

Rethinking Post-secondary Access and Engagement for Low-income Adult Learners Through a Community Hub Partnership Approach

Repenser l'accès et l'engagement postsecondaires chez les personnes apprenantes adultes à faible revenu grâce à une approche de carrefours de partenaires communautaires

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Breaking the Armour and Stirring the Soul

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Résumé de l'article

Le présent article s'appuie sur l'étude de cas d'un programme de partenariat campus-communauté en Ontario offrant des cours collégiaux sans frais aux personnes apprenantes adultes à faible revenu dans des lieux de carrefour communautaires. En examinant ces salles de classe collégiales co-situées dans des lieux de rencontre existants dans les quartiers (par exemple, centre communautaire ou bibliothèque), notre recherche examine si l'intégration de la capacité et des ressources collégiales aux carrefours communautaires peut faciliter l'accès à l'éducation postsecondaire. Nous comblons ainsi une lacune dans la recherche en explorant comment les carrefours communautaires créent une structure de soutien pouvant stimuler la motivation de personnes apprenantes adultes à faible revenu et faciliter leur parcours vers une formation postsecondaire. Selon une analyse thématique des entrevues, nous (a) analysons les perspectives des partenaires sur l'approche des carrefours communautaires pour améliorer l'accessibilité à l'enseignement supérieur, (b) réfléchissons au processus d'engagement campus-communautaire qui sous-tend la structure de partenariat et (c) effectuons une évaluation critique de l'efficacité du modèle des carrefours communautaires pour faciliter le parcours éducationnel des personnes apprenantes.

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RETHINKING POST-SECONDARY ACCESS AND ENGAGEMENT FOR LOW-INCOME ADULT LEARNERS THROUGH A COMMUNITY HUB PARTNERSHIP APPROACH

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Abstract

This paper draws upon a case study of a campus-community partnership program in Ontario that delivers tuition-free college courses to low-income adult learners in community hub locations. By co-locating college classrooms in existing neighbourhood gathering places (i.e., a community centre and a public library), our research explores whether integrating college capacity and resources in community hub locations can help increase the accessibility of post-secondary education. In doing so, we address a gap in the research in exploring how community hubs provide a support structure that can help boost the motivation of low-income adult learners and better facilitate their pathway to a post-secondary education. Drawing upon a thematic analysis of interview data, we (a) analyze partners' perspectives on the community hub-based approach in bolstering the accessibility of higher education, (b) reflect on the process of campus-community engagement underpinning the partnership structure, and (c) critically assess the efficacy of the community hub model in connecting learners with an educational pathway.

Résumé

Le présent article s'appuie sur l'étude de cas d'un programme de partenariat campus-communauté en Ontario offrant des cours collégiaux sans frais aux personnes apprenantes adultes à faible revenu dans des lieux de carrefour communautaires. En examinant ces salles de classe collégiales co-situées dans des lieux de rencontre

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existants dans les quartiers (par exemple, centre communautaire ou bibliothèque), notre recherche examine si l'intégration de la capacité et des ressources collégiales aux carrefours communautaires peut faciliter l'accès à l'éducation postsecondaire. Nous comblons ainsi une lacune dans la recherche en explorant comment les carrefours communautaires créent une structure de soutien pouvant stimuler la motivation de personnes apprenantes adultes à faible revenu et faciliter leur parcours vers une formation postsecondaire. Selon une analyse thématique des entrevues, nous (a) analysons les perspectives des partenaires sur l'approche des carrefours communautaires pour améliorer l'accessibilité à l'enseignement supérieur, (b) réfléchissons au processus d'engagement campus-communautaire qui sous-tend la structure de partenariat et (c) effectuons une évaluation critique de l'efficacité du modèle des carrefours communautaires pour faciliter le parcours éducationnel des personnes apprenantes.

