

Summer 2024

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# COLLECTIVE INSIGHT

## *Newsletter*



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VOLUME 2, ISSUE 5

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# Engagement in Action with Tam Perry

## *Connecting Campus and Community Through Engagement*

### *About Tam*

Dr. Tam Perry is a professor in the [School of Social Work at Wayne State University \(WSU\) in Detroit, Michigan](#).



She is the Research Chair at Senior Housing Preservation Detroit (SHP-D). Tam also works with the [Healthier Black Elders Center \(HBEC\)](#), a division of the [Michigan Center for Urban African American Aging Research](#) hosted at WSU. HBEC has been engaging Detroit's older African American population to improve research design and outcomes since 1997.

We had the opportunity to chat with Tam to learn more about her experiences with engagement. She shared insights on how to bring engagement to communities commonly left out of research and to the classroom of next generation researchers.

### *How do you define engagement?*

Tam defines engagement as the process of involving different voices and communities in your research work. She believes engagement is about holding yourself accountable to being a good partner. She emphasizes that successful engagement involves equal give and take between partners. Tam notes that “as an academic, it's really important to leave campus” to do this type of work well.

### *Speaking of the campus, how do you make engagement work in academia?*

For Tam, making engagement work often means stepping outside of the campus environment and stepping into the communities most impacted by her research. But this doesn't happen overnight. Instead, meaningful engagement requires taking the time to develop relationships and build trust. Meeting people ‘where they are at’ is an important part of building authentic relationships and trust.

Since moving to Michigan for her PhD, Tam has focused her energy on publishing about topics the people of Michigan really care about. As a result, Tam's work has led to continuous support from her community partners and research funders.



### *How do we create the next generation of community-informed researchers?*

Tam emphasized the importance of teaching engagement methods as part of her courses as well as engaging students as partners in projects. By doing so, Tam is able to give students an educationally enriching experience, expand the university's reach, and create more opportunities for community partners to drive research priorities and methods. By engaging students in her projects, Tam is able to demonstrate directly to students how fostering community relationships can lead to new and highly valued research opportunities.

As a part of her teachings, Tam encourages students to think about engagement as an important step of any sound research project rather than ‘extra work.’ This requires that we take time to recognize the rewarding aspects of engagement, which for Tam, include co-authoring and co-presenting, not just the challenges.

*You mention how important it is to leave campus to “do” engagement well. Could you share an example of how you have done this?*

Through Tam’s dynamic career, she has had many experiences working in and with communities. She highlighted HBEC as an important example of leaving campus to “do” engagement. HBEC’s mission is to encourage older African Americans to participate in research with the goal of addressing health disparities. HBEC’s Consulting arm is guided by a community advisory board (CAB) made up of 16 older adults. The CAB’s purpose is to oversee the center’s consulting work.

Tam explained that the CAB has several roles including to:

- Review proposals and ensure HBEC’s research focuses on issues relevant to the health of older African Americans
- Mentor academics on how to effectively engage older African Americans in research

Through these roles, the CAB uses their voices to impact change for and by African American older adults. Tam said the CAB takes great pride in the impact and influence of their work. Not only are they impacting Detroit, but they are also influencing HBEC’s partners across the country. They work together to share best practices on issues that are relevant to the health and wellbeing of older African Americans.

*How does the CAB play into your role as a researcher?*

Tam credits the CAB for making her work “richer” and more “user friendly.” Just this year, Tam partnered with CAB members to publish an [article for Generations](#) that featured the work of HBEC. The article explains the CAB’s unique role from CAB members’ perspectives. Long-time CAB member, JoAnn Smith, praised the CAB in the article as a “viable service for health awareness” by working together to benefit the community they live and work in.

Tam admits that co-authorship can be a learning curve, but it is critical to her work. She says that co-authors share their personal experiences in a way that helps academics see research challenges from a different, non-academic perspective. It also provides space for partners to be heard. Co-authorship with older adults in the community helps hone the message of the publication. Despite any challenges, the process of writing and revising, energizes all partners to keep sharing their work.

