

Partnership Perspectives



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El Proyecto Bienestar: An Authentic CBPR Partnership in the Yakima Valley

Vickie Ybarra and Julie Postma

The Partnership

In 2002, the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) and the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) released a request for applications entitled, “Environmental Justice: Partnerships in Communication.” The purpose of their request was to support research “...aimed at achieving environmental justice for socioeconomically disadvantaged and medically underserved populations” through community-based research strategies (p.3). In response to this request for applications, a community member notified a University of Washington researcher that we had an opportunity to work together to write a community-based research proposal focused on the health of Yakima Valley agricultural workers and their families. It was funded, and El Proyecto Bienestar, or The Well-Being Project, was born.

The Yakima Valley is located in central Washington State, a rich agricultural region producing most of the nation’s apples and hops, along with many other labor-intensive crops. With the highest concentration of migrant and seasonal farmworkers in Washington State, the Yakima Valley has long attracted researchers interested in studying occupational and environmental health issues that effect this largely Hispanic migrant and seasonal farmworker population.

Within El Proyecto Bienestar, environmental justice refers to the equal protection and education of all communities regarding environmental and occupational hazards. The primary goal of the project is to develop strategies that will enable the community of Hispanic agricultural workers to effectively identify, characterize, and respond to the many occupational and environmental health risks they and their families face. El Proyecto’s approach is novel in that previous attempts at collaborative agenda setting in the Yakima Valley failed to incorporate the expertise of local agricultural workers, even though they were often subjects of occupational health research in the Valley. Within this partnership, data collection was designed to obtain key informants’ and Yakima Valley residents’ perspectives on locally relevant occupational and environmental health risks. Issues were identified by numerous members of the agricultural community including farmworkers, growers, health care professionals, and representatives from state agencies. A Town Hall Meeting was held so that farmworkers and their families could rank the issues that had been identified. With this information, El Proyecto’s Community Advisory Board developed a set of priorities. This research agenda will be used to support the project’s primary outcome: development of an issues-driven action plan to be incorporated into future community-driven research proposals (See Figure 1).

El Proyecto’s approach is novel in that previous attempts at collaborative agenda setting in the Yakima Valley failed to incorporate the expertise of local agricultural workers, even though they were often subjects of occupational health research in the Valley.

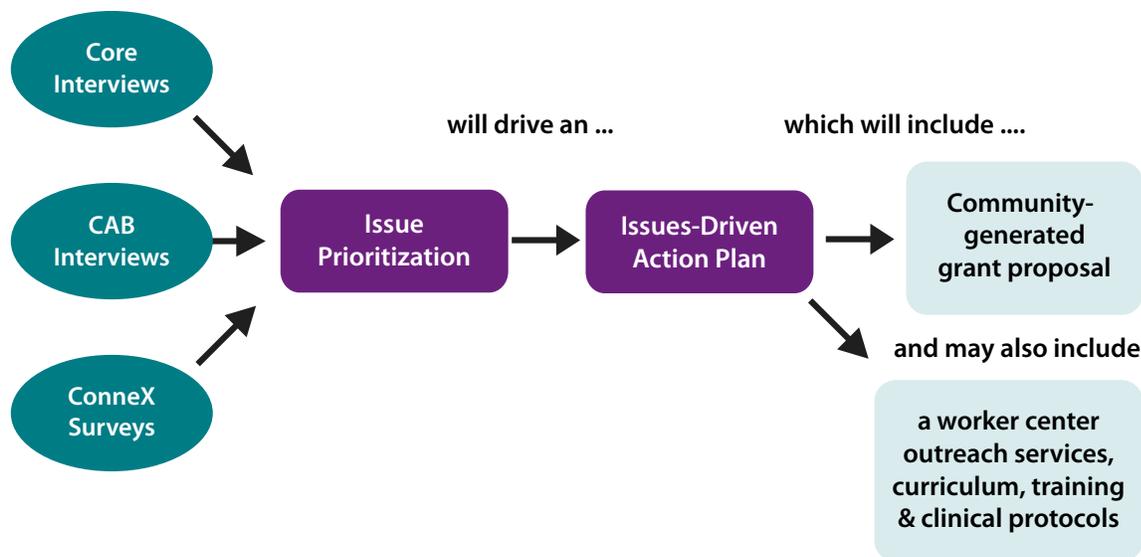


Figure 1. The El Proyecto Bienestar Research Process

CAB=Community Advisory Board ConneX=Connecting students to health careers

Strategies and Skills Used to Create an “Authentic” Community-University Partnership

