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Collaborating for community food security: Emerging scholar participation in a community–university partnership

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been rapid growth in community–university partnerships. As part of this trend, emerging scholars, including graduate students and postdoctoral fellows, have demonstrated significant interest in being part of community-engaged research projects. However, while there is a growing body of literature on the general subject of CU partnerships, the perspective of emerging scholars is not adequately addressed. In this paper, we aim to address that gap by presenting the case of a specific partnership – one that focused on the issue of community food security – and highlighting the role played by emerging scholars. We suggest that some of the challenges and opportunities characteristic of CU work affect emerging scholars, and the partnerships in which they are involved, in unique ways. Because we view emerging scholar participation in engaged research as valuable for both researchers and community partners, we argue in favour of developing institutional spaces that can support their involvement in CU partnerships by providing opportunities to do the work, facilitating skill building and creating communities of practice.

Keywords

Community–university partnership, emerging scholars, graduate student research, collaboration, community-engaged scholarship

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Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a growing emphasis on fostering collaboration between universities and the communities in which they are embedded (see Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003; Hall, 2009; Minkler, 2005; Muirhead & Woolcock, 2008; Onyx, 2008). Grounded in the rich history of action-oriented and participatory approaches to research, which dates back to the work of those such as Lewin in the 1940s and Freire in the 1970s, the current rise in community–university (CU) collaboration 'reflects a growing interest in broadening and deepening the public aspects of academic scholarship' and reaction to a commonly perceived 'disconnect between academics and the public' (Barker, 2004, p. 123). With the rapid growth of university-based centres explicitly dedicated to research with and for community partners (Barker, 2004; Hall, 2009; Onyx, 2008), an increasing focus on incorporating community-based learning experiences into university curricula (Greenwood, 2007; Ibáñez-Carrasco & Riaño-Alcalá, 2009; Walsh, Rutherford, & Sears, 2010), and the incorporation of community engagement language into university strategic plans (Bourke, 2013; Hall, 2009; Winter, Wiseman, & Muirhead, 2006), there is evidence that this perspective is gaining traction within academic institutions.

In conjunction with this trend, CU collaboration is of growing interest to emerging scholars, including graduate students, postdoctoral fellows and non-tenured faculty (Franz, 2013; Jaeger, Tuchmayer, & Morin, 2014; Matthews, Karls, Doberneck, & Springer, 2015). In spite of this, there is still relatively little literature dedicated to analysing the unique role of these actors within CU partnerships. In this paper, we aim to address this gap by telling the story of a CU partnership in which emerging scholars (specifically graduate students and a postdoctoral fellow) played a key role and by analysing the partnership from that perspective. We argue that, although in some respects the challenges and opportunities associated with engaged scholarship are similar regardless of the career stage of the scholars involved, the situation of emerging scholars is unique. As a result, it is important for their perspective to be shared more widely in the literature, and for universities to develop institutional supports that explicitly focus on facilitating the ability of these actors to effectively engage in CU partnerships.

We begin by providing an overview of some of the key opportunities and challenges associated with CU collaboration, paying particular attention to how these relate to community food security projects such as the one we describe in the paper and to the realities of emerging scholars. We then describe the specific partnership that forms the basis for our case study and provide an overview of its activities. This description is followed by three discussion sections, each of which has a strong focus on our positionality as emerging scholars. First, we analyse both the challenges and supports we encountered within the university space. Second, we explore the main challenges we faced in our work with community partners. Third, we consider the strengths and supports we found within the community and the benefits that we were able to achieve through our collaborative efforts. In our conclusions, we highlight the importance of institutional support mechanisms that

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facilitate emerging scholars' ability to engage in CU work in a way that meets community needs and produces high-quality scholarship.

Framing our case: CU partnerships, community food security, and emerging scholars

CU partnerships can take many forms, from transformative projects that strive to empower marginalized groups, to work that adopts a less critical approach, instead seeking to contribute to more incremental social change. Ross et al. (2010, p. 19) explain that, 'while the relative roles of community research partners and academic researchers differ across the continuum', all community-engaged research 'contrasts with the traditional model in which academic investigators define and control all aspects of the research project...'. Taking this contrast as a starting point, the collaborative work discussed in this paper relies on Boyer's (1996, cited in Hall (2009, pp. 15–16)) definition of engagement as 'the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity'. Although, like many CU efforts, our project took a distinctly transdisciplinary approach, we are also informed by Burawoy's (2014, p. 279) discussion of public sociology, which highlights the notion of scholarly pursuits being 'infused with moral purpose' that compels the researcher to contribute to social change without losing sight of academic rigor.

The relevance of the CU model for community food security work

Establishing connections between university- and community-based actors as a means of enabling research to contribute to social change has been – and continues to be – a particularly strong tradition in the arena of food systems work. Indeed, the establishment of land grant universities and related agricultural extension programmes could be considered a precursor to the kind of CU practices seen today. Those programmes may have initially been more hierarchical and prescriptive than reciprocal and participatory (Flora & Francis, 2000); however, they set the stage for an evolution towards more participatory methods such as those developed by Chambers (1987) in the 1980s. Although this work had a strong focus on agricultural production, Block (2010, p. 521) argues that food systems issues more broadly 'often lend themselves to research and action involving community partners' because food is so deeply relevant to people's everyday lives.