### Tam’s Recent Work Highlighting the Value of Co-Authorship

- Co-authored with CAB Members: [Consultant Program By and for Older Detroiters](#)
- Co-authored with SHP-D Community Members: [Affordable senior housing maintenance and renovations, COVID-19, and the precarity of residents’ health safety](#)
- Also check out this short film, co-created by SHP-D, and shown at the Michigan Film Festival: [Holding Down the Fort](#)

## *What other projects are you working on in the community?*

Tam also described her decade long partnership with a coalition called the Senior Housing Preservation Detroit (SHP-D). SHP-D's goal is to advocate on behalf of and alongside older adults to promote their housing priorities in local and state policy and research. The coalition is made up of folks with diverse professional backgrounds including tenant organizers, developers, senior housing professionals..

Recently, this coalition was asked to provide input for a state plan on housing. Tam reports that this opportunity shed light on the ability of a group like this to assume a powerful role in ensuring community voices have a say in how decisions impacting their lives are made. Learn more about SHP-D [here](#).

## *Any parting thoughts?*

Tam noted that we as researchers tend to think of our work as separate or siloed from communities for the sake of being non-biased. Tam encouraged us to rethink this paradigm. Tam believes community partnerships can actually sharpen our focus, incorporate new lenses of expertise, and advance sound research methods. The result, ultimately, is research that broadens perspectives and improves aging outcomes.

## *Thank you for your generous insights!*

Thanks, Tam for sharing your insights on the importance of bridging partnerships across academia and communities!



## Catching Up with Collective Insight

Collective Insight partners with UMass Boston LTSS LeadingAge Center and Boston College Connell School of Nursing to conduct our Measurement Matters Project. Measurement Matters is a PCORI-funded project striving to develop a tool to measure effective engagement.

Measurement Matters qualitative activities are well underway! This spring we hosted two rounds of Consensus Methods with engagement experts to learn the elements essential to effective engagement.

This June, our Deputy Director and Measurement Matters Qualitative Lead, Dr. Airia Papadopoulos, facilitated six Focus Groups with 34 participants, including engaged researchers, engagement facilitators, and community and patient partners. Analysis of findings is underway and will directly inform measurement tool development!

Learn more about Measurement Matters and stay tuned for updates [here](#)!



## CI Team Spotlight

### Collective Insight Project Director, Dani Foster, Honored with Volunteer of the Year Award

The [East Troy Chamber of Commerce](#) recently honored Dani Foster, Project Director at Collective Insight, and other participants of the grassroots organization, Vote for East Troy, with the Chamber's Volunteer of the Year. The award honored their efforts to educate and mobilize individuals to vote during a crucial local election.



Dani Foster, center, and other members of Vote for East Troy with their Volunteer of the Year Award

School districts across Wisconsin struggle due to enrollment decline and outdated state funding formulas. To overcome these challenges, districts turn to referendum to obtain essential funding. In April 2023, 82 school districts in Wisconsin conducted referendums. The East Troy Area School District was one of them. Despite numerous attempts, the community had not passed a successful operational referendum in nearly 20 years.

Vote for East Troy developed a robust initiative to educate East Troy citizens on the referendum to help community members make informed decisions at the polls. Engagement was at the heart of the group's work and included:



Vote for East Troy volunteers participating in a collaborative community art project to raise local awareness of the referendum

- **Asset Mapping** to identify key community partners, including businesses and community groups, with a vested interest in the school
- **Plain Language Information Sharing** to increase understanding of the referendum and school district operations and dispel misinformation
- **In-person Community Discussion** at 12 locations to connect district leadership with residents to share information and answer questions
- **Letters to the Editor Campaigns** from local families and business owners to share the school district's impact on the community
- **Community Art Installation and School Visibility Campaigns** to raise awareness, celebrate district accomplishments, and honor school traditions

As a result of these efforts, residents successfully backed the referendum, increasing the district's state-set revenue limits by \$9 million between 2023-2026, and effectively avoiding painful budget cuts. **WAY TO GO, DANI!**



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