

STUDENT FELLOWSHIP TOOLKIT

JUNE 2024

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CEDR
Consortium for Emergent Disaster Resilience

A tool kit for building capacity of community organizations through university partnerships

Introduction

This tool kit was developed as part of an initiative led by the Consortium for Emergent Disaster Resilience (CEDR) which is housed within the Tulane School of Social Work. CEDR developed a community focused fellowship program which was pilot tested with eight community based organizations. A part of that fellowship program involved a student internship, additional details of that internship program, and the larger initiative are outlined in two additional briefs, which can be found on our website (https://cedrhub.org/publications/). Based on the pilot testing of the student program, this document is a culmination of practical suggestions and guidance on what we did that worked, lessons we learned from what didn't work, and best practices from the literature. This is designed to be an actionable tool kit and roadmap for other universities and communities to replicate what we've done, and enhance resilience and capacity in their communities via these strategic partnerships. This program was designed to offer direct capacity assistance to small to medium sized NGO's, specifically to enhance their capacity to pursue funding opportunities.

The tool kit is presented in a chronological order of how to emulate the program, and provides step-by-step guidance with the graphical representation below. Along with each component, we drill down into suggested do's and don'ts to help others successfully set up parallel programs. Before exploring each of the components it is necessary to first explain our approach, which was foundational to this initiative.

Approach

The approach described here was implemented by CEDR throughout the student fellowship previously described and is largely credited with the success of the program. Any other universities or institutions trying to replicate this program using this tool kit should ensure that the approach described is foundational, central, and ubiquitous (i.e., incorporated in every part) in their efforts to replicate this program and to ensure success. This needs to be at the core of every interaction, and can not simply be cosmetic, cursory, or perfunctory. Without this approach at the core of similar efforts, such endeavors are likely doomed to fail as they may exacerbate strained relationships between communities, institutions, and students, ultimately doing more harm than good for all involved.

CEDR took a non-extractive and non-imperialistic approach, which ensured that the goals and objectives identified by the community organizations themselves were prioritized, a suggested best practice in the literature[1–4] .



This can be done by:

Gaining an understanding up front of the organization, its capacity and needs.



Placing their needs at the forefront and tailoring programming to position student interns as valuable resources rather than burdens.



Ensuring that **students** involved in the project have **demonstrated a past and continuing commitment to appropriate community engagement**. Each of these is supported by best practices in community engagement[3,5–11].

This approach was highlighted across all program operations, as suggested by the literature[5,8,12,13]. Such an approach not only fosters a productive partnership, but also ensures that the engagement is tailored, impactful, and aligned with the organization's evolving needs. This approach taken by CEDR allowed for all members of the program to build sustainable relationships that valued the contributions of all in co-creating solutions and sent a message to community partners that their community and organizational goals and needs were at the forefront. CEDR provided student trainings and facilitations to further strengthen our mutual understanding of this approach.



Tool kit for Universities to Model

This tool kit illustrates the lessons learned and key principles underlying CEDR's community-engaged fellowship program, which was designed to foster meaningful collaborations between university representatives/researchers, graduate and undergraduate fellows, and partner organizations. The program tool kit was crafted based on best practices in student and community engagement, as well as insights gained through the program's initial piloting. Our approach prioritizes community partners' needs and goals. While it certainly can be improved upon, and we welcome input and collaboration, the core tenets are soundly grounded in both best practices and research.

Figure 1 provides a comprehensive overview and serves as a guiding tool for subsequent discussions of the program timeline in the next sections. Specifically, this tool kit lays the groundwork for a thorough examination of important program elements, including:

- A Choosing supervisors
- B Recruiting students
- C Providing training
- D Maintaining regular communication, all reflecting a dedication to strengthening community partnerships and fostering student growth.

