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# Conceptual Foundations for Collaborative Communication

*A Framework and Practice for Community-Campus Partners*

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## Conceptual Foundations for Collaborative Communication

*A Framework and Practice for Community-Campus Partners*

Rebecca Dumlao and Sachiyo M. Shearman

### Abstract

Collaboration is fundamental to community engagement. Little is known about the practices of collaborative communication for partnerships. This article reviews articles on collaboration from community engagement that mention communication. Next, articles on communication explore practices/processes of collaboration. The resulting collaborative communication framework (CCF) is shared. Five elements of CCF are detailed: (1) connecting, (2) conversing, (3) committing, (4) envisioning, and (5) developing partner patterns. A table offers suggestions for applying the CCF to partnerships at different times in the relationship. Limitations are detailed along with suggestions for future scholarship and practice.

**Keywords:** *collaboration, collaborative communication, community engagement, partnerships*

## Fundamentos conceptuales para la comunicación colaborativa

*Un marco de referencia y práctica para la comunidad-socios del campus*

Rebecca Dumlao and Sachiyo M. Shearman

### Resumen

La colaboración es fundamental para el trabajo con la comunidad. Se sabe poco sobre las prácticas de comunicación colaborativa en las relaciones comunitarias. Este artículo revisó artículos sobre colaboración de trabajo comunitario que mencionaban la comunicación. A continuación, los artículos sobre comunicación exploraban prácticas/procesos de colaboración. Se comparte el marco de comunicación colaborativa (CCF) que resultó de este análisis. Se detallan cinco elementos del CCF: (1) conectar, (2) conversar, (3) comprometerse, (4) visualizar y (5) desarrollar patrones de los socios comunitarios. Se planteó una tabla que ofrece sugerencias para aplicar el CCF con socios comunitarios en diferentes momentos de la relación. Las limitaciones se detallan junto con sugerencias para futuros estudios y prácticas.

**Palabras clave:** *colaboración, comunicación colaborativa, trabajo comunitario, relaciones con socios comunitarios*

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## Introduction

Collaboration is fundamental to community-campus partnerships. Webster's (n.d.) online dictionary says "collaborate" is derived from the Latin "col" meaning "with, together, or jointly" along with "laborare" or "to labor." So *collaborate* means "to work with another person or group to achieve or do something."

The words "collaborate" and "collaboration" are widely used in community engagement (Ash et al., 2005; Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Longo & Gibson, 2016; Nichols et al., 2015) and in guidelines/toolkits for community-campus partnerships (Boyer, 1996; Farnell et al., 2020; Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, 2001; Ma, 2018). The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching writes, "Community engagement describes collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity" (Carnegie Elective Classifications, 2024). Moore et al. (2016) say community engagement as a "term is often used interchangeably with other concepts" like collaboration (p. 6).

Further, collaborative practices are touted for positive changes in higher education (Jacquez et al., 2016; Longo & Gibson, 2016) and in communities (Fitzgerald et al., 2010; Pasque, 2010). Collaboration sustains joint work and related relationships (Northmore & Hart, 2011). Those working globally need to work with partners using a "collaborative mindset" (Hartman et al., 2018, p. 122).

Importantly, Heath and Isbell (2017) differentiate cooperation, coordination, and collaboration. Cooperation is associated with reciprocity. Partners do not share a vision; instead, they informally agree to do something for one another. "Coordination refers to executing activities *already in place*, such as, agreements, ongoing procedures, arrangements, and practices" (p. 20). However, collaboration is "indeterminate," so participants make decisions as they go. Collaboration capitalizes on stakeholder differences to develop innovative ideas and solutions. Collaboration is also ambiguous since agreements and procedures will vary depending on the positions and interests of individuals and organizations involved.

Partners can progress from cooperation or coordination toward collaboration (Heath & Isbell, 2017; Mattessich et al., 2008). "Collaborations bring previously separated organizations into a new structure with full commitment to a common mission" and "require comprehensive planning and well-defined communication channels operating on many levels" (Mattessich et al., 2008, p. 60).

Notably, collaboration for successful community-campus partnerships requires communication (Ahmed & Palermo, 2010; Bosma et al., 2010; Williamson et al., 2016). Terms like interactions (Bringle et al., 2009; Nichols et al., 2015), dialogue (De Santis et al., 2019; King et al., 2020; Preece, 2016), deliberation (Longo & Gibson, 2016; Shaffer, 2014), discussion (Kniffin et al., 2020), listening (Mobley, 2011), and negotiation (Ross et al., 2010) accompany collaboration in the community engagement literature.