Researchers in the field of adult education have long been interested in the factors that influence the participation of adult learners in higher education (Boeren, 2017; Boshier, 1978; Cross, 1981; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2017). A growing subset of the literature focuses on the challenges faced by low-income adults and on the interventions designed to increase the accessibility of post-secondary (Boeren & Whittaker, 2018; Bragg et al., 2006; Childs et al., 2017; Flynn et al., 2011; Stonefish et al., 2015). Despite this, adults from low-income communities remain underserved and underrepresented in the post-secondary system (Frempong et al., 2012; Robson et al., 2016). The barriers faced by such populations are complex and varied, with initiatives that aim to strengthen post-secondary participation rates often designed in collaboration between higher-education institutions and their community partners (Bowering et al., 2017; Butcher et al., 2011; Habel, 2012). A central contention of our paper is that increasing the participation rate of low-income adult learners entails strengthening the accessibility of higher education through innovative forms of community engagement. Specifically, we draw upon a case study examining the workings of a college-community partnership program in a mid-sized city in Ontario that delivers college programming to low-income adult learners in community hub-based locations. Central to the program is the co-location of college classrooms in existing neighbourhood gathering places (i.e., a community centre and a public library) that connect residents with available amenities and social services. Our guiding research question is as follows: Does integrating college capacity in community hub locations help increase the accessibility of post-secondary education for low-income adult learners? In responding to this, we address a gap in the research in exploring how delivering college programming in collaboration with community partners provides a support structure that can help boost the motivation of low-income adult learners and better facilitate their pathway to a post-secondary education.

Drawing upon a thematic analysis of our interview data, the overall purpose of our study is to examine how the use of community hubs represents an opportunity for post-secondary institutions and their community partners to rethink how they engage with underserved adult populations. In presenting our findings, we (a) analyze partners' perspectives on the community hub-based approach in bolstering the accessibility of higher education, (b) reflect on the process of campus-community engagement underpinning the partnership structure, and (c) critically assess the efficacy of the community hub model in connecting learners with an educational pathway.

Low-Income Adult Learners and Post-Secondary Accessibility

Adult learners from low-income communities face a wide range of social, psychological, and environmental (classroom) barriers in accessing post-secondary education (Boshier, 1973, 1978; Flynn et al., 2011; Philibert et al., 2008; Robson et al., 2016). These range from situational barriers regarding life circumstances (e.g., poverty, family/child-care commitments, and limited access to technology and the Internet), institutional barriers regarding cost and the application process, and a range of dispositional/motivational barriers (e.g., a lack of confidence or a previous negative experience of education) (Flynn et al., 2011; Hyland-Russell & Groen, 2011; Pinsent-Johnson et al., 2013). Such barriers are often exacerbated by individual challenges related to physical/mental health, lower overall levels of educational attainment and high-school completion rates, and unemployment or underemployment, as well as a range of factors pertaining to ethnic or racial identity (Lange et al., 2015; McMullen, 2011; Vaccaro, 2012). The complex and intersecting nature of the barriers that low-income adults face highlights the necessity of viewing their ability to access and participate in post-secondary as a matter not only of individual self-determination and motivation but also of educational policy and practice (Boeren, 2017; Hoggan & Browning, 2019). To this end, initiatives designed to boost the post-secondary participation rate of low-income populations typically include the delivery of campus or high-school-based credit-based transition or continuing education courses, financial assistance through bursaries or grants, access to technology, and advising regarding educational pathways (Bowering et al., 2017; Childs et al., 2017; Habel, 2012; Robson et al., 2016). Although research on post-secondary access positions such wraparound supports as key to promoting greater engagement with higher education (Bowering et al., 2017; Childs et al., 2017; Frempong et al., 2012; Michalski et al., 2017; Stonefish et al., 2015), existing educational provisions and practices have limited efficacy when it comes to enabling the greater participation of low-income adult learners (Boeren et al., 2012; Boeren & Whittaker, 2018).

Interventions aimed at increasing the accessibility of post-secondary for low-income adults draw upon a wide range of campus-community partnership models (Gaffikin & Morrissey, 2008; Lasker & Weiss, 2003; Van de Ven, 2007). For example, Scull and Cuthill (2010) proposed a model of engaged outreach whereby partners nurture the post-secondary aspirations of low-income learners and their ability to access higher education. Other approaches align with Dempsey's (2010) suggestion that campus-community engagement be defined by partner commitment to "collaborative forms of organizing and typically involve under-resourced and marginalized communities" (p. 360). In essence, collaborative and participatory approaches to engaging low-income learners emphasize the importance of dialogic engagement between learners, educators, and community-based agencies and organizations (Freire, 2005; Scott & Schmitt-Boshnick, 2001; White, 2018; Zhu, 2019). Such approaches reframe the nature of the challenges involved from an individualized deficit model to a focus on the structural and systemic factors that hamper learner motivation and participation (Kastner & Motschilnig, 2021).