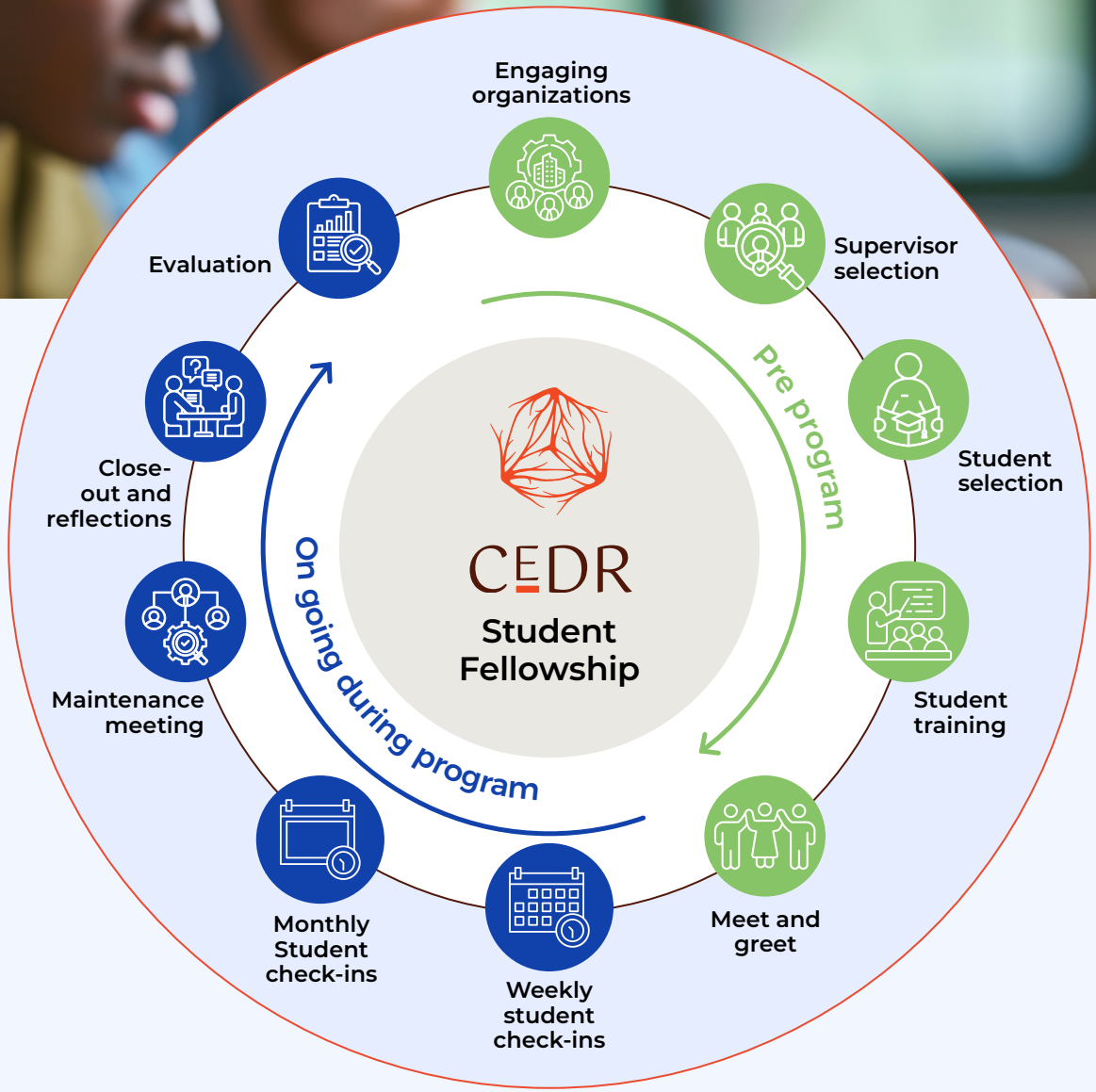


Figure 1. Student fellowship program model



Engaging organizations

Description

Organizations that may have an interest in a student fellow may be identified through faculty and staff social and professional networks, career days, advertising on the school's social media pages, working with the respective university arm responsible for community based relationships, or even by the potential student fellows themselves. Through these avenues you may get organizations approaching you, or find ones that you may want to reach out to (e.g., a staff member suggests an organization would be a good fit). Once a potential community partner has been identified, initial relationship building can begin if there isn't already a pre-established relationship. These initial encounters are geared towards the organizations getting to know one another and to begin developing a relationship and gauging fit. These can be an in person meeting over a meal, a zoom call, or even just making a point to connect with them at local conferences or community events.