Currently in its fourth and last year of funding, El Proyecto Bienestar is in a stage of reflection and planning for the future. What worked in this partnership? What challenges do we face? What made it “authentic?” El Proyecto Bienestar has created and maintained an authentic four-year academic-community partnership through cross-pollinating people and projects, partnering with the community using multiple levels of community involvement, building trust, and negotiating roles and budgets.

Cross-pollinating People and Projects

Although this particular partnership started in 2002, there was a historical relationship between the principal investigator, Dr. Matt Keifer from the University of Washington, and the community. Dr. Keifer is an occupational medicine specialist who has been faithfully coming into the community once a month for over ten years to provide medical care for patients who have been referred by family medicine physicians, primarily those with injuries and illnesses related to farm work. Through his work at the YVFWC he has demonstrated a commitment to farmworkers and their families in the Valley. He is someone who is trusted within the community. This history of collaboration and commitment brought the YVFWC “to the table” to discuss a collaborative funding opportunity.

Recognizing the breadth of potential opportunities between community and university partners is one way to maximize future partnership possibilities.

In addition, the YVFWC partners with other schools and research centers within the University of Washington including the School of Dentistry’s Northwest/Alaska Center to Reduce Oral Health Disparities and the School of Nursing’s Center for the Advancement of Health Disparities Research. Recognizing the breadth of potential opportunities between community and university partners is one way to maximize future partnership possibilities.

Partnering with the Community Using Multiple Levels of Community Involvement

El Proyecto Bienestar university partners include students and faculty from the School of Public Health and Community Medicine and the School of Nursing at The University of Washington. The project is also supported by the Pacific Northwest Agricultural Safety and Health Center, funded by the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health.

Often researchers and funders of research struggle to determine which community member or community organization is the “true” representative of a community within a community-based participatory research (CBPR) project. Some CBPR has involved community-based organizations, others have involved grassroots, unaffiliated community members, and it could be argued that both constitute “involving the community.” However, in El Proyecto Bienestar we recognize that “community” broadly defined is not a homogeneous set of opinions nor can its diversity be accurately characterized by one community-based organization or by a handful of grassroots, unaffiliated community members. In this project we have endeavored to involve community, and to hear community voice, on multiple levels and using multiple methods. These have included 1) working contractually with multiple, established and respected community-based organizations that have responsibility for decision making for the project through their membership in the Core group; 2) involving community organization and leader representation on the Community Advisory Board; 3) surveying grassroots, unaffiliated community members to determine their environmental and occupational health concerns; and 4) holding a large Town Hall Meeting specifically recruiting migrant/seasonal farmworkers and their family members to elicit their concerns and priorities. No single one of these mechanisms by itself could be said to “represent the community”, but collectively we believe these voices do represent the community. This combined approach to community involvement created the first farmworker driven occupational and environmental health research agenda in the Yakima Valley.

Organizational community partners: Community involvement in El Proyecto Bienestar is institutionalized through the contractual involvement of three community-based organizations. (See Figure 2.) Three well-respected and established community-based organizations are involved as primary subcontractors with both fiscal and programmatic responsibilities, including the YVFWC, The Northwest Communities Education Center/Radio KDNA, and Heritage University. The YVFWC is a large community and migrant health center founded in 1978. The YVFWC is the primary health care provider for the Hispanic agricultural workers in the Yakima Valley. The Northwest Communities Education Center is a community based non-profit organization that, in 1979, created Radio KDNA. Radio KDNA is a community-owned, Spanish language radio station in the Yakima Valley that provides health education messages to their farm worker audience. A third community partner is Heritage University, a small private Hispanic and Native American serving institution. Heritage has been in the community since the early 1980's. The University of Washington and the community-based organization partners make up El Proyecto Bienestar's “Core group,” which meets regularly every month to determine policy direction and ensure grant commitments are being met.

