

Reframing Impact through Storytelling: A Community-Led Methodology for Exploring Transformative Community-Academic Partnerships

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Abstract

Institutions of higher education often rely on quantitative indicators to assess community–academic partnerships, yet these metrics frequently overlook the relational, transformative, and equity-centered dimensions of long-term collaboration. To address this gap, we developed a community-led storytelling methodology to more authentically capture partnership impact. Our center partnered with nonprofit organizations in Baltimore City through two participatory approaches: (1) partner-to-partner conversations, in which community partners interviewed one another using a co-developed interview guide, and (2) personal narratives from community leaders reflecting organizational and community-level impacts of sustained partnerships. Grounded in co-created guiding principles for ethical community engagement, the methodology centers mutuality, community-defined impacts of partnership, and the shared value of telling stories that are too often ignored in academic spaces. This process generated rich qualitative data that surfaced outcomes often missed by conventional metrics, including trust-building, mutual learning, organizational growth, and alignment with community-defined values. Community partners reported that the narratives reframed how impact was understood and validated the depth of relational work. This praxis-based methodology offered an equity-centered approach for assessing partnership impact and expanding institutional definitions of value in community-engaged scholarship.

Introduction

Institutions of higher education are under increasing pressure to demonstrate their public value and effectiveness, particularly as contributors to workforce development and economic advancement. These pressures are rooted in longstanding debates over whether higher education serves as a public or private good (Williams, 2016), compounded by consistent reductions in state funding (Mitchell et al., 2015), more recent federal constraints (Galea & Bibbins-Domingo, 2025), and a growing emphasis on job preparation over expansive learning and personal discovery (Mitchell & Rost-Banik, 2019). These broader movements in higher education come to a point in institutionalized community engagement practices. We include curricular and co-curricular programs, faculty and research initiatives, and institutionalized practices that partner with community-based organizations within the broader community engagement landscape. This article focuses specifically on academic programming that connects faculty and students with community partners around community-identified goals.

Over the past three decades, community engagement scholars and practitioners have advanced community engagement as a public good while simultaneously critiquing its institutionalization for capitalistic ends (Baldwin, 2021). In an effort to secure legitimacy, funding, and institutional support, the field has frequently relied on quantitative indicators – such as volunteer hours, economic impact, and increased engagement – to demonstrate impact to institutional leaders, donors, and policymakers. While these measures are not without value, they reflect a narrow understanding of impact that risks omitting relational, transformative, and justice-oriented dimensions of community engagement.

Organizational theories and the social economics of higher education encourage a narrow view of what community engagement can and should do. The combination of institutional isomorphism and outcomes-based funding models helps explain the rationale for prioritizing limited quantitative data to explain the purpose and value of community engagement. Institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) explains how institutions aim to converge on similar decision-making and data collection practices to align with high-status peers. Some have noted that frameworks such as the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement have reinforced conformity in community-engaged practices (Pearl et al., 2025). As a result, community engagement offices, much like non-profit organizations, often prioritize metrics that are quickly legible and institutionally sanctioned, even when they fail to capture the *complete* scope of partnership impact.

This dynamic has led the community engagement field to organize around a narrow set of easily tracked indicators to define impact for a deeply relational and transformative field grounded in collaboration, learning, and social change. The mismatch is evident. While quantitative metrics provide useful insight, they are insufficient for capturing the full scope of community

engagement (Kuttner et al., 2024; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). Although higher education institutions often rely on measurable outcomes to demonstrate value within a capitalistic social market, economic and transactional indicators are not the only measures that matter for community engagement, nor do they adequately reflect community engagement's broader role as a mechanism for justice, social change, and community-based collaboration.

One notable gap with this practice is the limited inclusion of community partner perspectives in community engagement literature. For decades, researchers have called for more community-centered studies that draw attention to community outcomes and experiences (Blouin & Perry, 2009; George-Paschal et al., 2019; Gerstenblatt, 2022). We argue that institutionalized value systems centered on narrow, measurable outcomes hinder efforts to highlight community perspectives.

