

Becoming a community-engaged research organization

Top 5 Insights from RFA's Community Research Partnership





Top 5 Insights from RFA's Community-Research Partnership

We know that research is better and more impactful when communities are engaged throughout the research process. But how can research organizations become community-engaged? To document the “how,” Research for Action launched a Community Research Partnership in 2022 with a two-year grant from the Barra Foundation. After the first year, this brief shares five key insights learned as RFA began its transition to a community-engaged research organization. We also provide key guiding questions for community members, funders, research organization leaders, and researchers, to ask related to each insight (“*Putting it into Practice*,” page 11).

Research for Action (RFA) aims to transition to a community-engaged research organization to rediscover its roots in action.

Dear Reader,

A little more than three years ago, Research for Action (RFA) set out on a journey to become a community-engaged research organization. After 30 years in the field, it had become abundantly clear that traditional research approaches had too often failed to center the concerns and perspectives of students, families, teachers, and other community members. Researchers rely on students, families, and communities to provide us with data, but we seldom seek community input when crafting research questions or in discussions about research results and implications. This disconnect has become untenable and more dangerous as the COVID-19 pandemic has put immense pressure on our communities and education systems and exposed many vulnerabilities in who they were designed to serve.

But how could a small organization like RFA make a meaningful impact on the expansive field of education research? To start, we initiated an organizational change process to bridge the research-community divide, to make the shift to conduct research with communities as partners. Specifically, we built the Community Research Partnership model for educational researchers to create a multi-layered feedback loop between the

communities and the research we produce to drive improvement in their educational opportunities and outcomes.

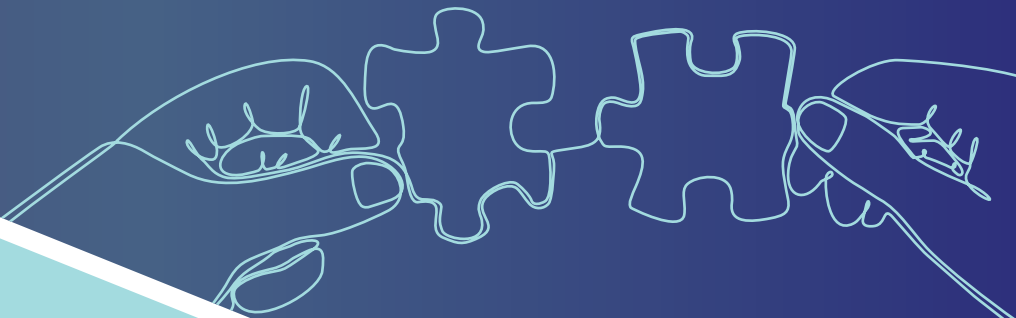
We are still early in our journey, and there is no roadmap guiding our path forward. As we continue to make our way through our change process, we documented FIVE INSIGHTS and an accompanying audio postcard to share our learnings and reflections along the way. At first, they may seem simple and straightforward, but they are the pillars of the deep change process required to become a community-engaged research organization. Communities deserve to have a research organization that works to support impacts IN their communities, FOR their communities. When this happens, a community-engaged research organization can become a community good, a trusted community resource.

It is our hope that the lessons and strategies from each insight will resonate and be useful to your own organizational contexts. Join us as we transform research practice to better serve community efforts and to advance more just and effective education systems.

With gratitude,
Kate Callahan and Saxon Nelson

Insight

1



Integration is more challenging than adding on, but it is critical for organizational change.

Why does this matter?

If your desired research outcome is advancing equitable and just systems, community engagement has to be infused throughout the research process. And yet, community members are all too often only involved once decisions about the direction of the research have already been made. Even when efforts to engage community members in research do happen early, they are experienced as a short-term add-on instead of a sustained and integral part of the full research process. For example, researchers might plan a focus group to gather input on research questions, but community members are left in the dark when decisions are made about what methods make sense or how the results will be used.



For community-engaged research to be meaningful, credible, and useful, community members need to be involved in all phases of research - from design to data collection and analysis to reporting.

What does this look like?

