

A Community-Engaged Approach to Survey Development: Validating an Engagement Outcomes Tool with Community Partners

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Abstract

Universities often measure community engagement by institutional outputs, ignoring outcomes relevant to community partners. This stems from a lack of evaluation frameworks that capture diverse partnerships and contexts, which are essential for understanding impact and authentic collaboration. When evaluation is one-sided, it risks misrepresenting impact and marginalizing community perspectives. To shift institutional evaluation policies centered on transactional reporting toward bidirectional impact assessment, investigators from Indiana University Indianapolis (IUI), in Indiana, led the co-creation of a new community engagement evaluation framework. The project engaged 16 faculty, 2 staff members, and 24 community partners through semi-structured interviews and focus-group cognitive interviews (FGCI) to identify relevant engagement outcomes. Centering partners as co-creators challenged existing institutional practices and facilitated a critical shift in the university's valuation of community knowledge. Navigating this change revealed significant disparities between institutional terminology, collaboration categorizations, and partners' lived experiences, necessitating major structural revisions to the evaluation tool before piloting. A key lesson for managing similar realignments of engagement programs is that deep, qualitative stakeholder engagement is vital for successfully transitioning institutional measurement frameworks to reflect authentic collaboration with communities.

Keywords: community-university partnerships, focus group cognitive interview, survey validation, partnership evaluation

Introduction

Indiana University Indianapolis (IUI) in Indiana is an urban research university and anchor institution with a long tradition of community engagement. Anchor institutions can “play a key role in helping the low-income communities they serve by better aligning their institutional resources—like hiring, purchasing, investment, and volunteer base—with the needs of those of communities” (Ubhayakar et al., 2017, p.1). To do that, anchor institution initiatives leverage their capital to support local communities: Financial capital (housing programs, prioritization of local purchasing, and creation of non-profits to attend specific community development goals); physical capital (buildings, roads, centers, etc.); intellectual capital (i.e., service learning, technical support, knowledge transfer, innovation, etc.); and human capital (for example, partnerships to address interdisciplinary community issues) (Garton, 2021).

Historically, IUI has initiated efforts that utilize its physical, intellectual, and human resources (Garton, 2021). IUI supports local communities through projects, activities, and partnerships with community allies; however, the impact of these engagements on the community has often been overlooked, with evaluation efforts mainly centered on institutional outputs. This article highlights the transformative role of community partners’ voices in changing how community-university collaborations and outcomes are measured. The community partners became not just contributors but also the primary shapers of data-collection quality and instrument development, ensuring that their perspectives and experiences were prioritized.

This research focuses on the qualitative development and validation of a survey tool designed to measure community engagement outcomes from the perspective of community partners. The study is situated within the specific context of Indiana University Indianapolis and its collaborations with organizations in four zip codes near the campus. It encompasses three main phases: 1) survey development, 2) survey validation, and 3) survey piloting with a small sample to test its feasibility. The scope is intentionally limited to these formative stages of tool creation and does not include a large-scale quantitative deployment of the final instrument.

Literature Review

Measuring engagement outcomes involves measuring the outcomes stakeholders expect when collaborating with universities (London et al., 2022). Partnerships are “at the heart of community-engagement activities” (Nelson, 2021, p.3) and facilitate the alignment of campus interests with those of local communities. Although community-university partnership evaluation has been a topic of interest since the 1990s (Rubin, 2000), it remains elusive due to the diversity of institutions, neighborhoods, and activities involved, as well as the contexts in which engagements occur (Farnell et al., 2020). This leads to inadequate frameworks for evaluating community-university relationships (Nelson, 2021) and to impacts (Borron et al., 2019). The

situation is not exclusive to the United States, as recent European studies suggest that universities are not effectively using indicators to measure their public engagement efforts and outcomes, nor adequately integrating impact assessment results into future planning and organizational development (Spânu et al., 2024).

Universities rarely develop frameworks that connect engagement efforts with mid- and long-term social outcomes (Cook & Nation, 2016). The Democracy Collaborative framework for anchor institutions (Dubb et al., 2013; Sladek & The Democracy Collaborative, 2017) aims to create this connection by identifying areas for engagement and the associated outcomes. Additionally, it pinpoints core internal (institutional) and external (community) measures (Sladek & The Democracy Collaborative, 2017). Community measures are evaluated through aggregated community outcomes, while the immediate effects on individuals, groups, and organizations are assessed through surveys.

Various efforts have been made to develop surveys that measure community partners' opinions on how collaborations produce outcomes that meet community needs (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2023; Gavazzi & Fox, 2014; Sladek & The Democracy Collaborative, 2017). Higgins et al. (2024) introduced the Socially Modified Economic Valuation (SMEV) approach, which involves a two-step process: first, estimating the economic value of project outputs, and second, applying social weights to account for the project's contribution to broader social goals. Weightings are “applied to impute relatively greater value to programmes affecting areas of greater deprivation” (Higgins et al., 2024, p. 24) and reflect “how the activity under consideration is achieving agreed ‘socially desirable’ goals, above and beyond its economic value” (p.22). This approach can offer valuable insights into the social value created by university-community engagement initiatives, particularly in addressing social inequities and advancing broader societal objectives.