The literature on adult education also highlights the pedagogical importance of the classroom as a space of transformative engagement between students and faculty (Hoggan & Browning, 2019; Lange et al., 2015; Shor & Freire, 1987). In addition to considerations of the importance of the classroom as a space of learner empowerment, however, is the specificity of its location. To this end, there is growing interest in the potential of

neighbourhood-based initiatives designed to strengthen the accessibility of post-secondary for low-income populations (MacKinnon & Silver, 2015). Such initiatives entail working closely with community partners to embed and integrate post-secondary programming capacity and resources in neighbourhood-based locations in a manner that builds upon and extends conventional (e.g., campus- or high-school-based) models of course and/or program delivery (Stonefish et al., 2015). It is in this regard that community hub-based initiatives have the potential to play a decisive role through the embedding of post-secondary programming and resources in established neighbourhood-based locations that operate as pre-existing community focal points.

The Community Hub Approach

Community hubs generally operate as one-stop neighbourhood-based locations where residents can connect with a range of services and supports variously focused on child welfare, health, employment, newcomer settlement, counselling, housing, recreational pursuits, and more (Dunston, 2015; Dyson & Edelson, 2011; Pitre, 2015; Queiser, 2019). In Canada and elsewhere, governments have been actively promoting the use of community hubs as part of a growing trend in community engagement and partnership-building between municipal agencies, community organizations, and social service providers (Cohen, 2015; Community Hubs Australia, 2015; Pitre, 2015; Queiser, 2019). In essence, a community hub operates as "a conveniently located place that is recognized as a gathering place for people, their activities and events" (Haig, 2014). The rationale is that by situating services and supports in locations where individuals are more likely to access them, community hubs have the potential to address the multiple and intersecting needs of low-income residents. An important feature of the community hub model is the co-location or clustering of social services and resources in an anchor facility (e.g., a community centre, library, or municipal building) (Haig, 2014; McShane et al., 2012). Such co-locating fulfills a tripartite aim in contributing a physical space for activities/events, represents a mechanism that facilitates service integration and collaboration among partners, and provides a community-building opportunity.

It is the clustering feature of the community hub model that provides post-secondary institutions with an opportunity for enhanced grassroots community engagement with low-income adults. Given that community hubs typically include a variety of neighbourhood-level supports and services in a convenient and accessible location, the integration of post-secondary-focused resources and capacity can build upon the programming and services of an existing hub location, thereby helping to offset the challenges and barriers that learners face. In effect, embedding post-secondary capacity in neighbourhood access points has the potential to overcome some of the more entrenched barriers to encouraging engagement with post-secondary opportunities—namely, a lack of capacity of community-based agencies/organizations to connect residents with such opportunities, a lack of access to technology and the Internet, and, crucially, a lack of trust in the educational system (Pollock, 2012). Furthermore, a community hub approach can help facilitate a participatory process of partner engagement premised upon the collaborative inclusion of relevant stakeholders, the use of multiple community structures, and the maintenance of ongoing communication among and between partners. In light of this, the hub model has the potential to boost adult learner motivation and participation by fostering a greater sense of inclusion and

connectedness, in addition to strengthening the degree of collaboration with community partners to provide a structured and multifaceted wraparound student support system (Bragg et al., 2006; White, 2018; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2017).

Study Overview and Methodology

Our research draws upon a case study of a campus-community partnership program that delivers tuition-free college courses to adult learners in low-income communities in two dedicated classroom spaces. Municipal data on the urban context in question indicates that residents in the city's low-income communities experience higher rates of social assistance and lower rates of educational attainment than the municipal average. In essence, the model is designed to address the diverse interplay of the situational, institutional, and dispositional/psychological barriers that residents face when seeking to access post-secondary (Flynn et al., 2011). The first classroom became operational in 2015 in a former school repurposed by resident groups as a community centre. Launched in 2016, the second classroom is situated in the city's central library location. Courses are also delivered on an on-demand basis to specific client populations in seven other pop-up locations, including two local library branches, two community centres, and three health-care facilities. Applicants must be 19 years or older and not currently enrolled in a post-secondary program of study.