Inspired by these calls for centering community voices in community engagement research, our center, which collaborates with over 100 nonprofit organizations in Baltimore City, sought to reimagine how partnership impact is understood, assessed, and communicated. Through community-led storytelling methodologies, we surface dimensions of impact – such as trust, organizational growth, and collaboration for social justice – that are often overlooked by traditional metrics, offering a more holistic understanding of community engagement impact as both an institutional contribution and a transformative practice.

We look to extend the work of recent scholars and community partners who have outlined non-extractive approaches to community engagement (Santiago-Ortiz, 2019), centered community voices (Ramirez et al., 2023), and highlighted the value of community narratives and experiences (Clandinin, 2019; Compare et al., 2022). We hope to advance lines of inquiry that have outlined innovative methods of collecting and analyzing community experiences and impacts, such as outcomes harvesting (Beardmore et al., 2023), ripple effects mapping (Zimmerman et al., 2019), and practical applications of the Max-Neef framework for human development (Lau & Snell, 2020). While recent work has proposed conceptual models, we continue the inquiry by adding practical methods that can link with these conceptual methodologies. This work aligns with the “Power of Place” theme by making visible the community knowledge, leadership, and relationships that shape partnerships in Baltimore City. Accordingly, this praxis paper asks: *How might community engagement professionals implement community-led storytelling methodologies to reshape how community impact is documented and understood?* We explore this through two storytelling initiatives that center community voices and expand the definition of impact.

JHU SOURCE

This praxis paper is co-authored by a collaborative writing team from Johns Hopkins University (JHU) SOURCE, the community engagement and service-learning center for the JHU health professional schools, whose mission is to engage these JHU schools and Baltimore communities in mutually beneficial partnerships that promote health and social justice. Situated within a metropolitan research university in Baltimore, Maryland, SOURCE supports community-engaged teaching, learning, and scholarship by building relationship-centered infrastructure and advancing programs and practices that prioritize community voice, equity, and mutual benefit.

The authorship reflects shared authority grounded in practice. Two co-authors are faculty leaders within JHU SOURCE who work to design and sustain community engagement infrastructure, critical service-learning pedagogy, and evaluation approaches. The other two co-authors are long-standing community partners who have shaped SOURCE's work through service on our SOURCE Community Council and as SOURCE Service-Learning Community Fellows within our Service-Learning Academy. Together, we write from collective experience and ongoing reflection on our partnerships. This collaboration emerged from a shared realization that traditional quantitative measures often fall short in capturing the relational, longitudinal, and community-defined impacts of engagement work. In response, this paper examines how we have adapted and acted—developing storytelling approaches rooted in lived experience, reciprocity, and accountability—to more meaningfully demonstrate the impact of community–academic partnerships.

Our methodology emphasizes storytelling by our community partners as a mechanism for mutuality and community-centered impacts. By engaging with community partners through narratives, we provide a forum for voices that are often missing from academic discourse. We position storytelling as a critical reflective practice that disrupts traditional, institution-centered definitions of impact.

Conceptual Foundations

Our conceptual foundation begins with a relationship-centered approach to community-academic engagement grounded in critical service-learning (Mitchell, 2008). This tradition emphasizes shared power, reciprocity, and social justice as essential conditions for ethical and effective partnership work. Consistent with these commitments, our methodology centers community voice, surfaces the relational dimensions of partnership, and treats reflection as a collective practice. By intentionally shifting interpretive authority to community partners, this approach challenges extractive models of engagement and assessment that privilege institutional metrics over lived experience. These commitments required a methodology capable of operationalizing shared power and accountability in practice, not merely in principle.

To translate these relationship-centered commitments into practice, our model draws from participatory and community-based research methodologies that emphasize co-creation (Moore,

1995), shared ownership, and accountability to community-defined priorities (Israel et al., 1998; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). Community partners were actively engaged in shaping storytelling prompts, defining what constituted meaningful impact, and interpreting emerging themes. This participatory orientation positioned community members as co-analysts and knowledge producers rather than sources of data, ensuring that the inquiry remained grounded in community priorities and relevant beyond academic audiences. Our approach directly challenges dominant assumptions about whose knowledge counts in evaluating partnership impact.