Still, precise processes for collaboration remain a "black box" (Thomson & Perry, 2006) and comprehensive descriptions of collaboration are neglected. Pasque (2010) argues that a complex framework for collaboration to enact community change needs "authentic conversation about past history" and "open discussions of barriers communities and universities face" (p. 295).

To facilitate such open discussions, collaborative communication must create opportunities for unheard or minimized voices (Mitchell & Chavous, 2021; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2009; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009) and for power imbalances to be addressed (Bloomgarden & Mann, 2022; Cohen et al., 2023; Kniffin et al., 2020) in community-engaged work. Also, Hartman et al. (2014) advocate "fair trade standards" focused on community voice and direction are necessary for international community engagement.

## Purpose of the Article

This article develops conceptual foundations of collaborative communication for service-learning and community engagement. Our purpose is to (a) share ideas from a systematic literature review about

community engagement and collaboration; (b) pinpoint insights about collaboration from communication scholarship; and (c) explain a framework for collaborative communication and show how that framework could work in teaching, research, and practice. We start with positionality statements to offer context about our backgrounds.

### Positionality Statements

The first author identifies as a White woman, married to an Asian American man before he died. She wants to exemplify cultural humility and cultural sensitivity and recognizes that she must change as she learns more. The second author identifies as an Asian female. She teaches in the United States as an international faculty member and understands the importance of respecting diverse perspectives. Both authors hope that ongoing learning conversations will provide opportunities to hear unheard or minimized voices and help them to become better allies.

### Methods

The literature review was conducted in two phases. In phase one, articles, book chapters, and books from multiple disciplines were identified using Google Scholar, OneSearch, and Amazon as part of a larger project. Keywords like collaboration, community-campus partnerships, community engagement, and communication were used to search for scholarly publications. Abstracts or synopses were reviewed first. If relevant, copies were read in full. A total of 52 publications were identified, including one thesis and two dissertations. In phase two, publications on collaboration and communication were located using Google Scholar and One Source, and reviewed as above. In total, more than 88 publications informed this conceptual analysis.

### Results

#### Collaboration in Community Engagement and Linkages to Communication

Collaboration between partners in community engagement ranges from the macrolevel of multiple organizations and their communities toward the microlevel of small groups and individual partners. Our literature review follows the macro-to-micro sequence followed by studies that offer interventions, models, matrices, and measures.

**Macro: Multiple Organizations and Communication.** Ahmed et al. (2016) conducted a structured content analysis of final reports by 109 teams of community-academic partners funded by the Healthier Wisconsin Partnership Program between March 2005 and August 2011. “One primary finding of the analysis is that communication is a consistent attribute of successful community-academic partnerships. ... Reports also indicated that relationship building allowed partners to leverage the partnerships as an asset in future collaborations” (p. 54). Also, “fostering a relationship where communication is sufficiently open so all partners are able to freely discuss and share thoughts and insights is fundamental to community-academic partnerships, and increases the likelihood of success of the project” (p. 58). Further, funders need to pay attention to “requirements that community-academic partnerships may require a great deal of work to determine how partners will interact, communicate, share responsibilities, and manage relationship dynamics because the relationship and communication have a significant impact” on success (p. 58).

Bosma et al. (2010) studied a multiyear collaboration between K–12 schools, community agencies, and university partners geared toward reducing violence and school failure among middle school students. They conducted semistructured group interviews with program facilitators at two K–12 schools serving 130 students in 45 weekly class sessions. The team twice interviewed school administrators from participating and comparison programs. They state, “Communication is necessary to share in decision making, share resources, recognize other partner organizations’ expertise and priorities” as well as to build trust, solve problems, and ensure that partners have a shared understanding (p. 505).

Communication to build relationships, and to share and plan together, takes time and is “especially important in communities that have not traditionally had a voice” (p. 506).

Nichols et al. (2015) used ethnographic case studies to examine “processes of interaction” for positive social change within four ongoing, multi-institutional partnerships in Canada’s community and postsecondary sectors. They conducted 25 standardized interviews, looked at project documents, visited sites, observed meetings, and had informal conversations. Participants “highlighted the importance of network building through collaboration” and noted that the partnership must “produce tangible outcomes or returns” (p. 18). In other words, “a reciprocal relationship exists between a collaborative process and its effects (i.e., outcomes, outputs, or impacts)” (p. 30).

