



Tips for Establishing Authentic and Equitable Partnerships

The tips shared by our 2024 Community Partners stem from our analysis of their experiences and recommendations. As such, these tips are geared toward K-12 STEM education researchers who are looking to initiate partnerships with community entities such as schools, districts, and out-of-school learning spaces while also considering the communities served by these institutions.

1. Be Your Authentic Self

Trust is often a challenge when working to develop a new partnership. Our community partners believed that being your authentic self can build trust in any partnership but especially new partnerships. A few ways to approach being your authentic self are by:

- » Allowing your core values to guide your decisions and interactions.
- » Developing self-awareness: Consider how your various identities influence your behaviors, thoughts, feelings, and interactions.

2. Maintain Honest & Transparent Communication

People seeking authentic partnerships are transparent about their goals and processes, and they strive to ensure that the distribution of resources and decision-making is fair and equitable. As someone seeking to establish a partnership, it is important to share why you are there, what you hope to accomplish through the partnership (including what you intend to gain and what you believe the partner can gain), your perceived approach to partnering (e.g., the norms and expectations you have for partnering), and the power, privilege, and resources you possess to support the partnership. Clearly articulating your why and how of partnering allows the other person or group to assess your intentions, character, values, and available resources. Recognize, however, that sharing this information opens the door for negotiations; it is not guaranteed that all of your desires will be fulfilled in an authentic and equitable partnership, as partnerships exist between people who may have different desires.

3. Collaborate & Share Leadership

Authentic and equitable partners share power and decision-making. Distributing power and resources in ways that account for structural inequities is especially necessary when external resources (i.e., grants) are available to support universities/organizations partnering with schools

and community organizations. Our community partners recommended establishing advisory boards to facilitate shared leadership and decision-making. These advisory boards can:

- » Ensure key representatives (community organizations, community members, educators, researchers, etc.) from the community are involved throughout the partnership.
- » Keep the project goals relevant and aligned with industry trends (e.g., research outcomes) while helping identify programming needs (e.g., community needs to sustain and enhance services rendered).
- » Share ways to minimize mistakes when forming the partnership that can lead to mistrust and harm. This includes but is not limited to setting clear expectations for how both the needs of the community and the needs of the research project can be met without making choices that hurt the community for the sake of achieving research goals.
- » Support in building and maintaining other partnerships that may emerge necessary to ensure the completion of the project.

Additionally, we encourage those seeking to establish partnerships to co-develop projects, proposals, and collaboration norms with their identified partners. During this process, partners should co-strategize the relationship structure, including but not limited to project and management responsibilities, team governance, and the supervision of resources.

4. Be Flexible & Responsive

Staying flexible and responsive can ensure that both the research and programming stay relevant, effective, and accessible to everyone. This often means consistent dialogue with the partnering organization and the advisory council throughout the project. Some ways to be flexible and responsive are:

- » Focus on meeting the community where they are, such as using local recreational facilities and public spaces instead of traditional academic settings.
- » Attend community events, network, and directly reach out to potential partners.
- » Regularly gather feedback from the community to adapt and improve your programs.
- » Schedule routine meetings to discuss project goals, outcomes, and implementation. These meetings should occur periodically, where the recommended minimum number of meetings is once a quarter. In these meetings, provide real project updates, including possible challenges that the team is running into with implementation, allowing community members to be part of the continued decision-making process.

5. Address Real Needs

Show how your initiatives meet the needs of the community in addition to aligning with the goals of the partnering organizations. Strive to form partnerships that provide value to all parties involved. For instance, ensure that partnerships with corporations, schools, and non-profits offer tangible benefits and align with their respective goals. An authentic partnership should ensure that the primary beneficiaries are those served by the organization, including those listed as the project participants. While both parties can benefit from the partnership,

equitable and authentic partnerships ensure that the community partners and project participants receive the most significant benefits. Our community partners shared ways community needs can be addressed:

- » Co-create programs and initiatives based on the expressed needs of the community.
- » Highlight and build from community assets. Use the community assets to support addressing community needs. That is, instead of positioning the researcher and grant as the ultimate keeper of power and resources (e.g., having a savior mindset), use the grant resources to elevate the community resources. Supporting the community with addressing its own needs by investing in their strengths and assets supports self-determination and autonomy within the community, ultimately contributing to project ideals being sustained beyond the grant's lifecycle.
- » Gather continuous feedback from community members and the advisory board to be responsive as needs shift and demonstrate how you are accounting for these shifts within your modified project implementation.