Recent tools and frameworks to evaluate the outcomes and impacts of community-engaged activities propose a more inclusive approach. The Community Partnership Health Assessment Framework (Lubar & Marks, 2022) is a significant effort to include partners' voices in evaluation. It is a five-step process that helps evaluate the effectiveness of partnerships and their mutual benefits. The framework is designed to be used directly with community partners to gather their feedback and ensure their perspectives are included in the evaluation process.

Wanjiru & Xiaoguang (2021) explored how to evaluate university-community engagement from a community-based perspective and identified indicators to assess the effects of engagement on the community, including strengthened democratic values, educated and engaged citizens, and social and economic development. Authors recognize that “[c]ommunity impacts are challenging to capture and evaluate” (Wanjiru & Xiaoguang, 2021, p. 145) and that indicators of community impact sometimes do not fully capture the outcomes of a university–community engagement

activity. The authors emphasize that “[i]nvolvement of both university and community partners in evaluation processes is necessary, considering the importance of evaluation to the universities themselves, the community, and the policymakers” (p. 142). Netshandama (2021) proposed an alternative, ecosystemic approach to monitoring and evaluation that is “inclusive, participative, consultative, and as reciprocal as possible, particularly bringing in the voices of the previously marginalised” (Netshandama, 2021, p. 179).

While defining community success is foundational, evaluating the partnership's ongoing health and equity is equally critical. The Transformational Relationship Evaluation Scale II (TRES II) Reflection Framework was designed specifically "to support reflection on, assessment of, and research into the qualities and dynamics of relationships" (Clayton et al., 2022, p.2). TRES II moves beyond basic outcome measurement by asking partners to critically reflect on whether their relationship is exploitative, uni-directional, transactional, or transformational, “noting that relationships may exhibit characteristics associated with more than one of these types... and they may shift among these types across time and across contexts. (pp 2-3)

An inclusive evaluation strategy is the best approach to address the insufficiency of community data. Involving local community partners facilitates access to local knowledge and experience, making the inquiry questions and methods relevant to the campus and the community. Kuttner et al. (2023) listed recent tools and frameworks for measuring impact. Some are community-driven, such as Ripple Effects Mapping (University of Minnesota Extension, 2023) and the Knowledge Engagement Impact Assessment Toolkit (University of Calgary, 2023).

A less recent tool is the Community Impact Scale (CIS), developed in 2015 (Srinivas et al., 2015). Researchers utilized a "bottom-up approach" to develop the 46-item scale. The scale development was "community-driven in that community voices were critically involved throughout scale development" (Srinivas et al., 2015, p. 13). Researchers generated scale items based on content analysis of interviews with community partners, and a long-term community partner continuously reviewed and provided feedback on iterations of the tool. The authors note that their project was unique in its rigorous integration of community perspectives.

These efforts suggest that community-driven evaluation, in which community partners are involved in designing, conducting, and acting on the evaluation, can make the process more rigorous and relevant. The tools presented underscore the importance of including community-defined goals and measures in the evaluation, noting a recent rise in efforts to gather feedback from community partners through surveys and questionnaires. However, more work is needed to co-create evaluation systems with communities (Kuttner et al., 2023).

Methodological Approach

This research uses a stakeholder-based approach (Ayers, 1987). The research team engaged key stakeholders in a consultative capacity throughout the planning of the new tool, while maintaining control of the inquiry process. Stakeholders provided vital information to identify meaningful engagement indicators for developing the survey tool and actively participated in its validation. The following describes the methodology used in the three main stages of this research: survey development, survey validation, and survey feasibility analysis.

Survey Development

The first draft of the survey was developed in four steps: 1) interviews with community partners to identify meaningful outcomes, 2) identification of outcome indicators, 3) validation of indicators, and 4) survey development.

Identifying Meaningful Outcomes

Sampling and Recruitment

The first step was to identify community-university projects to include in the study. Geography (location), engagement duration, and the purpose of engagement were the main criteria for selecting potential projects. The primary source of information was Collaboratory, a “software that helps higher education [institutions] understand the landscape of their engagement—the who, what, where, when, and why of activities designed with and for their communities” (Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities, 2023). Additionally, the research team searched the Digital Measures Activity Insight (DMAI) for entries between 2019 and 2022. DMAI was the database platform for faculty reviews across all IU schools and campuses until 2024.

Geographically, the focus was on communities where IUI had been actively engaged through research, outreach, and teaching between 2019 and 2022. The concept of hyperlocal engagement (Dostillo et al., 2019) was used to define the communities in which IUI had strategically organized community engagement efforts. Using the Collaboratory and DMAI helped identify, map, and categorize community engagement efforts according to the set criteria.

Twenty-nine organizations in four zip codes near the Indianapolis campus were identified as being deeply engaged in various projects and activities with IUI faculty and staff. The next step was to classify the list of 29 engagements by purpose. The Anchor Mission Dashboard (Dubb et al., 2013; Sladek & The Democracy Collaborative, 2017) was used for classification. Six of the Anchor Mission Dashboard outcomes were used for classification: a) stable and effective local partnerships, b) educated youth, c) safe streets and campuses, d) healthy community residents, e) healthy environment, and f) vibrant arts and cultural development. These outcomes aligned with

the areas faculty reported in Collaboratory (health and wellness, education, social issues, arts and culture, and community and economic development).