This research team also detailed communication for positive change: sharing people’s tacit and explicit knowledge, creating conditions for mutual learning, building flexibility in outcomes despite initial plans, recognizing the importance of prior interactions between people on campus and in communities, disseminating toolkits/sharing presentations to inform local policy and practice, recognizing that community professionals subsequently share information with their networks, and using research to generate public debate toward equitable change (Nichols et al., 2015). They recommend systematic approaches that look at interactivity among social, institutional, political, and economic factors in communities.

**Micro: Partnerships Between Two Institutions and Communication.** Weertz and Sandmann (2010) studied ways in which universities might “build bridges to community partners” (p. 634) using boundary spanning. They note, “A critical component of the boundary-spanning process is establishing effective lines of communication” (p. 639). The team conducted 80 interviews and reviewed the documents. Their data “suggests that boundary spanners have four distinct but flexible roles ... community-based problem-solver, technical expert, internal engagement advocate, and engagement champion” (p. 642). For effective engagement, boundary-spanning roles must work in harmony.

Bringle et al. (2009) state:

One of the defining characteristics of contemporary models of civic engagement is mutually beneficial collaboration, in which all persons contribute knowledge, skills, and experience in determining the issues to be addressed, the questions to be asked, the problems to be resolved, the strategies to be used, the outcomes that are considered desirable and the indicators of success in their interactions. (p. 1)

Further, they argue that dyads (i.e., two partners) are the basic building blocks for interactions between institutional or community units (i.e., networks, systems, communities, or cultures). Their SOFAR model represents different roles (i.e., students, organizations, faculty, administrators, and residents in communities) in dyadic partnerships that vary “in terms of the degree to which the interactions possess closeness, equity, and integrity” (p. 1). Partnerships rating higher on all three qualities are more likely to be transformational, with each partner changing as they work together. Partner interactions are complex and dynamic, and require re-negotiation over time.

Hickmon (2015) points out that “discussions about identity and various ’-isms (like racism, classism, and sexism) that interact with identities” are needed to help create a “pedagogy of diversity” (p. 87). This is a crucial consideration as we work to build greater inclusiveness and promote more authentic understanding between students and community members involved in service-learning.

**Communication Interventions, Models, Matrices, and Measures.** In a different type of scholarship, King et al. (2020) worked to address antibiotic resistance in Bangladesh using a sequential mixed methods design. First, they explored the “most appropriate mechanisms through which to embed the intervention within the existing health system and community infrastructure” (p. 1) and tried to “understand patterns of knowledge, attitudes, and practice regarding antibiotics and antibiotic resistance” (p. 1) through a household survey. Working with key stakeholders at policy, health system, and community levels, the team selected a community dialogue approach. Community volunteers were trained about antibiotic resistance and group facilitation and then held community dialogue sessions to identify solutions and do action planning that would be sustainable and scalable.

Sandoval et al. (2012) reviewed 258 articles about community-based participatory research (CBPR), detailed 46 CBPR instruments, and identified specific characteristics for systemic change in health outcomes. “Group dynamics” were most important to collaboration and included: structural dynamics, relational dynamics, and individual dynamics (p. 682). Under relational dynamics, for instance, “participatory decision-making and negotiation” as well as “dialogue, listening, and mutual learning” represented 10.7% and 9.7%, respectively, of the 224 measures reviewed (p. 682). Thus, while communication was not the sole focus of this work, two communication-related items rated the highest of any measures.

In another study done a decade ago, Suarez-Balcazar et al. (2005) developed an interactive, contextual model of collaboration for research in social sciences. In their model, a key to partnerships is “adequate communication” (p. 86) to include: articulating interest in the project and benefits for all, finding common ground, agreeing on principles/goals, articulating expectations, as well as developing trust and respect. These authors highlight different communication styles based on ethnicity, age, technology, and geographic region and note the need for ongoing communication as partnerships change.

More recently, Williamson et al. (2016) applied the Suarez-Balcazar et al. (2005) model to a translational research education program and found that communication is important for developing, sustaining, and evaluating partnerships. Willingness to communicate, for open dialogue, for frequent communication, and to provide ongoing feedback were noted items for future research.

Kniffin et al. (2020) examined the Transformational Relationship Evaluation Score (TRES) measure and how it has been used and concluded:

Relationships operate at multiple levels and are dynamic by their very nature (e.g. movement through various stages), and even more so when understood and undertaken in the spirit of democratic engagement with its complex interactions among diverse individuals and across distinct organizational, educational, economic, political, and cultural contexts. (p. 3)

The authors state that tools, like TRES, can be integrated into dialogic processes that support individual and collaborative meaning-making.

