

Article

The Order of Malta and ACU Community Hub:

Aligning Mission and Method to achieve Impact

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Abstract

Through a mission-aligned partnership, the Order of Malta and Australian Catholic University (ACU) have partnered in a staged and assets-based approach to work with the Darebin community, Melbourne, Australia, to develop a mobile community hub and transform opportunities for learning and connection.

The present paper reports on the development of the Order of Malta and ACU Community Hub (known as the community hub) and how an initial 6-month period of research and relationship development without formal activity led to authentic and assets-based community engagement and the success of the initiative. From 2022 to 2024, the community hub has grown from a single community café to a Read to Learn program for school-aged children, community cafés, and a cooking and connection program that addresses nutrition and food insecurity. We argue that through taking an assets-based and inductive approach to community partnership, activity can be better targeted to community desires, the partnership is more agile to develop and advance, and in time, university faculty, students, and resources can be harnessed to the greatest effect. Such an approach to community partnership, however, must be supported by appropriate institutional structures.

Keywords

University-Community Engagement, Assets-Based Community Development (ABCD), Community Partnership, Service-Learning

Introduction

Best-practice university-community engagement and service-learning has advanced to prioritise partnerships that are asset-based, reciprocal, and transformational (Hamerlinck & Plaut, 2014; Jones et al., 2018). It is through such partnerships that mutually beneficial outcomes for university and community, and more accurately, university 'as' and 'with' community can work for increasingly better outcomes for the social good (Pink et al., 2023). Indeed, when the partnerships are reciprocal, and truly community-engaged, the outcomes for the university such as enriched teaching, research, and creative activity 'circles back' to more broadly applicable outcomes. These include enhancing the civic attitudes and values of our students and staff as they grow in their commitment to a more just society and participate in addressing critical societal issues (Saltmarsh & Johnson, 2020). Equally, university core business that is engaged with, and has utility with respect to community aspirations, strengthening our communities' civic social capital and the pathways for individuals to flourish.

Faith-based universities, community organisations, and Church entities have long prioritised commitment to community, especially those communities who have experienced the most marginalisation and barriers to development (Jones et al., 2018; Mann, 2020; Wagner, 2017). In many countries, religious entities have been a primary agent in the social, educational, and psychological support of the people where governments have been found lacking. However, traditional approaches to charitable works have been criticised for being too 'deficit focused' and resembling 'top-down benevolence' (Smith-Carrier, 2020). Although such a focus can provide short-term benefits, it can also reinforce the systemic issues that cause marginalisation and ignore the strengths, gifts, and assets community members bring to a relationship. Such critique has led to approaches within higher education such as critical service-learning (Mitchell, 2008) and Assets-Based Community Development (ABCD; García, 2020). Taken together, these approaches recommend engaging 'with' community, not 'on' or 'for' and doing so within a critical knowledge and appreciation of the social, political, and environmental context within which community life occurs. Critical to this is an openness to the assets and gifts individual community members and community collectively bring to an engagement.

Australian Catholic University (ACU) and the Sovereign Order of Malta (SOM, Australia) are organisations committed to working with communities who have experienced disadvantage or marginalisation. ACU is Australia's largest Catholic university with seven campuses spread along the Eastern seaboard and an 8th campus in Rome. Formed in 1991, ACU's mission statement identifies institutional commitment to the "pursuit of knowledge, the dignity of the human person, and the common good" (ACU, 2021). Underpinned by the Principles of Catholic Social Thought (CST; Byron, 1999), ACU prioritises its community engagement efforts with communities who historically have experienced the most disadvantage and marginalisation, while also affirming community members' dignity and personal strengths aligned with ACU's principles of community engagement (Pink et al., 2021). SOM on the other hand, its mission is to alleviate the suffering of the poor and sick, without judgement, distinction of religion, race or political persuasion. The Australian Association of the Order of Malta was formed in 1974 and has more than 300 members and aspirant members. Faith-based alignment aside, there is also clear coherence of mission-based commitment to social justice across the two institutions.

