

Promising Practices for Starting (and Maintaining) Community Engagement

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People seeking to improve their communities through dialog and understanding are doing important work. Their missions and approaches vary widely; community groups, advisory panels, faith groups and others are tackling plenty of diverse issues that are specific to their circles.

These groups also have a lot in common, according to a couple of university researchers in Australia. Judyth Sachs and Lindie Clark of [MacQuarie University](#) studied community engagement efforts in higher education and distilled some common threads in their research, [Learning through community engagement: vision and practice in higher education](#).

While Sachs and Clark focused their energies on academic settings and the relationships between faculty and students, the truths they described work well in many non-academic settings. Here are a couple of important takeaways from Sachs and Clark's research that may be helpful to community engagement groups everywhere.

Collaboration is Key

Community engagement can apply to many different issues, but one of its most important markers is collaboration. Rather than relying on top-down directives, these groups work to gather input from various stakeholders; this may be accomplished through focus groups, surveys, polls and lots of other techniques, but the purpose is the same: ask the people who are affected what they think. Sachs and Clark describe this approach as a mindset that is grounded in mutual respect, shared authority, and co-creation of goals and outcomes.

Collaboration also gives the student - or in the case of communities, anyone who is not the facilitator - more input toward potential solutions. Both facilitators and non-facilitators bring their own experiences and knowledge to the discussion. The facilitator may help guide the conversation, but his/her goal is to help participants uncover knowledge already shared by their community. In other words, community members are active knowledge producers, not just passive knowledge consumers.

Engagement as an Institutional Priority

One of the most notable ideas from Sachs and Clark's work is the concept of community engagement as a priority within the institution to which it's tied. For example, many community engagement groups may work with city halls, houses of worship, or other nonprofits. Either of these settings could provide a setting where participants are seen as passive while paid staff are seen as experts. Researchers suggest that when engagement and collaboration are aligned with the institution's other priorities, engagement is more likely. In other words, the more participants are encouraged to bring their knowledge and experience ***as a matter of priority***, the more likely the community will contribute to solving problems and moving forward.

As we've read before, both here and elsewhere, Americans are pretty polarized right now; whether we're in different [political parties](#), [different communities](#), or different cultures, it seems that there is plenty to separate us. Community engagement may help us move past that. If people feel that their knowledge and experiences are valued in a group setting, they're likely to make a good faith effort to make a contribution to the greater good.