In the community engagement publications reviewed, collaboration and communication are repeatedly linked. These sources provide general guidelines for collaboration and recognize relationships are important, but little detail is offered. We turn next to the communication literature to learn more about collaboration and interaction processes that build and sustain relationships.

## **Communication Scholarship and Collaboration**

In the communication literature, some authors emphasize that communication can sometimes influence relational interactions at various levels simultaneously. One communication scholar looked in-depth at scholarly writing about collaboration. Our literature review in this section first considers macro partnerships, then explores ideas about communicating across partnership levels, and ends with more about collaboration.

**Multilevel Partnerships and Communication.** Koschmann et al. (2012) considered cross-sector partnerships (XSPs) for complex social problems and zeroed in on communication. “XSPs are multilateral collectives (such as businesses, government and civil society groups) that engage in mutual problem-solving, information sharing, and resource allocation” (p. 322). Communication theory was used to develop a framework that encourages “meaningful participation” (p. 349) among diverse participants and develops processes for openness in discussions, resisting premature closure.

Walker and Stohl (2012) conducted two studies to examine task communication and interdependency among participants in temporary engineering design projects that solved specific problems. They found that communication dynamics, including external influences, make temporary collaboration more complex than typical organizational structures. “The analyses suggest that interorganizational collaborative groups are volatile and nonhierarchical and relationships outside the group influence the

emergent structure of the negotiated temporary system” as well as their task communication and resource networks (pp. 466–477).

**Spanning Levels of Partnership With Communication.** Keyton et al. (2008) conducted a case study of six interorganizational teams and observed collaboration at three levels. They proposed a “mesolevel” communicative model that details simultaneous communication at multiple levels (i.e., group, organization, and public) that “give rise to the emergence and effectiveness of collaborating talk” (p. 376). Interorganizational collaboration is defined as the:

set of communicative processes in which individuals representing multiple organizations or stakeholders engage when working interdependently to address problems outside the spheres of individuals or organizations working in isolation. The outcomes of these processes have the potential to benefit or harm the parties to the collaboration, as well as others. (p. 381)

They argue that “collaboration must be considered at multiple levels. One level is the face-to-face communication of representatives in the collaborative group” (p. 377). At the team level, there is communication within and among teams. At the organizational level, there is communication among represented organizations and via direct and indirect stakeholders. Notably, “communication at any one contextual level can influence communication at other levels” (p. 406).

Reflecting on their community-engaged work with Circles USA—a social capacity initiative to address poverty—Collier and Lawless (2016) note that academics and practitioners involved in community engagement must regularly negotiate differences. That is, conversations about race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic class, educational status, age, as well as “histories, contextual structures and organizational forms, power relationships between institutions and organizations, status hierarchy positioning across group representatives and fundamental ideologies” are often needed (p. 156). These scholars recommend critically reflecting on and analyzing micro-, meso-, and macrolevels of context and action throughout the research process.

In other scholarship, Heath and Frey (2004) defined community collaboration as:

a group of autonomous stakeholders with varying capabilities (including resources, knowledge, and expertise) directed toward mutually accountable, typically innovative ends, producing long-term social change at a local level in a cooperative, relatively nonhierarchical relationship that is negotiated in an ongoing communicative and principled process. (p. 194)

This team developed a conceptual framework for community collaboration that considers (a) antecedents of ideal collaboration, (b) processes of ideal collaboration, and (c) outcomes of ideal collaboration. Details are offered for each of these features when considering each of the following: individual representatives, collaborative groups, stakeholder organizations, and the collaborating community as a whole.

Importantly, these authors conclude that “communication ... is more than a tool used by collaborations: it is constitutive of community collaboration” (p. 255). Their model “illuminates the importance of both microlevel communicative practices (e.g. sharing agendas or mission statements) that facilitate collaboration as well as macrolevel communication processes (e.g. dialogue and consensus) by which collaboration is created and sustained” (p. 255). Thus, different practices/processes are needed for different levels of collaboration and yield distinct, varied outcomes.

## **Collaboration and Communication: An Extensive Literature Review**

In her seminal literature review, Lewis (2006) reviewed 80 sources from 1995 to 2005 to determine how collaborative interaction works in learning, interpersonal relationships, conflict, group problem solving, health, community groups, and interorganizational settings. She specifies five “points of convergence” in definitions for collaboration.

