Interfaith America

The LAMP Lens

A Field Guide

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Foreword

I first met Dr. David Tillman in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, during Interfaith America's Faith in Vaccines (FIVA) project, where he played a pivotal role in community-based vaccine outreach. It was clear he possessed a rare combination of enthusiastic energy, deep integrity, and a relentless commitment to solving problems others might consider intractable. David has a gift for moving work forward—not by exerting authority, but by forging relationships, listening carefully, and building structures that help communities do what they most want to do: care for one another.

That gift became even more evident in the transformative effort he helped lead in response to the fentanyl crisis in Harnett County, home to Campbell University. Drawing on the trust, partnerships, and lessons forged through FIVA, David worked with public health officials, county commissioners, recovery advocates, and—crucially—local faith leaders to identify community-driven priorities and approaches that honored the lived, moral, academic, and professional wisdom present across the county.

The results speak for themselves. Harnett County saw **a more than 70% reduction in fentanyl-related deaths**, a dramatic and lifesaving decline unmatched by peer counties and far exceeding the statewide trend. This was not the product of a single program or a technical fix. It was the outcome of what David eventually named *the LAMP Lens*, the approach to engaging community concerns explored in this field guide.

LAMP is, at its heart, a lens through which communities can build trust, share power, and work across differences to collaborate toward a vision of mutual wellbeing. It is also a testament to the power of religious pluralism, of honoring the many sacred, ethical, and cultural frameworks that shape how people understand health, risk, and hope. In David's hands, this pluralism is not theoretical. It is practical and lifesaving.

When I first read through this document, I felt, deep in my bones, that every stakeholder who cares about fostering healthy communities can benefit from--and be deeply inspired by--this field guide. David has captured his learnings, observations, and sometimes his fumbling through for the benefit of your community and mine. What you'll find here is not only wisdom for community health work; it is wisdom for how to lead well in complicated times.

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Introduction

Why a Field Guide, Not a Framework

The first version of what would become the LAMP Lens didn't emerge from a whiteboard session or literature review. It emerged in a room full of people who had long been doing the work—practitioners, academics, and faith-rooted leaders gathered from across the country to reflect on the future of faith and health. We had convened at the AdventHealth Design Center in Florida, a place designed for collaboration and imagination, to see if our shared experience might yield something useful.

By the time I returned to my hotel room that evening, I was both energized and overwhelmed. The conversations had stretched across disciplines. They crossed theologies. They reflected a wide range of strategies. There was wisdom everywhere, but I kept wondering: Could we find a handle for the complexity we were sitting in?

When I woke up the next morning, I sketched out an idea on the little pad the hotel provides on nightstands. It wasn't a model or a framework, just a way of seeing—a lens. I was trying to capture four kinds of wisdom I'd heard again and again in the room: lived experience, academic perspective, moral insight, and professional skill.

I called it PALM, thinking it might offer a helpful orientation to what already felt present. The next morning, I shared it with the group. To my relief, it resonated. People recognized themselves in it. Then, in a moment of generosity I won't forget, Teresa Cutts suggested, gently and brilliantly, that the same letters also spelled LAMP.

Of course. A word easier to remember, and full of metaphorical possibility. We laughed. Then someone, with affectionate skepticism, said what we all knew to be true: "Just what the field needs, one more acronym, one more framework." We laughed again, but the question lingered: Does this actually help?

Over the years that followed, I kept testing it. I shared the LAMP Lens with colleagues at conferences, on Zoom panels, in classrooms, and in long hallway conversations at public health meetings. I shared it at church potlucks and with students preparing for fieldwork. I even found myself sketching it on napkins during late-night hotel bar conversations with fellow travelers in the work.

What I have found is mostly recognition by others. The LAMP Lens named what people were already doing or wanted to be doing. It helped them notice what was missing and shifted conversations from problem-solving to wisdom-sharing. The Lens invites teams to co-create their work with greater clarity, honesty, and trust.