Designed to equip students with practical knowledge and academic skills, courses focus on a range of subject areas, including Introduction to Health and Wellness; Health, Safety, and Nutrition; Family Dynamics; Digital Photojournalism; Introduction to Postsecondary Experience; and more. Courses typically run for 10 weeks, with a maximum of 14 students per course. Course scheduling, focus, and location were decided in consultation with resident groups and service providers. Participating students may take up to two courses, the majority of which provide a credit that can be later applied to select programs of study in one of the college's post-secondary programs. The first 3 years of the program saw 50 course deliveries, with a total of 227 students completing at least one course and an overall course completion rate of 67%. A total of 66 students have subsequently transitioned to the college for either full-time or continuing education studies.

Methodologically, we conceptualize our approach as a form of "collaborative entanglement" (Bennet & Bennet, 2007), a dialogical process that aims to be responsive to the perspectives of engaged partners. Central to this conceptualization of entanglement is the development of a participatory process in which the knowledge and expertise of community partners are shared and exchanged (MacKinnon, 2018; Mosher et al., 2014). Fostering a relationship of trust through ongoing communication, the process is oriented toward mutual capacity-building, with the ultimate aim of empowering the eventual beneficiaries of the intervention (Hanson, 2015; Kastner & Motschilnig, 2021; Zhu, 2019). For example, the development and launch of the initiative was the outcome of 2 years of community consultation by the college's access and engagement team with a range of community and municipal partners. In practice, this involved monthly attendance at the meetings of residents' groups, ongoing consultations with a range of social service providers, and the regular hosting of open-table events in neighbourhood libraries and cafés. Such engagement allowed the college to learn about the barriers to post-secondary experienced by residents, including poverty, family or child-care commitments, health challenges, previous negative experiences of education, and feelings of social exclusion.

Residents also identified a lack of educational readiness, a lack of confidence and/or interest in post-secondary, and a lack of knowledge regarding the application process. Furthermore, residents indicated a reluctance to travel to the main college campus and recommended the college engage them locally at convenient and familiar locations through the delivery of introductory-level courses that would act as confidence builders for those with an interest in pursuing a post-secondary pathway.

Interview Procedure

Grounded in a qualitative research framework, our study draws upon data gathered from 28 semi-structured interviews conducted with a range of individuals involved in the partnership at various stages during its development, launch, and operation. Although the background expertise of participants and their familiarity with the post-secondary system varied considerably given their diverse roles, interviewees were selected to represent the diversity of partners involved in the initiative. Composed of 19 women and 9 men, interviewees were drawn from post-secondary education (9), municipal library services (7), non-profit organizations (7), health services (2), workforce development (2), and a local school board (1). Although ethical commitments toward participant confidentiality preclude more detailed description, all worked in fields that either directly or indirectly brought them into contact with the challenges and barriers faced by residents from low-income communities, including poverty, mental health, addictions, newcomer status, social exclusion, and access to education and/or employment.

Our review of the literature guided us in developing semi-structured interview questions focused on the structure and collaborative processes underpinning the partnership model. Participants were asked questions regarding their views on the workings of the program, their role and participation in the partnership, how they perceived the community hub model has been received by the individuals and groups they work with, and what barriers and challenges they experienced through collaboration. All interviews, contact protocols, and consent forms received ethical clearance before the commencement of the research. Additionally, all interviews were conducted by two members of the research team, neither of whom were participating faculty or staff nor involved in the design or running of the program.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed following completion and analyzed through a process of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis involves identifying, analyzing, and discussing patterns and themes emergent from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Employed in a range of theoretical and epistemological perspectives, thematic analysis is an interpretative process of meaning making in which key themes and sub-themes are identified and categorized (Nowell et al., 2017). As employed in this study, deductively derived forms of thematic analysis provide less of a rich description of the overall data set, and more so a detailed analysis of selected aspects of the data as informed by the conceptual approach of the research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As such, themes emerging from the analysis are determined largely by the extent to which they provide insight regarding the overall research question and study purpose, as opposed to the frequency of their occurrence (as is more typical of inductive forms of thematic analysis). Our analysis of interviews was conducted in an iterative manner involving a sequential process of coding and subsequent identification and generation of themes. Results of the

analysis were checked and discussed by members of the research team as themes were identified, developed, and refined.