First, collaboration consistently focuses on action and doing rather than on a state or an object. She writes, “We don’t *have* a collaboration, nor *are* we a collaboration; we *engage* in collaboration” (p. 213).

So collaboration is “*a way of doing something communicative*” (p. 213). We can learn collaboratively, collaboratively solve problems, decide collaboratively, or discuss collaboratively, and so on.

A second common idea was relational or relationship-focused communication. “The ways in which participants in collaboration regard one another seems to be a further defining characteristic ... [this] relates to the perceptions and behaviors that participants have of/with one another” (p. 219). Thus, collaboration cannot be formally convened but “emerges when the participants choose to engage one another in a certain way or manner” (p. 219).

A third point of convergence involved equalizing participants in collaborative interactions. Equalizing practices might come about through recognizing roles, statuses, and value respect for different expertise or contributions. All partners’ wisdom, knowledge, concerns, and ideas become part of decision-making and problem-solving communication when collaborating (p. 219).

Fourth, Lewis found that collaborators focus on processes that can develop or change over time rather than emphasizing the product. The “collaborative activity will look different at various points along the process. Collaboration is less like a single action (e.g. kicking a ball) and more like an organized activity (e.g. a ball game)” (p. 220). Different communication may be needed at the beginning, middle, and end of the collaborative activity; distinct behaviors and roles may be needed at particular times; and important milestones, and the value of those milestones, may vary throughout the process.

Finally, Lewis (2006) notes that collaboration is emergent, informal, and volitional. Partners “own,” “construct,” and “self-organize” their collaborative interactions. Partners have an ongoing responsibility to co-construct their partnership repeatedly, especially so when their work is sustained.

Much of this communication scholarship fits with recognized practices for effective community-campus partnerships. These include as follows: being mutually beneficial, pursuing common goals/vision, including diverse voices (Stewart & Webster, 2011), sharing power, developing trust, building capacity, cocreating (Kniffin et al., 2020), spanning boundaries (Janke, 2008; Weertz & Sandman, 2010), and managing conflicts/tensions (Dumlaio & Janke, 2012), as well as addressing power imbalances (Kahl et al., 2022; Preece, 2016) and including diverse voices (Erasmus, 2011; Gilbride-Brown, 2011).

The above ideas from communication and from community engagement inform the collaborative communication framework (CCF), detailed next.

#### *The Collaborative Communication Framework for Community Engagement*

The CCF includes five communication practices for fostering collaborative, transformational partnerships, and promoting change in communities: (1) connecting, (2) conversing, (3) envisioning, (4) committing, and (5) developing partner patterns. No one sequence exists because collaboration is emergent, based on partners and their current context. Partners often start with connecting, but may use any part of the CCF as needed.

The CCF assumes relationship building for community engagement starts as a dyad (i.e., two people). Dyads can impact and be impacted by communication at the group or institutional level (Heath & Frey, 2004; Keyton et al., 2008). Still, as Barbara Holland (2005) notes, “This very personal (dyadic) level of communication is where most community partners feel some confidence there will be reciprocity, trust, and respect for their perspectives” (p. 11).

Further, the CCF emphasizes emergent interaction processes as community-campus partners cocreate their relationship over time:

Collaborative communication refers to a repertoire of knowledge and skills that allow partners to make considered choices that fit the situation or context. Collaborative communication promotes a relational perspective that shows respect and openness to the partner along with his or her unique contributions and views. (Dumlaio, 2018, p. 41)

Also, “the thinking that undergirds collaborative communication includes attention to the partnership (the ‘we’) as well as attention to the individual partner’s needs and concerns (the ‘me’) to reach beyond both” (Dumlaio, 2018, p. 41). This complex, “dual perspective” thinking (Phillips & Wood, 1983) involves managing one’s own concerns while learning about the other’s. A learning approach allows partners to



find ways to work equitably and treat one another well and to manage tensions or conflicts (see also Stone et al., 2010). Thus, the CCF intentionally sets up ways for partners to innovate together.

**Connecting—Establishing and Maintaining Partner Rapport.** Connecting involves using verbal and nonverbal communication to find common ground and establish rapport. Nonverbal communication (i.e., eye contact, posture, head motions, gestures, and tone) reflects relational meanings: how we feel about the other. Verbal communication involves spoken words that convey thoughts and ideas. These two types of communication happen simultaneously and can work together or be in contrast, creating mixed messages. Sometimes, meta-communication (or communication about communication) is needed to clarify what is meant, especially since people from various cultural groups use different communication patterns (Craig, 2016; Shearman, 2012).

