

In addition to reporting that university-based collaborators heard and valued their knowledge, focus group participants stated that their partnership with Temple afforded them tangible resources and support, including funding, volunteers, and professional development. Speaking about one of the university-based collaborators, one participant stated, "If we ask for something, [they try] to get it." Resources and support were offered in a way that attempted to promote an equitable relationship between the community program and the university-based collaborators; the program staff, not the university partners, made decisions about the types of resources and services that were needed. Additionally, participants recounted experiences of university-based team members working alongside them when trying to plan and execute activities for the children. Ms. Brown stated, "Together everybody's comfortable because not just Temple has an input, but [Evergreen] has an input. ... So, they're working together as a team."

In providing the resources and support that program leadership and staff deemed valuable and necessary, university-based collaborators fulfilled their role of supporting the development and maintenance of a program that was envisioned, desired, and directed by community members. The collaborative support also served to further community members' hopes and dreams for the program's success, exemplifying how the partnership leveraged the community members' aspirational capital.

Importance of Boundary Spanners

Participants perceived the university-based collaborators as instrumental in helping the program obtain necessary resources and support and described channels of communication as open and effective. Additionally, they reported that the university-based collaborators acted as go-betweens with the university, advocating to ensure that the program's needs were being met even when there was pushback or inaction from Temple. Speaking of a university-based team member's interaction with the university, one participant said, "If nobody's moving, [a university-based collaborator] gets them moving." Participants also reported that the advocacy of the university-based collaborators helped to secure the continuance of the after-school program after its initial grant funding ended. Participants' accounts indicated that the university-based collaborators, who functioned as boundary spanners, were perceived as distinct from Temple University as a whole (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010).

The university-based collaborators were particularly important when it came to respecting and bolstering the aspirational capital of the community members involved with the after-school program. Temple did not always provide clear channels of communication for the program leadership or necessary resources and support in a timely and effective manner. Program staff believed that this inaction and unresponsiveness impeded the successful maintenance of the program. At times, barriers introduced by the university sowed doubt in the minds of program leadership about the program's future. As the university-based collaborators advocated to the university on behalf of the community members, some of these barriers were removed. Thus, clear communication and trusting relationships with the university-based team helped restore community members' hope for the successful future of the program.

Throughout the founding and development of this program, the university-based collaborators respected and leveraged the aspirational capital of the neighboring low-income Black community in ways that privileged critical raced-gendered epistemologies and upheld tenets of critical CES. The community aspired for more than what after-school programs had historically offered neighborhood children and acted by removing the previous program and implementing their own. Additionally, when designing the partnership, the university-based collaborators were able to see, value, and utilize the community's aspirational capital. In the resulting partnership, the community's ideas were centered while the university helped secure grant funding and supported the objectives established by community members.

Discussion

Continuous efforts to center the community's aspirations guided the foundation and development of this community-university partnership in our urban neighborhood. The university-based collaborative team recognized how the culturally relevant knowledge and epistemologies of the program staff informed the after-school program's goals and provided a holistic perspective on resolving program needs (Brown & Lambert, 2015). Through the partnership, our university-based team addressed power differences and strengthened our ability to span boundaries between the university and community by consistently centering the community's aspirations and expertise. This successful partnership helped foster positive change in nearby Evergreen through an expanded, community-led after-school program. Here, we highlight three implications of our findings for future partnerships and research.

First, our research shows the importance of mitigating power differences between universities and community partners. These power differences, perpetuated through meeting formats and institutional structures, can create environments that exclude community members from the partnership (Miller & Hafner, 2008; Smith et al., 2010). As powerful institutions that have historically oppressed minoritized groups, universities have the responsibility to work with humility while partnering with communities that have less power (Miller & Hafner, 2008). In our case, the community expected a power differential at the founding of our partnership, in part because of the existing mistrust between

Evergreen and Temple University. Ms. Brown described her surprise when, in her first meeting with Temple and members of the university-based collaborative team, she felt "heard for the first time" by a prospective partner—notably, one with much more power than the fledgling program. Our team's commitment to supporting the aspirations of Ms. Brown and her peers and to recognizing their insights into community needs allowed us to practice humility and foster a more equitable partnership.

