

Jazzing up Community University Partnerships at CU Expo 2011

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Jazz musicians know a thing or two about collaboration and co-creating knowledge. [1] Through playing together, musicians have come to understand the inherent value of improvisation. They welcome interruptions and unanticipated turns as possibilities to uncover new dimensions of relationship, discover new harmonies, or break through to new levels of creativity. They deliberately take turns showcasing and appreciating all the skills sets present, and intentionally recruit a diversity of skills and instruments. They recognise the value of training and practice, and also of unplanned, free flowing explorations.

At times, a less skilled, or even an experienced musician might miss a cue or a beat or play slightly off key. While it's true that this may offset the synergy, more often than not, the other players are so attuned to the rhythm of their collaborators that they will instinctively adapt to ensure their co-creators are supported. Perhaps most fundamentally, jazz musicians have refined their listening skills to such a degree that they know when to back off, when to contribute at full volume, and even when to be silent.

Delegates at this year's CU Expo explored all these dimensions of community-university partnerships and much more. CU Expo is the leading conference in Canada that showcases and explores how Universities collaborate with other community groups to work for social change and solve some of the complex, multi-sectoral problems of our times. Held in the Waterloo Region of Ontario, Canada from May 10 to 14, 2011, this conference was organized by the Centre for Community Based Research (CCBR), in collaboration with Community-Campus Partnerships for Health (CCPH), and UCPSAR-Net (University Community Partnerships for Social Action Research). It was co-sponsored by the Wilfrid Laurier University, the University of Waterloo, and the University of Guelph. Over 500 activists, scholars, thinkers, artists, organizers and keen observers from 16 countries came together to explore how the UN Millennium Development Goals are being addressed in three cross-cutting themes: (1) community voice and relevance, (2) partnership and collaboration, and (3) action and change. The programme offered participants a wide range of methods for sharing best practices, provoking new insights, deepening our practice, and expanding our network of connections: from oral presentations, roundtable discussions, keynote addresses, and site visits, to experiential skill building workshops, storytelling, theatre performances, video screenings, and a laughter-filled Ceilidh in the park. The Global Alliance on Community Engaged Research (GACER) held a pre-conference meeting as well, during which time achievements were celebrated—such as the recognition of social responsibility and Indigenous ways of knowing as UNESCO priority areas in higher education.

In general, a sense that the community-university partnership movement was both maturing and growing stronger was expressed. A few areas to further explore in future conferences were also identified, including: reinvigorating the gender analysis of this work and taking action on the

inequities that we may be unconsciously reproducing; making funding available to actively recruit and listen to the voices of people who have lived experiences with the challenges we are working to overcome; highlighting the link between environmental and social justice; and exploring ways to partner with other stakeholders in social change (e.g. government, policy, media, business, and faith communities). At the closing session, CCPH, Community Based Research Canada and the Canadian Alliance for Community Service Learning announced that they would be working together (with CCBR) to establish a process for sustaining CU Expo, and generating a call for applications to host the next CU Expo in 2013. For those who are interested in hosting, more information will be available later this year.

At the conclusion of this conference we parted ways with a renewed sense of commitment to social action. Whether through jazz or through community-university partnerships, this conference reminded us that at the heart of collaboration are the tools, the lessons, and the hope for creating a more harmonious, equitable, and just global society.

For more information see:

- CU Expo 2011: <http://www.cuexpo2011.ca/>
- Centre for Community Based Research: <http://www.communitybasedresearch.ca/>
- Community Campus Partnerships for Health: <http://www.ccph.info/>
- UCP SAR-Net: <http://ucpsarnet.iglooprojects.org/>
- Global Alliance on Community Engaged Research: <http://communityresearchcanada.ca/?action=alliance>
- Canadian Alliance for Community Service Learning: <http://www.communityservicelearning.ca/>
- Community Based Research Canada: <http://communityresearchcanada.ca/>

[1] Many thanks to Dr. Ajay Heble for this analogy.