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## **Community-university partnered sustainability research: A place-based perspective from the Miami Valley**

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WHITE PAPER

# Community-university partnered sustainability research: A place-based perspective from the Miami Valley

Co-produced with input from the following organizations:

Hanley Sustainability Institute<sup>1</sup>  
Fitz Center for Leadership in Community  
Ethos Center  
Adventure Central  
Agraria Center for Regenerative Practice  
B/W Greenway Community Land Trust  
CityWide  
City of Dayton, Dept. of Water  
Collaboratory  
CO-OP Dayton  
Dayton Energy Collaborative  
The Dayton Foodbank  
Dayton Regional Green

Expressions of Life  
Five Rivers MetroParks  
Little Miami Conservancy District  
Marianist Environmental Education Center  
Miami Conservancy District  
Miami Valley Regional Planning Commission  
Mission of Mary Cooperative  
Office of Sustainability, Dayton, OH  
Omega CDC  
Rivers Institute  
St. Vincent de Paul  
Tecumseh Land Trust

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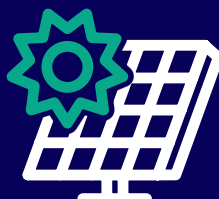
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Support for Partnered Research

# Introduction

The University of Dayton dedicates itself to the common good, a commitment shared by the full campus community that shapes our approach to teaching, scholarship, and service. It's a commitment echoed in Hanley Sustainability Institute's (HSI) strategic plan, which calls on us to collaborate with community partners to co-create sustainable solutions, and to facilitate transdisciplinary research that is action-oriented, responsive to community needs, and able to drive change both in the Greater Dayton region and around the world. To this end, and together with our campus partners in the Fitz Center for Leadership in Community and the Ethos Center, HSI consulted with sustainability organizations from across the Miami Valley to better understand how we can continually improve as collaborators in community-university partnered sustainability research. The response from the community was inspiring, with dozens of organizations participating in interviews and workshops to share feedback on how the university can sustain more reciprocal, responsive, mutually beneficial partnerships.

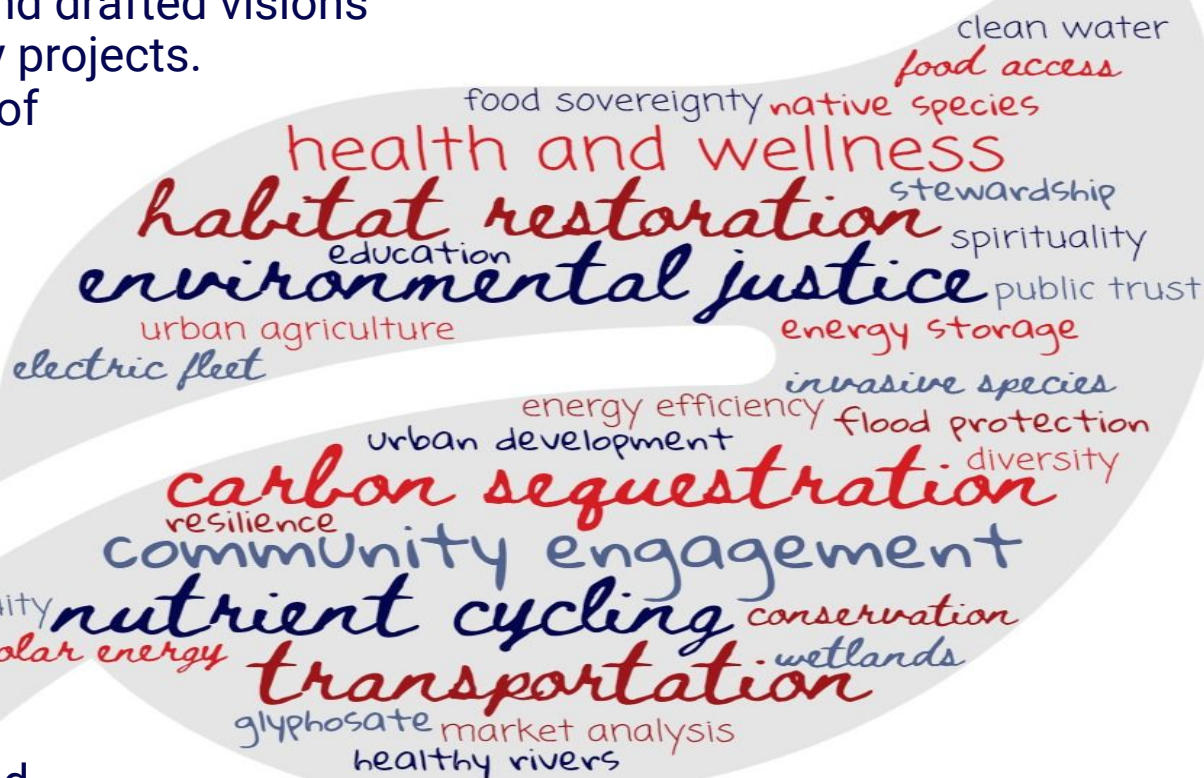
Before presenting the key takeaways from this dialogue, a brief note on our methods. More than a dozen organizations involved in environmental, social, and economic sustainability efforts participated in detailed interviews about their partnership experience. These "upstream" interviews informed the facilitation of the April 2022 workshop on community-engaged sustainability research that brought together nearly 30 participants representing two dozen organizations in the region. That workshop provided space to weigh in on the preliminary findings from the interviews and to share stories of successful (and less successful) research partnerships. It also invested time toward articulating potential research projects that community partners would find valuable and thinking about university practices and resources that could support those projects and others like them. Finally, the draft of this report was shared with workshop participants for additional feedback and suggestions.