Once a relationship has been established and the organization has noted a clear need for a student, more formal discussions about the specifics of how the student fellows can best support the organization can occur once a graduate student supervisor has been selected. Student supervisors can utilize this needs assessment template we've developed, to better understand the organizations need, better enabling them to manage and direct students. It's important to recognize that sometimes tailored trainings or resources might be needed to meet these needs. Also not all organizations may have the need or capacity for a student intern; these conversations are critical in determining the level of support required, which in some cases may be none. Whether it involves leveraging a graduate fellow for high-level assistance in research and grant preparation or hands-on support, the goal is to ensure that the arrangement is mutually beneficial.

Steps for success

1. **Relationship building** takes time, establishing truly successful programs may take years. Give yourself plenty of time initially to connect with various community partner organizations, and make it a point to maintain those relationships so the program can continue to grow. If you're starting from scratch, depending on how strong your ties to the community are, and how broad your recruitment efforts are you'll need 4-6 months just to establish a handful of potential partners.The selection process of organizations is first and foremost about whether they can utilize student support to help build out their capacity to secure more funding. It is essential to first assess if there is a need for an intern prior to the commencement of the program. This can be done by setting up a one-on-one with each partner organization, university representatives, and graduate fellow supervisors. This clarifies at the outset what assistance the program can offer the organization, if any. This ensures that the involvement of student fellows genuinely benefits the organizations rather than adding to their workload.
2. **Do be flexible** and know the role of interns may change over time in response to community partner's needs.
3. **Don't assume you know what's best for community partner** / best way for students to be utilized.

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Supervisor selection

Description

A pivotal component of our university's community-engaged fellowship program was the **strategic employment of graduate student fellows to oversee fellow students during their internships with local NGOs**. These graduate fellows are instrumental, not just in supervising, training, and managing interns, but also in serving as crucial liaisons for assisting partner organizations in research, capacity building, and student management. The ongoing mentoring that occurs between the supervisors and the student fellows is a core benefit of this program, so careful selection is key!

Steps for success

It is paramount to enlist top-tier graduate students with deep-seated experience in community engagement to fulfill these roles. Core qualifications to look for should include:

1. **Experience managing** other students;
2. Having an **understanding** of the intricacies and complexities of community engagement;
3. **Research and/or writing experience**; and most importantly,
4. **Real-world experience** working on the ground with or for non-governmental organizations (NGO) or civil society organizations (CSO).

Additional qualifications for gauging fit might include:

1. **Strong communication skills**;
2. **High academic standing**;
3. A depth of **knowledge around community engagement** and research that is sufficient to provide trainings and act as a mentor to other students;
4. **Previously established community ties**; and
5. **Research or practice focus** that is in the same general field of work of the organizations they will be paired with. Expectations of the supervisors should be clear so they are cognizant of their role as not just managers and instructors but also mentors of student interns. Given the amount of work and skills required to execute this program successfully, we suggest paying students a modest stipend to ensure that the opportunity is compelling for highly qualified individuals who likely have many other opportunities.

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For an example: Profile of what good candidates might look like, see the vignette to the right which highlights a few key qualifications of the student supervisors of the CEDR fellowship program that made them an excellent fit. When looking for students to fill these roles, we recommend hiring approximately 1 supervisor per 4 students. This ratio can be scaled up or down based on the availability and skillset of the supervisors. A general rule of thumb when hiring is for supervisors to expect to spend on average 6–8 hours per month per student and community organization pair. Having several supervisors over different groups of students can be beneficial, as high levels of supervisor collaboration allow students and organizations to benefit from the skill sets of multiple mentors. While institutional job boards can successfully recruit qualified candidates, where feasible, we suggest relying on established institutional social networks to assist in identifying capable individuals who have proven their abilities through working with staff and faculty. Letters of recommendation are a must for this position.