This focus on analytic authority places our work within a critical theoretical perspective that examines how power, voice, and representation shape institutional knowledge production. Critical scholars note that dominant evaluation frameworks privilege institutional perspectives and marginalize community knowledge (Foucault, 1980; Freire, 2018). Within this framing, storytelling functions as an epistemic intervention—a counter-narrative that surfaces lived experience and challenges institutional hierarchies of expertise (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Storytelling enables community partners to articulate what they value in their partnerships with academic institutions, expanding assessment beyond efficiency or compliance-driven metrics.

Guided by these ethical and epistemic commitments, we utilized community-led impact storytelling methodologies to explore how community partners understand and experience the impacts of community-academic partnerships. Co-developed with community partners, the model reframes impact as relational, contextual, and transformative rather than merely institutional measurements. Storytelling served as both inquiry and a reflective practice, allowing partners to define impact on their own terms. This framing required an inquiry process capable of supporting emergence, meaning-making, and reflection grounded in community-defined values.

As an exploratory form of inquiry, storytelling enabled inductive knowledge generation by allowing community-defined meanings, priorities, and forms of impact to emerge organically (Stebbins, 2001). Rather than forcing analysis into predefined categories, this approach supported discovery and sense-making attuned to the complexity of partnership work. Storytelling is especially apt for community-academic partnerships, where relational dynamics, trust-building, and long-term transformation are central but often invisible within standardized assessments. In this context, storytelling functions not as a supplementary outcome but as a primary mode of inquiry through which complex social processes can be understood.

Accordingly, our approach draws from narrative inquiry and qualitative storytelling traditions, which recognize stories as legitimate and rigorous forms of knowledge production (Clandinin, 2019; Riessman, 2008). These traditions emphasize context and how impacts unfold over time. Storytelling revealed dimensions of impact such as trust, capacity building, identity, and sustainability that outcome-driven evaluation frameworks often miss. Narratives were reviewed collaboratively through facilitation, collective reflection, and sustained attention to voice and relational dynamics, reinforcing both analytic rigor and ethical accountability.

This attention to meaning-making and legitimacy aligns with public value theory, which emphasizes that the value of public-serving work is socially constructed and defined in relation to community priorities and lived experience (Bozeman, 2007; Moore, 1995). Storytelling lets partners articulate what constitutes value in their partnerships with academic institutions, extending assessment beyond efficiency-based outputs or compliance-driven metrics. By centering narrative accounts, the methodology recognizes community members as co-authors of public value and strengthens the democratic legitimacy of community-academic engagement (Moore, 2013; Williams & Shearer, 2011).

Taken together, these theoretical and methodological traditions inform a practice-oriented approach that reframes community impact as something experienced, interpreted, and co-constructed within community-academic partnerships. Our community-led impact storytelling model provides a replicable, adaptable framework for centers and institutions seeking more ethical, participatory, and justice-oriented assessments of community engagement.

Methods

To explore our line of inquiry in practice, we co-developed and implemented two community-led storytelling approaches. Our innovative *Partner-to-Partner Conversations* initiative is a storytelling model designed to highlight the lived experiences of our community partners. To shift the narrative from institutional perspectives to community-led storytelling, we developed an interview guide with our Community Fellows and Community Council. These interview questions align with our jointly developed guiding principles for community engagement, which highlight mutuality and co-creation. We facilitated Zoom-recorded conversations in which partners interviewed each other. These videos, now publicly available, serve as powerful reflections of our shared work and values (JHU SOURCE, 2026).

Additionally, our ongoing *Community Narratives* project was developed with our Community Fellows, who crafted personal narratives illustrating the impact of our collaborative work. By identifying common themes emerging through these narratives, we are co-developing a framework that allows all partners to tell their own stories in ways that are both meaningful and beneficial to them. This approach not only strengthens our relationships but also creates a sustainable, community-driven model for impactful storytelling.