From the initially identified list of engagements, only the current or recently concluded engagements were selected, yielding 10 projects. The next step was to contact the IUI project coordinators via email to request a Zoom interview.

Seven IUI coordinators participated, sharing details on their community projects, impact, and recommended organizations for input. They emailed partners to introduce our work, resulting in interviews with 12 community partners.

Community partners held high- and mid-level leadership roles in various organizations, including a historical museum, an environmental agency, two community-based organizations, a youth-serving organization, two technology for-profits, and two agencies involved in re-entry programs. Another interviewee was a former participant in a STEM IUI program. No health-related organizations were included in this round because the people we contacted were unavailable.

In Zoom interviews with community partners, we asked them to describe the results of their collaborations with IUI, the impact on the community and their organizations, and the most positive/negative aspects of IUI's involvement in the projects. We used the last topic to identify indicators related to the quality of collaborations, specifically how they uphold authentic relationships and value context, history, power dynamics, equity, openness to change in a complex environment, and honest communication (Nelson, 2021).

Data Analysis

This interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using applied thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012). Each researcher initially conducted the analysis in MS Word and categorized the data according to the Democracy Collaborative Framework for Anchor Institutions' outcome areas (Dubb et al., 2013; Sladek & The Democracy Collaborative, 2017). One team member aggregated the codes into a code book with descriptions and examples (segments) for each code. Subsequently, the research team convened to discuss the individual analysis results and compare the codes generated in their analyses.

The analysis identified “community building” as a new outcome category, involving the development of community skills through evaluation, research, discussions, and training. It includes practices that improve access to university resources, promote inclusion, and strengthen social capital through collaboration, participation, and networking. It also covers the benefits organizations see from partnerships, such as increased organizational capacity. The team

identified 102 codes or indicators of engagement. Seventy were identified as being linked to processes, and thirty-two to outcome/impact (Table 1). The outcome indicators represent a deliberate departure from traditional, output-driven institutional reporting. We shifted the focus from university-centric metrics—such as the number of hours volunteered or dollars spent—to the shared, community-defined outcomes listed in Table 1. These indicators were curated and validated to ensure they capture the transformational potential of partnerships, specifically regarding how the university manages its human and financial capital in response to community needs. Consequently, Table 1 outlines the benchmarks by which IUI evaluates impact and manages community-facing programs.

Validating Indicators

The outcome indicators were compared against a draft of the Long-Term Impact Code Book that Paul Kuttner shared with the investigators via email in October 2023. Kuttner et al. qualitatively analyzed activity titles and descriptions for 700 activities, a randomly selected 10% sample of the 7,001 activities in the Collaboratory on campuses nationwide. The comparison led to the inclusion of outcome indicators not included in the first list and to the recategorization of outcomes into distinct categories. The last step was comparing the semi-final list with the 2030 IUI Strategic Plan goals to ensure alignment with campus goals. This comparison led to the inclusion of outcome indicators related to science, technology, and innovation. Table 1 presents the number of outcome indicators before and after validation. This alignment ensures that the university’s mission as an urban anchor institution is supported by a policy-driven evaluation system that facilitates significant, long-term institutional change, rather than merely transactional engagement.

TABLE 1. Indicators of engagement

Outcome area	Process indicators	Outcome/impact indicators	Validated outcome/impact indicators
Stable and effective local partnerships	38		
Arts and Cultural Development		4	7
Educated youth	9	8	10
Safe streets and campuses		6	6
Healthy community residents	8	7	8
Healthy environment	9		7
Science, technology, and innovation			7

Community building	6	7	16
Total	70	32	61

Tool Development

The process of translating the final, validated list of 61 outcome/impact indicators into the survey was direct and structured. The outcome categories became the core sections of the survey itself. The drafted tool included 94 questions. Part 1 (questions 1 to 12) had eight general/demographic questions about the respondent and four about the types and areas of collaboration with IUI in the last 12 months. Part 2 (questions 13 to 19) included seven outcome items on arts and cultural development, ten on educated youth (P-12), eight on health and wellbeing, seven on the environment and sustainability, six on community safety, seven on science, technology, and innovation, and sixteen on community building. Part 3 (question 20) asked respondents to rate IUI’s contribution in seven areas specified in the IUI 2030 Strategic Plan. Finally, Part 4 (questions 21 to 24) included four questions to evaluate the overall quality of partnerships with IUI, identify one relevant partnership, and suggest areas of improvement. This survey version was used for the next stage of the project.

Survey Validation

In 2023, the research team received funding to validate and pilot the tool. The method used for validation was focus group-based cognitive interviews (FGCI from now on) (Farmer et al., 2022; Wallen et al., 2017). “Cognitive interviewing (CI), also known as cognitive testing (CT) or cognitive debriefing (CD), is a qualitative survey development method used in questionnaire design” (Meadows, 2021, p. 375). The purpose is to gain insights into how respondents understand survey questions as intended by the survey creator. FGCI is a qualitative research method combining focus groups and cognitive interviews. This combination enables the collection of in-depth feedback on survey questions, insights into respondents’ cognitive processes during survey completion, and efficient data collection from several individuals simultaneously. FGCI provides “a feasible method to develop culturally grounded survey instruments” (Farmer et al., 2022, p. 2).