So this guide is not a new model. It's not a theory. It's a field guide shaped in practice, refined through reflection, and shared in the hope that it helps others see the work and each other more clearly.

A Simple Heuristic: Count to Four

If the LAMP Lens is not a prescriptive framework, then one might wonder what it is. The simplest answer is that it is a heuristic, and the heuristic is this: count to four.

Before you proceed, pause and count. Are all four sources of wisdom present and shaping the work? Which ones are dim? Who is missing from the conversation? That is the repeatable move, simple enough to use before a meeting, in the middle of a conversation, or when a project has stalled and you cannot quite name why.

Are there more than four forms of wisdom worth honoring in community health work? Almost certainly. But in my experience, most partnerships have not yet reliably gathered these four. We extract lived experience without capacitating it. We invite moral wisdom to open and close meetings while excluding it from the decisions in between. We defer to professional expertise in ways that quietly crowd out everything else. Before we reach for greater complexity, it is worth asking whether we have actually done the simpler thing. Count to four. See what is missing. Start there.

So what are the four? LAMP names them:

- Lived Wisdom – insight grounded in personal experience, memory, and place
- Academic Expertise – knowledge built through research, learning, and critical inquiry
- Moral Wisdom – values-based understanding shaped by faith, ethics, and meaning-making
- Professional Expertise – applied skill developed through training, service, and practice

The lens is what develops over time, as counting becomes habitual and you begin to see partnerships differently than your training taught you to. This guide does not assume that any person or partner represents only one of these streams. We often live at their intersection, bringing personal experience and formal training, spiritual conviction and analytic skill. The purpose of the LAMP Lens is not to categorize people. It is to help teams clarify which sources of light are shaping decisions and which ones still need to be invited in.

The LAMP Lens is grounded in a long lineage of participatory and justice-oriented traditions. While it draws heavily from CBPR, it is not a research methodology. It supports strategy rather than inquiry. It does not tell you what to do; it tells you what to check before you do it, and what you may have overlooked when something is not working. It can be used in designing new projects or revising ongoing ones. It helps clarify which forms of wisdom are shaping decisions, identifies who is being left out, and challenges partnerships to build with honesty, capacity, and durability.

Universities must be more than centers of knowledge creation, and effective community engagement requires more than outreach. It requires an orientation to complexity and a simple habit for navigating it. Count to four.

Using This Guide

The organization of the field guide is in three parts. PART ONE is a background section that works to articulate answers to a bunch of questions related to *why* one might try to integrate the LAMP Lens as a heuristic to shape their work. Specifically, the first section aims to answer the following:

- What is the LAMP Lens?
- What is an example of the Lens in practice?
- Who might find this useful?
- How is the Lens potentially helpful?
- How might the Lens shape the way you lead?
- What are the intellectual forbears of the LAMP Lens?
- How does the LAMP Lens fit within the scope of academia?

In PART TWO, the guide shifts focus to delving into each dimension of the LAMP Lens and focusing on considerations for recruitment and empowerment of partners in each way of knowing. Additionally, this second section looks at the strengths and unique contributions of each dimension and offers thoughts for facilitating co-creation of projects between this dimension and the others. Finally, each chapter in this section ends with some key takeaways and key questions that might be useful to teams who desire stronger inclusion of the particular dimension.

The last section of the guide, PART THREE, outlines some caveats and warnings that might assist teams in avoiding some of the mistakes we've made. Each chapter in this section is a brief consideration of a particular type of mistake, thoughts about why we made the mistake (and why you might tend toward the mistake as well), and some basic thoughts on what we wish we'd done.

So, as this is a field guide, please use it accordingly. Flip to the sections that seem most useful to you. Scan sections looking for quick direction for an upcoming meeting. Grab the questions at the end of a chapter and just use a few on an agenda. Take this work as field notes from one practitioner to another. Hopefully, this guide is organized in a way that serves application to the moment and rewards curiosity.