Partner-to-Partner Conversations

The first initiative focused on Partner-to-Partner Conversations, designed to capture community partner narratives related to mission, passion, partnership, and impact in Baltimore. This project emerged from a desire to more intentionally document and learn from the lived experiences of community partners while strengthening relationships across our network and informing future opportunities for collaboration.

The project was initiated with the SOURCE Service-Learning Community Fellows, a group of community partners who participate in a year-long professional development program through our SOURCE Service-Learning Academy. These Community Fellows, alongside members of our SOURCE Community Council, played a central role in co-designing, implementing, and analyzing the storytelling process. Community Fellows and Community Council members hold formal roles within the center that support co-creation, advising, and collaborative project development. Community Fellows receive a stipend for their engagement, which includes contributing to collaborative projects such as this initiative. Community Council members serve in an ongoing advisory capacity and are similarly compensated for their time. Consistent with principles of community-engaged and participatory approaches, community partners were not only participants but were co-creators of both the methodology and its implementation, shaping design, facilitation, and interpretation.

Together, we developed a semi-structured interview guide to support authentic, reflective conversations between community partners. The interview development process was iterative and collaborative, involving multiple rounds of discussion and refinement. Questions were intentionally grounded in a set of Guiding Principles for Baltimore Community Engagement (JHU SOURCE, 2026), which served as both a conceptual framework and an organizing structure for the interviews. These principles were developed through a university-wide, community-engaged process led by SOURCE in collaboration with multiple community engagement centers across JHU, alongside community partners. Through a series of iterative conversations, feedback loops, and shared sense-making, community and university partners collectively articulated the language, values, and practices necessary for authentic, mutually beneficial partnerships rooted in reciprocity, respect, transparency, and shared power. This process centered community voice and lived experience and resulted in a set of principles that reflect aspirational values and concrete commitments to how community-academic partnerships should be structured and sustained. Grounding the interview guide in these principles centered on community voice surfaced how partnerships operate in practice, assessed alignment between our stated commitments and realities, and reinforced mutual accountability.

The interview guide was organized into thematic categories, including: (1) organizational background and mission; (2) operational processes and experiences working with SOURCE, including volunteer engagement and onboarding; (3) learning about and working within the Baltimore context; (4) perceived value and outcomes of SOURCE partnership ; (5) impact on communities served and contributions toward social justice; and (6) future-oriented questions exploring possibilities for partnership growth. While the guide provided a shared structure, the semi-structured format allowed flexibility, follow-up questions, and in-the-moment exploration based on the direction of each conversation.

The Partner-to-Partner Conversations were intentionally implemented to reduce the burden on community-based organizations (CBOs) and to create a space that prioritized peer connection, trust, and authentic dialogue. SOURCE staff recruited participating CBOs through existing

relationships within our partner network, relying on long-standing social capital and established trust to invite partners into the process. While recruitment was grounded in established relationships, we intentionally sought variation in partner perspectives by considering organizations with different levels of engagement with SOURCE, including both long-standing collaborators and those with more episodic engagement. Participation was also shaped by partner responsiveness and availability. This approach aligned with the relational nature of the methodology, which prioritized trust and candid dialogue while exploring a range of partnership experiences. Outreach framed participation as an opportunity for peer connection, shared learning, and mutual reflection rather than as a traditional research interview. SOURCE staff coordinated all logistical aspects of participation, including scheduling meetings, to ensure ease and accessibility for participants.

Conversations were conducted virtually via Zoom and recorded with consent to capture video and audio. To support candid and community-centered dialogue, SOURCE staff intentionally removed themselves from conversations. At the start of each session, a SOURCE team member opened the Zoom meeting, initiated the recording, and then transferred host responsibilities before exiting. The conversations were facilitated by a Community Fellow or Community Council member who guided the discussion using the interview script while allowing flexibility for organic dialogue. Zoom sessions were configured to automatically record to the cloud, eliminating the need for participants to manage any technical aspects. Each conversation lasted approximately one hour and focused on relationship-building, shared learning, and deepened understanding of organizational missions, partnership experiences, and approaches to community-engaged work. Participants were informed that they would have access to their transcripts and recordings for their own use, and that recordings might also be used—with permission—for broader storytelling purposes, including promotional materials and website content.