Second, we find that programs that center the culture and unique needs of participants provide an avenue for programmatic success. Successful partnerships address the changing needs of the community, consider local histories, and develop new organizational structures (Denner et al., 2019; Maurrasse, 2001; Ostrander, 2004). To enact these pillars of successful partnerships, our team first recognized the aspirational capital of the community, which allowed us to strategically utilize faculty and new staff positions to connect the university and community and support the community's needs. Critically, our team recognized the trauma and pain caused by the previous after-school program; seeking to understand that history allowed us to better address community members' concerns (Brown & Lambert, 2015; Denner et al., 2019). As the program progressed, the university-based collaborators continued to emphasize the value of the community's aspirations to develop a culturally relevant and successful program driven by community priorities (Maurrasse, 2001). Program staff members wanted to improve students' lives by offering holistic programming that would bolster them against inequalities and injustices in their schools and community (Baldrige et al., 2017)—a goal that previous after-school programs did not accomplish. This aspirational goal aligns with culturally relevant pedagogy's key principles (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014). The university-based collaborative team both understood that larger purpose and was able to formalize processes using critical CES (Gordon da Cruz, 2017) to meet the needs of the outside funding organization. Thus, centering aspirational capital throughout the partnership provided a foundation for the partnership's success, leading to the continued growth of Evergreen's culturally relevant after-school program.

Finally, our research provides further evidence of the importance of university-based boundary spanners to mediate the needs of stakeholders in community-university partnerships (Van

Schyndel et al., 2019; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). The university-based collaborators in this partnership navigated the community–university boundary while continuing to recognize and value the aspirational capital of the community members who designed and first implemented the program. As trust is central to the work of university-based boundary spanners (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008), recognizing the community’s aspirational capital allowed our team to build trusting relationships and better facilitate conversations between the university and community. Our experience shows that university-employed boundary spanners who center the powerful aspirational capital of their partners and the totality of CCW can better serve the needs of Black communities and other Communities of Color; their position allows them to leverage the university’s many resources to advance the local community’s hopes and dreams. This additional function can be critical when boundary spanners navigate the inevitable conflict between organizations (Gaunter & Hansman, 2017). As noted in Figure 1, boundary spanners had multiple roles within Temple as faculty, staff, and graduate students; thus, they provided various perspectives and skills necessary to foster a strong partnership. Research on boundary spanners has noted that faculty members play a key role in this work (e.g., Purcell et al., 2020), and our findings highlight the need for supportive teams that include faculty, not just individuals who support projects. Additionally, by prioritizing the expertise and epistemologies of community members, university-based staff can participate in critical CES dedicated to race-conscious, authentically located, asset-based community change (Gordon da Cruz, 2017).

Our study has several limitations. First, as a single case, we are limited in our ability to generalize to other partnerships. Future research examining the components of successful community engagement involving different types of institutions, supports, and community contexts could further enrich understanding of community–university partnerships. Second, while aspirational capital may continue to be a useful lens through which to analyze other community–university partnerships, we recognize that it represents only one component of the CCW framework (Yosso, 2005). Several forms of capital found within Communities of Color are evidenced in this program; however, their full explication is beyond the scope of this paper. Future research could continue to explore how other forms of capital inform the relationships between

Communities of Color, institutional partners, and program outcomes. Finally, because our study focuses on the founding and development of the partnership, we have not discussed the program staff’s programmatic and pedagogical choices. These choices, grounded in the staff’s expertise as community members, were the foundation of the program’s success. Our future research on this partnership will consider the program staff’s pedagogical choices in the context of a theory of change.

Conclusion

Critical CES utilizes the assets of both a community and a university in the pursuit of justice (Gordon da Cruz, 2017). In our examination of a partnership between an urban university and its neighboring predominantly Black community, we found that the success of this partnership hinged upon the university-based collaborators taking a supportive role; respecting the knowledge, expertise, and aspirations of community members; and empowering them to take control over the direction and development of their local after-school program. This study contributes to a limited body of literature considering CES through a critical lens, and in doing so it highlights important connections between race and aspirational capital that can help guide research and practice.

The findings of this research suggest three central implications for practice. First, community–university partnerships should be grounded in the aspirational capital and local knowledge of community members. Community members’ knowledge and expertise should be instrumental to the functioning of the partnership to advance more equitable collaborations. Second, community–university partnerships should embrace transparency and inclusivity and should involve racialized community members as equal contributors whose epistemologies are central to the success of partnerships. Third, boundary spanners are particularly important when it comes to facilitating clear communication and effective interaction between community and university partners, thereby enabling them to address power differences and constructively cross boundaries. Because of their importance, boundary spanners must work diligently to understand local knowledge and aspirations to benefit community and university partners.

This project was guided by a desire to understand how a university-based research team helped to foster a successful and equitable collaboration with its local community in the hope

that this partnership model might be effectively adopted by others in similar contexts, especially in the growing number of partnerships that utilize a critical CES framework. This research furthers the conversation on how universities can do more to effectively engage and support their local communities and gives credence to the claim that higher education is a public good.

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