(That is, except for my graduate students, who should read this start to finish. 😊)

PART ONE: Some Background for LAMP

I first encountered the complexity of professional lighting as a leadership development consultant in state government. One of our programs was being featured in a professionally produced video and I would have a small “talking head” role. Since my contribution would be brief, I had not planned on spending much time with the crew.

But I had not factored in the lighting. Not just one or two lights, but an array: a key light just off-center to define my face, a fill light to soften shadows, a back light to create separation, and a background light accenting the screen behind me. Each was placed with precision and served a specific purpose. It took over thirty minutes just to get the lighting right for what ended up being a blink of screen time. (It may have also required a generous dusting of powder to keep my bald head from catching the glare.)

What seemed like overkill made sense when I saw the final cut. The lighting gave the image dimension and texture.

That experience taught me something I didn’t yet have language for: clarity requires complexity. And complexity, when handled with care, doesn’t confuse—it reveals.

Four-Point Lighting in Cinematography

Professional filmmakers and photographers understand that a single light source rarely tells the whole truth. One light alone, even a bright one, casts harsh shadows, flattens features, erases nuance, and exaggerates some elements while hiding others. The result may be visible, but it lacks emotional or aesthetic depth.

To address this, cinematographers often use a four-point lighting setup. The setup begins with a key light placed at a 45-degree angle to the subject, which defines the shape of what we see. Next comes the fill light, placed opposite the key, which softens shadows and brings subtle details forward. A back light, positioned behind and above the subject, separates the figure from the background. Finally, background lighting adds a wash of tone or drama to the setting.

Each light plays a distinct role, and the goal is balance. When used well, the lights work in concert, shaping an image that feels dimensional and alive. The best lighting avoids calling attention to itself; it lets the subject and the story take center stage.

Using Sources of Light in Community Health

The LAMP Lens takes inspiration from this approach. Just as cinematographers layer light to reveal depth and dimension, public health practitioners and community collaborators must layer knowledge to understand the full shape of a challenge. We need more than one kind of insight.

Health initiatives are often lit by a single source. Sometimes that source is academic research, clear and rigorous but narrowly framed. Sometimes it is professional expertise, efficient and evidence-based but detached from lived experience. Other times, efforts rely on personal

stories or moral urgency without the systems to support them. Each of these, on its own, leaves significant parts of the truth in shadow.

When we bring together all four dimensions, we begin to see the full picture. Lived wisdom softens the hard edges of technical expertise. Moral insight gives meaning to abstract data. Professional skill puts values into action. Academic rigor sharpens our focus and challenges our assumptions.

The LAMP Lens encourages attention and intention as we engage sources of illumination. We must notice which lights are on, which are dim, and which need adjusting. As in cinematography, missing a source of light can flatten the subject and distort the story.

Who Might Find This Useful

While I hope this guide is useful to many—community organizers, nonprofit leaders, public health practitioners, clergy, and people with lived experience—I am writing chiefly to fellow academics. This is the group I most identify with, the group I most often sit alongside, and the group that often holds convening power in community–academic partnerships.

Universities bring significant assets to this work: funding mechanisms, data systems, public legitimacy, eager students, and faculty with deep disciplinary expertise. But we also carry a complicated history. Academic institutions have extracted insight without reciprocity, driven projects by institutional timelines, and claimed authority where humility was needed. That history lingers in community memory and in the dynamics we step into.

As faculty, we must choose how to carry our roles with more intentionality, reflection, and care. We are no longer automatically presumed trustworthy or relevant, and higher education is being asked hard questions. Across the country, people are wondering whether universities still serve the public good and whether we contribute meaningfully to the communities we claim to support.

This guide is written into that moment. It does not defend higher education so much as invite a different way of practicing it—more responsive, more plural, and more deeply human.

