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### Authors

Kim, Moonhawk  
Shapiro, Valerie B  
Ozer, Emily J  
[et al.](#)

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**University's Absorptive Capacity for Collaborative Research:  
Examining Challenges and Opportunities for Organizational Learning  
to Engage in Research with Community Partners**

Moonhawk Kim<sup>1</sup>, Valerie B. Shapiro<sup>2</sup>, Emily J. Ozer<sup>3</sup>, Susan Stone<sup>2</sup>, Brian Villa<sup>3</sup>, Marieka Schotland<sup>3</sup>, & Colleen Kohashi<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*San Francisco Unified School District, San Francisco, CA, USA;*

<sup>2</sup>*School of Social Welfare, UC Berkeley, Berkeley, CA, USA;*

<sup>3</sup>*School of Public Health, UC Berkeley, Berkeley, CA, USA;*

<sup>4</sup>*Office for Protection of Human Subjects (OPHS), UC Berkeley, Berkeley, CA, USA*

Address correspondence to: Moonhawk Kim [moonhawk@berkeley.edu](mailto:moonhawk@berkeley.edu) San Francisco Unified School District, San Francisco, CA 94102

### **Abstract**

The study and the practice of collaborative research between university researchers and community entities of various types have generally focused on the organizational conditions that facilitate community partners to make use of research knowledge. In this article, we propose a conceptual innovation that absorptive capacity—the ability to identify helpful new information and to absorb and apply it in new ways—is important not only for community entities but also for universities. Using our experience of collaborating at UC Berkeley between scholars engaged in collaborative research and Institutional Review Board (IRB) analysts, we examine the dimensions of absorptive capacity—prior knowledge, communication pathways, strategic knowledge leadership, and resources—in the university context. The analysis generates insights that recommend 1) further research into the conditions and the processes of organizational learning for collaborative research in universities and 2) strategies for practitioners of collaborative research to strengthen and improve universities' capacity to engage in it.

Keywords: community-engaged scholarship; institutional review board

Subject classification codes: University-Community Partnerships; Community-Based Research; University-Community Collaborations; Community Research

## Introduction

*Berkeley has workarounds [for how researchers navigate through administrative processes]—but it feels like the investigator is working against the University.  
— University of California Berkeley campus administrator (April 29, 2021)*

Faculty members in multiple disciplines and universities engage in various forms of collaborative research with community partners, where research is co-constructed to meet the needs and priorities of the community and the two disconnected entities align their respective areas of expertise and collaborate to solve problems of practice. The precise methods and traditions of how this collaboration is carried out vary widely across and within fields, but examples include collaborative education research (CER) (The Collaborative Education Research Collective, 2023), community-engaged scholarship (CES), and participatory action research (PAR), among many others.

In this context, scholars have examined the conditions necessary for practice organizations to learn and improve from collaborating with external partners. The importance of “absorptive capacity” of the *practice* side for effective collaboration has garnered attention in recent years (e.g., Farrell & Coburn, 2017; Farrell et al., 2019). While scholars discuss the qualities of research institutions that facilitate a practice organization’s learning (Farrell & Coburn, 2017, p. 144-146) and the broader institutional changes necessary to support collaborative research (Gamoran 2023; Ozer et al., 2021), much less has been conceptualized about the absorptive capacity of universities as collaborators rather than as producers of research (Crain-Dorough & Elder, 2021).

In this article, we advance a conceptual innovation of examining the absorptive capacity on the side of the *research organization*, using our experience at University of California (UC) Berkeley to illustrate. The concept of absorptive capacity on the

university side grapples with the organizational and the institutional capacity to engage in *collaborative research*, the term we use as the most expansive and inclusive label for the phenomenon. More specifically, we examine under what conditions universities as a complex organization can engage and partner effectively with community partners for collaborative research. In particular, we report on institutional change work that has been facilitated by a grant from the William T. Grant and Doris Duke Charitable Foundations to address structural, motivational, and financial barriers that inhibit collaborative educational research (CER) partnerships.<sup>1</sup>

Our focus here is on the collaboration between CER scholars and institutional review board (IRB) analysts in the context of educational agencies as practice-side partners, but the implications of the conceptual innovation are much broader. While the insights about the role of prior knowledge, communication pathways, strategic knowledge leadership, and resources for strengthening collaborative research by universities are valuable, the most important contribution is larger. We highlight that in collaborative research, both sides—including the university—learn and that the learning stance of research organizations is critical for competitive advantage (Allred et al., 2011) and organizational growth.