To connect well, partners need to build a rapport. Over time, partners can observe or ask questions about ways to best connect. Connecting provides the “relational glue” (Dumlao, 2018, p. 44) between partners, helps build trust, and can foster greater closeness.

**Conversing—Creating Shared Understanding.** Conversing involves interactive dialogue between partners using face-to-face communication or communication technology (like email and social media). Conversing involves sharing detailed information or exploring ideas in-depth. When conversing, partners can consider different opinions or distinct perspectives as they cocreate possibilities and find out what is needed for the community(ies) served. Thus, conversing provides critical content from different cultural perspectives and can be used to manage tensions. Meta-communication can help clarify, get additional information, build shared ideas, and cocreate meanings.

What’s different between connecting and conversing is the purpose of the communication. Conversing is focused on building understanding while connecting emphasizes building rapport and closeness. These two types of collaborative communication often occur simultaneously in real life but have been separated in the CCF to emphasize two vital communicative functions needed by community-campus partners to build well-functioning relationships and to benefit communities.

**Committing—Deciding About Working With Partner(s).** Committing communication refers to dialogue and other ways to agree on responsibilities, roles, relationship specifics, and the ways the partnership will work. Frequently, dyadic partners will need to consider commitments at other levels, such as between organizations and the communities served, too.

At the dyadic level though, multiple kinds of commitment can help build a closer, interdependent relationship that exemplifies trust. Initially, the two partners may commit to working together toward a common goal. Another commitment is directly between the two people—to build trust and respect, to offer personal caring and support. A third type is the commitment to members of the community and their needs, rather than just to project goals.

Promises of commitment can be implied or shown by words/actions as well as through writing and other ways to codify expectations. Still, when one’s level of commitment is questioned, meta-communicative work can help sort out what is happening and what might work better. Overall, the goals for committing are for partners to be as comfortable as possible with one another, exemplifying closeness, equity, and integrity (Bringle et al., 2009) so that trust is strong and the relationship benefits the partners and the community.

**Envisioning—Dreaming and Acting Together to Create Doables.** An exciting aspect of collaborative communication occurs when partners envision or cocreate what they want to accomplish. Envisioning can use visuals or other representations (i.e., models or computer images) to show desired outcomes for the community.

Envisioning communication is complex, moving from abstract ideas and goals toward specific doable actions. Because of this, envisioning involves both creative and logical thinking. The initial creative “vision” can be developed through interpersonal communication and representations in artworks, design renderings, computer forms, or even a flipchart. Once the vision becomes crystalized, action steps bring the vision into reality. A calendar, flowchart, model, or timeline or computer-developed products can be used to make the dreams tangible and help partners stay accountable to one another, as they proceed toward making the vision come to life.

Like other aspects of collaborative communication, envisioning is not done just once. Rather, partners may revisit ideas and communicate more as relationships or circumstances change. Consider, for instance, the need to get additional “buy-in” from supporters, the public, or others. The original plans might need to be modified or changed substantially to create something everybody can support. So envisioning necessitates flexibility, risk-taking, and creativity, as well as trust between partners and the groups or institutions they represent.

**Partner Patterns—Evidence of a Partnership Identity.** When two partners work together over time, they develop unique verbal and nonverbal communication practices. Partners can use single words, short phrases, images/symbols, or signals to swiftly recall a memory to quickly check in with one another. Partner patterns reflect a shared past, present, and a base to work together in the future.

Partner patterns can be considered rituals that become part of the “partnership identity,” a term developed by Emily Janke (2008, 2009) after studying sustained partnerships in her dissertation research. Janke notes, “Partners must develop a shared sense of ‘who we are’ as members of a unified group if they are to collaborate effectively and maintain their efforts into the future” (Janke, 2009, p. 1). Not all partnerships create partnership identities but rather may reflect temporary cooperation focused on a short-term project. That said, partner patterns are worth identifying or creating as partners work together, since they help build a past, present, and future shared identity.

### Key Questions for Different Aspects of the Collaborative Communication Framework

The CCF provides a way for partners to focus on the aspects of communication most needed at a particular time. Toward that end, we have developed a table with brief descriptions of the CCF aspect (Table 1), then have suggested ways to use it, with sample questions shared that each partner can ask about the partnership—or with slight wording changes, partners could ask jointly.