The strong connection between food systems research and CU partnership is exemplified in a number of studies that address issues related to community food security. In the North American context, notable examples include: analysis by Levkoe (2006) and Levkoe and Wakefield (2011) of the development of the Community Food Centre model, which Levkoe was actively engaged in as both researcher and activist; Block's (2010) overview of a number of community-

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engaged food systems research projects; Carney et al.'s (2012) evaluation of a community-based research project designed to support a community garden initiative; Rojas et al.'s (2011) description of a complex CU partnership promoting sustainable food interventions in public schools; and, Knezevic, Hunter, Watt, Williams, and Anderson's (2014) critical discourse analysis of a participatory food costing project. These cases touch on many common challenges associated with CU work (see below); however, they also demonstrate how effective engaged research can contribute to changing food system discourse and practice and increasing community food security. This can be done, for example, through facilitating sustainable food production (Carney et al., 2012; Rojas et al., 2011), providing opportunities for people experiencing food insecurity to have their voices heard (Knezevic et al., 2014), and advocating for transformative approaches to food security work (Levkoe, 2006; Levkoe & Wakefield, 2011).

Emerging scholar participation in CU partnerships

Graduate students, postdoctoral fellows and untenured faculty are increasingly engaging in the kinds of collaborative endeavours outlined above; however, there is limited scholarship analysing the role(s) that they play and the ways in which their involvement can impact a partnership. The literature that does touch on the subject tends to focus on the challenges associated with emerging scholars' participation in CU partnerships. Specifically, there is discussion of a lack of opportunities to actively participate in such work and to develop the skills to do so effectively (Franz, 2013; Matthews et al., 2015), and university hiring (as well as tenure and promotion) practices that undervalue community engagement, thereby threatening the career trajectories of emerging scholars working on CU initiatives (Cutforth, 2013; O'Meara & Jaeger, 2006; Rojas et al., 2011; Sandmann, Saltmarsh, & O'Meara, 2008).

In addition to these concerns, many of the well-documented challenges of CU collaborations can have particularly acute impacts on emerging scholars. For example, research undertaken by CU partnerships is often subject to critique for insufficient theoretical and methodological rigour (Levin, 2012; Mosavel, Ahmed, Daniels, & Simon, 2011) and limited generalizability (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003). As such, CU projects tend to suffer from a lack of formal credit and recognition within academic institutions, and corresponding difficulties securing funding and resources (Block, 2010; Burawoy, 2014; Jaeger, Sandmann, & Kim, 2011; Mosavel et al., 2011). While these issues can affect even the most senior scholars, they are especially problematic for graduate students, postdoctoral fellows and untenured faculty, whose positions within academic institutions are relatively precarious, who do not yet have solid records of scholarly excellence to rely upon, and who are often working with very limited financial resources. Similarly, the inherently messy, time-consuming nature of CU collaborations can be frustrating for anyone involved (Block, 2010; Brydon-Miller et al., 2003; Christopher, Watts, McCormick, & Young, 2008; Onyx, 2008); however, for emerging scholars working

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within the confines of time-limited programs or contracts, and depending on specific outputs to help secure positions or tenure, the iterative nature of engaged research and the patient relationship building that is required can be especially problematic.

Although much of the existing literature emphasizes the challenges of and barriers to emerging scholar participation in CU partnerships, there is also some attention paid to the advantages of such work. In particular, there is discussion regarding how emerging scholars can benefit from participating in CU projects, for example by diversifying their career options and fostering leadership abilities (Case, 2014), offsetting the sometimes isolating experience of graduate research (van der Meulen, 2011), and finding opportunities for learning and personal development (Armitage and Levac, 2015; Greenwood, 2007; Ibáñez-Carrasco & Riaño-Alcalá, 2009). Although there is far less analysis on this point, there is also some mention of community partners benefitting from the unpaid work of graduate students participating in CU collaborations (Ibáñez-Carrasco & Riaño-Alcalá, 2009; Tryon & Ross, 2012).

An issue that has received relatively little analysis from the specific perspective of emerging scholars is the importance of reflexivity as part of any CU endeavour. Regardless of the career stage of the scholars involved, there is well-documented consensus that it is essential for engaged researchers to pay ongoing critical attention to their own positionality with respect to the work. As England (1994, p. 82) argues in her discussion of reflexivity, ‘self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher’ must be integrated into all stages of the research process. Similarly, ongoing analysis of the ways in which power dynamics (within *and* between both the university *and* community) affect the research process is imperative, as questions regarding whose voice is heard, who is ascribed authority, whose knowledge and expertise are valued, and who may be excluded have a profound impact on partnership research and results (Johnston, 2010; Minkler, 2005; Prins, 2005; Ross et al., 2010). Because the positionality of emerging scholars (particularly graduate students) is, in some important respects, significantly different from that of more established researchers, there is a need to explicitly consider questions of reflexivity and power dynamics from their perspective.

