

# COVID-19 Reflections of Hyperlocal, Placed-Based Engagement

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**Cite as:** Ellerbee, D.A., Kirby, J., Kuttner, P., Schwartzentruber, L., Valis, A. & Dostilio, L. (2023). COVID-19 Reflections of Hyperlocal, Place-Based Engagement. *Metropolitan Universities*, 34(1), 55-66. DOI: 10.18060/25833

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**Editor:** Valerie L. Holton, Ph.D.

## Abstract

The degree to which Universities could nimbly and effectively respond to the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on their local communities depended upon the structure and orientation of their community engagement infrastructure. Institutions that support a hyperlocal form of place-based engagement were uniquely positioned to harness their extensive place-based organizational networks, intimate knowledge of community assets, and existing paths to leverage institutional resources to work alongside neighbors, residents, organizational leaders, elected officials, elders, youth and families committed to everyone's thriving through the COVID-19 crises.

Hyperlocal, place-based engagement describes an engagement approach within higher education in which a university's community engagement efforts are focused on a bounded area, such as a neighborhood, within a larger city or metropolitan region, and are aligned with that community's development goals (Dostilio, Ohmer, McFadden, Mathew, & Finkelstein, 2019). These efforts typically advance two goals: to a) position the institution to partner with, and add value to, community building efforts undertaken by the neighborhood being engaged and b) to enhance and accelerate the institution's ability to forge mutually-beneficial alliances and mobilize knowledge production. Because these efforts are long-term, they create unique conditions for engagement that proved to accelerate community-campus engagements to address COVID-19 impacts.

The Community Engagement Professionals (Dostilio, 2017) who lead hyperlocal engagement activities were particularly crucial to their institution's COVID-19 community responses. At the time of the pandemic, a group of such professionals had been meeting as a learning community to exchange promising practices of hyperlocal engagement. This article is written from the perspective of these professionals, endeavoring to reflect on how their work to steward hyperlocal approaches was challenged and affirmed through the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a group of directors committed to social change, we share a common desire to make a difference by acknowledging the power and privilege of the universities we represent. Making evident the expressed commitments of each CUMU member institution who contributed to this article, we aim to share insight into our unique position within the university and community which permitted us to be responsive during COVID in ways that both strengthen our relationships and challenged them. We pivoted and found new ways to remain impactful as neighbors supporting neighbors. We acted to steer partners through institutional systems to access resources. Dedicated program staff remained familiar faces who were able to identify needs and mobilize quickly to address them. Hyperlocal, neighborhood-based centers remained trusted pipelines to partners interested in finding ways to support residents, and more. As this new reality shaped by COVID-19 emerges, we reflect on how the pandemic affected, refined, and changed the way we carry out our missions, recognizing through this experience that the real work exists beyond our centers' walls.

**Keywords:** university-community, collaboration, multidisciplinary, institutional structure

## **Daren A. Ellerbee**

University of Pittsburgh

Community Engagement Center in Homewood

The University of Pittsburgh (Pitt) Community Engagement Center (CEC) in Homewood is one of a number of hyperlocal engagement efforts at Pitt that advance a place-based engagement frame. The Homewood CEC links and leverages engagement assets across all 16 schools to be of sustainable impact within Homewood. The University has dedicated staff who lead our place-based work and a neighborhood advisory council comprised of residents, business owners, elected officials, faith leaders, and representatives of community-based institutions and organizations. The CECs are welcoming spaces for university-community collaborations which are mutually beneficial and aligned with each community's goals.

Relationships built in Homewood enabled us to pivot quickly during the onset of the pandemic. Internally, our senior engagement leader mobilized the COVID-19 Community Response Task Force, which met weekly to assess, share, and act on emerging community and university challenges as a result of the pandemic. The Pitt Pandemic Service Initiative emerged to expand staff, faculty, and student service opportunities to help or neighbors and to shape impactful partnerships. Our community collaborators – the organizational leadership, staff, and residents looped us in as neighbors to strategize and fill gaps related to digital access for families, exacerbated learning loss for students, and the need for additional educational supports, COVID-19 vaccines, and more. One program, the Community Care Callers, aligned faculty, staff, and student personpower with partner organizations making telephone calls and wellvisits to the constituencies they served. They would connect those constituents with resources at the sponsoring organizations, providing information about COVID-19 testing (and later vaccination), access to basic needs supports, and connection back to the region's essential community services hotline. As a convener, the CEC also helped to coordinate and make available technology that enabled community networks to meet virtually. The Homewood CEC convened many online community meetings and events for existing partners like the Homewood Community Development Collaborative (the Collaborative), and new partners like the United Black Book Clubs of Pittsburgh, leveraging Pitt's enterprise Zoom account and tech-savvy students, we ensured that our community collaborators felt just as supported online as they would at the CEC. Pitt's Hill District Community Engagement Center convened a network of more than 20 community-based organizations weekly to develop coordinated services for the Hill District neighborhood.