During 2021, ACU and the Order of Malta began discussing the prospect of partnering in our endeavours to engage

meaningfully and collaboratively with communities. A partnering approach was conceptualized to maximise the assets of each organization and mitigate limitations that restrict each organisation's engagement with community. It was proposed that a partnership would lead to greater community benefit and impact. Given its size, ACU could contribute organisational infrastructure that was not present within SOM, essentially a member and volunteer-based organization. This included employee-related infrastructure such as Human Resources personnel and policy, organisational policy and procedure, and the information technology, plant, and equipment appropriate to support paid employees. Further, ACU had access to a large number of staff and students with gifts and talents that could contribute to the partnership. SOM on the other hand had both members and volunteers who engaged in significant work within communities that were not tied to any research or teaching program, the latter of which can often be limited by the length of the semester or duration of the project. The partnership with SOM enabled greater agility in the scope of community work. While ACU as a partner given its size and infrastructure provided support for the operation of the community partnership and access to staff and

students. Staff and students from ACU assisted with a larger scale partnership with community and expansion as community relationships deepened.

SOM also had a significant fundraising arm that supported their mission-aligned works. SOM and ACU came to an agreement that SOM would provide seed funding for 2.5 years of partnering in community engagement. Initial funding would support the hiring of a suitability qualified project officer, and a steering group made up of ACU and SOM staff was established.

A decision was made to explore opportunities to partner in work with community that was mission-aligned yet avoided more traditional approaches to community service that have been top-down, benevolent, and at best transactional (Clayton et al., 2010; Kniffin et al., 2020). Rather, in pursuit of maximising the prospects of sustainability and impact, a pragmatic and assets-based (Nel, 2018) approach to the development of a community hub was taken with limited pre-conceived ideas on where the hub would exist, and the focus on the activities. Such an approach was taken to allow flexibility and to set the foundation for authentic engagement with the community.

Through a 6-month period of research and relationship development, the partnership settled on the Darebin Local Government Area (LGA) in the suburbs of Melbourne, Australia. The steering group started with the scope of the greater Melbourne area but was directed by the work of the project officer who considered the opportunity for impact, local assets of community, and level of engagement by community during the relationship development period. The steering group would receive updates via presentation from the project officer as the project moved towards a defined geographical area for work and early activities. Darebin, and in particular the suburb of Reservoir, is an area typified by socio-economic disadvantage yet contains assets including neighbourhood community spaces, schools, common spaces in shared medium density housing, a high degree of cultural diversity, and the lived experiences and talents of community members.

The present paper reports on the development of the Order of Malta and ACU community hub and the relationships, activities, and impacts that have arisen from its establishment with community.

Theoretical Framework

The primary theoretical framework that supports the analysis in this paper is that of Assets-Based Community Development (ABCD; Harrison et al., 2019). Successful community engagement projects are founded upon community inclusion and collaboration. Further still, approaches to community engagement that identify and recognise the strengths and assets of a community are shown to lead to longer lasting collaborations and greater development of capacity (Nel, 2018). Such approaches can still recognise communities of priority (e.g., the 'preferential option for the poor' described within CST), however also seek to leverage local strengths and abilities to produce partnered, tailored, and locally owned advancement of community desires. In aligning with the missions of the partner organisations, an assets-based and inclusive approach is consistent with the CST principle of Subsidiarity, where those closest to a problem should be involved in its solution (Evans, 2013). This means mutual and co-led development of capacity in the community which goes beyond the provision of a welfare service, and which is more likely to lead to transformational outcomes with community. Consistent with the latter, this paper is also informed by models and frameworks for transformational community partnerships such as the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification (Saltmarsh & Johnson, 2020), the International Association of Public Participation IAP2 framework (Burdett & Sinclair, 2024) and Clayton et al.'s (2010) continuum of transformational partnerships.