### **University's Absorptive Capacity to Engage in Collaborative Research**

In this section, we briefly develop the conceptual framework of absorptive capacity as it is applied to the university. In making this adaptation, we emphasize the importance of the university's organizational learning. The superintendent of a large

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<sup>1</sup> We use “collaborative *education* research” or CER instead of collaborative research, when referring to specific efforts, scholars or literature about collaborative research in the field of education.

urban school district, with which UC Berkeley partners, repeatedly maintained that the learning in the research-practice partnership needed to be *on both sides* (M. Kim, personal communication, January 28, 2020). The content of learning, however, differs between the practice organization and the research organization. In CER, educational agencies learn how to improve systems, structures, and practices to improve student learning and outcomes (e.g., Coburn et al., 2013). For universities, the learning is how to strengthen the production of knowledge in collaboration with external partners. In this way, whereas absorptive capacity of educational agencies is with respect to *research knowledge*, absorptive capacity of universities is with respect to the *experiential knowledge* from endeavors with external collaborators.

In the context of CER, the literature focuses on four factors that shape organizations' absorptive capacity: prior knowledge, communication pathways, strategic knowledge leadership, and resources to partner.

### **Prior Knowledge**

As Farrell and Coburn (2017) summarize, “people within an organization need relevant, domain-specific knowledge to be able to recognize and make use of external knowledge” (p. 141). For universities to learn to collaborate more effectively with external communities, a critical mass with knowledge and experience of engaging in collaborative education is necessary. The locus of this knowledge and experience is critical in practice organizations (Farrell & Coburn, 2017) and is even more so in universities. The prior knowledge needs to exist throughout the university across all the departments that play a role in partnering with external entities, including IRB, sponsored projects, and contracting and grants, as well as the researchers.

### **Communication Pathways**

Formal and informal channels of communication are important for all those involved in collaborating with external partners to share knowledge and engage in collective problem-solving (Farrell & Coburn, 2017). Formal pathways include working groups, organized meetings, and cross-functional project teams. Informal pathways arise spontaneously based on social connections among university personnel. What scholars emphasize is the critical role of shared sensemaking in facilitating organizational learning through social interactions (Weick, 1995). Opportunities need to exist for new information and emerging knowledge to be interpreted and processed collectively.

### **Strategic Knowledge Leadership**

Strategic knowledge leadership is the ability of an individual or a group of individuals to authoritatively connect the extant knowledge inside the organization with new knowledge and build new routines and structures (Farrell & Coburn, 2017; Volberda et al. 2010). In the context of large and complex organizations like the university, the leadership also needs to be endowed with sufficient positional authority to effect the necessary institutional changes in a coordinated way across compartmentalized departments and divisions (e.g., Gumport & Snyderman, 2006).

### **Resources for Partnering**

Lastly, while universities are typically seen as being endowed with more resources than the community partners engaged in CES (e.g., Turley & Stevens, 2015), resources for partnering with external communities are not guaranteed. When CES depends on grant funding and/or short-term resources, the concomitant instability and uncertainty in resources effectively limit the absorptive capacity of universities for

CES. For entities that are not external facing—for example, the IRB—the leadership needs to make an explicit allocation of staff time dedicated to learning about and improving the processes involved in collaborative research with external partners.

### **Balancing the Needs of Collaborative Research and IRB**

Partnering with external communities for collaborative research involves multiple administrative departments at a university. Thus, a university's absorptive capacity would pertain to how the entire system functions for organizational learning. We focus on the IRB to specifically illuminate this conceptual innovation on the side of the research organization.

In general, human subjects review in research organizations is an area with a large potential for organizational learning with respect to CER (see Bang & Vossoughi, 2016, p. 188). Federal regulations require that institutions carrying out research involving human subjects establish an IRB to “ensure the protection of the rights and welfare of all human participants in research conducted by university faculty, staff and students” (University of California Berkeley Office for Protection of Human Subjects, n.d.). Because CER departs significantly from models of traditional research and engagement, some existing assumptions and research administrative processes that work well for conventional research production are not always in alignment with collaborative models of research (Shore, 2006; Wilson et al., 2018). This does not imply that the fundamental goals of collaborative research and IRB are in conflict. In fact, both enterprises deeply consider the intersection of power and morality and have established norms that prescribe an ethical way of conducting research. However, whereas collaborative research comes from a perspective of sharing power to protect community partners, IRB comes from a tradition of using power to protect community partners.