Analysis was conducted collaboratively between center staff and Community Fellows through facilitated review sessions in which all team members read transcripts, identified salient messages, and engaged in collective sensemaking. Using a guided thematic approach anchored in our community engagement guiding principles, we identified emergent themes and engaged in interpretive analysis of participant narratives in relation to the principles. Through iterative discussions, the group co-constructed the themes and insights presented. This process positioned Community Fellows as co-analysts, helping ensure that interpretation remained grounded in community-defined meaning and lived experiences. The resulting data provided rich insights into partnership dynamics, relationship-building, organizational practices, and collective impact across Baltimore.

Beyond data generation, the Partner-to-Partner Conversations model functioned as a relationship-building strategy. By creating space for community partners to learn from one another and share their stories directly, the process strengthened peer connections within

SOURCE's network while amplifying community voices in how partnership impact is defined and communicated.

Community Partner Reflection on Partner-to-Partner Conversations

When university representatives interview community leaders, there is often an unconscious pressure on the partner to "perform" or present a sanitized narrative that highlights success to secure future funding or approval. By utilizing our Partner-to-Partner Conversations structure, we disrupted this dynamic.

In these peer-led spaces, the "code-switching" often required in academic settings was abandoned in favor of authentic reflection. Because the community interviewer shared the lived experience of navigating Baltimore's non-profit landscape, the conversations moved quickly past surface-level pleasantries into the gritty realities of leadership. As partners, we did not just report data to one another; we commiserated over shared struggles, celebrated nuanced wins that outsiders might miss, and spoke with a candor that is rarely captured in institutional surveys. This shift transformed the data from a performance of compliance into a repository of practice-based wisdom.

The format also functioned as an unintended but valuable form of professional development. In a sector where leaders have limited time to pause, the conversations articulated organizational growth, leadership philosophies, and professional journeys, which helped combat burnout through meaningful reflection.

Community Narratives

The second storytelling initiative, the Community Narratives Project, focused on co-developing a structured yet adaptable approach for documenting and communicating the impact of community-academic partnerships over time. This project was conducted with a subsequent cohort of SOURCE Service-Learning Community Fellows and unfolded as a year-long, reflective, and iterative process.

The project emerged from collective conversations about the challenges of articulating community-defined impact and benefits of engagement in ways that extend beyond transactional outputs and short-term outcomes. Community Fellows and SOURCE staff engaged in ongoing dialogue about how to more effectively demonstrate the longitudinal value of community engagement, centering community perspectives on what partnerships contribute to organizational capacity, community well-being, and systems-level change.

Early discussions focused on identifying what constitutes impact from the standpoint of community partners, including whether partnerships were delivering what CBOs needed and valued, and how these collaborations affected communities more broadly. These conversations

informed a shared goal of developing a tool that could support partners in documenting impact in ways that were accessible, free of academic jargon, and adaptable for multiple uses, including organizational learning, external communications, and potential donor engagement. Fellows expressed interest in creating a format that could function as an “impact spotlight” template that other organizations could modify.

Through this process, Community Fellows were encouraged to think expansively about impact, including both tangible and less visible forms of value. Discussions explored concepts such as social and human capital, organizational capacity, and intrinsic and social value generated through sustained engagement. Fellows examined how partnerships contribute to access to resources, professional networks, learning opportunities, and long-term relationship-building, even when outcomes are not immediately measurable or attributable to a single project.

The cohort collaboratively explored potential “buckets” or domains of impact—such as programs or curricula developed, grants written or received, evaluation activities, volunteer engagement, training and workforce development, event planning, and community reach—while emphasizing that these categories were illustrative rather than prescriptive. Partners were asked to reflect on which impacts were most meaningful, memorable, and transformative for their organizations and communities, with attention to both quantitative indicators and qualitative narratives.