In terms of methodological limitations, our decision to focus solely on representatives of the partnership is guided by our specific focus on the understandings and perceptions of the collaborative processes and structures informing the program by those involved in its design, implementation, and operation. In previous research (Bourke et al., 2019), we have explored the complex interplay of the individual and structural barriers that low-income adult learners face when seeking a return to education. Specifically, we found that having the opportunity to take a course in a community-based setting helped mitigate the challenges participants face and allowed them to explore their post-secondary options. We have also conducted previous research on the crucial role of the teaching practices that faculty employ when seeking to boost the confidence of students, and the importance of designing and delivering courses from a social justice perspective to meet the distinctive needs of low-income adult learners (Bourke et al., 2020). In addition, we are cognizant that interviewees may be representative of the communities in question, but not necessarily from those communities. As such, we are mindful that they may have a limited view of the workings of the program due to their specialized roles and responsibilities. In light of this, our analysis of the interview data is sensitized to the complex interplay of power and positionality that informs an access program composed of partners with diverse institutional and organizational mandates.

Findings

Respondents' Views on the Community Hub Model as a Pathway to Education

All participants commented on the benefits of the community hub-based model in providing residents with a taste of post-secondary in a convenient, neighbourhood-based setting. As described by one respondent, "I do think that it [the location] is very helpful to demystify post-secondary education by giving people an opportunity to be part of a class in the [city] core, because location is sometimes a barrier" (Interview 17). Another respondent described how the hub delivery model "makes it comfortable for people to go to college without going to college" (Interview 8). Respondents were cognizant that the main college campus was both geographically and symbolically removed from the everyday lives of many of the city's low-income residents. One individual remarked on this as follows:

I was surprised to know and learn from these students that they were reluctant to take even a city bus up [to the college], that there were almost two cities within one city . . . and that they saw the college as some other place, and that they were from the core. (Interview 17)

This view was echoed by a representative of a neighbourhood resident group. Commenting on how the community-based nature of the program helped alleviate both situational and psychological barriers that adult learners face, the individual stated,

There may be students who either feel intimidated to go to the college, or they don't have the means to be transported to the college. It gives them a chance to learn in their communities and it makes it more barrier-free . . . so that they're able to access education without the barrier of having to go to a spot that may be unfamiliar to them. (Interview 26)

Commenting on the attitudinal shift they saw in a student they were familiar with, one community-based partner remarked, "That's a huge win. It might not be something that you'll see on a check-box or a spreadsheet . . . just the fact that that program was there for that kid to move on, to move the needle even a little bit" (Interview 2).

Respondents variously described the program as a "meeting place" (Interview 12), a "stepping stone to get used to something different" (Interview 3), or a "launching pad" to further their educational prospects (Interview 20). As described by a college-based representative,

What I find in a lot of the communities we reach out to is [that] they feel like they've lost that hope and there's no hope for them . . . but now we've come in and reassured them that there is hope and that we can help you get through this. It may not be to the extent that they need, but at least we give them that stepping stone to start it. So, I think that's what we have, that pact. (Interview 22)

Several respondents commented on how the customizable feature of the model was able to overcome some of the perceived rigidity of conventional post-secondary program delivery. As one individual remarked, "I would say [the] perception is that it's more open and it's more flexible than most other areas in post-secondary" (Interview 4). Another partner noted, "There's flexibility and there's innovation so we can do new things . . . and we can find success that we just can't with the traditional kind of college model of diplomas and classes and all this kind of stuff" (Interview 5). Such flexibility included courses selected as per resident input and interest, small class sizes conducive to varying the speed and delivery of course content, and the selection of experienced faculty sensitized to the barriers faced by adults from low-income communities (Interview 10).