Student Vignette



Student 1

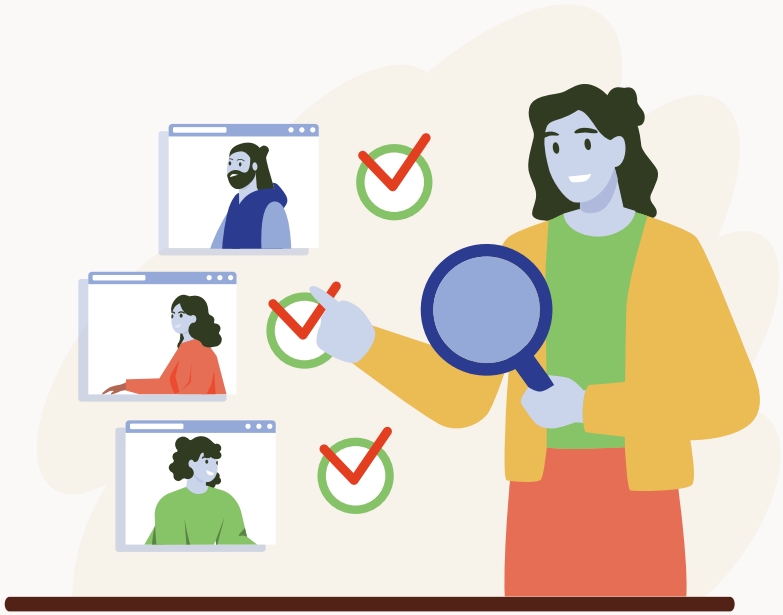
- Political Science PhD student whose research focus is on environmental politics, ethical development, community engagement and NGOs.
- Decade of experience working in NGOs.
- 3 years working with Tulane's Center for Public Service to support community-engaged learning and scholarship.
- Teaches a seminar called Topics in Community Engagement regularly for student interns through CPS.
- Works as development director for a local green NGO.

Student 2

- PhD student in the Social Psychology program whose research focus is on intergroup relationships and individual well-being in U.S. organizations.
- Extensive experience in cross-level and interdisciplinary project collaboration, project management, and management of other students.
- Brought a keen understanding of university-community dynamics.
- Research experience in organizational identity.
- Community Engagement Advocate at the university's Center for Public Service, where they perform regular trainings on topics and themes related to community engagement.

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Student selection



Description

Student selection should occur only after community organizations have been consulted with and specific needs identified. This can allow for a more targeted identification and selection of students. Students can be successfully recruited from institutional job boards, especially over the summer months when many students may be looking for opportunities to build their resumes and engage with communities.

Steps for success

Student selection should be done with equity and diversity in mind in both the selection of students and also in the selection of reviewers for the student applications. Except in the most exceptional cases, candidates should be selected from either Master's or PhD-level student bodies. While undergraduate students may be readily available, we found that they often lacked foundational research skills crucial for jumping right into a fellowship that aims to build capacity and support community organizations, largely in grant proposal development. Such gaps in competencies can risk making the program more of a burden on the partner organizations rather than a source of meaningful support. Undergraduates are appropriate for more traditional internship-style engagements, but without significant levels of training up front, their involvement may add more strain to organizations. That's not to say that future endeavors cannot explore the option of using undergraduates if there is;

1. A need identified by the organization that these students could fill; or
2. An understanding that students will need to undergo intensive training before they begin engaging with community organizations. Anyone pursuing such endeavors to train students from the ground up as CEDR did should explore CEDR's Resilience Hub, where there is a truncated version of our curriculum specifically designed to train students in the needed skills to become true community assets within a community-based organization (for additional information about the full curriculum, reach out to the contacts listed on the back of this document). Many of the qualifications noted above for the student supervisors apply equally here but should be considered "goodness of fit" gauges rather than strict requirements, as training and mentorship from quality student supervisors can supplement areas where students may be lacking.

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Student training

Description

Regardless of the style of student and community engagement and the students' past experience, **students will likely need additional training**. A few recommendations are noted on the right.