Methods

A case study methodology (Yin, 2003) was employed to explore the phenomena of the establishment of the community hub and its outcomes. A case study was deemed appropriate as the community hub was social phenomena bound by location, community partners, and focus (Swanborn, 2010). The case of the community hub was explored via analysis of the project proposal and reports to the steering committee from 2022-2024, the 2023 annual report (Vandierendonck & Tredinnick, 2023), the Impact Report 2023-2024 (Vandierendonck & Tredinnick, 2024), and community grant applications and acquittals. These documents were analysed for critical pieces of information that assisted in understanding the development of the hub and its outcomes and impacts. This preliminary case study will inform a larger case study that will include interviews with key stakeholders, community partners, and community members.

Findings and Discussion

The critical nature of the first six months

Covey and Merrill (2006) advocate 'working at the speed of trust' as a crucial first step in community-engaged approaches to partnership. Allowing this critical time ensures partnerships grow from a place of integrity and trust (character) as well as enabling partners to explore their unique strengths and assets (competence; Covey & Merrill, 2006). In-line with Covey's 'speed of trust', the initial 6-month period of the community hub project focused, without strict deadlines or expected KPI's, on research, relationship development (trust) and community asset mapping. Utilising the Social Health Atlas of Australia (Public Health Information Development Unit, 2023) as a desktop research tool, three possible community locations were identified. One of these, the Darebin LGA, Melbourne Australia, was subsequently selected because of the willingness/readiness of its community organisations and council, to engage with the concept and vision of the Community Hub.

The first six months also enabled the opportunity to engage community partners in the co-design of the Community Hub concept. Originally conceptualised as a 'bricks and mortar' provision, these crucial, early collaborations proposed a 'mobile' hub that was agile enough to engage in place-based activities that could enhance 'scale' and 'reach'. While generally out of scope for most community organisations, mobile and collaborative outreach initiatives facilitated through the community hub could significantly enhance 'reach' into communities experiencing the most marginalisation within the Darebin LGA. Additionally, the mobile unit, enabled from the outset, connection with community members directly, in the familiar and safe places they gather, encourage honest conversations, build networks, and understand community perspectives, goals and aspirations. For example, the Community Hub was able to support the capacity of a community organisation to undertake community outreach. In 2022, a Community Partnerships Advisor from a local community health centre invited the Community Hub's Project Officer to join their team to check in with elderly residents at a public housing estate. Through door knocking to undertake welfare checks, residents were also invited to attend a morning tea to discuss ideas for activities they would like to see in their on-site community room. These interactions led to the design and implementation of a weekly social engagement activity, the Mobile Community Café, facilitated collaboratively by the community hub – Order of Malta volunteers, ACU students and community members, and representatives from community organisations and the local council. The community café also coincides with an emergency food relief program coordinated by a local neighbourhood centre to maximise community reach and engagement.

The critical first six months of research, relationship development, and listening led to foundational activities that grew to be a program of place-based partnership with community in the

Table 1. *Community Hub Program Reach 2024*

Read to Learn Program	Mobile Community Café sessions (across two café settings)	Cooking and Connection program	Food literacy workshops
2 x 9-sessions 16 student participants each semester	83 total sessions 106 Community members attended one or more sessions	2 x 4-session programs + 1 x 2 session family program 17 parent participants 9 children participated	1 workshop 20 Community members

Table 2. *Community Hub Program Collaborators 2024*

ACU Students completing community or professional placements	Order of Malta and community volunteers	ACU academic and professional Staff	Community Partners
45	11	4	6

Darebin LGA. In the following section we discuss the overall engagement of the hub during 2023 and 2024.

Overall engagement

In the following section, Table 1 and Table 2 communicate the community hub program reach and type and number of hub collaborators during 2024.

