

Reviews / Comptes rendus

Community-University Research Partnerships: Reflections on the Canadian Social Economy Experience

*Edited by Peter V. Hall and Ian MacPherson
(Victoria, BC: University of Victoria, 2011, 259 pages)*

In North American discourses about participatory research, we tend to tell our “story” in terms of local and global societies, characterized by increasingly complex issues that require collaboration to effect change. I review *Community-University Research Partnerships: Reflections on the Canadian Social Economy Experience* as a researcher–educator who creates opportunities through graduate and continuing education programs to learn about community–university research. This book specifies the narrative to Canadian community–university research partnerships focused on the development of the social economy, or “the ‘third sector,’ as distinguished from the public and private (for-profit) sectors” (p. 159):

The Social Economy is never static. It is not easy to define in absolute terms or as precisely as some literal-minded observers might like. It is constantly mutating because its essence is to respond to the consequences and possibilities of social and economic change. (p. 28)

The diverse cross-sector players of the Canadian Social Economy Research Partnerships (CSERPs) grappled not only with various opportunities and challenges of community–university research but also with a shift to a politically conservative federal government in Canada in 2006, the 2008 global recession, and neoliberalism with its marketization of society. However, even though the governing Canadian Conservative government cancelled the capacity-building part of the original funding for CSERPs, the participants managed to publish this book about lessons they learned.

Amid a societal buzz regarding the importance of university engagement with communities and governments, the contributors invite readers into critical commentary about collaboration. In 2005, in response to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), existing and yet-to-be formed partnerships applied for and were granted funds with which they formed CSERPs. They established an extensive set of community–university research partnerships with six regional “nodes” and a national “hub” with over 300 people participating between 2005–2012. The book offers insights into the rationale for collaborating, how policy and

funding landscapes influence social-economy research partnerships, and opportunities and challenges in collaboration. Through ten chapters, an afterword, appendices, and tables and figures, the contributors offer insights for community practitioners, academics, policy makers, and citizens who are considering and/or are already immersed in community–university partnerships.

With colleagues, the co-editors distinguish this book not as a review of CSERPs' research outputs but rather as "insights on the process and challenges of forging (and maintaining) practitioner–university engagement" (p. 3). In the introduction, the authors offer conceptualizations of partnership and engagement and "a set of eight categories for understanding 'engaged research partnerships'" (p. 3) as a frame for subsequent chapters; however, for me, that framing was not predominant in the book. What did surface were frank reflections about how "engagement was frustrated by the institutional context[s] of the partners" (p. 3), contexts that govern not only academics and practitioners, but also the primary funder, SSHRC. These institutional contexts "shaped" the various partnerships within CSERPs; some partnerships also challenged conventions (e.g., node leadership by a community organization rather than a university partner).

Another admirable element of the book is the chapter by the coordinators of the national hub and the six nodes: "The Academic/Practitioner Divide—Fact or Fiction? Reflections on the Role of the Lead Staff Personnel." From a continuing education perspective, I perceive this chapter as a resource for curricula regarding a new type of academically savvy community practitioner: coordinating facilitators, a role that is increasingly necessary in community–university research. It has been a somewhat invisible role, yet in CSERPs, the "coordinator" role was dedicated full time to supporting the partnerships. They managed and facilitated incredible dynamics, given Canada's landmass, time zones, languages, and cultures. The authors note that each of the nodes and the hub evolved uniquely in terms of structure, approach, and operations, in part, relative to "the coordinators' diverse backgrounds" as they created their roles in "assisting [each of] the principal investigator[s] (PI) in managing the work of the research partnership[s]" (p. 206). The authors cite the emerging literature regarding this facilitation and describe how their backgrounds and CSERPs' activities

blurred the lines between academia, practitioner and administrator ... We facilitated and nurtured the partnerships, engaged in research, developed projects, supervised and mentored students, wrote grant applications, co-authored papers, developed museum exhibits, gave presentations, while maintaining the necessary paperwork to satisfy both university and SSHRC requirements. (p. 215)

The authors observe that SSHRC's regulations disregard the breadth and depth of this role in community–university partnerships. For instance, CSERPs' hub and nodes had to innovate to support coordinators not only as partnership staff but also as researchers. Two effects of this constraint are power imbalances and entrenched divisions between community partners and academics. Yet, if this "fulcrum role of the coordinator" were supported appropriately in terms of salary and "sphere of authority" (p. 222), these facilitators would be able to help partnerships to actualize the "shared ownership" and "shared leadership" that they perceive as possible for "true partnerships" (pp. 208–211). The authors do refer to SSHRC's redeveloped funding architecture and express hope that it will enhance support for "meaningful community participation in research" (p. 220).

In the afterword, Edward Jackson comments on the current Conservative government's ideology and offers recommendations. He observes that developing social-economy capacity is critical, "as economic conditions have worsened in the developed world" (p. 230). I write this review in 2013 from a context in which Alberta's provincial government is "managing," through funding cutbacks, how universities will and will not be able to engage with society to

respond to issues. Community–university partnerships will be hard-pressed to respond to one insight from this book for universities to “‘creat[e] the space’ for development and organizing efforts” (p. 124).

This publication is an open-access, electronic resource, demonstrating consistency with the nature of collaboration by enabling lifelong learners across sectors and income (e.g., non-profit agency practitioners, students in academia, freelance policy-shaping advocates). I read a print version, which is available for purchase but was frustrated by the absence of an index. The URL (www.socialeconomyhub.ca) provided in the book points to additional resources, including two books from CSERPs regarding the social economy.

I encourage continuing education scholars to adopt this book as a resource for curricula in which we attempt to introduce rationale for collaborating across society to adopt democratic, equitable ways for effecting change and social, economic, and environmental justice, too.

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