Community Advisory Board: El Proyecto Bienestar's Community Advisory Board represents a variety of community interests including farmworkers, farmworker organizations, growers, and the Yakama Indian Nation. The Community Advisory Board was developed after the

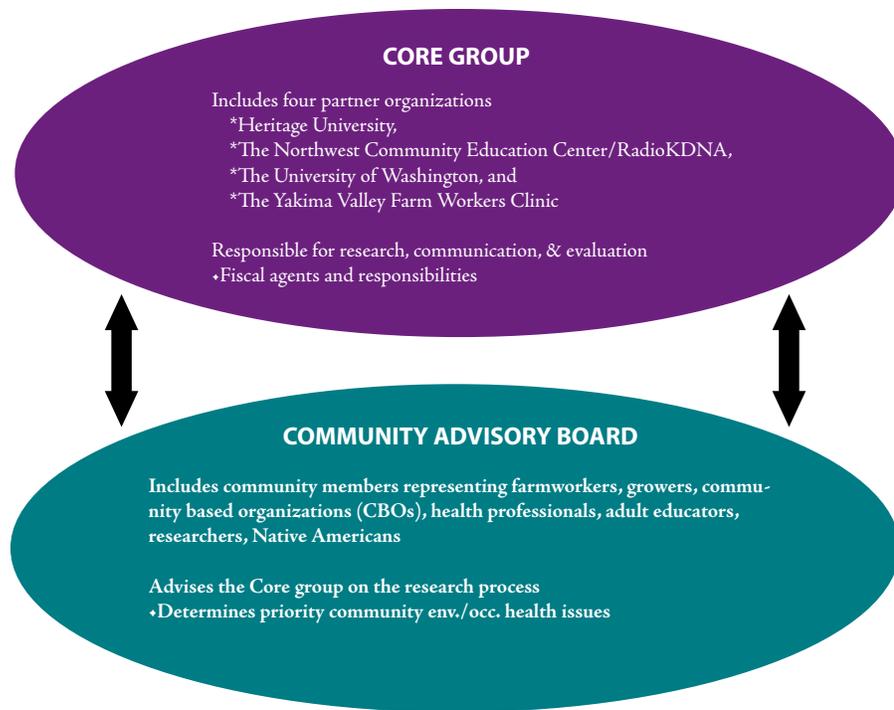


Figure 2. El Proyecto Bienestar’s Organizational Schematic

Core group took part in a nominal group process to determine constituencies of interest. Positions were advertised over the radio and by word of mouth. Members applied and were chosen by the Core group. Farmworkers are represented by a field worker, a dairy worker, a pesticide applicator, and a warehouse worker, as well as a representative from a farmworker organization. Others, while representing categories such as “student” or adult educator, come from farmworker families. The advisory board meets regularly with the Core group at least four times a year, with additional meetings as necessary. Meeting times with The Community Advisory Board are negotiated, and usually held in the evenings after the workday or on Saturdays.

Work is shared between the groups, with the Core group handling most administrative duties, external communication and evaluation. The Community Advisory Board contributes to the research process by making recommendations on the appropriateness and completeness of data collection instruments, data collection locations, and relevant forms of communication that will reach the farmworker community. In addition, The Community Advisory Board has the responsibility for prioritizing the many environmental and occupational health risks identified by the community for future work and funding.

Community Surveys: Over 170 farmworkers were surveyed in the community each of three consecutive summers as to what they thought the most important occupational and environmental health issues are in the Valley. Each summer’s survey had a different area of focus based on information gathered during the year leading up to the survey. Students from the community, most of whom were children of migrant and seasonal farmworkers, were used in survey administration, data collection and initial data analysis. Participants were recruited at community events, grocery stores, soccer games and other places that farmworkers gather in the community.