The most rewarding collaboration proved to be our most challenging. In early 2021 when COVID-19 vaccine supplies were scarce, especially within African American communities, the Homewood and Hill District CECs supported first and second-dose vaccination clinics led by a

coalition of community partners across two communities, Homewood and the Hill District. With the goal at that time to vaccinate two thousand residents aged 65 old and older, both CECs acted as conveners coordinated Pitt supports from the School of Pharmacy and other health sciences schools and units, along with community partners to collaborate on this effort.

The Allegheny County Health Department supplied us with the vaccine. The Greater Pittsburgh YMCA permitted free use of their branch in Homewood. The Homewood Children’s Village created and led the registration process ensuring that appointments were protected and went to residents from both neighborhoods. Primary Care Health Services, Inc. – Alma Illery Medical Center was an instrumental partner who continues to ensure community members have access to vaccinations. The challenge emerged with the second dose clinic.

Vaccination clinics all over the country, including ours, were impacted by shortages causing delays. Residents were concerned about not getting their second dose within the required timeframe and rightfully angry. Many questioned if we had forgotten about the Black community and whether they would indeed get their second dose at all. Organizations throughout the community, including the CEC, began to get calls from residents driven who were fearful. Many calls were fielded by Community Care Callers and some of the volunteers were student workers of the CEC. We convened with our collaborative partners to outline the informational available to us and to devise a second-dose schedule that accounted for the possibility of just-in-time supply. I encouraged students to remain empathic, respectful, and kind. The calls proved to be tough for everyone to follow and we all had to sit with it and accept responsibility. The following week we received word that vaccine pipelines had improved and we could reschedule the clinics within the necessary time frame. The tone of residents had shifted during return calls to schedule their second appointments. Callers reported uplifted spirits and relief from residents and their families as we hastily worked to fill slots. I am proud to report that we fully vaccinated 100% of residents from the first dose clinic. All partners, including Pitt, rallied together, exhausting numerous organizational resources to address vaccine inequity within minoritized communities while ensuring that our neighborhoods’ most vulnerable residents were protected. All of these intentional, collaborative efforts ensured that the majority of vaccines stayed in the community.

As we look ahead, the CEC will continue to lean in and work alongside Pitt faculty, staff, and students, and our community collaborators to ensure thriving for all!

**John Kirby**

Drexel University

Dornsife Center for Neighborhood Partnerships

In 2014, Drexel opened the Dornsife Center for Neighborhood Partnerships, a university-sponsored resource center, in Mantua, a neighborhood in the heart of the federally designated West Philadelphia Promise Zone. Inspired by the tradition of cooperative extension, the Dornsife Center hosts creative, collaborative activities, and services that bring the University's academic and administrative resources together with the ambitions and interests of residents. The offerings are richly connected to Drexel's distinctive strengths and are often provided by university faculty and students. Having now welcomed over 27,000 participants and visitors since opening, individuals engage in a range of activities. For example:

- The Kline School of Law hosts the Andy and Gwen Stern Community Lawyering Clinic (CLC);
- the Westphal College of Media Arts & Design offers classes in dance, theater, music, and music production; with the potential for courses in graphic design, gaming, music production, fashion design, animation, and other creative fields;
- through Writers Room, faculty from the English Department in the College of Arts and Sciences lead writing programs for local high school students, Drexel students, and local seniors;
- students and faculty from the College of Nursing and Health Professions through its Community Wellness HUB provide a range of health, wellness, and nutrition programs and educational opportunities;
- and the Beachell Family Learning Center (BFLC) creates pathways to career entry and advancement, wealth building, and entrepreneurship.