More specifically, at UC Berkeley, the capacity to engage in collaborative research has been growing haltingly, despite the shared commitment to protect and serve community partners. We provide a few examples of these frictions. First, in partnered work, the boundary between what is research and what is not research is blurry. Faculty, staff, and students who conduct research (i.e., the process of creating generalizable knowledge), may use the same set of skills and processes in pursuit of other public goods (e.g., the creation of local knowledge for immediate decision-making). Broader collaboration, capacity-building, technical assistance, and evaluation activities can transition over time to become research, and can also progress with research simultaneously, with the same partners involved in both research and non-research activities, from the IRB's perspective. Second, principal investigators conducting collaborative research may not have the same primacy, autonomy, or authority that they typically have in less applied or less partnered projects. In fact, many forms of collaborative research are intended to disrupt the asymmetry between the academy and the community. Lastly, the time frame for collaborative projects differs in substantial ways—sometimes, for example, it is much shorter than traditional research projects. Given a key principle of meeting the needs of community partners, sometimes projects need to pivot quickly (e.g., Arce-Trigatti et al., 2023). At other times, the timeframe for collaborative research is much longer. A principle of collaborative research raises the necessity of hearing and consulting all the relevant voices. Authentically doing so may frequently lead to a lengthened timeline for research decision making, including decisions around central IRB concerns, like data storage.

In this context, the grants from William T. Grant and Doris Duke Charitable Foundations provided the opportunity and the resources to enhance the absorptive

capacity. In particular, the group of convening collaborative research scholars at UC Berkeley realized that some individual faculty and staff members were managing this tension with the IRB analysts individually, enabling those scholars with the most knowledge and know-how to find a path through. However, the learnings were not accumulating or being shared broadly, leading to inefficiently re-creating the wheel for each human subjects protocol, without creating on-ramps for broader collaborative research contributions that were equitable or sustainable. A more systems-oriented approach to overcoming the challenge was deemed necessary.

### **Building Absorptive Capacity through CER-IRB Collaboration at UC Berkeley**

As part of a broader effort to strengthen the campus's infrastructure for supporting collaborative research, staff from the Office for the Protection of Human Subjects (OPHS) and researchers conducting CES began working together to explore these issues. At UC Berkeley, the Committee for Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS) serves as the IRB, and the Office for Protection of Human Subjects (OPHS) is the administrative office supporting the CPHS. This section traces the evolution of this collaboration between CER researchers and OPHS.

### **The William T. Grant Foundation's Institutional Challenge Grant**

Multiple streams of efforts have existed at UC Berkeley to pursue improvements in university processes and structures related to CER, specifically efforts to strengthen absorptive capacity. The William T. Grant Foundation's Institutional Challenge grant, awarded to a UC Berkeley and its practice-side partner the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) in 2020, was an instigator for launching and resourcing the latest concerted efforts. In addition to the research project focusing on inequities of chronic absenteeism in SFUSD, the UC Berkeley side of the team began working to improve various university infrastructures to sustain the partnership.

Principal Investigators of the Institutional Challenge grant clustered the endeavor into four different domains: Modify faculty merit evaluation to place greater value on collaborative research; collaborate with campus IRB to improve the review of collaborative research protocols; promote greater visibility and coherence of collaborative research work at Berkeley, for both internal constituencies and external partners and funders; and smooth the flow of research administration processes and procedures for supporting it at UC Berkeley (Ozer, 2021; Ozer et al., 2021). In this manner, the team provided the much-needed strategic knowledge leadership to enhance UC Berkeley's collaborative research.

### ***An Initial Memorandum (Spring 2021)***

Initially, the team gathered information from collaborative researchers about their experiences of navigating the administrative aspects at the university. These efforts led to the documentation of tensions that the researchers experienced with the university administrative processes supporting collaborative research. We compiled existing knowledge and experiences (the prior knowledge) about the IRB review process from scholars across campus. These issues were then fleshed out by a workgroup of community engaged faculty to collect further input and examples.

The assembled stories culminated in a four-page memo that was shared with the CPHS Executive Committee in May 2021. Among other tensions, the memo covered the following three major points: (1) the ongoing and unanticipated evolution of collaborative research projects and the corresponding need for rapid responses and approvals from the IRB; (2) unclear and changing boundaries between research and non-research activities and the challenge of obtaining appropriate informed consent; and (3) shared responsibilities between researchers and community partners in carrying

out research, challenging the traditional and clear responsibility of the researcher for the performance of particular roles.