**Table 1.**

*Collaborative Communication Framework: Applications and Checkup Questions.*

<b>1. Connecting</b>	
<b>Definition</b> Verbal/nonverbal communication to find common ground and build rapport or closeness.	<b>Applications/suggestions</b> Share your thoughts and emotions with your partner as much as you can. Allow time to establish and foster a trusting relationship and build rapport. Ask questions and self-disclose things that others may not know about you, your experience, or your background. Be ready to learn.
<b>Assessment questions</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How much can you and your partner be open with each other?</li> <li>● Do you and your partner have established trust?</li> <li>● Are there ways that you hold back and don’t feel comfortable sharing with the partner? (Do you know why? What would make you more comfortable?)</li> <li>● How emotionally connected or close are you with your partner?</li> </ul>	
<b>Diversity/power-related questions</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Are you able to speak freely, as an equal, when you connect with your partner?</li> <li>● How might you feel if you are more equal or more respected in this partnership?</li> </ul>	
<b>2. Conversing</b>	
<b>Definition</b> Interactive dialogue or other ways to share information or discuss ideas in-depth and create shared understanding/meaning.	<b>Applications/suggestions</b> Set meeting schedules, tools, channels, and routines for meetings. Recognize that different kinds of sharing might work better for each one of you (or for different topics). Focus not only on communicating basic information but also on sharing your experience and expertise as you work together.

<b>Assessment questions</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What kinds of information do you need from your partner now (or in the near future)?</li> <li>● Are there topics that you think your partner needs to know but you haven't discussed? What are those?</li> <li>● When did you and your partner interact last? Is more interaction needed?</li> <li>● Do you and your partner have a recurring meeting? Do you have plans of what to talk about the next time you interact?</li> <li>● Do you and your partner have established methods of contact that work well? What type(s) or method(s) of communication might help you even more?</li> <li>● What time for talking works best for you? For your partner?</li> </ul>	
<b>Diversity/power-related questions</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Do you feel like you have enough power when interacting?</li> <li>● Can you readily contribute to the scheduling, planning, and routines (or not)?</li> </ul>	
<b>3. Committing</b>	
<b>Definition</b> Dialogue or other ways to reach agreement and commit to the partner, the project, and/or the community.	<b>Applications/suggestions</b> Set a time to clarify each of these commitments. Share about other work that could interfere. Clarify how much you intend to give to the project, the other, and the community.
<b>Assessment questions</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What level of commitment do you and your partner currently have for this project? For each other? For building the relationship? Is there a need to discuss?</li> <li>● Are you and your partner clear about how much work each of you are willing to put in? (And what are your contributions?)</li> <li>● Do you and your partner have any written agreement about the shared project or work? Would this help one or both of you?</li> </ul>	
<b>Diversity/power-related questions</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What hidden assumptions or expectations from your partner impact your involvement?</li> <li>● Do you think you are equally committed? Why or why not?</li> </ul>	
<b>4. Envisioning</b>	
<b>Definition</b> Cocreating what partners want to accomplish or see in the future. Followed by action steps to make that a reality.	<b>Applications/suggestions</b> Work with your partner to visualize what could be possible for the future. Then, find specific ways to make that vision reality.
<b>Assessment questions</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What final product or creation do you and your partner anticipate?</li> <li>● How can your vision best be represented so that you can refer back in the future?</li> <li>● What action steps are needed to bring the vision into reality?</li> <li>● Who else may be needed to make this happen? What else do you need?</li> <li>● Do you and your partner have a clear vision about your future relationship while implementing your project?</li> </ul>	
<b>Diversity/power-related questions</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Can you easily contribute to the visions for the collaboration?</li> <li>● Do you eagerly anticipate the final product/outcome?</li> </ul>	
<b>5. Partner patterns</b>	
<b>Definition</b> Verbal or nonverbal practices or symbols unique to the partners. Reflect past, present, and the promise of a future together.	<b>Applications/suggestions</b> Step back and assess your partnership. See what you can do to change the relational climate or patterns that you may have with your partner to make them better aligned with what you want or need.

**Assessment questions**

- Can you identify a shared partner culture? Explain.
- What relational “climate” feels right to each of you?
- Do you and your partner have a shared identity separate from who you are individually?
- Do you and your partner have shared symbols or terminologies?
- What might you want to do to build a stronger future as sustained partners?

**Diversity/power-related questions**

- Do you think there is a cultural balance when collaborating with your partner?
- Are important aspects of your culture incorporated into this partnership?