FGCI focused on determining whether the tool assessed community engagement outcomes that community partners would understand when completing the survey, and whether those outcomes were contextualized in their experiences of engagement with the university.

Focus Group Participant Selection, Sampling, and Recruitment

A purposive sample of eleven community partners and eleven IUI employees was selected based on engagement areas, including health, education, economic development and youth

development, arts, religion, social services, and safety. Participants were invited via email with six available FGCI dates and times, allowing them to select the most suitable. Community partners and IUI staff consented to 90-minute focus groups and received \$100 gift cards. Table 2 details group organization.

Research team members received training on conducting cognitive interviews, including readings and discussions on avoiding probing pitfalls. They practiced questions with the moderator’s guide. During the first FGCI, all three were present: one as the moderator and two taking notes. In subsequent days, FGCI co-occurred in different rooms with one researcher each.

TABLE 2. Focus groups cognitive interview organization

Day one: First FGCI	Four community partners, one faculty member
Day two: Second FGCI	One community partner, two faculty, one staff
Day two: Third FGCI	One community partner, two faculty, one staff
Day two: Fourth FGCI	Two community partners
Day three: Fifth FGCI	Four faculty members
Day three: Sixth focus group CI	Three community partners

Data Collection

Participants completed the survey on paper. The survey was adapted to include spaces for participants’ notes and an assessment key in which respondents indicated whether each item was easy or difficult (Farmer et al., 2022). The survey also included spaces at the end of each section for participants to add comments.

After completing the survey, the moderator asked the target question(s) and probed for additional information (Willis, 2011). This helped identify misunderstandings and ambiguities and gather suggestions to improve the wording and sequence of the questions. Participants recommended changes based on their experiences and pointed out items and wording that did not reflect their partnership experiences. Table 3 shows examples of probing questions (Willis, 2011).

TABLE 3. Examples of verbal probes during the focus group CI

Verbal probe type	Illustrative verbal probes used	
	Scripted	Spontaneous
Comprehension/ Interpretation probe	<p>Can you provide an example or scenario where any option included in the question has occurred in the past?</p> <p>What does “community program, project, or activity” mean to you?</p>	<p>What could make that easier for you to understand?</p>
Paraphrasing		<p>What other name would you give to this category?</p> <p>How do you suggest rephrasing or modifying this question?</p>
Confidence judgement	<p>Can you tell us specifically the collaboration you had in mind when selecting this option?</p> <p>What do you think when you respond “Neutral”?</p> <p>When you responded “N/A,” what were you thinking?</p>	
Recall probe	<p>How do you remember this collaboration occurring within the past 12 months?</p>	
Specific probe	<p>Can you think of any collaboration not included among these options?</p> <p>Do the items in this question accurately capture your experience partnering with IUI?</p>	<p>Do you want to provide more details?</p>
General probe	<p>Was it difficult for you to select your area of collaboration?</p> <p>Do any specific words or phrases appear unclear or ambiguous in this section?</p>	<p>So, if I hear you correctly, is this a mutually beneficial collaboration?</p>

Data Analysis

All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed using Google recording services or Kaltura, a university platform. Transcripts were analyzed with N-Vivo 14.0. Participant survey notes were transferred to Excel and included in the analysis. An inductive approach organized quotes into themes and sub-themes, following Braun and Clarke (2006 & 2019). Initially, all texts were coded to identify patterns regarding whether the survey captured community partners' perceptions of engagement outcomes and collaboration quality. Two coders independently analyzed the texts and then met to refine themes, linking them to survey questions to organize the findings.

Results of Validation Process

Results are presented in the same order as they appeared in the previously described survey tool.

Questions 1-8: Information About the Respondent

Questions 1 through 8 collected information about the survey respondent, including name, race, ethnicity, gender, ZIP code where they lived and worked, civic role (i.e., business owner, non-profit leader, elected or appointed official, teacher or school administrator, etc.), name of the organization, and their positions in the organization. Community partners questioned the usefulness of collecting information on respondents' gender, race, and ZIP codes, and whether it was more relevant to gather data on the populations their organizations serve. They also shared that the question about roles was confusing because it included intersecting categories, such as "paid employee of a non-profit agency (other than CEO)" and "Member of the clergy". Additionally, in two focus groups, faculty, staff, and community members suggested reducing the gender categories initially created to collect detailed information about gender identity to just three: Male, Female, Other.

Question 9: Collaboration within the Last Twelve Months

Question 9 of the survey asked participants whether the organization or community had collaborated with IUI in the past 12 months. We asked focus group participants how they remembered the collaboration had occurred in the last 12 months. Participants' comments show that the process was more difficult for those who collaborated more than once in this period. One community partner said, "I had to go back and think of it because there are three to four different ways we partnered over the last 12 months that I can remember. And so, I had to go back and think of people who were the lead or staff or who volunteered" (Community partner 2).