RFA has been working to integrate community-engaged practices into all phases of our work. Incorporating community engagement into new projects has proven easier than integrating community engagement into existing projects. Additionally, some projects and some teams are positioned - either because of the project's focus, the funder/ funding structure, or team leader/ member skills and competencies - to more fully engage communities than others. Nevertheless, RFA's experiences this past year show how research organizations can successfully implement community-engaged practices at different phases of existing research projects (design, analysis, and reporting) as the organization works to infuse community engagement more fully.



Examples of Community Engagement Activities



Research Design

Invest in a Community Advisory Committee that is fairly compensated to co-design the research.



Data Collection & Analysis

Invite follow-up conversations with interview participants to inform the interpretation of early findings.



Reporting

Invest in a student panel to give input on the final report and plan for dissemination in community spaces.

How can this be put into practice?

To advance racial and social justice, community engagement must be central to how research is designed and used, not just how it is implemented. Those engaging in research should move conversations with community members upstream, meeting early and often so their voices and insights shape how research is designed and how the results are used to advance racial equity and social justice. This calls on research organizations and funders to prioritize relationships with community members and let those relationships shape the way research is structured and funded. It also calls on community members to ask critical questions early on, before agreeing to participate.



For Community Members

When researchers or funders approach you to participate in a project, ask questions.

- ▶ Are you able to have a say in when and how you will be included in the research process and how the insights generated will benefit you and your community, **before** agreeing to participate?



For Funders

Provide larger, longer-term and more flexible investments.

- ▶ How can you provide additional and more flexible resources for relationship-building and ongoing engagement with community members beyond project timeframes?



For Organizational Leaders

Allocate time, budget, and resources so research staff can prioritize community engagement.

- ▶ How can you dedicate time and resources to building processes and practices within the organization to support community engagement?
- ▶ How can you simultaneously add community-engaged practices to existing projects, as you work to shift organizational structures to more fully integrate community-engaged methods across new projects?



For Researchers

Reconsider research project timelines.

- ▶ As you plan new projects, how will you build in time to engage community members **before** starting a research project and **at each stage** of the process, including dissemination?



It is not only who participates in the research, but **how they participate** that matters.

Why does this matter?

The goal of transitioning to a community-engaged research organization raises questions about what counts as knowledge, how different types of knowledge are valued and recognized, who produces knowledge, and how engagement should happen. Too often, traditional research creates a division between researchers and community members or those who bring knowledge/expertise and those who receive that knowledge/expertise. Breaking down the hierarchy that overvalues research skills and undervalues community member experience requires recognizing that multiple types of knowledge and expertise are needed to advance the goal of racial and social justice. It also involves critically examining and restructuring research timelines, practices, and funding structures to acknowledge the value and assets that community members bring to research projects.

It is important to embrace a broader conceptualization of what counts as knowledge or expertise to ensure that everyone - researchers and community members - can contribute to the work.

What does this look like?

Community advisory committees are one structure RFA has leveraged to center community member knowledge and facilitate formal participation by community members to shape the research. Building an advisory committee requires dedicated resources and shared expectations for the level of decision-making that committee members will have in the project. RFA put this into practice as a part of their Allegheny County Education Research Project (ACER) through a **Research Advisory Committee (RAC)**. The RAC membership is composed of community leaders, parents, and teachers/former teachers and is a fundamental component of this work.

Research Advisory Committee (RAC)



As part of the Allegheny County Education Research Project (ACER), the **Research Advisory Committee (RAC)** is a fundamental component of the work. The RAC membership is composed of community leaders, parents, and teachers/former teachers. The RAC structure has clear roles and expectations for RAC members in each phase of the research process to ensure that those perspectives shape the research project overall.

The RAC met six times over the course of a year and was compensated for their contributions. RAC members shared feedback on protocols, recruited participants, reviewed and provided feedback on findings and how the findings were communicated. Finally, the RAC strategized public convenings and how to share the learning.