Respondents' Views on the Efficacy of the Model to Address Resident Needs

The effectiveness of the hub model in serving the needs of residents in multiple ways was remarked upon by several respondents. One respondent, working in the field of social service delivery, commented,

I think the philosophy of having classrooms in peoples' communities is a natural one. I know that, most importantly, we bring services to them, we don't ask them to go to the services. People want a one-stop sort of shop. They want to go to a place and access one service and to be able to access and meet a couple of their other needs in that same building, and that is a natural philosophy to me and it works really well. (Interview 5)

The one-stop model was especially important for respondents who worked with client populations with diverse and intersecting needs, such as individuals from racialized groups, newcomer groups, and individuals identifying as LGBTQ+. In such terms, the classroom location helped offset the risk factors associated with such groups by providing "a safer space or as safe as possible [so] they have the extra protection of us there to support them should something happen" (Interview 12). Building upon this, the following individual remarked that "having [the college] there made it really accessible, I would guess maybe less intimidating because it was practically part of our centre, where people feel very safe

and comfortable right now” (Interview 3). Another respondent connected this sentiment to what they described as the perceived barriers experienced by low-income populations:

I always wonder why people don't walk in the door when it's free, and when there are free resources. Like, there's no barriers . . . but actually, there are barriers . . . barriers of people's perceptions. For whatever reason, you know, those people haven't had the same kind of supports to get them to higher education. (Interview 8)

The importance of the supports and services that community organizations provide to residents was emphasized by the following respondent: “That focus on customer service is very, very important for that very reason because the experience can decide for someone whether they'll ever come back again” (Interview 12). Another respondent echoed this view:

The importance of building trusting and trustful relationships with residents and prospective students or people who are maybe pre-contemplative and starting to put together pieces related to employment and education, and having those recurring relationships is really important. (Interview 20)

Although participants enthused on the benefits of the community hub-based delivery model, some respondents cautioned against losing sight of the *raison d'être* of the model. The following partner compared the workings of the hub model to the spokes of a bicycle wheel:

I mean the concept is a pretty good one so long as you think of the end goal, which is to get people into the hubs connected to what they need and then back out. They can't get stuck in the hub. The whole point is the spoke. And I think sometimes people forget that the hub has a spoke that leads elsewhere. (Interview 7)

Central to achieving this connection is the relationship of trust that exists between participating students and the locations they are already familiar and comfortable with. As noted by the following community partner,

It gives people an opportunity to do something in a place where they already feel comfortable. You know they might not travel up to [the college]. So that's a big thing, and we know that just by telling people where to go for help. If it's not convenient, they won't go. If they're not familiar with it, they won't walk there, or they won't go alone. So just the fact that it's in a building where they're already comfortable, with staff that they have relationships with, saying, “You know, I really suggest you check this out. I'll even take you upstairs” . . . like myself. I think that that is a super important part. (Interview 5)

Such comments testify not only to the importance of the community-based setting, but also to the meaningful, trusting relationships shared among service providers and residents. Such relationships are crucial when working to engage residents with the post-secondary resources embedded in their communities.

Respondents' Views on the Community Engagement Process

Participants were appreciative of the consultative and reciprocal decision-making process underpinning the partnership, one that they perceived to be sensitized and customizable to the needs of the community. As one community partner noted,

The challenge is finding community partners who will engage in it because it's so much work to set it up. Because you've got to get the buy-in from your staff, you know, but when they do buy in, it really does make a difference. (Interview 17)

The collaborative ethos and sense of mutual trust embedded in the partnership were described by several respondents as central to any positive achieved outcomes. This theme was addressed by the following respondent:

I think mostly what it's done is sort of build our confidence or maybe increased our faith in [the college] as a partner that really is more than just interested in [fee] paying students . . . Our team has seen what [the program] has done and how it's affected the youth, and they are sort of spreading the word out in the community that [the college] is a solid community partner that understands the issues of social justice and equality and is trying to make efforts to reach people who can access post-secondary that traditionally haven't. (Interview 7)

A benefit of the collaborative approach underpinning the partnership is the perception that it gives residents a voice in the process. For example, one community representative commented, "It's the feeling that the community has a voice . . . that residents felt that they were being heard and that their voice also had an impact of how programming came about later on" (Interview 27), whereas another remarked, "I feel like they actually appreciate our voices so I'm all for that" (Interview 28). Another interviewee remarked that the grassroots engagement structuring of the program allowed them to "remain active participants in the dialogue" (Interview 8). Commenting on how the design of the programming was conducted in collaboration with representatives of resident groups, one college representative remarked,

I think the greatest thing . . . is we ask them what they want to learn. We're not going in knowing all and saying, "This is what we think you should learn." No. We ask them exactly what they want to learn. (Interview 24)

Such amplification of resident voice was described by another college-based respondent as the outcome of an approach rooted in a social justice lens: "It's rooted in a place of social justice and duty . . . like we're here . . . we're not going anywhere, so we really should make sure that we're doing as much as we can to make access more equitable for everybody" (Interview 20). The following respondent described the design and functioning of the initiative in the following terms: "The setup is very open, it's welcoming, it's quite informal and for people [it's] an on-ramp to education . . . a pathway to education" (Interview 2).