# Developing Research Questions

Community partners joined the workshop with wide-ranging sustainability interests. Introductions invited everyone to speak to the topics that energize each participant. This was the starting point of a journey to co-construct a research partnership, and over the course of the workshop, we developed more specific research questions and drafted visions for scholarly projects.

A snapshot of interests included:



Many of these interests occurred within the context of broader social justice and human rights issues that require inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration, through which research can be designed in ways responsive to everyone's interests and expertise. For instance, one participant specified that a general interest in public trust might generate questions about how cities cultivate trust and how they might avoid the erosion of trust. Another participant interested in the environmental impacts of different crops proposed that the first order of business is investigating baseline ecological conditions at their agricultural sites.

## Different Partners, Different Priorities

When asked about the outcomes most important to them, partners tended to emphasize research that produces practical benefits, develops innovative strategies, solves pressing problems, and creates and shares information accessible to the wider community. While these priorities reflect the averaging out of responses, it can also help to identify distinctive perspectives in the community. We used the mixed-methods approach known as “Q methodology” to appreciate such differences. Our analysis suggests four unique viewpoints among community partners, each reflecting different priorities. The representative quotes below speak to diverse perspectives, and partners should always start by talking about what outcomes matter most.

### Problem Solvers innovate solutions to pressing problems

*“...If a partnership with university researchers can make us more effective in our work, that’s a really important reason to work with university researchers... They might have access to research tools, databases, journals... Or be able to take more of a broad view, like look comparatively across communities at what people are doing that’s effective”*

### Capacity Builders strengthen relationships, build credibility, and secure funding

*“There’s a level of legitimacy to the project, to our organization, our initiative, that would be lent to us by having respected institutional partners who, even if they weren’t primary financial contributors, by collaborating with us, I believe they would lend a tremendous amount of weight to our initiative, simply because we’re new and nobody really knows us”*

### Community Advocates elevate community’s expertise and address barriers to participation in local decision-making

*“Every community member has their own expertise... they know what they need and they maybe don’t know the steps to get there. That’s where the city or a community project... at the university can help... Work with them to figure out how to get the solution that’s needed”*

### Far-Sighted Visionaries seek energy, creativity, and financial support for seeing beyond barriers

*“Where we’re going from a young emerging non-profit, to a growing blossoming one, but we’re still young and small. We don’t have a ton of resources... so I’m hoping... we can expand and increase our engagement for the benefit of the community and their needs we serve”*



# Deliverables in Demand

Research can generate all sorts of deliverables above and beyond the scholarly publications that typically count for university faculty. Three general types of deliverables were frequently requested among the workshop participants:

**Grant proposals**, plus help in identifying promising opportunities for outside funding

**Communication materials**, such as press releases, presentations to give to their board or to local government, and videos and documentaries to raise public awareness

**Program evaluation**, both to demonstrate progress toward goals to external audiences and to inform internal decision making

*I think it's always a little bit of a push-pull, because typically, there are particular kinds of deliverables and outcomes and timelines within academia, and those are not the same as the timelines, deliverables, and outcomes in the community*

*You want a researcher who's willing to take action, not just do the research to write a report, but do the research to really put it into practice*

Collaborative research is research *with* the community, not *on* the community. Therefore, the evidence that is collected is co-produced and often co-owned, utilizing metrics and instruments that community partners play a key role in developing. This is also a critical time to discuss who owns and has access to the data, which partners stressed must occur before research begins.