This paper aims to meet that need, and the more general gap in the literature on emerging scholar participation in CU partnerships, by providing an in-depth analysis of a specific partnership in which the university team involved consisted of a group of graduate students and a postdoctoral fellow. While our analysis will touch on some of the challenges and barriers that arose, we will also provide a more comprehensive discussion of the unique ways in which emerging scholars can contribute to high-quality engaged research that helps foster positive social change. Because these contributions are important, yet the challenges and barriers are also very real, we argue that there is a need for supportive and dynamic institutional spaces to enable the engaged work of emerging scholars and help ensure mutual benefit for all partners.

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Case study overview

The case study analysis presented in this paper draws on three primary sources of data. First, we rely on our own notes taken over the course of the partnership's work, including our minutes from project meetings held between January 2011 and May 2014. Second, we include observations and insights gleaned throughout that period during regular meetings at The Research Shop. As will be described below, this institutional space provided us with regular opportunities to reflexively assess our CU work and engage in analysis regarding its strengths and weaknesses, achievements, and limitations. Finally, our discussion is informed by the results of a developmental evaluation of the partnership, which was conducted as part of the Community First: Impacts of Community Engagement project – a research initiative based out of Carleton University. That evaluation work was carried out from 2013 to 2014, and included workshopping with research team members and community partners to critically assess the partnership's process and outcomes.

The university partner: The University of Guelph's (UofG) Research Shop

The primary institutional academic partner involved in the work presented here was the UofG's Research Shop. Founded in 2009 and embedded within the university's Community Engaged Scholarship Institute (CESI), the Research Shop's mandate is to work directly with local organizations – in particular collaborations – to identify pressing social issues, and conduct collaborative research projects that can contribute to positive social change at the community level. Integral to the Research Shop's approach are its 'Intern Tables' – clusters of graduate student volunteers from a variety of disciplines who, under the supervision of Research Shop project managers and staff, volunteer 5 h/week to carry out research projects with community partners. Over the course of our three-year involvement in the project discussed in this paper, one of us worked as a PhD student intern and then project manager at the Research Shop, while the other transitioned from a project manager to a postdoctoral fellow position. In addition to our participation as academic leads for the project, we worked with seven additional graduate student volunteers, with support from the director of CESI, to conduct the research discussed in this paper.

The community partners: The Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination and the Food Access Working Group

Consistent with Barker's (2004, p. 131) 'community partnership' mode of engaged research, our research team relied heavily on 'contact with intermediary public entities such as public agencies, local schools, activist groups, and community organizations'. The primary partners were the Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination (Poverty Task Force, or PTF) and the Food Access Working Group (FAWG) of the Guelph-Wellington Food Round Table.

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These two collaborations bring together multiple stakeholders (including local service providers, policy-makers, people with lived experience of poverty, and community activists) to address issues of poverty and food security in Guelph and Wellington County. Like the Research Shop, both were founded in 2009.

For both the PTF and FAWG, improving food security was recognized as a key priority almost immediately after their founding. Although their member organizations had significant anecdotal evidence regarding some of the challenges and gaps within Guelph and Wellington's existing emergency food service system, the groups lacked empirical data on the issue. There was also no clear consensus regarding what the main problems were and, more importantly, how they might best be addressed. After commissioning some preliminary research, which was conducted by the local United Way's Social Planning Department (Martin, 2010), FAWG approached the Research Shop to explore the possibility of a more in-depth research project focused on how to improve food security in the region. After a series of conversations, we initiated that work in January 2011.

Collaborative research and action for community food security

For the first phase of the project, research focused on emergency food providers and other agencies working with populations vulnerable to food insecurity, identifying their capacities and sense of what needed to be changed. At the request of FAWG, we also asked participants about the concept of a community food hub and its potential local applicability. The results of that work were published in a report in November 2011 and shared widely through a series of public presentations.[1]

Following publication of the first research report, the PTF struck an ad hoc committee tasked with developing a set of concrete recommendations for both short- and long-term action based on the research results. As research coordinator, the first author was invited to serve on that committee along with a number of other stakeholders closely familiar with (but not directly offering) emergency food service in Guelph-Wellington. In addition to the action-oriented recommendations, the ad hoc committee also called for a follow-up research project that would more directly give voice to people who use emergency food services. Whereas the first iteration of the research had been conducted in collaboration with a multi-stakeholder community advisory committee, all parties decided that it would be more effective for the PTF to serve as the primary community partner for this second project. The results of the second round of research were published in April 2013[2] (Dodd, Nelson, Cairney, Clark & Cartaginese, 2013) and were used by the same ad hoc committee to inform a second set of action-oriented recommendations.