6. Leverage Resources

When engaging in partnerships with various communities leverage the resources and social capital you have to support that community. This may look like engaging with local politicians and community influencers to open doors and create opportunities or utilizing connections to gain support and access to resources and venues for the community organizations. It could also mean facilitating connections between other STEM Education Researcher organization members and the community. By utilizing and leveraging your current connections and networks the community organization may develop additional natural partnerships. This work does not necessarily have to be built within the research project design; however, to demonstrate one's commitment to the community beyond the benefits they can provide, STEM Education Researchers are encouraged to think holistically and humanistically about what it means to be in an equitable and authentic partnership. Such perspectives can push STEM Education Researchers to think outside of their research "hats," when strategizing ways to support the community.

7. Plan to Engage in a Long-term Commitment:

Authentic partnerships are not short-lived but are built for the long-term. Therefore, committing to long-term investments in community programs is important rather than short-term projects. This helps to build sustainable programs and demonstrates genuine commitment. Authentic partnerships are marked by a high level of commitment from all parties involved, including ongoing engagement and genuine investment in the partnership's goals to ensure the work you are doing with the community is sustainable over time. Partnerships that are merely checking off a box or fulfilling quotas are less likely to be authentic. True partnerships involve meaningful collaboration, reliable presence, and investment beyond superficial or obligatory actions. In the partnering process, enter into the partnership with the mindset that you are building and hoping to sustain a potentially life-long commitment. This mindset can help situate initial conversations, including guiding how you approach a potential partner.

Background & Acknowledgements



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About this Work

In 2022-23 our team recruited five community partners from diverse backgrounds to participate in a focus group to understand how STEM education researchers can better engage with communities. From that work we developed [**"Strategies for Fostering Authentic Community Partnerships in STEM Education Research."**](#)

As a follow-up to that paper, in 2023-24 our team recruited four additional community partners to understand issues, solutions, and factors that impact community engagement in STEM education research partnerships. Specifically, we were interested in understanding the steps they take or believe should be taken to establish effective partnerships, which are highlighted in this document.

As connected to the previous brief, we define communities as the various individuals, groups, businesses, and institutions that are invested in the welfare and vitality of a particular group and its members (adapted from [**edglossary.org**](https://www.edglossary.org)). This definition is based on the idea that communities (and community members) may or may not be bound to a specific geographic location and space, and that communities may represent groups of people with similar ideologies, backgrounds, or experiences.

Community partnerships, thus, reflect a) community as groups of people organized by demographic identities and shared background experiences, and b) communities as represented by institutions (e.g., college or university community, K-12 school districts, K-12 schools, NGO, etc.).

As we offer tips for partnerships between K-12 STEM education researchers and communities, we account for the brokering of relationships between institutions and organizations like universities partnering with K-12 school districts and the brokering of relationships between researchers and the communities served by the institution (e.g., communities organized by racial, ethnic, gender, gender identity expression, socioeconomic status, sexuality, geographic location, physical and neurological abilities, citizenship, age, and the intersections of these identities).

Our Approach

Our goal was to recruit individuals who are actively engaged with community organizations and efforts that are also involved in STEM education. We were also aware that NSF developed an investment strategy to improve research and development competitiveness within the [**Established Program to Stimulate Competitive Research \(EPSCoR\) jurisdictions**](#). As such, we were intentional about recruiting individuals from these jurisdictions in order to

better understand contextual and cultural implications for establishing partnerships. The team identified 12 individuals and/or organizations who met the above criteria, four agreed to participate in a 60-minute interview to share their experiences. Each interview was then transcribed and coded to identify the tips and strategies shared in the conversations.

Our 2024 Community Partners

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