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Student Researcher Reflections on Co-Leading a Community-Academic Partnership to Advance Community and Intergenerational Well-Being in North Nashville

Key Words: community–academic partnerships, community health, well-being

Introduction: Community–academic partnerships address inequities by bringing universities and local organizations together to co-create knowledge, and build solutions grounded in community priorities. This project centers on a student-led partnership in North Nashville, a historically Black community impacted by systemic disinvestment, gentrification, and overpolicing. Despite these challenges, the community demonstrates resilience through longstanding organizations, faith institutions, HBCUs, and cultural heritage.

Methods: In collaboration with Transformation Nashville and Black Mental Health Village, student researchers worked to co-design an intergenerational program supporting senior, adolescent, and adult well-being. They participated in community meetings and planning processes over one year. Engagement journals captured reflections on observations, challenges, and lessons, offering insight into how equitable partnerships are built in practice.

Results:

Flexibility is essential when working with community partners.

Adapting to shifting priorities and timelines was more valuable than expecting the work to follow an academic schedule. Being responsive to organizational needs built trust and showed that authentic collaboration requires patience and openness.

Power dynamics must be acknowledged and navigated with care.

Vanderbilt's history and reputation shaped how the partnership was received, carrying both privilege and baggage. Ethical engagement required humility, awareness of these dynamics, and a focus on building genuine relationships rather than relying on institutional authority.

Translating research into action strengthens impact.

Community-engaged research must move beyond abstract findings to create tangible benefits. In this project, meetings shaped programming to match residents' needs, addressing concerns that researchers often leave without support. Though resource limits and translating findings posed challenges, co-created action plans and feedback help ensure evidence drives lasting change.

Conclusions: Reflections from this partnership provide a framework for future community–academic collaborations in public health, highlighting practices that foster power-sharing, reciprocity, and sustainability. By prioritizing community co-creation over

institutional approaches, students can meaningfully support collaborations that advance community and intergenerational well-being.