One notable conclusion from both research projects was that there was widespread support on the part of both service providers and users regarding the concept of a community food hub. The development of such a hub was viewed as having the potential to build on the strengths of the existing emergency food services system and address some of the important challenges and gaps in service – particularly those related to stigma and eligibility requirements. Based on this

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information, in May 2013 the PTF's ad hoc committee presented its second set of research-informed recommendations, calling for 'a hub and spoke model [to] replace the current emergency food system in Guelph-Wellington' (PTF, 2013, p. 7). In its report, the committee outlined a number of requirements for this model, including that it: 'Partner with other community stakeholders on advocacy and public awareness campaigns aimed at addressing the root causes of poverty and reducing stigma'; 'Be a community-driven initiative that includes those accessing emergency food services as key decision makers'; and (citing Nelson, Aberdeen, Dietrich-O'Connor, & Shantz, 2011, p. 22) that it 'should eventually address issues surrounding food, health and poverty in a more holistic way, with a range of programming that could include community gardens, kitchens, nutrition (and other) education, and more' (PTF, 2013, pp. 7–8).

In response to this recommendation, the PTF transformed the ad hoc committee into a full-fledged working group dedicated to implementing the food hub vision, along with a number of smaller scale complementary actions. In May 2013, this group was renamed The Seed Community Food Hub Committee (or, simply, The Seed) and, since then, its efforts have focused increasingly on the creation of a local community food hub. To that end, Seed Committee members have presented the results of both research projects, along with the accompanying recommendations, to stakeholders across the region. They also held two in-depth rounds of community consultation to share and build upon research results by facilitating broad-based community participation in the initiative. In 2015, The Seed received a three-year grant, which allowed the group to hire a full-time Directing Coordinator. At the time of writing, The Seed was actively facilitating community efforts to build a collective cold storage facility and develop an improved emergency food distribution network, and they hoped to open their doors as a functioning community food hub by 2017.

Navigating academic institutions as community-engaged emerging scholars

There is no doubt that the community-engaged research carried out by our CU partnership played an integral role in helping to gradually shift the food security discourse in Guelph-Wellington away from a focus on emergency food provision and towards a broader dialogue about community food security. As part of that shift, the research directly contributed to the emergence of the action-oriented community food hub initiative described above. In this section, we explore the challenges as well as supports that we encountered as community-engaged emerging scholars navigating university space.

Concerns about 'professional suicide'

Engaging in CU work is deeply satisfying to us both personally, in part because it provides us with the sense of moral purpose described by Burawoy (2014);

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however, we are also keenly aware that it can, in some cases, 'constitute a form of professional suicide' for less established academics (Ibáñez-Carrasco & Riaño-Alcalá, 2009, p. 81; see also Cutforth, 2013; Rojas et al., 2011). Indeed, although our efforts on the project described here resulted in three community research reports, two recommendation reports, numerous community presentations and conversations, and a number of tangible actions, such outputs continue to be ascribed limited value within the confines of academic institutions (Boyer, 1996; Burgess, 2006; Greenwood, 2007; Sandmann et al., 2008).

Citing the challenges associated with securing academic outputs, as well as a lack of control over project timing and direction, Burawoy (2014, p. 279) builds on the idea of career suicide by comparing public-facing scholarship to 'playing with dynamite'. However, although there is widespread recognition of the potentially negative career implications, there also appears to be a general consensus amongst those involved in CU projects that the risks are worth taking. In our case, we do not consider the community-oriented results of our partnership work any less rigorously produced, less valid or less valuable than this paper, which marks our first more traditionally scholarly engagement with the project. To that end, we are grateful for a growing – if not yet universally accepted – trend that views relevance as being intrinsically tied to rigour (Levin, 2012), collaboration as an important component of validity (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003), and the degree to which research serves as a catalyst for positive social change as a key indicator of value (Block, 2010; Brydon-Miller et al., 2003; Greenwood, Whyte, & Harkavy, 1993; Greenwood & Levin, 2005; Khanlou & Peter, 2005; O'Meara, 2008; Whyte, 1989). At the same time, we recognize that if we focus too heavily on community-oriented outputs, at the expense of more traditional scholarly publications, we run the risk of limiting our potential to secure work within academic institutions. In our roles as emerging scholars, we already experience how the pressure to produce high value products from an academic perspective (e.g. peer reviewed journal articles, research grants) can compromise the amount of time available for the more applied activities that are often more highly valued by community partners.

The importance of institutional supports

Although concerns about career advancement are real for us, our location at the UofG did help to mitigate them, at least to some extent, as we were able to take advantage of a number of institutional supports for our CU work. To begin with, the UofG grew out of the Ontario Agricultural College, which – following in the tradition of the American land grant colleges – historically had a strong focus on applied agricultural research and extension work. As one of Canada's 'comprehensive universities' (i.e. an institution focused jointly on research and student learning), the tradition of promoting engaged scholarship has extended to the present day (Armitage & Levac, 2015) and is given explicit mention in the university's most recent strategic plan. This kind of supportive institutional environment has been recognized as a key factor in the success of CU work (Kaufman, 2004). Against this

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general backdrop, the UofG's Research Shop provided a concrete enabling structure to support our engagement in CU collaboration.