Steps for success

1. Given CEDR's use of **undergraduate students' upfront training sessions** covering essential skills such as database searching, grant writing, and best practices in community engagement were crucial. Future replications of this model with graduate students would still need to provide intensive baseline training for all students on appropriate community engagement methods.
2. Scholarly searches will likely already be in the arsenal of any Master's or PhD students so only **minor technical training** may be required, but this will vary by cohort and based on the specific needs of the community.
3. **Grant searching** is also a skill fewer graduate students have, particularly at the Master's level.
4. While skills related to **navigating a research database** are largely translatable, some form of basic training to expose students to the variety of databases available and their useful features would still be much needed.
5. **Training should be an ongoing process** based on the needs and desires of the students to develop their professional skills further.



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"Meet and Match" or Meet and Greet

Description

When **setting up a capacity development collaboration between students and organizations**, first impressions are important. Setting up an opportunity for an organizational representative to meet the students and ensure fit is key. This introductory meeting should be convened with all student fellows and community partners to foster introductions and outline the program's goals and timelines.



Steps for success

1. **Don't assume students will automatically know what to do**; scope out students' interests, skills, and training needs before students and organization representatives meet. Tentatively match them based on these skills and interests and the needs of the participating organizations. Keep in mind that if the fit isn't right, don't force it. If a student doesn't have the skill set needed, pairing them may do more harm than good, but leave it up to the organization to decide. Careful pairing will help to ensure a mutually beneficial collaboration between students and organizations.
2. **Facilitate a meeting**; we recommend in-person, but where necessary, virtual meetings that are carefully structured can also work.
3. **Set a collaborative tone** from the outset.
4. **Allow time for organizations and students to set goals and expectations**, as well as provide introductions and socialize. One-on-one break-out sessions are ideal.
    - Prepare a list of questions and prompts that should be answered/discussed by students and organizations to help guide the discussion and keep it productive.

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Weekly Student check-ins

Description

The program's structure should include weekly one-on-one meetings between graduate fellows and student interns to facilitate reflection on their community engagement experiences, discuss progress, address challenges, and identify additional training and support needs. Interns often face uncertainty and feel lost at the outset of their placements due to several factors: it may be their first experience in a professional setting, there can be a disconnect between what the program envisioned and what the community partner truly needs and community partners may be unsure how best to utilize interns' skills. Early and frequent meetings with the students and a more structured support system can help avoid this and ensure that interns can contribute effectively and gain valuable experience from their participation in the program.

Steps for success

1. Check in frequently with students, offering support and training where needed.
2. Establish a robust system of direct and anonymous feedback and communication (e.g., zoom calls, texting, anonymous surveys, etc.)

Monthly Student check-ins

Description

To further enrich the student interns' experience and foster a reflective practice of community engagement, monthly meetings involving all student participants are recommended. These gatherings should aim to reflect on experiences, share insights, challenges, and successes, encourage collective growth, and provide support to ensure students' continued autonomy and confidence. A portion of the time can also be dedicated to focusing on personal growth and professional development through tailored trainings. This can empower undergraduate interns with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed while also ensuring their work is impactful and aligned with the needs of community partner organizations.

Steps for success

1. Have students reflect on their holistic experience.
2. Provide training and facilitate discussions on best practices in community engagement
3. Make it a safe space to discuss challenges and wins.
4. Take student feedback and needs seriously and adapt as needed
5. Don't make this a vent session where students are heard but no changes to programming occur; this should meaningfully inform ongoing adaptations to the program.

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On going during program

Weekly student check-ins | Monthly Student check-ins | **Maintenance meeting** | Close-out and reflections | Evaluation

Maintenance Meetings

Description

Several maintenance meetings are advised, including;

- Bimonthly check-ins between graduate fellows and community partners and
- Monthly check-ins between graduate student fellows and program leaders. Meetings with community partners are vital to maintain alignment and allow adaptation to evolving needs.

These can be virtual or on-ground visits, depending on the circumstances. Meetings between graduate student fellows and program leaders are necessary to oversee progress, provide logistical support, and address ongoing challenges. These help ensure that the graduate fellows can successfully serve as crucial liaisons, ensuring a seamless flow of communication and alignment of goals between the university, the student interns, and community partners.

