Topic:
Effective Communication with Community Partners

Speakers:
Dr. Amanda Morris (Regents Professor; Human Development and Family Science)
Dr. Martha Zapata (Research Scientist; Human Development and Family Science)

Summary:
Dr. Martha Zapata began by presenting three popular models of community-university engagement: Deficit, Lab, and Partnership. She noted that the first two models are largely defined by their extractive nature. In each, university actors spend time in communities for the sole purpose of collecting data through research designs over which they have complete control. Interactions of this type damage local trust in institutions of higher education and can cause accelerate the negative trends researchers profess to want to curb. Unfortunately, these practices are common in many universities and colleges. Roundtable attendees agreed with Zapata that while research can take many forms that can be more or less challenging to include community partners in, OSU has taken important steps in recent years to promote more equitable collaborations. Zapata argued that the third model—the Partnership model in which all stakeholders participate with equal voice in all stages of a research project—should be most preferred; attendees agreed. Dean Stephan Wilson suggested that the Partnership model is largely about intentionality and investing adequate time. Even well designed projects can drift towards the deficit model if not well maintained.

Dr. Zapata then contended that not all community partners are ready to effectively partner with OSU. Creating an equitable partnership requires a relationship of trust between stakeholders and a shared commitment to improving the lives of community members. Effective, bidirectional communication is a key component in creating the kind of collaborative projects we desire. Dr. Amanda Morris suggested that effective communication of this kind plays to each partner’s strengths, identifying them early in a project and being honest about the roles each partner should therefore play. University actors therefore need to do their homework before contacting a potential partner so they can ask the right questions. The goal should be a partnership with sufficient trust to enable both effective work and honest evaluation. Dean Wilson argued that sharing leadership among OSU and community partners is also important, including allowing others to take the lead in communication. Mr. Dave Lassen suggested that some community partners may not feel confident exploring potential partnerships, indicating that OSU would benefit from widely strengthening its communication practices and networks among potential partners.

Dr. Amanda Morris then discussed some best practices for effective communication. She recommended that university partners meet with their community partners at least 1-2 times each month (or more) while a partnership is active. Early meetings may need to focus on relationship building (she noted that she likes to bring cookies or another treat) and may not seem to move a project forward at first. Morris also urged OSU
actors to be sure to communicate at all levels, especially with the individuals who will be expected to implement project activities. Without these messages, project activities can be overlooked or actively impeded. More broadly, Morris argued that OSU actors should not assume that their community partners understand their intention or desire. Dr. Zapata added that this should include communicating the results of a project with all community partners. More broadly, Dr. Morris argued that communication is about trust and should therefore occur in contexts and through media that community partners are most comfortable with. Thus, OSU actors should find a champion, a knowledgeable individual willing to help them learn the relevant interpersonal and inter-organizational dynamics at play in a given area. Finally, Morris recommended creating a memorandum of understanding (MOU) for each partnership in order to establish preferred communication practices and commitments early on. She argued that all partners should explicitly signal their commitment to the project’s success by devoting specific resources to project activities.