The Research Shop served as an entry point to the university for community partners, without which the research needs of the PTF and FAWG might never have been articulated to an academic partner. With its distinct model focused on connecting graduate students and community organizations, the Research Shop provided us with a unique opportunity to gain experience as leaders in a CU partnership. In order to support us in that role, the Research Shop's Intern Tables and project manager meetings provided a platform for invaluable peer learning and capacity building in the principles and practices of community-engaged research. Over the three years that our project was active, we created an Intern Table specifically dedicated to food security work. Led by the first author, this group of approximately 10 graduate students would meet regularly to share project updates, reflect on any issues or challenges that were arising in the work, collectively brainstorm solutions, celebrate achievements, and engage in peer-led skill building on topics relevant to CU partnerships (e.g. plain language reporting, focus group facilitation, etc.). Both authors also participated in regular Research Shop project manager meetings, which were facilitated by the CESI director. These meetings, in addition to ongoing support from the CESI director, provided opportunities for higher level problem-solving regarding the full range of active Research Shop projects, as well as additional skill-building opportunities (e.g. project management, ethics review processes for CU projects, etc.).

Beyond their capacity-building function, Research Shop meetings also provided a structured space for reflexive analysis of our CU work. For example, we had opportunities to 'consider the structure of our social relations, how we are accountable for them and how our actions perpetuate those relations' (England, 1994, p. 80) with fellow graduate students participating in other projects. Such peer support is generally considered an important element of student participation in community-engaged work (see Ibáñez-Carrasco & Riaño-Alcalá, 2009; Walsh et al., 2010); however, it took on special importance in our case because our experiences were not mediated by course curriculum or supervision by university faculty, as is commonly the case. Rather, senior students with relative expertise in CU collaboration mentored more junior students, who eventually became leaders themselves. This extracurricular model allowed us to avoid problems associated with grading community-engaged work and requiring outputs to match semester schedules sometimes associated with community service learning courses (Ibáñez-Carrasco & Riaño-Alcalá, 2009) and created valuable opportunities for us to develop our leadership skills (Case, 2014). It also enabled us to feel part of a community of practice, which Cutforth (2013) notes is very important for emerging scholars engaged in community-based research as it decreases potential feelings of isolation and improves the quality of research practice.

While the Research Shop offered a distinct institutional space that supported our engagement in a CU partnership, we both had the additional benefit of personal mentorship from senior faculty members with decades of experience

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conducting community-engaged research. This mentorship pre-dated our involvement with the Research Shop and allowed us to gain knowledge of and experience with engaged research. As a complement to the Research Shop's peer learning model, our relationships with these senior scholars provided clear demonstrations of best practices in CU – for example with respect to building and maintaining reciprocal relationships – that helped inform our approach to the work. We also relied significantly on wisdom and advice from these experts during some of the more challenging moments of our partnership project, and their career success served to highlight for us the potential to be successful within an academic institution while prioritizing meaningful engagement with community partners. Our deep appreciation of the support provided by these advisors is consistent with observations by others regarding the essential nature of strong faculty mentorship for students interested in CU partnerships (Case, 2014; Cutforth, 2013; Franz, 2013; Jaeger et al., 2011).

The significant support provided by the UofG – particularly through its Research Shop and the mentorship of community-engaged senior faculty – allowed us both to cultivate a number of skills necessary for effective engagement in CU projects. We developed significant leadership capacity, along with practical skills in meeting facilitation, public speaking, plain language writing, project management, and multi-stakeholder relationship building and communication. Common elements of engaged research projects, these skills are, importantly, 'transferable between academic and non-academic work' (Ibáñez-Carrasco & Riaño-Alcalá, 2009, p. 82). While we certainly appreciate the value of strengthening these specific abilities, we suspect that the most useful capacity we were able to build through our partnership experience was an increasing level of comfort with the chaotic, messy, non-linear nature of community-engaged, action-oriented research. This learning process was not easy – rather, we can relate to Walsh et al.'s (2010) assertion that it may provoke anxiety, and even tears – and it is not (nor likely ever will be) complete. However, it is worth noting that, in spite of the challenges, at the time of writing we both continued to be involved in community-engaged research in some way: one of us through ongoing graduate study and teaching a community-engaged undergraduate seminar, and the other as postdoctoral fellow and coordinator at a university-based centre dedicated to collaborative research on sustainable food systems.

Navigating challenging dynamics with community partners

Just as our navigation within the university space was characterized by both challenges and opportunities, the dynamics that evolved with our community partners over the course of the CU project were sometimes fraught with tensions, though they ultimately proved to be highly productive. In this section, we analyse the key challenges we confronted in developing and maintaining our relationships with community-based actors, with a particular focus on how our position as emerging scholars influenced those relationships.