Following these discussions, Fellows then independently drafted their own impact narratives using the emerging framework. Each Fellow approached the narrative differently, with some focusing on in-depth accounts of specific projects and others emphasizing the cumulative impact of long-term relationships. When the group reconvened, Fellows shared and reflected on their narratives, discussing structure, framing, use of data points, and intended audiences. These conversations surfaced the importance of combining numbers with narrative, recognizing that while quantitative indicators can be compelling, they are most powerful when embedded within broader stories of growth, trust, and transformation.

Through this reflective process, Fellows emphasized the value of portraying partnership impact as an evolving, relational process rather than as a series of discrete transactions. The narratives highlighted how SOURCE’s role extends beyond individual projects to support sustained capacity building, access to resources, and long-term organizational and community transformation. The resulting narratives served both internal and external purposes, offering partners a flexible way to communicate impact while collectively advancing a more holistic and community-centered understanding of what meaningful engagement looks like over time. The Appendix contains a sample community narrative.

Community Partner Reflection on Community Narratives

The Community Narratives project made partnership impact visible beyond individual conversations. Through storytelling, community partners articulated organizational, relational, and community-level values that are often overlooked in traditional evaluation frameworks. Narrative practices allowed staff to articulate their expertise, reflect on growth, and document the relational and professional impacts of partnership in their own words. By capturing lived experience, storytelling affirms staff as knowledge holders, strengthens professional identity, and translates day-to-day collaboration into meaningful accounts of human, relational, and professional values that can be shared, learned from, and sustained.

Storytelling plays a critical role in strengthening agency-institutional relationships by shifting partnerships from transactional arrangements to relational, co-productive engagements. Through narratives, partners surface how trust is built, power is negotiated, and value is co-created over time. By centering community stories, ethical collaboration is not only practiced but documented, reducing extractive dynamics and reinforcing shared ownership, mutual accountability, and partnership sustainability.

At the public level, storytelling connects collaboration to broader civic and demographic outcomes by ensuring that services, systems, and institutional practices remain grounded in lived experience. Community narratives illuminate how partnerships shape access, responsiveness, and trust, allowing public value to be understood not as an abstract ideal but as a shared outcome of collective action. By amplifying community voice and making impact legible to the public, storytelling strengthens legitimacy, fosters transparency, and demonstrates how collaborative engagement contributes to public good.

Together, these storytelling projects reflect an intentionally iterative and community-centered approach to understanding and communicating partnership impact. While the Partner-to-Partner Conversations emphasized relational learning, peer exchange, and co-creation of qualitative data through dialogue, the Community Narratives built on these insights to support deeper reflection, synthesis, and the opportunity to make sense of longitudinal impact over time. These projects demonstrate how participatory storytelling with structured reflection functioned both as a data collection strategy and as a core methodological practice that supports collective meaning-making and learning.

Key Insights from Storytelling Initiatives

Several key insights emerged that demonstrate how storytelling expands what counts as impact and who defines it within community–academic partnerships. Notably, the storytelling process itself became a site of mutual learning, reflection, and growth. Through Partner-to-Partner Conversations, partners shared experiences learned from one another. The Community Narratives project also enabled partners to collaboratively examine programmatic outcomes and

how Fellows and their organizations evolved through sustained partnership. These processes deepened understanding of one another's contexts, strengths, and challenges, reinforcing storytelling as not simply a dissemination method, but a relational practice grounded in trust.

A central outcome of the initiative was the intentional enactment of our shared guiding principles through a community-centered methodology. Partners emphasized the importance of seeing these principles enacted throughout the storytelling process. This alignment strengthened accountability and trust by centering reciprocity, respect, and community voice. Over time, this consistency contributed to stronger, more sustainable partnerships, as partners saw their values reflected in both the process and outcomes.

Community partners highlighted significant leadership development and capacity-building outcomes. Participation created space for partners to reflect on their organizational journeys, articulate impact in their own words, and build skills related to narrative framing, advocacy, and visibility. These outcomes extended beyond the scope of the project, strengthening organizational capacity and supporting partners' longer-term goals.