Question 10: With Whom in IUI Does the Community Collaborate?

Question 10 asked, “In the last 12 months, how often have you interacted with the following groups of people from IUI?” Options included faculty, staff, students, and members of the board of trustees. Participants’ comments suggest that the question would not lead to reliable responses. One community member mentioned, “I wasn't sure if it was faculty or staff or who they were. I know they were part of IUI, but ...was it a staff member, was it a student, faculty, was it a board of directors?” A faculty member in another focus group confirmed that community members would have difficulty identifying whether they are interacting with staff or faculty.

Question 11: Types of Collaborations

Question 11 asked to select the types of campus-community collaborations during the last 12 months: 1) research and innovation, 2) technical or professional assistance, 3) student intern, tutor/mentor, 4) community program, project, or activity, and 5) other.

Participants suggested that for “research and innovation,” community partners often do not see engagement as research but as a community project or consultation, especially in community-engaged research and evaluation projects. “Technical and professional assistance” was unclear to participants. For some, it was the same as “consultation”; for others, it was “training”; or it equated to “research.” One community partner thought that “internships” also fell into this category. One faculty member recommended separating technical assistance from professional assistance, noting that although both terms overlap, they are different. Technical assistance typically focuses on providing specific technical knowledge or skills, while professional assistance covers a broader range of expertise and services.

About “student intern, tutor, mentor,” participants considered that the survey should use a broader term to define the interactions of students with the community, “We've had students who work on capstone projects with community organizations ...but they're definitely not interns and it's maybe not mentoring” (Faculty member 7).

When asked what “community program, project, or activity” meant to them, one faculty member said that the term was “too broad” explaining that it included “things like working with students to develop exhibits or public programming or oral history projects,” adding that different kinds of things they “do in different degrees are like front-facing to the community” (Faculty Member 1).

Participants suggested examples of types of collaboration that had been left out, such as “program evaluation,” “event organization,” and “international exchange.”

Question 12: Areas of Collaborations

Question 12 in the survey asked about areas of collaboration, with the following options: 1) arts and culture, 2) PK-12 education and youth development, 3) health and wellbeing, 4) environment, 5) public/community safety, 6) science, technology, and innovation, community building, and 7) other. Survey respondents were directed to different sections in the survey based on the selected areas of collaboration.

The interdisciplinary nature of some engagements made pre-selection of the area challenging. One community partner mentioned that the focus of their project was on “the health side,” but some included murals and art events. Another faculty member said they “had trouble fitting some of [our] collaborations into one of these buckets.” One faculty member expressed:

“A lot of our projects ... kind of overlap with arts and culture. But I don't think any [of] our partners would pick that as a category. Because the focus is on the health side, but it's through a lens of [arts], ... We're doing things to build quality of life. Some of those include murals and art events, but that's kind of just one side of it (Faculty 3).

A comment heard across multiple groups was that collaboration areas should be defined with examples or descriptions so respondents can better understand their choices. For instance, what does “technology” mean in this context? Additionally, participants suggested adding an open-ended field at the end for respondents to note other areas.

Questions 13-19

The discussion centered on the scale used to rate outcomes under each collaboration area, and whether these outcomes accurately reflect their experiences. An example of a question in this section is: Statement: How would you rate the contribution of community-university partnerships or collaborations to the following arts and cultural development outcomes? Followed by stems such as “Community knowledge about arts, history, and culture (including other cultures and religions).” Participants also discussed whether “partnership” was an adequate word to assess collaborations and the “language style” used in the questions.

H4 Focus Groups. Participants discussed how much the respondent will know that these outcomes are being achieved. Community partners may be responding under the assumption that something is being done and select either of the two “positive” options: “I started with neutral and then changed my answer to very positive... I'm working out of the assumption that I'm sure they're doing this” (Community partner 4). This opinion matches that of a community partner who explained, “I can't say you guys do any of these things. ... [the] assumption of, do you know if we do these things is different ... there is no way I can answer those [questions]” (Community partner 5).

This addresses the challenge of linking collaboration activities to expected or observed results. One community partner mentioned that despite working with IUI on a community fitness program, they were unsure of its impact on community health outcomes. They expressed, “[IUI] is showing [the community] how to use this equipment and helping you find a fitness program that you can do, but I'm not sure, anything else about, you know, diabetes, for example” (Community Partner 3).

Alignment between Collaboration Areas and Outcomes Under Each Area. Some participants noticed that outcomes listed under certain collaboration areas did not match their observed outcomes. One faculty member mentioned that some items were not relevant, adding, “I picked community safety because we do so much research around public safety and reentering criminal justice. But they didn't feel applicable, so I skipped over those...”

Language. Participants recommended using more precise language to define the outcomes so they accurately reflect the core of their work in the community. A participant staff member wrote, “...one of my areas for improvement with this survey is making sure that when we're seeing something that's either being defined in the actual survey, or we're breaking it down so that an audience can understand it” (Staff 1).