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Inexperience can contribute to confusion

As mentioned above, the first of this project's research reports was published in November 2011. The plan had been to publish in August and, in accordance with that timeline, we prepared a draft report by July and held a meeting to discuss the initial findings. That meeting was attended by the first author (who was leading the research), the director of CESI, and representatives of the PTF, FAWG, and three of those coalitions' member agencies, all of whom had been provided with a full draft of the report prior to the gathering. Although the plan for the meeting was to collectively discuss minor feedback on that draft in the hopes of publishing within weeks, it quickly became clear that the various stakeholders each had significantly different understandings of their roles in the CU partnership, and that those differences would have to be addressed in order for the project to move forward. While the research team had been working under the impression that the four partners present at the meeting represented a kind of advisory committee for the work, it turned out that only one of those individuals felt they had been actively playing that role. This meant that research design and implementation had been heavily influenced by feedback from one community representative whose views were not entirely shared by other partners. As a result, the preliminary report we had prepared was perceived by three of the four partners as reflecting a relatively narrow sense of community priorities and lacking sensitivity to community tensions and politics.

This lack of clarity with respect to roles, responsibilities, and expectations is a frequently cited challenge in CU projects such as ours (Bruce, Flynn, & Stagg-Peterson, 2011; Brydon-Miller et al., 2003; Onyx, 2008), and the July meeting could be seen as an example of what Prins (2005) refers to as a 'critical incident', not uncommon in engaged research. While such experiences can be fraught with tension, they can also serve as useful opportunities that prompt 'a transition from informal to more intentional decision making and [help partnership] members to clarify their expectations of each other' (Prins, 2005, p. 58). Indeed, in the months that followed the meeting, the partnership was reoriented as the PTF became the key decision-making authority and other community partners adopted more consultative roles. In addition, the responsibility for developing research-informed recommendations shifted from the research team to the PTF's ad hoc committee, thereby creating further clarity with respect to the roles for the research team vis-à-vis a broader cross-section of community stakeholders.

Although these issues may be common for CU partnerships, our reflections on the experience included the observation that, in our case, a relative lack of experience on a variety of levels contributed to the confusion that put the project's success in jeopardy in its early days. As project lead, the first author had conducted participatory research on food-related topics as both a Masters and PhD student; however, when the project began, her experience in the Canadian context was limited, and she had never coordinated a collaborative CU team like this one, that involved a complex network of community partners and a number of graduate student volunteers. In addition, as a graduate student working with a group of

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highly experienced community-based professionals, she was reticent to take a lead in defining roles and responsibilities at the project's outset. As a result, in the absence of anyone else taking that on, such definitions were left to be (mistakenly) assumed until after the 'critical incident' occurred.

It is likely that the community partners also failed to explicitly define roles and responsibilities because they too were inexperienced in the kind of collaborative research project being undertaken. Beyond a relative unfamiliarity with such research, the organizational partners on both the community and university sides of the partnership were, more generally speaking, in early stages of development when the work began, having all been founded in 2009. Consistent with findings by Block (2010) regarding sometimes uneven community capacity to engage in research, the fact that each partner's internal protocols were still being established and refined helps explain why defining clear protocols for the partnership did not happen until an overt conflict made it necessary.

The problem of poorly defined roles and responsibilities during the early stages of the partnership was compounded by the research team's initial ignorance of deep divisions within the community with respect to strategies for improving food security. Such divisions are not uncommon in contexts where community-engaged research takes place (see Minkler, 2005); however, they were largely invisible to us at the outset of the work. Our ignorance of existing conflicts and politics could be attributed to three main factors: a lack of prior work on local food security issues; a (mistaken) assumption that the voices of a few representatives reflected the general opinion of a much broader and, in reality, more fractious coalition; and, low levels of trust between us and our community partners at the project's outset, which prohibited them from openly disclosing information about conflicts related to power and resources.

The question of credibility

In addition to influencing clarity and communication during the early phases of the CU project, our status as emerging scholars had implications with respect to the credibility ascribed to our research findings. As already noted, CU research is often vulnerable to academic critiques from those who argue it lacks theoretical and methodological rigour (Levin, 2012; Mosavel et al., 2011). When presenting findings to community partners, such critiques can be mitigated because researchers are often perceived as possessing considerable power and authority (Minkler, 2005). In our case, the way we were perceived by community partners and other stakeholders shifted depending on the extent to which our research results were considered desirable.

At two specific points, our student status was used by critics of the work in an attempt to discredit results. In one case, this perspective eventually changed as relationships of trust were built, roles were better defined, and our capacities as researchers became more clearly recognized and valued by the partner in question. Moreover, this partner became a strong advocate for our involvement in efforts to

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improve community food security. In the other case, however, an outspoken critic of our work maintained a negative opinion, at times citing our position as students in efforts to diminish the credibility of the findings. While this particular organization consistently sought to halt the use of our research to inform community-based action, their efforts were thwarted by the otherwise widespread community support for the project. The fact that our status as students was used as a means of trying to discredit our research results highlights the significantly different power dynamics at play in our CU partnership, as we did not possess the authority traditionally ascribed to more established university-based actors.

Capitalizing on community strengths

The somewhat inverted power dynamics that characterized our relationships with community partners may have made it easier for detractors of our work to raise questions about its credibility, and our relative inexperience may have exacerbated communication issues; however, our position as emerging scholars also enabled us to take advantage of significant supports within the community to further our partnership's common goals. In this section, we reflect on some of the factors that facilitated our ability to eventually develop a productive collaborative partnership with community-based actors and the impacts that the partnership was able to achieve.