Partners identified the relational nature of the initiatives as a meaningful outcome, emphasizing that relationships and trust were foundational to the work. Feedback highlighted how the initiatives created authentic opportunities for connection and affirmation, while making community voices highly visible. By centering lived experience and honoring community expertise, the initiatives demonstrate how storytelling can function as both a product and a practice, advancing equity, elevating community leadership, and deepening the impact of community-academic partnerships. Taken together, these insights suggest that community-led storytelling not only generates richer data but also shifts how impact is defined, interpreted, and valued.

Community Benefits and Partner Perspectives

Beyond products generated for university use, the storytelling process yielded tangible benefits for community partners. For many CBOs, the capacity to produce high-quality narrative assets is limited. Partners used transcripts and recordings for grant writing and fundraising, incorporated narratives into reports to add qualitative depth beyond standard metrics, and shared video clips on websites and social media to support marketing and advocacy. Narratives were also used in staff onboarding to communicate organizational history, values, and partnership experiences. The projects elevated the visibility of CBOs and their expertise. Dissemination through university channels enhanced credibility and positioned community partners as subject matter experts alongside faculty. Partners reported increased social media engagement, website traffic, and inquiries from potential collaborators and volunteers following the release of the conversations.

Perhaps most critically, the methodology addresses the historical and often fraught relationship between academic institutions and communities of color in Baltimore. Traditional research has frequently been extractive, taking knowledge from residents without returning value. By centering community voice without censorship, storytelling acted as a trust-building mechanism. The interview process itself was restorative, allowing community partners a rare moment of reflection that reconnected them to their "why," and helped to prevent burnout.

For Black-led organizations specifically, having our expertise codified and celebrated by the university helped bridge the legacy gap of mistrust. It demonstrated that the university values the *intellectual* authority of the community, not just its geographic proximity.

Limitations

Our storytelling initiatives have several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the insights generated from our exploratory, praxis-oriented process. Grounded in a specific institutional and community context, the aim was to surface community-defined experiences of partnership and explore alternative approaches to understanding impact. The following limitations reflect both project design and the conditions under which the work played out.

Participation relied on existing relationships within SOURCE's network, as well as partnership responsiveness and availability. Although we intentionally included partners with varying levels of engagement, this approach may have shaped the perspectives captured. Partners with more positive experiences may have been more likely to participate, potentially underrepresenting newer or more critical perspectives. As such, these findings represent a range of partner experiences rather than the full partnership network.

Power dynamics between the university and community also represent an important limitation. As a university-based center, SOURCE holds power related to resources, relationships, and process design, which may influence participation and what partners choose to share. We worked to mitigate these dynamics by using peer interviewers, excluding SOURCE staff from conversations, engaging partners as co-creators and analyzers, and compensating community partners. However, these dynamics cannot be fully eliminated and may have shaped both participation and the narratives produced, underscoring the need for ongoing reflective practice in community-academic partnerships.

These storytelling approaches are also resource and time-sensitive, which has implications for both implementation and scope. Co-creating the process, facilitating conversations, and engaging in collective reflection require sustained commitment from partners and staff. These demands may limit participation by organizations with varying capacities and influence whose voices are included. Differences in partner availability and prior engagement with SOURCE also shaped the level and depth of participation, which in turn influenced the scope and richness of the stories.

From a critical and public-value perspective, the resource-intensive and relational nature of storytelling is not merely a limitation but a defining feature of equity-centered, community-led approaches to understanding community impact. While these demands challenge efficiency-driven institutional assessment models, they reflect the ethical and relational investments required to produce legitimate, community-defined knowledge. At the same time, the initiatives highlighted broader institutional challenges with assessment and evaluation. Institutions often prioritize numerical outcomes, limiting their ability to capture the complexity of community partnerships. While storytelling offers insight into relational and transformational outcomes, complementary metrics are still needed to fully assess partnership quality, equity, and long-term impact.