“It’s also about shifting the notion of who the expert is, right? And who is able to contribute to knowledge production. Instead of it being the objective expert researcher coming in with their training and tools, it’s flipping that on its head a bit and saying, let’s learn from the folks who actually might know more about their own experiences and have them help us design a study that is culturally relevant and asset based.”

- Leana Cabral

Research Associate, Research for Action





Definitional clarity is hard but necessary.

Why does this matter?

Everyone has their own lived experience and perspective, which influences how they define and think about “community engagement.” Asking questions about “what” and “whom” the research is for is essential for guiding the work. To ask those questions, you have to first define “who” the community is and what “community-engaged” really means. Without alignment on the terms, it can create confusion and sometimes tension in how the work happens.

Developing a shared definition of what “community-engaged research” means is critical because the approach is impacted by how the terms are defined.

What does this look like?

Researchers at RFA have wrestled with what constitutes community engagement and the goals of RFA’s community engagement work. Engaging with non-researchers in RFA’s **Community Research Partnership (CRP)** opened up an opportunity to unpack and align on implicit definitions of community and community engagement. The CRP’s year-long theory of change development process created the time and space to explore the terms and goals of their community-engaged work.

“I think we’re in a phase probably right now where we just, we maybe assumed we’re on the same page and have the same definitions and we’re starting to realize that we might not.”

- Rayane Alamuddin

*Chief Research Officer,
Research for Action*



Theory of Change for the Community Research Partnership (CRP)



Theory of Change for the Community Research Partnership (CRP)

With funding from the Barra Foundation, one of the first steps RFA took in the Community Research Partnership (CRP) work was to recruit community advisory committee members who they engaged with over the course of a year to develop a Theory of Change (ToC) for the CRP. The advisory members were compensated and met regularly over the

course of the year with RFA researchers to work through multiple iterations of the ToC.

The process of developing a ToC with the community advisory committee created space and time to define “community” and “community partners.” They define “community” as those most affected by the policy/ services/structures being examined. “Community partners” may include practitioners working in the field of study, community members, and organization leaders and staff who serve the involved communities. Communities are project-dependent and identifying community partners is an essential first step of any research project.



What got us here may not be enough to **get us where we are going.**

Why does this matter?

Community-engaged research marks a departure from the way most researchers were trained. It can be uncomfortable and vulnerable to dig into and reflect on the appropriate roles for researchers on a project. As a result, transitioning to a community-engaged research organization requires building additional skills, experiences, and competencies. For example:

- ▶ An ability to be flexible and effectively respond to shifting needs and priorities
- ▶ An ability to create an emotionally safe environment where everyone has a voice
- ▶ Willingness to ask difficult questions that challenge conventional thinking
- ▶ An ability to build trusting relationships that create collaborative and authentic spaces that prioritize communication and respect
- ▶ Willingness to recognize lived experience as expertise

Implementing a community-engaged approach to research requires additional skills, experiences, and competencies.

What does this look like?

Researchers at RFA have varied levels of experience and comfort with community-engaged research methods. While certain projects have focused explicitly on implementing community-engaged methods like **participatory action research (PAR)**, these types of practices are not consistently used across the organization. To support researchers, RFA's leadership is committed to prioritizing internal learning, professional development, and resource sharing within the organization.

Participatory Action Research (PAR)



RFA is embarking on a new and exciting project funded by Spring Point Partners that focuses on teacher diversity and uses **participatory action research (PAR)** with a team of teacher researchers. In contrast to traditional research approaches, PAR prioritizes collaboration with those most affected by the issue being studied at every phase of the research process and aims toward action or social change.

“The foundation of the proposed study was participatory research, not just a line item in the budget.” (Rayane Alamuddin)

The RFA research team has limited experience in PAR work, but is working to tap into the existing skills in the team and exploring what additional PAR research skills and experience are needed to successfully implement this research project. The grant/funder dedicating the resources (time and money) to this PAR project is an investment in building the team’s skills in participatory research methods and practices.

“The RFA team is bought in on the idea that we shouldn’t be doing research to people - people are comfortable talking about it in the abstract, but implementing practices is more challenging. There’s a skill gap and we need to fill it.”