For Academics at the Early Stage of Exploration

This guide may be most helpful for academics beginning to explore community–academic partnerships. You may be asking whether your research addresses community needs or starting to rethink how you approach partnership itself.

Defining a problem is never neutral; it sets the course for everything that follows. What gets named as a challenge, and how that naming occurs, determines which questions are asked and which paths are pursued. Often, the very act of labeling something a “problem” reflects outside assumptions rather than community priorities. Well-meaning efforts can rush to solve issues that the community does not experience in the same way or does not want addressed in the ways being proposed.

That is why early-stage reflection matters. The LAMP Lens encourages teams to ask at the outset: Who named this issue? What ways of knowing shaped that judgment? When lived, moral, academic, and professional wisdom are engaged from the beginning, definitions become more grounded, and the work that follows becomes more relevant, trusted, and capable of real impact.

For Academics Actively Building Collaborative Relationships

If you are already developing a community–academic partnership, this guide offers tools for navigating the complexities of collaborative work. The focus shifts from making contact to building shared practice among people who hold different forms of knowledge and responsibility.

Co-creation requires more than goodwill; it requires clear processes for decision-making, communication, and shared contribution. This guide provides strategies for building structures where joint ownership can emerge, both in name and in practice. It supports teams in creating

the conditions for insight to travel between disciplines and between lived realities and professional routines. It also helps maintain the trust those collaborations require to thrive.

For Academics Reflecting on and Refining Established Projects

If your partnership is well established, your focus may be shifting toward sustaining the work with wisdom. At this stage, reflection replaces planning as the central task. Questions emerge that move beyond what is working to ask what no longer serves the community's needs—and what may need to end.

The LAMP Lens offers a way to revisit earlier decisions with fresh perspective. It draws attention to what is guiding momentum, what is fading, and whether the people closest to the work still see themselves in it. By grounding that reflection in multiple sources of insight, the lens helps teams evaluate progress and alignment. It equips collaborators to pause with purpose, making space for conversation before course correction. In doing so, it supports decisions that are accountable to the people most affected, rather than to the systems funding or measuring the effort.

What This Actually Looks Like

Before exploring the LAMP Lens in depth, it helps to begin with a grounded example, one that shows how this way of seeing took shape through real partnership rather than abstract theory. What follows is only marginally useful as a model to replicate, but it is a true story from the field and a proof of concept.

Case Study: A Rural Overdose Prevention Initiative and the Emergence of the LAMP Lens

In 2022, a rural county in North Carolina invited our public health team to design a county-wide strategy to address the overdose crisis. At the time, opioid settlement funds were just beginning to flow, and local leaders wanted a process that built trust, reflected local realities, and led to lasting impact. There was no ready-made playbook, only a clear sense that the stakes were high and many voices needed to be heard.

Over the next two years, a collaborative structure took shape and steadily strengthened. The initiative now includes three active subcommittees and an executive committee. Each subcommittee is co-chaired by individuals who carry different forms of insight, pairing a health professional with a pastor or a parent who lost a child with a behavioral health provider.

These chairs do not serve symbolic roles. They set agendas, guide deliberation, shape project selection, and vote on funding proposals. The broader governance structure was co-created by people representing what we would later name the four dimensions of the LAMP Lens: lived experience, academic partners, moral leadership, and professional expertise.

Together, they built the entire strategy. They influenced outreach priorities, program design, and decision-making structures. When the strategic plan was presented to County Commissioners, it reflected all four sources of light. When the Commissioners adopted it, they were not just endorsing a document; they were backing a collaborative process rooted in shared knowledge.

At the time, we did not yet have a name for what was emerging. It was not until about eighteen months into the work, after I returned from the convening at the AdventHealth Design Center, that the language of the LAMP Lens came into focus. The idea of these four ways of knowing as distinct but interdependent sources of light helped us see both what had guided us and what we should be wary of overlooking.