Building trust-based relationships

In the aftermath of the contentious meeting discussed above, three important things happened that contributed to building trust-based relationships within the CU partnership. First, all parties explicitly agreed that the four community partners represented at that meeting would serve as an active advisory group to help oversee the completion of the research project. Second, it was decided that the research team would not make any recommendations itself; rather, it would focus on reporting research findings and leave the development of recommendations to a separate multi-stakeholder committee. Finally, the group spent four months working in close collaboration to revise the draft report, ensuring that its framing reflected a broader cross-section of community priorities. Initially, some members of the advisory group, along with some research participants, expressed frustrations with the delay in publishing the report; however, those concerns were mitigated by the effectiveness of the collaborative revision process in terms of improving the quality of the final document and, more importantly, strengthening the relationships amongst and between the researchers and community partners.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the relative inexperience of all partners involved in the CU project contributed to initial miscommunication and confusion about roles and responsibilities; however, our reflections revealed that the same inexperience also helped facilitate moving past the conflict. Because we could

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acknowledge our mutual lack of experience, all parties were able to view the 'mistakes' that occurred early on as part of an inevitable learning curve and, rather than assign blame, consider the challenge an opportunity for co-learning. The researchers' position as students helped community partners perceive them as co-learners rather than external experts, thereby increasing their patience as the need to take time for relationship building slowed the project's progress. This willingness to be patient, learn from mistakes and adapt to changing circumstances is a key component of effective action research (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003; Onyx, 2008). While it is certainly not the exclusive domain of partnerships that involve emerging scholars, there is no question that our position as students increased our own openness, as well as that of the community partners, to address the conflict with patience, generosity, and perseverance. This is consistent with Kaufman's (2004) finding that graduate students can serve as effective bridges between the university and community, perhaps because of their somewhat unique positionality on the edges of academia.

Facilitating community action

One of the lasting benefits of the relationship-building process that took place as our CU partnership matured was that it created the kind of social capital that is widely recognized as a necessary precursor for effective collective action (see Flora & Flora, 2006; Onyx & Bullen, 2000; Ostrom & Ahn, 2008). As relationships were gradually strengthened, they allowed us and our community partners to delve more deeply into issues of emergency food provision in the community and to become increasingly critical and action oriented in our approach. This action orientation is typical of Barker's (2010, p. 130) description of the 'community partnership' model of engaged scholarship, which he notes seeks to address social change and structural transformation and is 'concerned with power, resources, and building social movements'. Much like the cases described by Block (2010) and Knezevic et al. (2014), establishing the relationships required to address those issues enabled the partnership to contribute to important social change with respect to food security discourse and practice – most notably through the development of The Seed initiative.

That process inevitably involved navigating and shedding light on complex and deeply entrenched community power dynamics, which was not without its challenges. In order to confront those challenges, we relied heavily on the knowledge and expertise of our community partners. This was particularly the case during the second phase of research, which focused on the experiences of people accessing emergency food services. As Johnston (2010, p. S245) explains, '[d]ocumenting social conditions with an aim toward exposing and addressing abuse is difficult work even in the most rights-protective of settings...[it] can generate an array of personal, professional, and societal risks...' Indeed, by the time the project reached the stage that work with service users was undertaken, it was clear that highly sensitive issues related to stigma, judgment, and poor treatment would be directly addressed through the research process, and this presented significant risks for the

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participants, many of whom depended on emergency food service provision to meet their food needs. These risks were addressed by conducting data collection in close collaboration with community organizations that had well-established relationships of trust with the participants – a strategy that Ross et al. (2010) note is common when doing research with vulnerable populations that may experience isolation and lack formal organization. Without our community-based collaborators, the second phase of the work would not have been possible, at least not in a way that we would have considered ethical. Our role as researchers then became to share participants' stories, and thus 'communicate to the public about political and social structures that might otherwise be difficult to expose or explain' (Block, 2010, p. 521).

The eventual shift in research focus from the service provider to service user perspective represented a key turning point in the partnership's work, as results from the latter phase of research proved particularly effective at illuminating and documenting troublesome power dynamics within the community and, as a result, helping create a strong impetus for social change. This critical, action-oriented turn in the work was precisely what some community stakeholders were looking for, and the PTF unanimously endorsed the findings from all phases of the research, along with the recommendations informed by those findings; however, not everyone was satisfied with the outcomes. Ross et al. (2010, p. 27) explain that tensions can occur when 'data analysis reveals unflattering findings about a community' and, although we made a concerted effort to present the data in a 'respectful manner that minimizes harms to the community' (Ross et al., 2010, p. 28), the results were perceived by a small but important minority of community actors as unfairly critical. While the conflict this created was difficult to confront, it proved to be a necessary part of the eventual development of The Seed initiative, which was able to garner widespread – though not unanimous – community backing. The power of the second phase of research to catalyse change confirms Knezevic et al.'s (2014) conclusion that participatory research with people vulnerable to food insecurity can help change dominant discourses on the subject.