The Meaning of Partnership. A phrase repeatedly used in question statements 13 to 19 was “contribution of community-university partnerships or collaborations.” This was a significant point of discussion in all focus groups. The survey used “partnerships” and “collaborations” interchangeably, sparking discussions about the length, depth, and purpose of partnerships versus other types of collaborations. Participants expressed that the survey's use of the word “partnership” in key questions failed to capture more casual forms of community-university collaboration, potentially affecting relevant community outcomes.

Question 20

Question 20 collected information from the community about the accomplishment of some of the goals in the University Strategic Plan 2030. As such, the stems reproduced some of the language in the plan (See Table 4 for details). Participants considered the outcomes measured in this question too broad. One faculty member expressed that “for me I know about a lot of things because now I'm on campus, but I didn't know about it when I was off campus. And so I think a huge result of this should be that people just don't know” (Faculty member 8). This was echoed by one community member who said, “It's just one of those things of no knowing.” Participants suggested not including this question.

Question 21

Question 21 included twelve items designed to assess the quality of community-university partnerships. This section used items developed for the Partner Survey (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2023). The items were considered easy to answer; however, participants questioned whether they captured the more complex aspects of reciprocity. One faculty member stated, “I don't think that's going to be captured here. The amount of frustrations that my community partners go through applying for grants, you go through all the compliance stuff, even when there's no money on the table” (Faculty member 4). A community partner also mentioned:

The one that I had difficulty with was if the campus shares opportunities for individuals who are external to the university to connect to institutional knowledge, expertise, and resources. I somewhat agreed with that. I think that is available. But I thought it was difficult to answer because I thought to myself, how do I know who I'm going to try to contact? ... Where do I start? (Community partner 9).

Question 22

Question 22 asked about community partners' contributions to IUI, with options: “student learning” and “research and innovation.” Participants suggested other collaboration forms, such as “employer development” and “helping IUI connect with the community,” and recommended separating research from innovation, as research does not always lead to innovation. Merging both might omit “creative activities.”

Question 23: Target One Collaboration

Question 23 asked respondents to name one engagement with IUI in the last 12 months. Participants suggested moving this question to the beginning of the survey so they could complete it with that engagement in mind. Participants expressed that “responding to the survey without one project in mind was difficult just because of the complicated nature of some of the projects and the fact that we have such a long history with IUI and at different times and with different departments” (Community Partner 2).

General Impression of the Survey

Some impressions were that the survey was too long. Participants also suggested adding open-ended questions at the end of questions 13-19 and at the end of the survey. The survey was revised (Table 4) based on feedback from FGCI participants.

TABLE 4. Changes made to the survey tool after focus groups CI

Question(s) in the validation tool	Questions in the revised survey
<p>Questions 1 to 8</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Name,2. Race & Ethnicity3. Gender4. In what Zip Code do you currently live?5. Please select the role(s) that primarily applies to you6. In what Zip code do you currently work?7. Name of the organization8. What is your position in the organization	<p>This section was reduced to collect the following information about the respondent’s name (Q.1) , name of the organization (Q.2), position in the organization (QA.3), and organization zip code (Q.4).</p> <p>The questions about the respondent’s race, ethnicity, gender, and zip code were placed at the end of the survey (Q29-Q32). The team decided to keep the questions because the information collected was important for reporting to external agencies (i.e., Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement). Placing the question at the end mitigates the negative feelings a respondent may have toward sensitive questions (Steele & Aronson, 1995). "Threatening" or "boring" questions at the end allow respondents to engage with the substantive, interesting content first, which increases overall completion rates (Dillman et al., 2014)</p> <p>The question about the respondent’s primary role was deleted.</p> <p>The survey added two more questions:</p> <p>Q.5. What is the age range of the population your organization currently serves?</p> <p>Q.6. Please use this space to describe other aspects of the demographics of the population your organization serves.</p>
<p>9. Has either your organization and/or community worked in collaboration with IUPUI in the last 12 months?</p>	<p>Became Q7. In the past 12 months, has your organization collaborated with IUI?</p> <p>Three more questions followed:</p> <p>Q8. Please identify one project or activity your organization has collaborated with IUI in the last 12 months</p> <p>Q9. Please, tell us where this collaboration took (or is taking) place (e.g. neighborhood (name), organization (name), etc.)</p> <p>Q.10. For how long has your organization been engaged in this collaboration with IUI?</p>

10. In the last 12 months, how often have you interacted with the following groups of people from IUPUI?:
Students, Faculty, Staff,
Administrators, Members of the Board of Trustees

Became Q.11. Did the collaboration include (Mark all that apply): IUI students, IUI employees, none.

Three more questions follow:

Q.12. Approximately how many students were involved?

Q.13. Approximately how many IUI employees were involved?

Q.14. Would you say that this collaboration was beneficial for: Your organization, the population your organization serves, Indiana University, IUI students, None of these, Other.

11. What type of collaboration(s) has your organization or community been involved with IUPUI in the last 12 months? Mark all that apply.

Q.15. This collaboration is (or was)... (mark all that apply): Internships, professional assistance, research, professional development and training, project/program evaluation, technical assistance, event organization, international exchange, and others.

The word “collaboration” instead of “partnership” is used throughout the survey.