## Virtuous Partners

Community partners weighed in on the character traits that they look for in a university partner.

These traits—what we might call the virtues of community-university partnerships—offer further guidance over how to conduct ourselves when pursuing reciprocal, responsive, mutually beneficial partnerships.



*“I’d rather work with somebody over multiple years than just one semester as a one-off. It just takes a lot of time to get people to understand our mission and how our organization works, and so I’d rather invest that time for a multi-year collaboration”*

For their part, community partners understand their contribution as providing real-world research opportunities for students, mentoring them, and leveraging the partners’ network to engage the community. They are often more than happy to provide physical space and host events, plus serve as a test case for implementing new ideas and seeing their impact.



## Centering Partners' Research Interests

Over the course of the workshop, partners synthesized our many conversations to produce snapshots of mutually beneficial research collaborations.

“The Collaboratory would benefit from collaboration with mutuality-focused UD community members on a project that explores bringing the well-being index and actions geared to move the needle on the well-being index over time. This research would help us make Re-Imagining America a reality and a force for change in the region”

“Five Rivers MetroParks would benefit from collaborating with excellently communicating engineers and ecologists on a project that explores carbon accounting and answers data driven questions in order to develop a net-zero carbon plan. This research would help us improve climate change mitigation efforts and/or develop investment/budget strategies that support our mission in terms of environmental impact.”

Without real dialogue with university partners, this synthesis was mainly an exercise, but it conveys the sorts of community-university partnered research that University of Dayton should pursue.

# Sustainable Research Partnerships

Community partners expressed a deep commitment to mentoring students and enriching their education, but in order to sustain that, long-term partnerships should keep in mind the core outcomes that ensure mutual benefits. We must work to build reciprocal relationships that have a place for student projects but are not defined by those projects. Indeed, partnerships are most resilient when they connect the organizations involved and not just the individuals. Faculty join and leave the university, and professionals move in and out of different organizations. Collaborations should still be sustained, especially when the community has invested in and plans to act on the basis of investigation.

This requires some rethinking of how the university supports community-engaged research. Community organizations reasonably view themselves as in partnership with the University of Dayton, and not just with an individual researcher, department, center, or institute. Meanwhile, faculty aren't in the habit of coordinating their research with other units on campus, and there's value in faculty having a good deal of autonomy in what research they pursue. The university should invest in stronger networks to coordinate community-engaged research, and starting again this Fall, the Community Building Coordinators Consortium is creating space for regular communication.

Community organizations would benefit from support in identifying university partners for research questions and topics. This might take the form of a "researcher clearinghouse" that provides biographies of community-engaged researchers and helps community partners swiftly identify shared interests and pertinent expertise. It could build off of ongoing efforts like "Give Pulse," which might serve this purpose but has so far lacked traction on campus and in the community. While the university works toward more clearly curating the opportunities for partnered research among its own faculty, it should also strive to support broader networks inclusive of other higher education institutions in the region, for instance as part of the Strategic Ohio Council for Higher Education and Partners for the Environment's efforts in building a "Research-shed."

## Support for Partnered Research

University of Dayton is ramping up programming to support community-university partnered research in ways that complement our longstanding tradition of community-engaged teaching and learning. We encourage faculty and community organizations to consider the opportunities below that offer resources to partnered research collaborations from conception to implementation to evaluation.



Hanley Sustainability Institute's Planning Grant program provides stipends of \$1,000 to \$1,500 to faculty and community partners to co-design research projects and pursue outside funding



Hanley's Graduate Fellows and Sustainable Undergraduate Research Fellows can be valuable assets to longer-term partnerships, and both programs prioritize projects that engage the community.



The Fitz Fellows program offers course releases to faculty and stipends to community partners in order to support new community-university partnerships or strengthen and grow existing partnerships.



The Ethos Center's research and development (R&D) program brings together engineering faculty and community organizations to plan and implement R&D initiatives that meet communities' technical needs and aspirations. The faculty member also mentors a team of undergraduate and graduate researchers to work on the projects.



The Ethos Center's immersion program provides full-time, part-time, or remote engineering student support for research, design, and development initiatives with community organizations locally, regionally, and internationally.



The Human Rights Center's Action Research and Rights Collective supports researchers who seek to advance human rights by employing methods of inquiry that lead to action.