Town Hall Meeting: El Proyecto Bienestar held an evening Town Hall meeting in the third year of the project to generate environmental and occupational health priorities from farmworkers in the community. The Town Hall meeting was heavily publicized on local Spanish-language radio and other local Spanish-language media. The meeting was conducted in Spanish and translation was provided for English speakers. Childcare and food were also provided and helped reduce barriers to participation for the target community. Over 60 farmworkers attended the meeting, and provided valuable qualitative information that helped to complement the data collected through the summer surveys of farmworkers.

Building Trust

Successful historical relationships have been an important part of building trust among the partners in the first year of the project. That level of trust enabled the grant writing and project development to evolve quickly and collaboratively. Many processes were established in the first year including how decisions were to be made, how resources were to be divided, and how the community would be involved in the research process. In addition, a tragedy occurred during the first year of the project that brought the team closer together. At a national conference highlighting all the partnerships funded through the environmental justice grants, the project coordinator, Samuel Martinez, passed away. Samuel was a community leader who had been a driving force behind the project through his vision for improving farm worker health, and in fact the name of the project, “El Proyecto Bienestar,” was his idea. Although tragic and difficult, grieving together and supporting one another through Samuel’s passing provided a point of bonding for the Core group members.

Negotiating “Statements of Work” and Shared Budgets

The grant was written collaboratively over approximately three months. Statements of work were negotiated for each Core partner with corresponding budgets. Each community-based organization partner had an opportunity to articulate the staffing and indirect costs that they needed. The University of Washington established a subcontract with each of the community-based organizations. They, in turn, are responsible for billing the university every quarter for reimbursement. Although these roles and budgets were initially negotiated in the first year for the entire project, there was opportunity at each year’s budget renewal for each community partner to make changes based on their needs and the needs of the project.

Cross-pollinating people and projects, partnering with the community using multiple levels of community involvement, building trust, and negotiating roles and budgets are four ways that academic and community partnerships are created. But then what? Now that the partners are “at the table,” how do they communicate with each other? And make decisions? How is power shared among the different players? Consensus decision making is one way to share power in a group. Both the Core group and the Community Advisory board adopted consensus as a way to make group decisions. Admittedly, communication and decision making among this diverse group has been and continues to be a challenge. Adding structure to these processes is one way to facilitate participation and transparency in cross-cultural communication.

Consensus Decision Making

In Latin, consensus means to “think and feel together.” It is a process. Unanimity, which in Latin means “one spirit,” is the result (Butler, C.T. L & Rothstein, A., 2006). In a consensus

process: a) decisions are adopted when participants consent to the result of discussion about the original proposal, b) decisions aren't adopted until there is resolution of all concerns, c) participants can *agree to disagree* by acknowledging that they have unresolved concerns but consent to the proposal anyway (Butler, C.T. L & Rothstein, A., 2006).

One example of a formal consensus process is outlined in the book, *On Conflict and Consensus* (2006). In this approach, a proposal is presented to the group. After questions are clarified regarding the proposal, a broad and open round of discussion occurs. After that discussion, the facilitator calls for consensus. At this point, consensus may either be reached or unresolved concerns may be brought to the table. There are a variety of techniques that can be used to help structure the discussion at this stage. For example, each participant may be invited to express his/her approval or concerns one by one regarding the proposal. This approach works well in groups when there are language barriers or power dynamics that affect participants' willingness to speak their opinion. Alternatively, if a group is short on time, a simple show of hands of those that endorse the proposal may suffice. However, if there are concerns, they should be stated at this time.

Next, concerns are brought to the group. *The Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision Making* is a useful resource to help structure this stage (Kaner, S., Lind, L., Toldi, C., Fisk, S. & Berger, D., 1996). The authors provide a variety of "gradients of agreement" scales to be used when participants do not unanimously agree on the proposal. For example, one scale offers five choices for participants to express how they honestly feel towards a proposal. These include; 1) endorse, 2) agree with reservation, 3) mixed feelings, 4) don't like but won't block, and 5) veto. If, for example, a participant does not want to block a proposal but he or she has unresolved concerns that need to be discussed, that person could indicate "agree with reservation." This framework encourages discussion until all concerns are resolved.