12. In what areas has your organization or community collaborated with IUPUI in the last 12 months?

Q.16. “Would you say this collaboration is (was) to support... Nine areas are listed, each with examples. “Other” option at the end.

Q.17 to Q.23 are visible to all respondents regardless of the areas selected in this question.

13. How would you rate the contribution of community-university partnerships or collaborations to the following **arts and cultural development** outcomes? (7 stems)

The number of stems under each question was reduced to show only those with the higher response rate during the validation phase. The language was modified to reflect outcomes that respondents can relate to. The question stem changed to measure magnitude and focused on the collaboration being evaluated. Example: Q.17. How much do you think this collaboration directly or indirectly contributes to arts and cultural development? (followed by three items for selection and one open-ended item)

14. ... **PK-12 education** outcomes? (10 stems)

15. ...health outcomes? (8 stems)

16. ...**environmental** outcomes? (7 stems)

17. ...community safety outcomes? (6 stems)

Open-ended questions were added at the end of each outcome category for respondents to include their perceived outcomes.

18. ...science, technology and innovation outcomes (7 stems)

19. Community building outcomes (16 stems) The rating scale was changed to a four-point scale, eliminating the “Neutral” point and adding an “I don’t know” option.

20. On a scale of 0 to 10, how would you rate IUPUI’s contribution to the community in the following areas: Eliminated

- Strengthen education and educational pipelines
- Improve community health
- Reduce health disparities
- Contribute to workforce development
- Foster economic development
- Provide local solutions to global challenges (i.e., poverty, violence, environmental degradation, pandemics, etc.)
- Strengthen partners’ capacity to respond to local challenges

21. As someone who has collaborated in partnerships with IUPUI to support the community, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? 12 options Q.26. Please tell us to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements (10 options)

22. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your organization's contribution to IUPUI in these two areas? Student learning; research and innovation Changed to: Q.25. In reference to this collaboration in particular, how would you rate your organization’s contribution to IUI in the following areas: Advance innovation; make research and creative activities more relevant to community needs; provide real-world experiences to students; support IUI employee professional development; enhance IUI connections with the community. 5 (five means “Extremely positive”, and 1 (one) means “Extremely negative.”

Q25 and Q26 use a unipolar ordinal 5-point scale due to the kind of construct being measured, “level of agreement” and “level of contribution,” measuring gradation along one dimension (Dillman et al., 2014). Q.25 had an initially 7-point scale that was reduced after the feasibility study to a 5-point scale. A 5-

<p>23. Can you mention one project or activity your organization has engaged with IUPUI in the last 12 months and its purpose?</p>	<p>point scale allows for enough nuance in the response without significantly affecting the response quality (Østerås, et al., 2008),</p>
<p>General suggestions Original open-ended question (Q.24) In what areas should IUPUI improve to develop more effective partnerships that contribute to the quality of life of Indiana communities?</p>	<p>Q.8, followed by a question about where the collaboration took (or is taking) place (Q.9).</p> <p>The last two questions were preceded by a prompt to engage respondents (Dillman et al., 2014): “The next two questions are important to understanding how we can be better at collaborating with our community partners. Please take your time answering them.” One question was re-worded, and one more question was added at the end of the survey: Q.27 (re-worded). What should IUI or your partner(s) at IUI do to develop collaborations that better contribute to the quality of life of your community? Q.28. (added) Please share anything that would be helpful to understand your experience collaborating with your partner(s) at IUI</p>

Assessing the Feasibility of the Survey

After extensive qualitative validation through focus-group cognitive interviews, a pilot test of the revised survey was conducted with a group of community partners. The main objectives of this pilot were to evaluate the feasibility of the survey distribution method and to collect data on the instrument's performance in a real-world environment.

The survey invitation was sent through Qualtrics to 49 partner organizations. Twenty-four surveys were opened, but only 20 responses were valid and complete. The organizations included six community centers, five schools, two after-school network coalitions, two foundations, one development corporation, one faith-based organization, one health organization, and one neighborhood organization.

While this sample size provided valuable insights into the survey's deployment and confirmed the clarity of the revised questions, it was insufficient for robust quantitative validation, such as calculating internal consistency with Cronbach's Alpha or conducting factor analysis.

The feasibility analysis considered average response time, quality of responses to text-box entries, number of questions skipped, and over- or underutilization of response options. The following is the summary of the results:

- The average response time was longer (16.5 minutes) than the nine minutes recommended by Qualtrics. This may result in high drop-out rates. To help reduce respondent response time, the revised version reduced the number of response choices from a 10-point to a 5-point scale in the question measuring partners' perceived contribution to IUI (Q.25 in the revised survey, Table 4).
- High engagement on key questions: The two open-ended questions at the end aimed at gathering detailed feedback received relatively high response rates (between 63% and 72%). The prompt used to introduce these questions was effective in encouraging thoughtful responses (See table 4, Questions 25 and 26).
- Low skip rate suggests that topics were relevant to respondents and answer options were relatable. The survey effectively prevented forced responses by providing options that discouraged most respondents from skipping questions or entire sections.
- The pilot indicates a tendency for respondents to choose positive answers in certain questions, which may indicate extreme response style (ERS) or social desirability responding (SDR) (Wetzel et al., 2016). To mitigate these issues, we implemented choice randomization, in which the order of choices is randomly flipped for each respondent.