Through community immersion and outreach, the Community Hub has developed trusting relationships from which projects have emerged that respond to the priorities identified by and achieved with the community. When invited by communities to assist them in meeting their goals, the Community Hub garners, coordinates and supports community-engaged partnerships with local organisations, members of the Order of Malta, ACU students and staff, and volunteers. The Community Hub is committed to collaborations with communities, community organisations, and relevant stakeholders to pool resources and engage in 'collective action' to respond

to the needs and aspirations of the Darebin Community. In the following section we report on the major streams of activity during the first years of hub operation.

Community cafés

Incorporating the assets of local knowledge, neighbourhood centres, and common living areas in senior residential housing, SOM and ACU partnered with local service providers to launch community cafés aimed at decreasing social isolation. Community collaborators identified social isolation as a significant issue for elderly residents, and residents with limited social mobility. The cafés have grown in size and impact. For example, during 2024, two community cafés engaged 106 residents in social connection with an average of 30 residents each week. The community cafés have led to important assets-based developments where previously isolated community members have begun to share their gifts and talents with other residents. This has included culturally based cooking classes, painting, and banding together to successfully receive funding to improve the gardens in their shared residency. The community cafés are supported by ACU students on credit-bearing service-learning placement alongside members of the Order of Malta. The cafés have also become an important place for local community services to connect with residents. The cafés have decreased social isolation and have broadened the social engagement and participation in community life. In reviewing the 2023 annual report and as described by a community member,

> **"We used to live in dark times, now the program brings some light that shines through the week" – Community café resident, Annual Report 2023**

As corroborated by a community staff member from a local neighbourhood house,

> ***"The attendees are more connected and more engaged with other community members and have more confidence to access services that are available to them" – Staff member, Annual Report 2023***

A survey in the annual impact report showed that 89% of participants (N = 18) felt more socially included through attending the cafés (Vandierendonck & Tredinnick, 2023).

The community garden

Connections and conversations amongst residents during the Mobile Community Café in the public housing estate have resulted in the establishment of a low-maintenance community garden designed and created by a small group of residents. The residents recognized a common interest and identified the development of a community garden to bring their community together, help to reduce their cost of living, and enhance their individual and collective health and wellbeing. All over the age of 55, many of the residents live on their own and experience, to varying degrees, loneliness and isolation,

> ***"This is an elderly residents' estate. We have a serious lack of social interaction. We also have serious language barriers. Gardens have no language barriers! Gardening together will help unify our community." - Resident, Community Grant Application May 2024***

Through collective action amongst the residents, supported by the local council through a community grant, and active involvement of council staff, a local community organisation, Community Hub staff and volunteers (i.e., ACU students and SOM members) and neighbours of the public housing estate, the establishment of the community garden was realised. Activities included the planting of donated fruit trees and native shrubs, and the installment of raised garden beds to grow fruit and vegetables.

The community garden has been transformative for the community. The garden continues to help address place-based socio-economic disadvantages and health inequity

through building the capacity of the residents to improve their food security and to increase their social connections. In addition, the garden also offers the residents an opportunity to upskill, informally through learning from each other, from the many resources available online, or more formally with a resident who has since enrolled in a Horticulture course.

The community garden is now fully managed and maintained by the residents with the ongoing support from the Order of Malta & ACU Community Hub and local council staff.

> ***"The community garden is a real asset to us, it brings a great sense of pride, achievement and belonging to our community. It's so rewarding to see it thriving now and producing a wide variety of fresh produce for all residents to enjoy. Many of us have really enjoyed taking part in this project and being able to participate in tasks like watering, planting, maintenance, or offering advice and ideas as much or as little as we're able or choose to do." – Resident, Community Grant Report (Acquittal) June 2025***

The Read to Learn program

Through relationship development and presence in the Darebin community, it was also identified that the local primary school had a high proportion of students with and eagerness to learn however limited opportunity to read at home with their parents and/or whose parents speak English as a second language. The Community Hub was invited by the local primary school to enhance their work in building the reading skills of the students. The school community encompasses a high proportion of families from non-English speaking backgrounds. The Read to Learn program, partnered initiative with the Community Hub provided support for children to develop a love for, and confidence in reading. Through discussion with the school assistant principal, a 'Read to Learn' program was launched during 2023. The program provides an opportunity for children to practice reading outside the formal classroom (after school) with volunteer tutors. Children can choose what they would like to read and after one-on-one time with their tutor, engage together in some fun language and literacy games. The program continues to provide impactful support for children. Feedback from families and the assistant principal describe how the program positively influences the children's learning and confidence.