After concerns are shared and potentially resolved, a call for consensus occurs again. If unanimity is not reached, concerns are restated. Discussion is limited to resolving once concern at a time. If unanimity still cannot be reached, participants can choose to step aside, declare a block, or reformulate the original proposal. Although "one spirit" may not have been reached through this process, the group will have been "thinking and feeling together" throughout the process. Participants in El Proyecto Bienestar have found this to be a fruitful exercise, and another way to share power between community and university partners.

The Core group's first opportunity to utilize and demonstrate success with the consensus decision making process was in negotiating the specific role of the Core in work flow and decision making, as distinct from the Community Advisory Board and other project stakeholders. This deliberative work, during which each component of the workplan proposed in the initial grant application was deconstructed and assigned responsibility, took three months and was at times difficult. However, that initial work has proven a basis on which the specific tasks of the project can move forward.

The consensus process was also successfully used by the Community Advisory Board when they refined the list of occupational and environmental health issues that the farmworker community had ranked during the town hall meeting (See Table 1). They started with a ranked list of 34 issues divided into three categories: exposures, outcomes, and contextual factors. In approximately an hour and a half they came to consensus on their four top issues. While the formal consensus process was not strictly followed (the issue was presented before the process was clarified, and issues were identified but not clearly grouped) it did provide some structure that, in conjunction with a good facilitator, encouraged everyone to participate and express their views.

The Role of Students

The involvement of local undergraduate students was built into the project during the grant writing phase, and has been a key accomplishment of the project. Community-based organization partners feel that development of local undergraduate students will help to develop and institutionalize knowledge and leadership around occupational and environmental health issues in the community. It is from an educated community young people that future community leadership will be drawn, and investing in that future leadership is one essential component to building capacity in the community.

For El Proyecto Bienestar, involvement of local undergraduate students was accomplished through the partnership with the YVFWC which operates a health professions pipeline program called “ConneX: Connecting students to health careers”. As a part of the pre-existing ConneX program, YVFWC provides a six-week summer enrichment program for 15-20 disadvantaged/low-income undergraduates from the Yakima Valley who are pursuing BA or higher-level health professions. During the grant writing phase, El Proyecto Bienestar partners decided to build on this existing cohort of undergraduate students by providing instruction in community-based participatory research during the six-week summer session, and using project resources to extend the summer session an additional two weeks for fieldwork in community survey data collection. In practice, the students brought many strengths that facilitated data collection such as bilingual ability and connections with the community. Later, the university partner was able to gain approval to grant credit to the undergraduate students for the CBPR instruction and fieldwork. In this manner the project benefits students in the short run (skill building and credit), provides an important source of data (surveys of grassroots community members) for El Proyecto Bienestar, and builds long-term capacity in the community by investing in local students.

Other examples of successful student involvement in local environmental and occupational health community-based participatory research projects include development of youth leadership through the POWER Project in south central Los Angeles which used population empowerment education as a tool to involve local high school youth in environmental justice work (Delp, L. et al., 2005), and involvement of high school, undergraduate, and graduate students in an prevention project with farmworkers in North Carolina (Roa, P. et al., 2004). While these two projects used distinct approaches to involve students in their environmental health community-based participatory research projects, each explicitly approached student’s involvement as a strategy for capacity building in the community.

Table 1. Consensus-in-Action: The Community Advisory Board Prioritizes the Issues

Note: Selected quotes illustrate stages of the consensus process. Not all comments were included in this table.