A copy of the final survey is available online. The skip logic was eliminated in this version to facilitate navigation.

Discussion

The Indiana University Indianapolis Office of Community Engagement developed a survey to assess engagement outcomes. The project incorporated community partners' voices to help define and measure engagement outcomes. More importantly, it offered insights into how various groups view engagement outcomes.

Group discussions enabled IUI to improve question comprehension, assess the quality of the scale, and validate the content. Participants expressed their difficulty in selecting an area of collaboration due to the interdisciplinary nature of their work in the community. The discussion of definitions and terms, informed by the different experiences of university and community partners, helped the research team understand the limitations of the survey language. This led to revisions to the survey language and design for greater clarity.

The literature suggests that evaluating community-university partnerships remains "elusive" due to the wide variety of contexts and activities (Farnell et al., 2020). This elusive quality was clear when focus group participants found it difficult to categorize their work into predefined areas, noting that their projects are often interdisciplinary and do not fit neatly into a single "bucket." This reflects Nelson's (2021) assertion that inadequate frameworks struggle to capture the complex, lived realities of community relationships and underscores that when community

engagements naturally span multiple disciplines, universities must adapt by managing people and programs across traditional academic silos to support these complex initiatives effectively.

The challenge of standardization was also apparent during discussions about the use of specific terms like “research” as a type of engagement, revealing a possible disconnect between institutional language and the actual experiences of partners. This disconnect underscores that a university's strategic response to community and workforce demands should be articulated and measured in a language co-defined with its partners.

Additionally, some partners struggled to directly link their specific collaborative activities to broader survey outcomes, highlighting the complexity of measuring impact in a standardized way. Cook and Nation (2016) previously noted that universities rarely develop frameworks that connect engagement efforts with mid- and long-term social outcomes. These issues collectively show that the nuanced reality of community engagement requires deep, qualitative dialogue—like the approach used in this study—to develop a truly relevant evaluation tool (Clayton et al., 2022).

Our findings also suggest that survey data on community outcomes may be artificially inflated, reflecting perceived intent rather than actual, observable results. This poses a serious challenge for institutions that rely solely on this type of data to demonstrate their value. The phenomenon has broader implications for how the field of community engagement conducts evaluation. It emphasizes the limitations of relying exclusively on quantitative surveys and highlights the need for mixed methods approaches that add context and depth. This insight shows that for an evaluation to be truly valid, it must not only capture a partner’s rating but also understand the basis of that rating, distinguishing between actual experience and hopeful assumptions. It ensures that executive decisions regarding program realignment and financial investments are grounded in reality, driving authentic institutional and community changes.

Research Implications

Very few studies report using FGCI for survey validation (Farmer et al., 2022; Wallen et al., 2017). The primary contribution is demonstrating that cognitive interviewing in a group setting helps develop valid measurement tools. Therefore, this research supports prioritizing this form of dialogic, co-creative validation to ensure evaluation tools accurately reflect the complex realities of community-university collaborations. If an institution relies on internal jargon that does not resonate with its partners, it cannot effectively assess its public impact, as noted by Spânu et al. (2024). True institutional transformation requires that a university's strategic response be articulated and evaluated in a language co-defined by its ecosystem, moving toward the inclusive approaches advocated by Netshandama (2021) and Wanjiru and Xiaoguang (2021).

Kuttner et al. (2023) emphasize that while community-driven evaluation makes the process more rigorous and relevant, more work is needed to co-create these systems with communities. This study answers that call by utilizing deep, qualitative dialogue to develop a truly relevant evaluation tool. The most significant implication is the process itself; by demonstrating a feasible model for co-creation, this work provides a blueprint for other institutions to move beyond top-down evaluation toward a more authentic understanding of their community impact.

General Implications

Beyond its function as a measurement tool, the co-created survey has broader implications for institutional practice at IUI and other anchor institutions. Moving away from a strictly top-down evaluation approach requires fundamentally reorganizing how a university assesses its community footprint and reconsiders its strategic role in a changing environment. The data collected will enable leaders to make data-informed decisions about resource allocation, faculty professional development, and the strategic prioritization of partnership activities that yield the most meaningful community outcomes. The institution can intelligently pool resources, streamline overlapping initiatives, and realign institutional policies and programs to match regional needs. The metrics gathered provide the exact evidence base required for executive briefings on how the university is actively responding to shifting community and workforce demands. For community partners, this tool provides a formalized channel to share their experiences, fostering greater institutional accountability and more equitable collaborations.

Study Strengths and Limitations

A primary limitation of this study is that the pilot test did not yield a large enough sample to conduct quantitative validation of the survey tool. Consequently, we were unable to establish statistical measures of reliability, such as internal consistency, or to conduct validity analyses, such as construct validity, at this stage. However, the core strength and primary contribution of this research lies in the detailed and rigorous qualitative development and validation process, providing a robust, replicable methodology for the crucial first stage of tool development.

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