As it did for most institutions, the pandemic forced us to change quickly. Closing our doors to the public on March 13<sup>th</sup> was difficult as in-person activity has been core to our mission. Our staff and partners were torn because we understood that for many, the Dornsife Center provides the most convenient access to health, legal, workforce development, and community arts programs and services. Our partners didn't waste time as the student lawyers in the CLC began scheduling appointments with their clients to resolve any outstanding cases before the center closed and assuring others that the work would continue virtually.

As a trusted location for many, though we were closed, our physical space allowed us to find new ways to support families in West Philadelphia. We partnered with civic leaders and our colleagues from the West Philadelphia Promise Neighborhood education initiative and their Action for Early Learning program, to collect, store, and distribute cleaning supplies, masks, food, and remote learning tools for families. Our on-site Operations team remained working throughout the crisis, which made this possible.

The quick-change also challenged us to think differently about how we engaged our community and utilized the skills of the university. Like many, we transitioned to remote work and programming. We made our Community Dinner "To-Go", teaming with civic and faith leaders to

deliver 250 dinners monthly to families and seniors in 6 neighborhoods. Our arts and culture program partners designed remote engagements that would allow participants to continue their progress. As our most regularly utilized resource, the BFLC, which hosts one of the two local public-access, free computer labs, understood that the loss of services and access were devastating for those seeking opportunities to earn for themselves and their families and connect to essential services online, including claiming unemployment benefits. The team developed YouTube lessons, surveyed participants about their home internet capacity, and provided virtual career workshops with local employers. We believe that the future will continue to be offered in a hybrid capacity as these engagements have created diverse access points to the activities and support provided.

As we returned in February we first reactivated our outdoor spaces teaming with our partners from Trellis for Tomorrow and student group Drexel Urban Growers (DUG) to host activities in our newly rebuilt 14 raised bed community garden; and our BFLC partners to host outdoor computer labs. As a COVID testing and vaccination location since late May, we have provided COVID testing for over 110 people and administered over 450 vaccine shots. With our buildings now reopened, this summer we hosted three youth programs, often welcoming over 100 young people on days throughout the week.

We have had the privilege of continuing to have the trust of our community partners and the support of our university colleagues and students, which has allowed us to identify new opportunities to bring the university into a deeper relationship with our neighbors. We know that we need to find more creative ways of hearing from our neighbors, staying true to the proven methods of connecting face-to-face, while also making better use of the remote engagement tools to hear the voices of the many with diverse ideas, perspectives, needs, and interests. With anticipation, we are looking forward to what is to come.

## **Paul Kutner**

University of Utah

University Neighborhood Partners

University Neighborhood Partners (UNP) was created in 2001 as a long-term collaboration between the University of Utah and west side of Salt Lake City neighborhoods. The west side, as it is familiarly known, is a vibrant and leader-full community. It is a major resettlement area for immigrants and refugees and home to the majority of the city's residents of color. It has also faced decades of segregation and disinvestment, separated physically, economically, and culturally from the wealthier east side where the University is located.

UNP's mission is to "bring together University and west side people and resources in reciprocal learning, action, and benefit — a community coming together." It is a university department with a staff of 16, many from the neighborhoods in which UNP works. Its main office is in the west side neighborhood of Glendale. UNP also oversees the UNP Hartland Partnership Center, a 10,000 square foot building that houses a walk-in center, youth center, startup incubator, classrooms, and community meeting spaces.

UNP is first and foremost a convener. UNP brings together west side residents, higher education, and local organizations and institutions and supports them in identifying shared goals and working together. UNP is proactive in amplifying the voices of people who have historically been marginalized in decision-making spaces, investing heavily in relationship building and leadership development. At any one time, UNP staff are supporting between 40 and 70 partnerships focused on resident-identified priorities such as education, leadership, capacity building, employment, and health.

20 years of partnership work have established UNP as a trusted entity in the west side, with a broad web of relationships with community leaders and grassroots organizations. This social capital placed UNP in a unique position at the start of the pandemic. We were one of the few entities that had a direct relationship with grassroots organizations, service providers, higher education, local government, and, most importantly, families impacted by the pandemic.

The early months of the pandemic were an extraordinary time in UNP. The first thing we did, after checking on the well-being of our staff, was to reach out to hundreds of our partners to ask, "How are you doing? Is there anything you need?" This way, we were quickly able to identify needs for direct aid and who was in a position to help. We shifted our budgets to create a direct support fund and began handing out gift cards to families who were ineligible for federal aid because of citizenship status — an effort we eventually helped our city to take on themselves.