***Multi-stakeholder Meetings (Summer 2021)***

To delve deeper into the issues raised in the memo and to create a more formal communication pathway, a multi-stakeholder meeting was organized in July 2021. The attendees included the leadership of OPHS, two faculty members who serve as the chair or the vice chair of CPHS, and the leaders of the Institutional Challenge team at both the visionary and implementation levels. The main goals for this first meeting were to open lines of communication between OPHS and researchers conducting collaborative research so that OPHS could better understand the tensions raised in the memorandum, and to create a plan together for next steps.

Several themes arose in this initial meeting. First, the OPHS team highlighted that, despite the strictures of the federal regulations, some important flexibility existed in how researchers could design their protocols—flexibilities of which many researchers were not necessarily aware, for example, in the process of obtaining consent. Second, the conversation revealed that misinformation, misunderstanding, and misgivings about the IRB process abounded among collaborative research scholars, indicating that without systematic leadership, established prior knowledge can be inaccurate. The meeting participants wondered whether preemptive educational outreach might be helpful in reducing these. At the same time, the OPHS team noted the realistic possibility of some researchers exploiting flexibilities if pointed out—earned and unearned mistrust based on prior experiences. To continue making progress after the meeting, the OPHS team committed to marking up the memo and including comments on it. The attendees also committed to regrouping before the end of the summer.

A second summer meeting focused on the possible next steps. The group further envisioned the outreach document to be formatted as frequently asked questions (FAQ), which could help CES researchers to navigate the human subjects review process. Beyond the vision for this FAQ, some raised the possibility of establishing an ongoing *process* for collaboration, a structured communication pathway. Given stretched resources and human capacity, however, others believed that the FAQ document would be sufficient for summarizing the current interpretation of the federal guidelines. More broadly, the group grappled with the questions of when and how IRBs might evolve, and from/with whom they might learn. In always seeking to learn, OPHS largely looked to other IRBs, typically ones at other UC campuses, to guide this process. In the end, the participants decided to delegate the task of continuing the collaboration to a small working group consisting of three of the attendees.

Examining these meetings through the lens of absorptive capacity brings additional clarity and insight. First, prior knowledge, while important for serving as the basis for organizational learning, can be erroneous. As researchers worked in compartmentalized manner (e.g., National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018), wrong information sometimes did not have an opportunity to get corrected. Second, communication pathways may be challenging to establish and maintain. Every team and entity are overcommitted and under-resourced, while every new formal communication pathways requires staff time. These first two observations interact. When communication pathways do not exist and are difficult to create, prior knowledge may not accumulate effectively, and incorrect knowledge may not be rectified. But appropriate leadership may redress the situation. Third, *where* strategic knowledge leadership looks externally to learn is an important variable. As the OPHS team highlighted, IRBs look to other IRBs for lessons rather than other entities. Lastly,

resources always provide the underlying context.

***Working Group Collaboration (Fall 2021 – Spring 2023)***

The working group consisted of three individuals: an IRB Administrator at OPHS with 13 years of experience in the field; an Associate Professor of Social Welfare with 18 years of post-MSW experience conducting partnering research with non-research partners, and a Director of Research-Practice Partnerships and Community Engagement at the School of Education. This working group met virtually nine times between October 2021 and May 2022. One of the first things that the group decided to do was to go line-by-line through the marked-up memo and identify items that remained unresolved. Some issues raised in the memo were no longer relevant, as they were based on outdated OPHS policies and procedures that researchers believed were still in place. Other topics required deeper, longer, and multiple conversations. One such topic was how to manage protocols that grew extensively over time as initial projects morphed rapidly in lockstep with the work of the community partner. Another lengthy topic was the challenge of obtaining appropriate informed consent and parental permission and possibly waivers for them. Lastly, a novel idea surfaced toward the end of the collaboration period. Recognizing that the IRB process was only one part of the larger research administrative landscape on campus that collaborative research struggled with, the group proposed forming a body with representatives from various administrative units—OPHS, contracts and grants, data sharing, etc.—to review and support innovative yet challenging projects, including those from collaborative research. This approach would avoid uncoordinated delays and buck-passing that happened with the traditional workflow that proceeded sequentially through each of the units.

Over the course of the nearly eighteen-months long collaboration, the working group tried a few different formats for organizing and structuring the lessons. One possibility was a collection of anecdotes from researchers about how they handled illustrative scenarios in their IRB protocol. Another possibility was a collection of approved IRB protocols that could not only illuminate how to approach difficult human subjects issues in collaborative research, but also serve as a resource library of example protocols that others could mimic. These two approaches, however, were difficult to implement as gathering a sufficient number and diversity of anecdotes and protocols proved challenging. Researchers that found their way through felt vulnerable to any additional scrutiny, and the contexts of collaborative research proved remarkably varied and non-generalizing. A more effective approach was generating short documents that accumulated and summarized the learnings, which could then be shared with a larger group of stakeholders involved in the Institutional Challenge efforts on campus. Two such summaries were produced—in December 2021 and June 2022.