> ***"The homework club [Read to Learn] has provided not only one on one support and mentorship for many of our refugee and vulnerable students but also a sense of respite and support for families struggling to support their child's education" – Assistant Principal,***

local primary school Impact Report 2023 –2024

"I like the reading. It helps me learn English."- Primary School Student, Impact Report 2023 - 2024

"I loved working with my students, despite any challenges, and these sessions have definitely affirmed my future desire to be a teacher." - ACU Student, Annual Report 2023

"I think anyone who joined the program [as a volunteer tutor] would find it rewarding because they would quickly build a bond with their student. However, I think it important to see yourself as a mentor more than a tutor and be willing to be flexible and occasionally wander down lanes that the student may wish to explore." - Order of Malta Volunteer Sovereign Order of Malta Newsletter June 2023

Cooking and connection

In 2024, ACU Master of Dietetic Practice students and two local community organisations came together with the local primary school engaged in the Read to Learn program to support their aspiration of enhancing the food literacy of families from a range of social, economic and cultural backgrounds. Through collaboration, a 4-week Cooking and Connection program for parents was designed and facilitated. The topics of each session were chosen by the community, and in addition to the theoretical elements of the program, the group prepared a nutritious and low-budget family meal to take home each week.

This mutually beneficial exchange of assets is building the capacity of families to prepare nutritious, low cost and convenient meals with locally sourced ingredients. For ACU students, this collaboration extends their knowledge, experience and appreciation of nutritional education, facilitated with community and for the common good.

Based on feedback from the community, the program was extended over the school holidays and parents were invited to bring their children so they could learn together.

"The room was buzzing with excitement. With 8 enthusiastic participants and two kids proudly sharing their homemade dishes, the day was filled with fun and flavours. The group played games, explored creative ways to eat well on a budget, and enjoyed a delicious oat bar demonstration by ACU students. The best part? Everyone left not just with new skills, but as a big group of newfound friends! And to top it all off, we received fantastic feedback through the program evaluation, highlighting the positive impact and joy it brought to all involved!" -Community Partner, Impact Report 2023 -2024

"….the cooking program has had a unifying effect of drawing together families from a range of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds into the school, giving them an opportunity to learn and celebrate success together around food. This has been a powerful experience for our families and we know will have a flow on impact to our students through healthy eating. The connection between the school, the order of Malta and the ACU has been an invaluable one" - Assistant Principal, local primary School Impact Report 2023 -2024

"This placement has allowed me to apply my skills in various settings, which has been a valuable experience. Engaging with individuals from diverse age groups and backgrounds has enhanced my understanding of different community members, which I found has contributed significantly to my development in effectively communicating and delivering information to various audiences"- Master of Dietetic Practice, Impact Report 2023-2024

Conclusions and contributions to theory and practice

The SOM and ACU Community Hub provides an example of partnering in an agile and assets-based way to ensure that community assets, gifts, and desires are at the centre of any activity (Harrison et al., 2019; Nel, 2018). Key to the success of this dynamic and expanding hub was the 6-month period of community research and relationship development before settling on foundational activities in partnership with community. This development was free of any teaching or research agenda which at times can derail authentic university-community engagement (Burdett & Sinclair, 2024; Covey & Merrill, 2006; Mitchell, 2008). The involvement of service-learning students and academics came after the development of relationships which led to the exchange of knowledge and the co-creation of mutually beneficial activities. The transformation of community life through relationship development and partnership was the primary concern of the endeavour (Clayton et al., 2010; Pink et al., 2023). We argue that through taking an assets-based and inductive approach to community partnership, activity can be better targeted, is more agile to development and advancement, and can then incorporate university staff and students as appropriate. Such an approach was also supported by a forward-thinking community partner (SOM) and a university with a centralised department (ACU Engagement) focused on advancing the practice and impact of community engagement institution wide.