Many agencies and nonprofits were caught flat-footed by COVID, without plans for communicating or connecting with multilingual communities. They quickly recognized UNP and our partners as important bridges. Suddenly, the historically underappreciated work of cultural navigation and partnership building was in high demand. We were working with our partners to disseminate information to the neighborhood's inaccessible and multilingual formats, while simultaneously speaking back to systems about what resources were needed, what approaches were culturally responsive, and what questions needed to be answered through research.

As systems recognized the importance of cultural navigators/brokers, they began hiring some of our long-time resident partners. While we were glad that these residents found employment, it depleted some of the human resources of local organizations. In the end, however, our partners were pushed to reach deeper into the community, including a new generation of younger

leaders, which strengthened the work. Meanwhile, with relief funds coming into the state, we used some to hire a team of local leaders as multilingual resource navigators, and supported partners in accessing the funds for their ongoing work.

Many of our traditional activities had to change, of course. Partners had to quickly adapt to new crises and learn to offer education, enrichment, mental health, and other services online. One example of an initiative that was adapted was our flagship Partners in the Park event, traditionally a tabling event where our partners convened in local parks in the hundreds. Just a month after lockdowns, over 50 people joined a Zoom call to reimagine the event. The result was **Partners in the Park(ing lot)**, which included a car parade (with lowriders and car clubs), as well as a drive-thru event where we handed out hundreds of bags of resources, activities, information, and food. This event pulled in many new volunteers and reinvigorated ongoing partnerships. The results reflected the strength and resilience of our communities and the importance of creating spaces of belonging and mutual aid.

On an internal level, UNP staff become more attuned to one another. We began checking in daily on Zoom, and staff appreciated the feeling of not being alone in the pandemic. We learned new things about one another and got a peek into the lives of the people on the screen. COVID was rough on everyone, and the meetings were a time to express empathy and compassion. UNP became a critical support system, strengthening our relationships, even as the increased work risked staff and partner burnout.

## **Lorna Schwartzentruber**

York University

TD Community Engagement Center

The York University-TD Community Engagement Centre (CEC) is located off-campus in the heart of the Black Creek/Jane Finch Community of Northwest Toronto, Canada. This community has a long history of deep economic and social marginalization and is home to many newcomers to Canada. Many families face systemic barriers to education and/or employment opportunities such as lack of childcare, transportation, and quality housing. Historically, the pursuit of higher education was low, and the university was viewed as a self-contained island, interested more in its own development than its neighbors in the community. The community is currently undergoing heavily disruptive redevelopment.

Since 2008 York U has sponsored the CEC and has developed a "hyper-local" approach. The CEC provides drop-in consultation regarding education and community resources, collaboration with various community organizing tables, school partnerships to encourage increased access to PSE, bridging university and community interests in research and experiential education, and

developing partnerships for increased economic inclusion. These priorities are determined by ongoing consultation with the community over more than 15 years.

When the pandemic took hold, the CEC didn't take long to adjust its way of doing community work as we were already tapped into community tables and networks. We heard from the community perspective what the real-time impacts were which allowed us to waste no time in seeing where we might have the most impact. Because of the direct connection to resident groups, i.e. seniors through our free income tax program, we had networks in place and could reach out to them and inform them of the status of pandemic activity (testing sites, programs) and share other resources and information.

Initially, there were a lot of challenges with access to technology and platforms. We were able to provide electronic meeting hosting to help grassroots organizations stay in contact with residents and each other. Many did not have this technology at the beginning, so it helped them transition.

The CEC is a community space of congregation and meetings. However, being part of a large institution, we were one of the first organizations to close. This created a bit of tension at first, with the community not having moved as quickly to pivot to a virtual world. There were also programmatic challenges. For example, we work closely with the local high schools, so no longer being embedded in the schools was hard. Larger bureaucracies and systems required more readjustment time, i.e. schools figuring out issues of privacy/consent/safety. Helping the community navigate these bigger systems became a role the CEC staff could assist due to the two worlds (institution/community) these staff inhabit. The benefit in the end though was more flexibility. While we had more participation, we felt the relationships weren't as deep as when in person. Initially, engagement went up as barriers of time, travel, childcare was less. Over time, however, zoom fatigue and lack of physical action kicked in and reduced participation.