Naming the lens gave us shared language for reflection. Subcommittees began asking whether all four dimensions were present. On several occasions, projects were paused—not rejected, but paused—so that lived experience or moral insight could be brought into the conversation. In this way, the LAMP Lens did not dictate direction; it created a rhythm of pause and recalibration, a habit of checking the light before moving forward.

One of the clearest expressions of this approach came during an overdose awareness vigil in the basement of a rural church. The event reflected the values and structure of the broader initiative.

Public health students handled logistics, preparing the space, coordinating the evening, and ensuring materials were available. This was Academic Expertise in action, not as the central voice but as scaffolding that enabled shared participation.

Four mothers who had lost children to overdose stood at the center of the gathering. They had helped organize the event, prepared materials, and shared their stories. Their grief shaped the space. They named truths others struggled to say and reminded the room why the work matters. This was Lived Wisdom, leading and anchoring the event.

Health department staff and community paramedics offered instruction and distributed naloxone. They answered questions and stayed present throughout. Their participation grounded the vigil in tangible response. This was Professional Expertise, clear, practical, and essential.

Ministers from local churches closed the evening with prayer. They blessed the hands of health professionals, blessed the naloxone and the lives the vials might save, and led a candlelight meditation. Their presence gave the evening weight and marked the work as shared responsibility. This was Moral Wisdom in practice.

No single perspective dominated. Each brought clarity to something that would have remained in shadow without it. Together, the vigil became a living expression of the LAMP Lens, a co-convening of insight across difference. It was not a framework on display; it was simply what happened when every kind of knowing was fully welcomed into the room.

Tangible Outcomes and Ongoing Learning

The initiative is already resulting in quantifiable outcomes:

- A dramatic increase in community-based naloxone distribution, with more than 1,000 doses distributed throughout the community at events like the vigil above.
- Expanded access to medications for opioid use disorder, including jail-based induction, buprenorphine in primary care, and additional support at methadone clinics.
- A 72% reduction in fentanyl-positive overdose deaths over two years, nearly double the statewide rate of decline during the same period.

But the most profound outcomes have been relational and cultural, harder to count but critical for sustainability. The work has created new circuits of trust and mutual recognition across sectors that previously had not collaborated. It has given rise to ongoing partnerships, new programs, and invitations into faith communities that had once been wary of public health outreach.

Why the LAMP Lens is Useful

In the summer of 2022, I was having coffee with a small group of highly accomplished academic colleagues at a professional meeting. We were discussing the strain of leading academic programs during the pandemic, trading stories about enrollment challenges, remote instruction, and shifting public health guidance.

When it was my turn, I shared about some of the vaccine acceptance work I had been involved in, specifically conversations with a group of Baptist pastors who were navigating widespread skepticism in their congregations. I spoke about the deep roots of historical mistrust and the layered influence of both conservative political identities and religious worldviews. I mentioned that I had recently spent the better part of a lunch with these pastors, listening carefully as they expressed concern that the vaccine might be the Mark of the Beast.

The table of public health leaders laughed. Their laughter was not warm or knowing, but condescending, the kind of laugh we all give when something sounds ridiculous or irrational. In that moment, something in me turned. These were thoughtful, well-trained people, yet they had so few touchpoints with the cultural and spiritual frameworks shaping these pastors' decisions that they could not recognize the conversation as legitimate.

What was deeply real for the pastors was, to this table of academics, something absurd. That moment has stayed with me, not because it was surprising, but because it was so familiar.

This is why the LAMP Lens matters. Public health exists in contested, complicated spaces. People do not check their stories, histories, or theology at the door before making health decisions. If we ignore that, we miss opportunities and deepen disconnection.

Community Health is Complexity

Community health challenges are often wicked problems, difficult to define, lacking clear solutions, and involving multiple interdependent factors. Unlike technical problems, which may be resolved through linear analysis or evidence-based interventions, wicked problems resist textbook answers; their causes are entangled, their outcomes uncertain, and their solutions always partial.

