

Participation vs. Engagement – Here is the Difference

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That comment led to a vigorous discussion.

From my perspective, the terms are often used interchangeably. I was interested in how those doing a lot of participation/engagement see the differences.

Here are the themes of our digging into Participation vs. Engagement

1. Emotional investment. “I go and vote,” said Marcella Beam (Cabarrus Health Alliance). “It is something I do and need to do. But I am not invested because my vote is so small in the total election.” This is an example of participation, not engagement.

2. Degree of impact. Cherie Jzar (Concord, NC Community Outreach Coordinator) noted a continuum of activity (participation) with levels of impact on a decision. Engagement occurs when you have greater impact. She referenced the Collaboration and Empower levels of the [IAP2 Spectrum of Participation](#).



3. Feeling a part of something. “If I have the power and willingness to participate actively in the opportunities, that is engagement,” said Emily Ford (Duke *Clinical and Translational Science Institute, Kannapolis Campus*). “Or if not opportunities, still expressing their voice. You are a part of something. Your contribution is essential to the project or decision. You have more ownership and want to make it work.” At the same time, you may not always be happy with the results.

4. Short vs. long-term. Health researchers have long-term studies, such as the longitudinal MURDOCK Study (more than 12,000 participants enrolled with an on-site study visit and contribution of biological samples. They complete a yearly follow-up form online or by mail). “We need ENGAGEMENT – we depend on people coming back and keeping connected year after year,” says Cecilia Plez. “I see participation as being in a focus group. You contribute, but it is limited. Study participants do things in short spurts, such as interviews and health logs. But it is our job to keep them engaged for the long-term.” Another example: we involve stakeholders in developing tools for community health work. That is engagement.



5. For neighborhood work, there is a mix of participation and engagement. Cherie Jzar reflected, “As part of evaluating our neighborhood programs, we send out a survey to neighborhood leaders. We ask them to participate by completing the survey. Then we have focus groups around areas that we identify that we need to work on – an example of engagement, since we ask more of the people and they rightly can expect more impact from their critiques and suggestions.”

6. An Event versus Ongoing Relationships. As noted above, engagement has a meaning for the longer-term, and is less tied to specific events or “participation opportunities,” e.g., surveys, a public hearing, etc.

How do you distinguish Participation vs. Engagement, particularly in a local community setting?

Some may call it a quibble over small differences, but I see it as important for communicating clearly about *expectations* and *potential outcomes*.

Thanks to the participants in this discussion:

- Emily Ford ford@dm.duke.edu Duke CTSI *Clinical and Translational Science Institute* <https://www.ctsi.duke.edu/> Communicator for Duke CTSI health studies based in Kannapolis/Cabarrus County. Five years in her position.
- Cherie Jzar jzarc@concordnc.gov; City of Concord, City Manager’s Office, Public Affairs, Community Outreach Coordinator. Facilitates the City’s [*Partnerships for Stronger Neighborhoods*](#) program and other public outreach and communication efforts. <https://www.concordnc.gov/Government/Public-Affairs>
- Cecilia Plez plez@duke.edu - Clinical Research Coordinator for Duke CTSI, 10 years. Extensive work with Hispanic Community, which is about 12% of Cabarrus County

population.

- Marcella Beam - beam@cabarrushealth.org (Chief Community Health Officer) Cabarrus Health Alliance (started her position December 2014). Leading work on Community Needs Health Assessment. <https://www.cabarrushealth.org/> Cabarrus Health Alliance (formerly Cabarrus County Health Department) is a public health authority created by the Cabarrus County Board of Commissioners effective July 1, 1997.
- Becky Tolle BTolle@kannapolisnc.gov City of Kannapolis Parks and Recreation, Special Events Coordinator. 15 years with Parks and Recreation.
- Annette Privette Keller aprivettekeller@kannapolisnc.gov Director of Communications and Marketing for the City of Kannapolis, <http://www.kannapolisnc.gov/Government-Departments/Communications-News>