Steps for success

1. **Graduate fellows should do site visits to each partner organization** as part of an initial visit but also occasionally as part of the maintenance meeting schedule. This will help students establish rapport and understand the operations of the organization better.
2. **Recognize that the capacity and needs of organizations may evolve**; adapt the level and kind of engagement of both graduate and undergraduate students based on feedback from the organizations.
3. **Maintain clear and ongoing communication with partner organizations**. This necessitates thoughtful planning and consistent follow-through. The form, kind, and frequency of communication should meet the needs and expectations of the community partner.



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Close out and reflections



Description

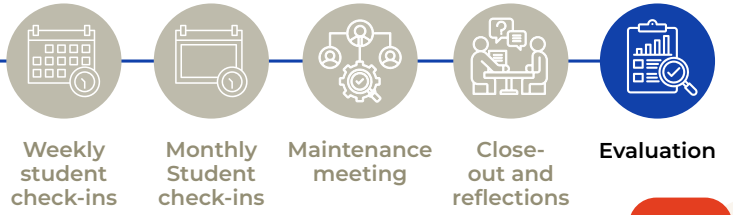
The program should culminate in a final closeout meeting involving all stakeholders to review achievements, lessons learned, and discuss future directions for both the organizations and the students involved, ensuring a comprehensive and adaptive approach to community engagement.

Steps for success

1. Make sure that organizations and students each have unique (i.e., time in the room when the other party isn't also there) as well as overlapping time with each other. The unique time slots allow both students as well as organizations to speak freely about their experience without offending the other party, while the overlapping time slot ensures the collective voice can be captured and acts as a formula closeout for goodbyes, etc.
2. Be sure to have someone specifically talking notes and collecting feedback.
3. In addition to group discussion, we also include anonymous surveys in case anyone doesn't feel comfortable sharing their honest feedback openly.
4. Use this feedback to improve the next iteration of the program.
5. Make clear that the formal opportunity is concluding, but this doesn't have to be the end of the student's engagement with the organization. If both parties are in agreement, they can continue working together outside the bounds of the program; this is the ideal scenario, so do your best to facilitate and promote this.

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On going during program



Evaluation



Description

Evaluation should be ongoing in nature, involve all parties involved, and include various metrics and measurements. It should occur throughout the program rather than simply one point in time for both organizations and students to ensure adaptations can be made as necessary along the way.

Steps for success

1. At group check-in meetings, ask for feedback and make it clear verbally and through your response/reaction to feedback that you are open to candid feedback. Once you have that feedback, make it clear how you've incorporated that feedback.
2. Incorporate anonymous surveys or feedback forms at several points in the program, not just at the end. This can offer invaluable insights into the student's and organizations' experiences, expectations, and areas for improvement, ensuring the program remains responsive and effective.
3. Be flexible in how you get this feedback; sometimes organizations may not want to fill out a survey, but a quick chat over lunch may serve the same purpose.

Conclusion

In summary, the **framework presented in this tool kit encapsulates the essence of CEDR's community-engaged fellowship program**, designed to forge robust partnerships between academic institutions and local communities. By adhering to what is outlined in this model and the best practices in student and community engagement, other universities can replicate the success seen in this program. This model can help establish enduring connections that empower communities to access resources, address pressing needs effectively, and provide students with real-world experience, skills, and connections.

While this tool kit provides a basic roadmap for implementing similar initiatives, additional details may be needed. CEDR is committed to collaborating with other institutions seeking to develop community-engaged fellowship programs. By sharing insights and fostering collective learning, we can collectively advance the principles of community engagement and student development in higher education, creating lasting positive impacts for both academia and society.

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Suggested citation:
Davidson, T., Ferreira, R., Sullivan, Z., Feliscar, L., & Diaz, L. (2024). A tool kit for building capacity of community organizations through university partnerships. https://cedrhub.org/publications/

Acknowledgements
The research included in this report was made possible by the Walmart Foundation. The findings, conclusions and recommendations presented in this report are those of the Consortium for Emergent Disaster Resilience and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Walmart Foundation.

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