Becoming members of our own community

One additional point we would like to make regarding the value of the community-based relationships established through our CU partnership is that they helped us both become more fully engaged local citizens. As young people who were not from the area, but had moved to Guelph for school, the relationships we developed through our collaboration with community partners became central to our sense of belonging in the local community as, much like Burawoy's (2014, p. 280) public sociologists, we became 'bound up with the fate of the people' involved in our research. Notably, both of us continued to participate as active volunteers in Seed activities long after the collaborative research was complete, and the first author maintained her role on The Seed organizing committee even after leaving her position at The Research Shop. This is consistent with findings by Tryon and Ross

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(2012), whose study of a CU partnership at the University of Wisconsin-Madison found that participation offered students an important entry point into the off-campus community. It is also consistent with findings by Case (2014) and Kaufman (2004) that participation in a community engaged scholarship opportunity had the potential to transform community-engaged graduate students into lifelong engaged scholars and community members.

Conclusions

In their discussion of a variety of action-oriented research projects, Brydon-Miller et al. (2003, p. 14) note that '[w]orking collaboratively with others leads not only to community and organizational changes, but also to personal changes in the action researcher'. Indeed, the kinds of challenges confronted, lessons learned, and processes of change that occurred within the partnership and the community over the course of our work were closely mirrored by our own internal processes of struggle and growth, and we wholeheartedly share in the opinion that researchers engaged in a CU partnership can expect to be 'profoundly changed' by the experience (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003, p. 14).

In this paper, we have addressed a distinct gap in the literature on CU partnerships by analysing one such partnership from the perspective of the emerging scholars who were involved. Our reflections yielded a number of conclusions about the nature of emerging scholar participation in CU research collaborations. On one level, many of the same challenges and opportunities that have been well documented in the literature applied to our work. However, our relative inexperience with the kind of partnership in which we were engaging (particularly at the project outset) and the relative precariousness and lack of power associated with our positions at the university meant that we were more vulnerable to certain challenges, but also that we could capitalize on some unique opportunities.

Our relative inexperience proved challenging at the partnership's outset, as we failed to adequately define roles and responsibilities and establish clear mechanisms for communication. Notably, organizational experience (or lack thereof) also proved to significantly impact the capacity of both community and university actors to engage in well-defined, and thus effective, partnership work. As the individual and organizational actors involved in our partnership evolved and matured, our relationships became far stronger, roles and responsibilities became clearer, and the work became easier and more fruitful.

In some cases, our positions as students and emerging scholars was used by critics of the research results, and the actions informed by them, to try to discredit the process. This vulnerability to critique was mitigated by the gradual strengthening of the partnership and a growing sense of community consensus regarding its work; however, it highlights how concerns regarding credibility and validity can plague engaged research projects, particularly when the researchers involved are emerging scholars. Those concerns extend to academic institutions, and we are both cognizant of the risks we run in terms of our ability to secure academic positions if we continue

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to devote the bulk of our time and energy to outputs not traditionally recognized by academic hiring or tenure and promotion committees.

In spite of these challenges, our involvement in the CU partnership described in this paper also presented a number of opportunities, both for us and for the community partners. Most importantly, the work we carried out together helped shift local discourse on food security, and contributed to a community food hub initiative that has garnered widespread support for its focus on reducing the stigma attached to emergency food service use, and fostering increased collaboration amongst service providers in the area. Our positions as students and new scholars facilitated our ability to participate in that work, as community partners and research participants viewed us as co-learners, rather than experts seeking to impose a particular agenda. Our relative inexperience also increased partners' willingness to be patient as our collaboration worked through initial conflicts and miscommunications. Finally, regardless of where our career trajectories eventually take us, our work on this CU partnership helped us gain valuable skills and, even more importantly, to become more fully engaged members of our local community.

In light of these observations, we would like to add our voices to the calls that have been made for increased institutional attention to community-engaged research within university walls (Franz, 2013; Jaeger et al., 2011; Kaufman, 2004; Matthews et al., 2015; O'Meara & Jaeger, 2006; Sandmann et al., 2008; Tryon & Ross, 2012). Jaeger et al. (2014, p. 90) argue that 'today's emerging scholars will be instrumental in determining future directions of the higher education reform movement'. In order for this to be true, we suggest that universities need to be creating – and strengthening – structures like The Research Shop that support emerging scholar participation and leadership in CU partnerships. We also believe there is a need for emerging scholars doing such CU work to contribute to the scholarly literature on the subject, thereby increasing attention to the role(s) that they can play, the unique challenges they face, the value that they can bring to engaged research projects, and the value that such engagement can bring to their lives as students, scholars, and community members.

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Notes

1. That report, *Emergency Food Services in Guelph-Wellington: A Scan of the Current System and Thoughts for the Future*, is available at https://atrium.lib.uoguelph.ca/xmlui/handle/10214/9314.
2. *Using Emergency Food Services in Guelph-Wellington* is available at https://atrium.lib.uoguelph.ca/xmlui/handle/10214/9066.

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