Community health is not alone in this. Advances in chaos theory and complexity science remind us that the world is rarely linear or static: weather systems, power grids, and financial markets all behave in nonlinear ways, where small inputs can cascade, feedback loops can amplify, and patterns appear that no linear models can predict. Over recent decades, researchers have explored these dynamics with computer simulations, agent-based models, and machine-learning tools that trawl vast datasets for strange attractors hiding behind what appears as randomness.

In many technical arenas the payoff has been impressive: hurricane forecasters now narrow the likely path of a storm with lifesaving accuracy, and grid operators can spot voltage instabilities before lights flicker. But those systems behave in relatively stable ways compared to the concerns of this guide. Public and community health occupy a different epistemic terrain, where the “rules” are renegotiated every day and the variables answer back. The same message that encourages vaccination in one neighborhood might fuel resistance in another, because history,

power, memory, and moral meaning all reshape how health information is received and whether it is trusted.

As a result, predictive technologies lack the power to capture the full social, cultural, and ethical dimensions that drive community health outcomes; what looks like random noise from a distance is often the real signal on the ground. The LAMP Lens offers a different way of navigating this kind of complexity. Rather than attempting to model it, the lens helps us intuit it, recognizing pattern through deliberate reflection across multiple forms of knowledge. The four sources of light help us build approaches that are robust to uncertainty, not because they predict it accurately, but because they are grounded in the kinds of wisdom that can move with it. Where traditional models seek clarity through control, the LAMP Lens seeks clarity through coherence.

Towards A Complex Knowledge Network

In this context, the LAMP Lens is useful because it recognizes the importance of combining different ways of knowing. Explicit knowledge, organized and shared through research studies, models, reports, and evidence-based guidelines, remains a critical resource in community health, but by itself it often struggles to address the complexity and context of real-world challenges.

Tacit knowledge, by contrast, is rooted in experience and shaped by context. It includes moral intuition, professional judgment, cultural wisdom, and embodied understanding, forms of knowing that are often difficult to articulate or reduce to formal metrics. In community-engaged public health, tacit knowledge enables responsiveness and adaptability, particularly in the face of rapidly changing conditions or contested values.

The LAMP Lens invites academic teams to intentionally draw from both networks of knowledge to create a more complete and resilient foundation for project design and decision-making, one that honors complexity rather than bypassing it. By integrating its four sources of light, the LAMP Lens offers a way to stay oriented in the messiness of community work. It reveals the shape of the terrain without over smoothing the topography.

That kind of multidimensional clarity matters, especially when decisions must be made with limited information and uneven trust. Technocratic models can be reductive, but empowered lived and moral wisdom resists the overly simplistic. In real-world contexts, the decisions that matter most are made in the middle of competing priorities and incomplete information, and when we pretend otherwise, we often end up with strategies that look solid in theory but fall apart in practice.

Gary Gunderson, Teresa Cutts, Jim Cochrane, and other scholars with the Leading Causes of Life Initiative invite us to look to the natural world as a guide for working in complexity. They remind us that forests thrive not because they are tightly managed, but because their life-giving systems, such as the vast mycelium networks beneath the surface, are quietly adaptive and relational. Likewise, flocks of starlings move together not because they follow commands, but because each bird follows a few simple rules in close connection with those nearby. These models do not rely on rigid control; they rely on flexible principles, local awareness, and shared orientation, what ecologists call coherence.

The LAMP Lens draws from the same logic. It does not add complexity for its own sake. It offers just enough structure to help us respond with wisdom and enough flexibility to move with the realities of the moment.

Nothing New Under the LAMP

“We need to revise everything” is what I scrawled into my notebook, feeling equal parts inspired and overwhelmed. I was sitting in the César Chávez Student Union at San Francisco State University, realizing that we would need to overhaul our curriculum.