Consensus Process	Representative	Quotes (<i>italics represent text that has been translated from Spanish to English</i>)
INTRODUCTION		
Present the issue	Facilitator	<i>Dr. X, he's going to talk for about five minutes about what we're going to do...</i>
Clarify the Process	Primary investigator	<i>I want to give a little bit of orientation about ... the next step.</i>
Questions to clarify presentation	Adult educator	<i>Remind us where the students were recruited from and who they were?</i>
Clarify the process	Primary investigator	<i>So what we have is 3 lists, and we would like you to unite them...we would like to have priorities to 4</i>
LEVEL ONE		
Broad open discussion	At-large	<i>...you just take the first four that people took [from the town hall meeting]... that's the people, that's what they chose</i>
Broad open discussion	Facilitator	<i>What I'm thinking is [there are] too many ...maybe cut them, modify them ...</i>
Broad open discussion	Researcher	<i>If you had to merge these lists what would you think would come out on top?</i>
Broad open discussion	Healthcare professional	<i>If we were to try and select what we think they thought is the most important then I think we're misconstruing it</i>
Call for consensus	Facilitator	<i>So what do you think?</i>
LEVEL 2		
List concerns	Pesticide applicator	<i>I think they are all important but if you have to make the list smaller ... Let's say we can group under contamination [air and water] ... And also if you talk about issues of work ...you have to talk about low income and documents and being mistreated...</i>
List concerns	Adult educator	<i>Why did we break it out [into exposures, outcomes and contextual factors] and now we are going to put it back together?</i>
List concerns	At-large	<i>We need to follow ... the rule that they chose</i>
List concerns	Community based organization	<i>They were talking about injuries from work, I had the experience of seeing these issues with the workers, for me it's really important. Because it is not just the injury, but the separation of their families ...the way that it impacts the society, the community, the children, the family, those probably are the ones that have the main priority</i>
List concerns	At-large	<i>Why don't we leave 2, the first two of each one [category]</i>
List concerns	Farmworker organization	<i>... if you get hurt or you get injured, if you get sick, it's the same condition.</i>
LEVEL 3		
Resolve concerns	Warehouse worker	<i>We have to be realistic</i>
Resolve concerns	Facilitator	<i>I agree with everybody, that everything is important. But we don't have the capacity to see them all. So that's why we have to give – two, let's say four, so we can put all our time and emphasis, all our energy on those things and maybe next year we can see another four.</i>
Call for consensus	Facilitator	<i>Can we find consensus about that? ... I'm going to repeat the order. If somebody doesn't agree, they can raise their hands...pesticides & chemicals ... That's one of those priorities, the other one is going to be work related illnesses. Number three is going to be conditions, abusive conditions, workplace conditions and fourth one is work related injuries. So are we in consensus? And the ones that are not, the ones that don't agree raise their hand? ... - nobody? We find consensus, Doctor, thank you.</i>

While the specific mechanisms by which local students are involved in community-based participatory research projects will vary, investment in local students, particularly disadvantaged or low-income students who are from local families that have experienced the issues under study, is one important tool for building long-term capacity in the community. And without long-term community capacity building, community-university partnerships run the risk of exploiting the community for short-term gains.

Community Assertiveness Strategies

In sum, there are a number of strategies that El Proyecto Bienestar's community partners have used to ensure an authentic community-university partnership. The following methods help operationalize the idea that ensuring a genuine partnership is not just the responsibility of the university partner.

Fostering relations between university and community partners outside of the constraints of a grant process has proved important to the success of partnerships in El Proyecto Bienestar.

- **Community research review process:** For example, the YVFWC has set up its own institutional research review process. While not an IRB, the local process provides a mechanism for YVFWC to determine which research projects it will engage in, and sets out expectations for researchers who wish to partner with them. These include a commitment to a set of partnership principles, equitable distribution of grant funds, and organizational review and comments on findings.
- **Relationship development:** Fostering relations between university and community partners outside of the constraints of a grant process has proved important to the success of partnerships in El Proyecto Bienestar.
- **Local data collection:** Keeping data collection local with community members assisting in data interpretation helps keep the research relevant to the community.
- **Involvement of local students:** A crucial mechanism in building long-term capacity in the community.
- **Multiple levels of community involvement:** Including multiple community-based organizations as well as grassroots community members.
- **Multiple and ongoing methods for hearing community voices directly:** Methods may include community health surveys, key informant interviews, town hall meetings, and radio call-in shows.
- **Communication back to the community:** Transparency of the research process is maintained through regular meetings with community partners, public service announcements on radio and other Spanish-language media, and town hall meetings.
- **Building on research to create action that will benefit the local community:** Examples of potential benefits include locally relevant curriculum, clinical protocols, and possibly an intervention grant.

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