- Alyn Turner

Director of Quantitative Research, Research for Action





When engaging with communities, **a sense of place** - and how you fit in that place - **matters**.

Why does this matter?

If research is intended to advance equitable and just systems, researchers must understand the historical, cultural, racial, and political context they are working in, as well as their own positionality in that place or project. This deeper understanding takes time, but it's a critical step in building authentic relationships and trust in a new place or community. Relationships and trust are pathways to break down the division between researchers and community members so they can work together toward the goal of racial and social justice.

Community-engaged research requires being deeply embedded in a community and building relationships that last beyond the scope of an individual project.

What does this look like?

While RFA is based in Philadelphia and originally was primarily Philly-focused, the organization has taken on national projects to grow and expand its reach. Now the organization is wrestling with the balance between local and national work and asking important questions about how to engage with communities outside of Philadelphia. One way that RFA is thinking about community-engaged work in other locations is through deep relationships with local partners. The **Teach In: The Need for More Teachers of Color** held on April 23, 2022, was a great example of this work.



“We are a national research organization, but our responsibility is to Philadelphia. We are connecting and learning in our immediate community then we consider how to apply that learning elsewhere too.”

- Kate Callahan
Executive Director,
Research for Action

Teach In: The Need for More Teachers of Color



The **Teach In: The Need for More Teachers of Color** held on April 23, 2022, was organized on the foundation of strong and existing relationships with individuals and organizations (e.g., Center for Black Educator Development) in Philadelphia. Nearly 100 community members, teachers, and advocates joined to learn more about RFA's research on the need for more teachers of color. Findings were shared about teacher diversity in

Pennsylvania as a whole and specifically in Philadelphia, including examination of how teacher diversity has changed in Philadelphia over the past 20 years.

Building on the learning and implementation of this work in Philly, RFA is now partnered with the Center for Black Educator Development to facilitate a parallel partnership in Detroit to research teacher diversity. This project would not be based in Detroit without this deep existing partnership with the Center for Black Educator Development.



Putting It Into Practice: Guiding Questions

Insight

1

Integration is more challenging than adding on, but it is critical for organizational change.



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For Funders

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For Organizational Leaders

Allocate time, budget, and resources so research staff can prioritize community engagement.

- ▶ How can you dedicate time and resources to building processes and practices within the organization to support community engagement?
- ▶ How can you simultaneously add community-engaged practices to existing projects as you work to shift organizational structures to more fully integrate community-engaged methods across new projects?



For Researchers

Reconsider research project timelines.

- ▶ As you plan new projects, how will you build in time to engage community members **before** starting a research project and **at each stage** of the process, including dissemination?

What steps can I take?



Insight

2

It is not only who participates in the research, but **how they participate** that matters.



For Community Members

Make sure your expertise is valued.

- ▶ How is your knowledge recognized (and compensated)?
- ▶ In what ways are you a part of decision-making processes related to the project?



For Funders

Explore alternative funding structures to enable and support community engagement.

- ▶ How do funding structures impact the ability of projects to recognize and benefit from community member knowledge and contributions?



For Organizational Leaders

Prioritize ongoing engagement over time.

- ▶ How can you signal to research staff that community engagement is a priority?
- ▶ How can you ensure sufficient organizational resources and time are dedicated to in-depth engagement with community members?



For Researchers

Explore different research practices and team structures.

- ▶ What practices and structures facilitate and recognize the value of contributions from community members to the research project?
- ▶ What is an appropriate role for you to play in the research project? Do you need to shift your role based on this project?

What steps can I take?

3

Definitional clarity is hard but necessary.



For Community Members

Ask questions about definitions.

- ▶ Are you aligned with the researchers in what constitutes the “community” and what “engagement” looks like?
- ▶ Are there other terms being used that need to be unpacked to make sure you are on the same page with everyone involved?



For Funders

Recognize the importance of this definitional work and the time and resources required to do it intentionally.

- ▶ What changes are needed in project timelines and resources in order to ensure definitional clarity for this work?



For Organizational Leaders

Ensure that team members have the support and skills to facilitate these conversations.