I had recently become the chair of a new public health program in North Carolina and was attending a weeklong CBPR Intensive led by Nina Wallerstein, Meredith Minkler, and their collaborators, leaders whose work had long shaped the field but now, in person, reshaped my paradigm. I remember hearing Wallerstein describe her partnerships with Indigenous communities. She was not just explaining research design; she was describing relationships grounded in trust and accountability. It was clear these partnerships were not built for the sake of publication; they were built to last.

I looked at my notes and realized we could not keep teaching as if communities were sites for exploration. If we were serious about community health, we had to start teaching as if communities were partners from the beginning.

From CBPR to LAMP

The ideas in this guide have many intellectual ancestors, but the LAMP Lens draws most directly from community-based participatory research (CBPR). The field of CBPR, rooted in social justice traditions, Indigenous research protocols, and emancipatory pedagogies, has long emphasized that good research must be accountable to the people most impacted by its findings.

CBPR has given us a robust set of principles: shared power, co-learning, capacity-building, and long-term commitment to change. These principles also form the bedrock of the LAMP Lens. But where CBPR is, by definition, a research methodology, the LAMP Lens functions as a strategic heuristic. More than a method for conducting research, it facilitates convening in complexity. Many of the projects I have encountered—shared decision-making about health policy, curriculum co-design, mutual aid collaborations, overdose prevention efforts—have little or nothing to do with formal research, yet they demand the same ethical posture, the same intentional alignment of diverse forms of wisdom, and the same shared responsibility for outcomes that CBPR champions.

In that sense, LAMP does not replace CBPR; it draws from it and extends its reach. It gives collaborators a way to ask whose experience is guiding this effort, what we mean by “effective,” and who gets to decide. These are questions CBPR scholars have asked for decades, but the LAMP Lens applies them to scholarly activity beyond research.

The Invocation of "M"

CBPR has long emphasized the importance of cultural identity and local epistemologies, but the LAMP Lens draws particular attention to one dimension that can be underemphasized in CBPR: Moral Wisdom. This emphasis emerged directly from our experience partnering with the Coharie Tribe of eastern North Carolina during the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, we connected through formal tribal channels such as health offices and community centers, but very quickly, community members steered us toward their churches. It became clear that critical health decisions were being influenced not only by health messaging and data, but also by spiritual practices and scriptural interpretation.

We have seen similar dynamics in other settings, from Baptist congregations wrestling with vaccine decisions to multifaith coalitions addressing overdose and housing. Questions about prophecy, moral obligation, communal responsibility, and the role of science shape how information is received and whether it is trusted. Moral frameworks anchored in faith and ancestral or communal traditions help people interpret risk and decide how to act. CBPR has always made room for these complex meaning systems, particularly through its attention to historical trauma and cultural humility, but the LAMP Lens names this as a distinct dimension, recognizing Moral Wisdom as a necessary source of knowledge alongside lived experience, academic insight, and professional expertise.

Importantly, this is not a call to theologize public health work. It is a call to recognize that moral and spiritual worldviews already shape decisions in communities. Wise collaborative action requires making those frameworks visible and fundamental in the partnership process. Including Moral Wisdom is more than a matter of justice or respect; it is strategic and practical. In the complexity of community, ignoring the role of Moral Wisdom in the name of neutrality often leads to irrelevance.

From Shared Knowing to Shared Doing

CBPR has taught us that knowledge must be co-created. It reoriented the academy's relationship with community, not as a site of extraction but as a partner in meaning-making. Through CBPR, we learned that research must be shaped by the lived realities, histories, and values of those most impacted by its findings. That shift, from studying communities to learning with them, has changed how we think about our work and taught us to ask more than simply what we can measure, but what matters—and to whom.