Future Directions and Implications

Storytelling initiatives open important directions for future practice, evaluation, and scholarship in community–academic partnerships. Our methodology development extends others’ work, such as ripple effects mapping (Zimmerman et al., 2019), which highlights the value of narratives to reveal the range and depth of impact of work with communities. The ultimate conceptual finding that narrative data is vital to advancing our work is not novel (Blouin & Perry, 2009). However, the material methodological practices for equitably collecting and co-analyzing are concrete extensions of the field’s literature that future work can take up and build on. One next step is developing community impact indicators grounded in emergent story themes. Rather than relying solely on institutionally defined metrics, these indicators would be co-informed by community narratives and would capture dimensions of impact that are often difficult to quantify, including trust, reciprocity, relational quality, capacity building, and perceived partnership value. Translating story themes into shared indicators could strengthen accountability to community partners and support more meaningful institutional assessment practices.

This work also highlights the value of building capacity for community-led storytelling through training and professional development for community engagement centers, faculty, students, and community partners. Trainings could focus on ethical storytelling, power-sharing, facilitation, narrative analysis, and the use of stories for learning rather than extraction. In doing so, storytelling becomes not only a method for data collection but also a pedagogical and relational tool that strengthens partnerships and shared ownership of knowledge.

Incorporating longitudinal storytelling represents another important future direction. Capturing narratives at multiple points over time can enhance how institutions monitor and understand the evolution of partnerships, including shifts in goals, roles, challenges, and outcomes. Longitudinal narratives are particularly well suited to documenting the non-linear and relational nature of community–academic work and can illuminate how trust, capacity, and mutual benefit develop—or erode—over extended periods. This approach offers a powerful way to refine impact assessments for community partners, specifically, centering their lived experiences and

interpretations of partnership success over time rather than relying on static or episodic measures.

Higher education is often pressured to demonstrate value through economic and quantitative metrics. In community-academic partnerships, evaluation has traditionally emphasized indicators such as student placements, service hours, and estimated financial value – measures that, while necessary for institutional reporting, can extract data without fully honoring community partners as intellectual peers. Our community-led storytelling methodology challenges this paradigm by redefining impact as relational rather than transactional. Storytelling does not replace traditional quantitative tracking; instead, it complements existing data systems by providing essential context and meaning. When paired with traditional indicators, qualitative narratives illuminate not only what occurred, but how and why it mattered to community partners. Together, these approaches offer a more authentic and holistic model of evaluation that aligns with the values of community-engaged scholarship.

Finally, while this project emerged within a specific institutional and community context, the storytelling methodology is highly transferable to other universities and nonprofit organizations. Institutions seeking to adapt this approach must be willing to invest in shared principles, institutional supports, trust-building, and time. When these conditions are present, community-led storytelling can serve as a flexible and scalable model for deepening engagement and improving how impact is understood and communicated across diverse settings.

Conclusion

This praxis paper responds to the guiding question of how community engagement professionals might implement community-led storytelling methodologies to reshape the documentation and understanding of partnership impact. Our findings demonstrate that community-led storytelling offers a more authentic and relational understanding of impact—one that reflects how partnerships are experienced by community partners themselves, rather than solely as reported by institutions. Storytelling surfaces dimensions of community engagement that are often overlooked in traditional evaluation, including trust, reciprocity, mutual learning, and perceived value of such partnerships.

Taken together, the methods described here demonstrate the potential of storytelling to transform institutional practice. When used intentionally and ethically, community-led storytelling can improve how institutions define success, enhance the perceived value of community engagement, and strengthen trust between academic and community partners. The approach challenges extractive evaluation norms and instead promotes learning, reflection, and shared accountability.

Looking ahead, there is a need for future research that advances community-led narrative evaluation, including longitudinal studies that examine partnership impact over time. Expanding

qualitative and mixed-methods approaches within the scholarship on community–academic partnerships will be critical to capturing the complexity and depth of this work. As institutions and CBOs increasingly seek to demonstrate impact, storytelling offers a powerful pathway to ensure that measurement practices remain grounded in community experience, equity, and authenticity.

By centering community voices and embracing qualitative inquiry alongside quantitative data, storytelling holds significant promise for reshaping how partnership impact is understood, valued, and sustained—both within higher education and across the non-profit sector. In doing so, storytelling provides a viable pathway for aligning impact assessment with the relational, place-based, and community-defined realities of partnership work.

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