Respondents' Views on the Synergy of the Partnership

Several respondents commented on how the presence of the college in the hub location strengthened the ability of partners to “piggyback” (Interview 6) on each other’s capacities and resources. One partner noted,

The partnership has enriched our organization only because [it] has enabled us to fulfill our mission statement and our mandate in the community. Being able to partner with a bigger organization like [the college], they have allowed us to become more visible, to do our work more effectively and efficiently, and has allowed us to have a broader reach than we would otherwise have. (Interview 1)

Respondents working in the delivery of social services commented on how the collaborative nature of the partnership helped them to avoid redundant or replicated projects and helped free them up to devote more time to serving their client populations. As one respondent noted, “It’s like a reciprocal kind of a relationship, right? It’s not just what they do for us . . . it’s what we do for them and what they do for us” (Interview 14). As described by a college representative, part of the challenge in building the partnership was in attempting to “deconstruct the silos” (Interview 20) that too often compartmentalize the efforts of those working in a multisectoral collaboration.

Respondents also commented on how the co-location strategy helped facilitate greater awareness of each other’s mandates, and how the program represented what one respondent described as a “unique referral opportunity” (Interview 2) for the populations they work with. For example, community-based service providers can connect individuals with college programming available in the community, whereas college staff can connect students with the community services available at the classroom location. As one interviewee remarked, “In the hub model, there is value in that each partner can gain a deeper understanding of the work that’s happening from the different partners, and that’s good, and I think it also enhances support for your institution” (Interview 8). Granted, such mutual benefit is based on service providers being knowledgeable of the college programming available and on college representatives being well-versed in the diversity of partner-provided services. In addition, there was consensus among respondents that the program is a “cog in a much bigger wheel” of municipal intervention (Interview 25). Another respondent commented on the ripple effects of the initiative in the community: “I think the broader community is affected because they hear about these partnerships and they go ‘oh cool,’ . . . so you’re actually demonstrating it by fostering these partnerships” (Interview 7). In such terms, the collaborative ethos underpinning the program is premised upon the common goal of serving the community from multiple vantage points, as informed by the differing institutional and/or organizational mandates of engaged partners.

Respondents' Views on the Challenges of Collaboration

Throughout interviews, respondents had realistic appraisals of the ultimate reach and impact of the program in addressing the complex array of challenges and barriers that residents experience. Several interviewees alluded to the tension that exists between participating in the initiative as a moral imperative, and more pragmatic considerations regarding financing the running of their programming and their capacity to participate in the partnership. As

one respondent noted, "My thought is [that] even if it isn't cost-effective, it's the right thing to do. We should be doing this. It's ethically, morally, the right thing to do" (Interview 15). On this note, respondents working in the community sector contextualized the program within the precarious funding climate they continuously find themselves working in, and the impact this has on their ability to deliver programming and services (Interview 23). As expressed by one respondent, "I think there's always limitations around these things, and it's staying ahead of the curve, right?" (Interview 14). Another individual remarked,

If you ask me what our program is going to be 5 years from now, I don't think I would be able to tell you. I would know certain elements that would exist, but at the same time, we need to respond to changing needs and community interests . . . our goal is to do ongoing tweaks and not wait for the sky to fall and then have to redevelop everything. (Interview 8)