Asking questions while listening mindfully can help partners gain new insights. Discomfort, inequities, or misunderstandings may need to be addressed. Revisiting different parts of the CCF may help, too. So, for instance, connecting communication could follow a heated discussion so partners not only feel heard but also determine what they need to move forward together.

## **Discussion**

### **Collaborative Communication and Possibilities for Future Research**

In this article, we have reviewed both community engagement and communication scholarship and have presented the CCF. Additionally, we shared a table and suggested ways partners can use the CCF in their own communication to build and support dyadic relationships for teaching, research, or practice.

When delving into collaboration and communication, there are many possibilities to consider beyond the scope of this article. Intersections between macrolevel, mesolevel, and microlevel communication should be carefully considered. The models, matrices, and measures reviewed could be used to examine aspects of collaborative communication. Additional promising communication topics for partnerships include: conflict management among diverse people (e.g., Ayoko & Konrad, 2012; Friedman & Davidson, 2001; Jehn et al., 1999), dialectical tensions and ways to manage them (e.g., Baxter et al., 2021; Dumlao & Janke, 2012), ways to share power at multiple levels (e.g., Heath & Isbell, 2017; Preece, 2016; Youakim, 2020), language usage by different groups (e.g., Hwang, 2013; Neeley et al, 2009), as well as ways to develop greater cultural sensitivity (e.g., Chen & Starosta, 2000; Hammer et al., 2003).

Also, scholarly work in community engagement could also be expanded in terms of communication practices for partnerships. For instance, the work by Weertz and Sandman (2010) could provide a solid base to consider the kinds of communication practices for effective boundary spanning. Also, Bringle et al. (2009) point out that integrity, closeness, and equity are important to transformative dyadic partnerships. Follow-up considerations could look at what verbal and nonverbal communication best facilitates those partnership characteristics. We have highlighted some promising possibilities but much more empirical work is needed to look at communication practices/processes that promote or prevent different outcomes for community-engaged work and that address problems along the way.

### **Limitations of This Work**

The literature reviews for this conceptual article were not comprehensive or time focused and that is one major limitation. A more comprehensive review that looks at multiple disciplines as well as international publications during a set timeframe might offer additional insights and practical possibilities. That said, this compilation of sources is unique and has identified important ideas about communication practices and processes that inform community engagement and help community-campus partners do their work. So additional scholarly reviews might add to this base.

Another limitation is that the CCF itself is not comprehensive. The CCF model could be adapted to include other factors in the collaborative communication process. For instance, partners may need to consider the in-depth cultural background and practices or perspectives that guide their communication.

With insights into cultural communication, partners could make informed decisions about how to proceed when they communicate and do their collaborative work. Additionally, this model does not address the dark side of collaboration that might include miscommunication, conflict resolution, and managing crucial differences or power imbalances. Also, as Stone et al. (2010) discuss, one may encounter a partner who may not intend to build equitable collaboration but might take advantage of the other partner. In that case, other forms of working jointly may be needed other than collaborative communication. Coordinating separate efforts might be an alternative, for instance.

This article's predominant focus on dyadic interpersonal communication is another limitation. The CCF could potentially be expanded to look at other levels of communication, such as communication between groups or between institutions, for example. Dyadic communication is a useful "building block" for other levels of collaborative communication, such as between groups, cultures, organizations, and communities. Further, as multiple scholars noted above, communication at one level can be significantly impacted by communication at other levels. So we enthusiastically echo Heath and Frey's (2004) contention that a communication-oriented theory of collaboration is needed. Such a theory would be highly valuable for future community engagement. In addition, a comprehensive model that considers communication occurring simultaneously in community-campus partnerships at different levels (i.e., macro to micro) could be invaluable for community-engaged practice.

### Concluding Remarks

Despite these limitations, this article contributes useful insights about collaboration, a useable CCF, and some specifics to guide conversations between partners. These conceptual foundations and practical suggestions can help partners look more closely at communication practices and processes in their relationships at different times. Then, they can meta-communicate to determine explicitly what is needed or wanted by one or both partners for the future.

Considering the multiple ways that communication can facilitate collaboration is imperative to our success when doing community engagement. Building our partners' capacities in communication knowledge, skills, and practices, including working across various cultures and paying attention to diversity and power issues, can add to the repertoire available for future work. Indeed, a focused concentration on collaborative communication between or among partners holds great promise for both the processes and the outcomes of our community-focused work.

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