- ▶ How can you support research staff in developing the skills to facilitate conversations about definitions and to recognize and address the power dynamics that can be at play in defining terms?



For Researchers

Dedicate the time and resources to build shared definitions with those that are critical to the work.

- ▶ Do community members agree with your definitions?
- ▶ How can you ensure those that are critical to the work are aligned on definitions of key terms?

Clarify a process that enables different groups to contribute and shape the definitions.

- ▶ What is the end goal of this process and how will the outcomes be used? In other words, start with the end in mind.
- ▶ Who is positioned to lead or facilitate the process of building shared definitions? Consider the value of an outside facilitator.



For Everyone Involved

Remember that the definitions are just the first step.

- ▶ How will you communicate and use the shared definitions?
- ▶ How can new learning be incorporated to inform the definitions over time?

4

What got us here may not be enough to get us where we are going.



For Funders

Ensure resources are available to build additional researcher skills.

- ▶ How can you structure funding to ensure adequate resources (time and money) for researcher training to develop the additional skills needed for community-engaged research?



For Organizational Leaders

Identify and prioritize the critical competencies/experiences/skills needed for effective community-engaged research.

- ▶ What skills/competencies/experiences are needed on the research team to effectively incorporate community engagement into existing projects?
- ▶ What capacity/experiences/skills can be developed (& what cannot)?



For Researchers

Be open and humble - remember that there is always so much more to learn.

Create internal learning processes.

- ▶ What resources and opportunities can you find to develop new skills and competencies?
- ▶ How can you create checkpoints for yourself to continually reflect about your own role?
- ▶ How can organizations capture learning in order to integrate it into processes, practices, and projects?
- ▶ How can we support researchers in reflecting on their own positionality?

What steps can I take?

5

When engaging with communities, a sense of place - and how you fit in that place - matters.



For Community Members

Question the research team's connections to your community.

- ▶ How connected is the research team to the history and context of your community?
- ▶ How can you support their growth and learning to ensure the research is relevant and actionable?



For Funders

Encourage researchers to reflect on their own positionality.

- ▶ How can you support and hold research teams accountable for understanding and reflecting on the context of the research project and their positionality within it?



For Organizational Leaders

Consider what is transferable to other places and what is not.

- ▶ What is needed to integrate community engagement into projects in locations other than your home base (time, staffing, partnerships) and how is that incorporated into project plans/ budgets/ timelines?



For Researchers

Reflect about how to engage with a new community and build connections to understand the context.

- ▶ What are potential barriers (historical, personal/ cultural, institutional/ structural) for engaging in a new community?
- ▶ What actions can you take to build trust and relationships with members of a new community?
- ▶ What do you know about the context, history, and dynamics at play where you are working? How can you deepen your understanding?

What steps can I take?

Research for Action (RFA) partnered with **ImpactED**, an evaluation and training center based in the University of Pennsylvania, to reflect on their learning and generate the five critical insights from the first year of the Community Research Partnership discussed in this report.

1. Integration is more challenging than adding on, but it is critical for organizational change.
2. It is not only who participates in the research, but how they participate that matters.
3. Definitional clarity is hard but necessary.
4. What got us here may not be enough to get us where we are going.
5. When engaging with communities, a sense of place - and how you fit in that place - matters.

The work happened in three phases:

- ▶ **Phase 1: Strategy.** During this phase, the ImpactED team met with Research for Action leadership and staff to learn more about the Community Research Partnership model and create a framework for documenting the lessons learned.
- ▶ **Phase 2: Data Collection & Analysis.** ImpactED researchers interviewed eight Research for Action staff and other key stakeholders to capture a robust picture of the purpose, implementation and early outcomes of the Community Research Partnership model.
- ▶ **Phase 3: Storytelling.** During this final phase, the ImpactED team worked with Research for Action staff to distill lessons learned and co-create key insights to share with a wider audience.

This report is accompanied by a podcast that shares the story of the Community Research Partnership and provides examples of the insights in practice. You can access the podcast on our website.

If you're interested in learning more, visit www.researchforaction.org.