Such views contrast with the perception that, compared with the community sector and notwithstanding their budgetary considerations, the college is relatively well-resourced, both in terms of staffing and finances. Commenting on their greater capacity to conduct community outreach and engagement, one college representative commented, "Some of the smaller organizations would struggle to provide the same kind of service and part of the problem is it takes time to build those relationships and trust with the people" (Interview 14). Such considerations, in addition to the recognition among community partners that collaborating with the college served to boost their organizational capacity, was suggested by the following respondent as a key reason behind their willingness to partner: "It tends to be hard to get resources for horizontal kind of initiatives . . . horizontal government initiatives are consistently underfunded, and I think that's the time when we need to strengthen our partnerships" (Interview 8). One manifestation of these government priorities is the fact that funding is increasingly tied to economic outcomes and the needs of employers. As such, college and community-based representatives commented on the increasing necessity of aligning their services and programming both to funding availability and labour market needs.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our contribution to the literature with this study is two-fold. First, we have addressed a gap in the research on adult education in exploring how neighbourhood-based approaches help bolster the accessibility of post-secondary education for low-income adult learners. Our findings indicate that integrating post-secondary capacity and resources at the neighbourhood level has the potential to help overcome some of the limitations of conventional modalities of campus-community engagement and provide participating students with a convenient and accessible opportunity to explore a post-secondary pathway. By co-locating college classrooms in existing neighbourhood gathering places that connect learners with available amenities and social services, the initiative provides a community-based supportive learning environment that works to boost the motivation and participation of low-income adult learners in post-secondary education. Such learnings have important implications for educational policy and practice.

Second, our study has highlighted how a community hub approach helps facilitate a process of mutual growth and empowerment among partners in helping them achieve their respective institutional/organizational mandates. Although the college may see the delivery of post-secondary programming in the community as encouraging students to pursue a further course of study, community partners see such delivery as a means by which to better support and serve their client populations. In serving this synergistic community-building function, the hub-based model has the potential to strengthen the knowledge residents have of the social services and supports available to them, in addition to demystifying what is involved in pursuing a post-secondary pathway.

The importance of building the partnership from a foundation of communication and trust was perceived by participants as crucial to moving beyond engagement to empowerment. In such terms, community partners felt included in discussions regarding the form and functioning of the program, with this ultimately proving conducive to a participatory partnership model that incorporated both transactional (e.g., mutually beneficial in terms of helping partners become more efficient and effective in serving residents and/or their client populations) as well as transformative (e.g., changing the nature of post-secondary accessibility) components (Butcher et al., 2011; Strier, 2011). Acknowledging the differential distribution of resources and capacity among partners regarding such factors as finances, staffing, and time, the structuring of the collaboration is underpinned by guiding principles of trust and dialogue. As such, the partnership seeks to avoid a model of “trickle-down community engagement” (Wolff et al., 2016) by investing and embedding post-secondary resources and capacity focused on nurturing learner engagement and empowerment. In essence, the imperative of engaging in such capacity-building holds post-secondary institutions accountable for expanding access to higher education for underserved populations.

Notwithstanding the promise of the community hub model, we remain mindful of the challenges that partners continue to face. For example, the shift toward multisectoral partnerships indicates a move from a top-down framework of social service delivery and coordination to a bottom-up approach of building capacity and resiliency at the community level (Cohen, 2015; Peacock, 2012). An overriding concern for those working in the community sector is trying to achieve their institutional/organizational mandate in the context of an unpredictable funding climate and era of economic uncertainty. More specifically, a challenge for community partners seeking to build long-term trusting relationships with their client populations entails committing to a programmatic time frame that exceeds that of most funding cycles, thereby hampering their ability to plan for the long term. This uncertainty, compounded by limited staffing capacity, compels them to focus on achieving their service delivery priorities, with this inevitably impacting their ability to equitably participate in the program. Such insights highlight the necessity of establishing a partnership structure that adjusts to the differential operational resources and capacity of those involved, while striving to maintain a commitment to the overarching objectives of the initiative.

In terms of study limitations, we are cognizant that the systemic and structural challenges of socioeconomic disparity and inequality that contextualize the lives of low-income adult learners remain intact, and that there remain hard-to-reach populations who continue to experience barriers to post-secondary (Boeren, 2017). Any initiative of community engagement aimed at boosting the accessibility of higher education will,

therefore, have limited impact if implemented in isolation from a more comprehensive and multifaceted poverty reduction strategy. As such, we acknowledge that government support for the development and expansion of community hubs can encourage partner participation (Pitre, 2015). Notwithstanding this, our study provides insight and guidance for practitioners in the field of adult education seeking to build pathways to post-secondary education for underserved adult populations.

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