This preliminary case study was limited by a small set of foundational information garnered through program reporting. However, the present paper sets the agenda for future investigation of community-engaged processes, outcomes, and impact of the community hub. Future research on the community hub should further explore community perspectives on the hub and through formal and deep research substantively investigate and report on the ongoing development and impact. This will further elucidate community engagement practices and phenomena of the hub that may be informative of practice in similar settings.

The Community Hub is an initiative that is mission aligned for both the Order of Malta and ACU with regards to commitment to affirming human dignity. Further, both organisations had complementary assets that enhanced both organisations' potentials for impact with community. Projects and Programs within the mobile Hub are enabling flourishing lives, building initiatives that affirm human dignity and support community well-being. The Community Hub serves the community by enacting in partnership, inclusive, accessible, and supportive projects and programs that are underpinned by subsidiarity, enabling local autonomy and decision making. Critical to the success of the Community Hub was the six-month period of research and relationship building before formal activity that supported targeted and assets-based reciprocal partnerships. Early hub activities in this spirit only led to further relationship development and initiatives that were coherent with community aspirations, mutually beneficial, and incorporated local strengths and assets. We argue that higher education institutions should reflect upon means by which their institutional structures and support mechanisms can enable authentic community engagement as a precursor to any specific teaching and research activities. Such an approach can be supported by centralised departments of community engagement that can then make connections to the appropriate faculty schools, staff, and students (Hutson et al., 2019; Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013). We further argue that such an approach is more likely to support higher quality reciprocal partnering that is more targeted and impactful.

Dr Matthew Pink

Dr Matthew Pink is the Head of ACU Engagement at Australian Catholic University. He is also Deputy Chair of Engagement Australia. He publishes in his research areas of interest which include the transformational processes of university-community engagement, sport for positive youth development in developing, and developed nations, and athlete welfare and development. Matthew is passionate about harnessing the power of universities and communities to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes that transform society. Matthew received his doctorate from ACU in 2016 and was co-academic-lead in establishing the ACU and DePaul University (Chicago) Conference on Community Engagement and Service-learning which is now a biennial tradition between the two institutions. Matthew also led ACU's involvement in the first phase of the Uniservitate Global program for service-learning in Catholic Higher Education. In his teaching career, Matthew has received two citations for the quality of his teaching and in particular for showing empathy and support for students from diverse backgrounds.

Annelore Vandierendonck

Anna joined the ACU Engagement team in 2021. She has a strong background in program and project management across not-for-profit and major events sectors working with a wide range of groups, including veterans, elite athletes, corporate teams, and school students. Anna established the Order of Malta and ACU Community Hub in 2022, which operates within the Darebin LGA in Melbourne. The Hub facilitates place-based programs leveraging the skills and expertise of community members, ACU staff & students, and Members of the Order of Malta, to improve social, mental and physical health and wellbeing outcomes of people experiencing disadvantage and marginalisation.

Jennifer Tredinnick

Jennifer Tredinnick is Manager-Community-engaged Projects and Programs at the Australian Catholic University. Her qualifications and work history encompasses design education, youth and community education and collaborative community engagement in both Australia and the United Kingdom. Jennifer has a deep passion for, and extensive experience in, participatory partnerships and collaborations in learning that support aspiration, promote active citizenship and strengthen communities.

Since 2013, Jennifer has worked within the university sector managing interdisciplinary student community engagement projects and building university capacity for peer-to-peer support and Students as Partners initiatives. Her role at ACU encompasses the design and facilitation of community-engaged projects and programs by fostering safe, respectful, and supportive collaborative capacity building partnerships that aim to break cycles of inequity, inequality, and injustice.

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