The first one presented a brief case of why collaborative research projects confronted challenges with respect to IRB reviews and suggested some potential solutions, including the creation of a campus-wide registry that would maintain an ongoing, vetted database of collaborative research projects and initiatives on campus. The second document presented a new scheme for organizing the proposed changes: improvements through campus-wide collaboration; improvements through IRB-researcher collaboration; and improvements through updating researchers' understanding. The first category included items that required collaboration across multiple entities on campus and thus constituted systems changes. The second category comprised new workflows and processes that collaborative research scholars would

need to adopt in working with OPHS. The last category dealt with misunderstanding that needed to be rectified through information and education campaigns.

This smaller working group consisted of a helpful set of members from the perspective of absorptive capacity. First, each of the three members had extensive prior knowledge about collaborative research and human subjects review in their respective role and responsibility. Moreover, the roles of the three members also endowed them with different experiences and perspectives, which enabled them to piece together a systems view. Second, the extensive interaction—although solely online—gave rise to strong relationships among the three members, which in turn helped build informal as well as formal communication pathways. Third, what emerged from these meetings is *collaborative* strategic knowledge leadership. The three members collected and compiled the knowledge about collaborative research and IRB processes interacted and generated ideas about how to improve the overall process. They brainstormed ideas that built on various existing administrative structures and thus considered the extant cultures and constraints. However, what the team lacked was sufficiently high position in the university hierarchy to effect institutional changes.

***Embedding in Broader Efforts and Moving Forward (Spring 2023 – present)***

During the fall of 2022, OPHS expressed concerns about implementing changes to its review processes specific to collaborative research scholars. Questions were raised about the unknown number of collaborative research investigators who might benefit from such changes and implications for perceptions of favoritism toward one group of campus investigators. However, additional endeavors were emerging around campus that helped bring renewed vigor to the OPHS-collaborative research collaboration.

A key effort was led by the new Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost

(EVCP). He was committed to broader “bureaucracy busting” on campus, which would reduce red tape and bottlenecks in various processes affecting the university’s missions. Working under this umbrella, the Assistant Vice Chancellor for Research Administration and Compliance (AVC-RAC), the position that oversees OPHS, learned about the OPHS-CES working group in November. The AVC-RAC then sought to understand how the working group’s concerns and recommendations fit within the larger priorities and initiatives of the Vice Chancellor for Research (VCR). In February 2023, the AVC-RAC initiated a campaign to carry out some purposeful data gathering with respect to collaborative research projects. The plan specified an OPHS analyst for supporting collaborative research scholars, and that data about the protocols for collaborative research projects would be collected during the Spring 2023 semester to enable a more explicit root cause analysis. The analysis would help OPHS to better 1) understand the scale and nature of the challenges that collaborative research scholars faced in undergoing the IRB process and 2) design its educational outreach. At the time of this writing, these endeavors are in progress.

### **Conclusion**

The challenge of reconciling collaborative research with the regulatory requirements of research ethics is real and prevalent, and it shapes the absorptive capacity of university for more effectively engaging in deeper and more timely collaboration with communities. Numerous efforts and ideas exist around the country, seeking to address and mitigate this challenge (e.g., Mikesell, et al., 2013; Solomon et al., 2016). Given UC Berkeley’s deep commitment to public service and impact and the myriad community-engaged projects carried out by researchers across campus, it is a fitting place to tackle this challenge.

The conceptual innovation exemplified by the experiences at UC Berkeley has

important implications for both research and practice. Researchers should investigate organizational learning and development of universities specifically in the context of collaborative research. Although scholars of CER have long recognized the importance of adjustments in researchers' mindsets and approaches (Farrell et al., 2021; The Collaborative Education Research Collective 2023), less attention has been paid to the institutional and the organizational context in which researchers are embedded.

Practitioners of collaborative research can strategically aim to strengthen the absorptive capacity of their research institutions. This can entail collectively compiling accurate institutional knowledge about the processes involved in working on collaborative research; institutionalizing communication pathways across different administrative departments, both formal and informal, bringing together all the units involved; and investing in developing shared strategic knowledge leadership that can engage in learning. Obtaining and allocating more resources always aids in facilitating institutional changes.

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