We saw firsthand that it was a difficult year to start something new as colleagues in less community embedded spaces had a harder time. Because we had an open door and relationships that are ongoing, our colleagues became more dependent on the CEC to help during this time. In the community, there was distrust of new relationships during this health crisis, so trusting relationships were relied on. In some ways, the work of the Community Engagement Centre was seamless despite the in-person shutdowns. We were able to re-strategize quickly and even build new partnerships.

Through the pandemic, we valued, even more, the importance of human connection. Our joint reflective practice, the work that happens when you are together, over lunch, in the hall, after meetings, etc, was missed. But learning new ways to be flexible and innovative will serve us well. We have

created new engagement points. We will ensure spaces are equipped with the technology to ensure a variety of ways to participate. What we learned is that the University relies heavily on us and the community has its expectations of us – especially during a crisis – and expectations are raised. Managing amid these two worlds will always be our challenge.

## **Ashley Valis**

University Maryland, Baltimore  
Community Engagement Center

The University of Maryland, Baltimore (UMB) Community Engagement Center (CEC) in Poppleton, a neighborhood in West Baltimore, is where local residents partner with UMB on mutually beneficial goals. The CEC serves adults and children and offers a variety of programs that leverage the University resources to meet community-identified needs such as exercise, food, employment, afterschool and educational programming. Originally in a small storefront location, in 2019, UMB purchased and renovated a 20,000 sq ft blighted property across the street from the pilot storefront site and opened the newly expanded CEC in July of 2020, during the peak of COVID.

Having the UMB CEC embedded in the West Baltimore community, with a staff dedicated to working in the neighborhood every day, allowed us to use our workday during the pandemic to immediately identify and meet a variety of urgent community needs. For instance, when food became a concern, we were able to use the back parking lot of our building as a food distribution site, a known location in the community where people already knew to come for help. We then were able to erect a large tent on that parking lot and it became an outdoor distribution site for household items, masks, hand sanitizer, laundry detergent, and many other giveaway items we felt our neighbors could use. When access to reliable internet and the digital divide surfaced as the most pressing need, we partnered with a small community internet provider and walked the neighborhood to install wifi antennas on row homes and buildings nearby to get more families online as fast as possible. We also were able to gather donations to buy and distribute new computers to families and seniors in nearby apartments. Because we offered the community some level of service throughout COVID without ever closing our doors (even when we had to move operations outside), that has allowed us to shift back to in-person very easily. We never lost touch with our neighbors because we maintained programs like our community lunch, albeit outside with grab-and-go meals and masks, we still had that physical presence in the community that people could count on.

Another reflection of note is the new relationship we forged with the Arrabber Preservation Society (APS). An arabber is a street vendor (hawker) selling fruits and vegetables from a colorful, horse-drawn cart. Once a common sight in American East Coast cities, only a handful

of Arabbers still walk the streets of Baltimore. They rely on street cries to attract the attention of their customers. During the height of the pandemic, the UMB CEC connected with the Vice President of the APS and teamed up to enlist the Arabbers, trusted messengers in West Baltimore neighborhoods, to take COVID 19 health information out with them while they were selling fruits and vegetables to city residents. We were also able to receive donations of bread and frozen poultry that the Arabbers were able to distribute to neighbors along their routes all summer long in 2020 when families were facing high food insecurities. This partnership turned into a creative public health intervention. We worked with the Arabbers to use the horse-drawn carts and travel routes as a way to get the word out in underserved and disconnected communities about COV19 and how to stay safe and healthy. Now that we have built this relationship with the Arabbers, we hope to continue to partner with them on other initiatives in the future.

All of these things were able to be offered because we have a “home base” in the community that even though we couldn't be indoors- we still were able to shift and serve our community outside, safely and visibly. Not to mention, all of the relationships that we have built over the years with neighbor's were valuable at identifying other community needs, and then we were able to use the UMB network to call on partners to provide those things. We even turned our tented parking lot into a Christmas Toy store so that families could still have a place to shop for deeply discounted toys for their kids, in a safe outdoor venue that felt comfortable shopping in. The fact that we never really "closed" made all of the difference, and for that, we are particularly proud.

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