Yet co-creating knowledge functions differently than co-creating action. Many community–academic partnerships, especially outside of formal research, are primarily concerned with goals other than generating findings; they are focused on making things happen. The LAMP Lens offers a way to co-create action when certainty is out of reach and when the stakes—social, moral, and human—are high. While CBPR equips us to learn in partnership, the LAMP Lens offers a way to move in partnership, especially when the way forward is not yet clear.

Using the LAMP Lens to Lead

Back in 2014, we were trying to secure funding for a new initiative: a community garden in a historically Black neighborhood that had faced decades of disinvestment. I helped assemble a group that included the local health department, Cooperative Extension, a few engaged faith leaders, and some human service professionals who had long worked in the area. We hosted meetings, planned site visits to other gardens across the region, and designed a proposal we felt proud of. It was, in many ways, an early version of the kind of community–academic partnerships this guide seeks to strengthen.

To cap off our planning, we hosted a well-organized community meeting that we intended to focus on selecting the model for the community garden. My students helped run the event, and we had strong turnout. We had put together a polished presentation showing several different models and layouts for the garden, and various agency partners took turns sharing how different versions could be supported by their agencies. When it came time for discussion, I closed the presentation by inviting input: “What questions can we answer before we start deciding together which of these we’d like to do?” I said it with what I thought was confidence and hospitality and even half-expected applause.

Instead, there was a long pause. Then, slowly, an older gentleman stood and walked toward the front. I smiled and welcomed him, asking what question he had for us. He took his time, offered a kind word of thanks for all the work we had done, and then, very directly, met my eyes and said, “My big question, though, is what made you think that what we really wanted was a community garden?”

That question was a quiet rebuke that immediately shifted how I think about community work and continues to shape my approach today. Not one person on our planning team—not me, not the pastors, not the agency partners—had ever lived a single day in that neighborhood. We had convened a broad group of professionals and stakeholders, but we had not centered anyone who actually called that place home. We had illuminated a lot, but the most important truths were still in the shadows.

It’s Not About “Buy-In”

Academics are often positioned as subject matter experts who contribute specialized knowledge or design evidence-based solutions. The LAMP Lens supports a different kind of leadership. It invites faculty to act as conveners, bringing together people with different kinds of knowledge and helping shape collaborative responses to complex health challenges. This work is not separate from academic identity. For faculty who understand their role as leaders in learning, convening becomes an expression of that commitment. Using the LAMP Lens, academic partners can structure inquiry across lived, academic, moral, and professional perspectives. In this role, the academic shifts from providing answers to helping ask better questions, questions that make more of the relevant knowledge visible.

This shift can also prevent a common but problematic dynamic in community–academic partnerships: designing solutions in the academy and then seeking community “buy-in.” The LAMP Lens helps teams create co-creative processes in which ideas are developed together rather than presented for approval. It reinforces that lived experience, moral wisdom, and

practice-based insight are essential and distinctive forms of knowledge that must be empowered to shape the work from its conception.

As the work unfolds, the Lens becomes a tool for structuring conversations around tasks and around different ways of seeing impact. Planning sessions, check-ins, and community gatherings can be framed with questions from each domain of the Lens: What is lived experience telling us? What does the evidence suggest might be effective? What moral tensions are showing up? What are professionals seeing on the ground?

The Lens also plays a quiet but essential role in how decisions get made. In moments of ambiguity, returning to the Lens can help teams avoid deferring to the loudest or most credentialed voice. Instead of asking, “What should we do?”, teams can ask, “What would this decision look like if we were guided by trust more than by expediency?” or “Who at this decision-making table is most impacted by the consequences of our choice?” These are not delays; they are safeguards.

During evaluation, the LAMP Lens helps teams reconsider how they define success and how learning happens. Technical metrics—outputs, participation, fidelity—still matter, but they are not the whole story. What also matters is whether the work reflects shared values, makes sense to those involved, and builds lasting trust. The Lens gives teams language to name when something looks complete on paper but feels off in practice.

Most importantly, the Lens should be used repeatedly. Teams change, conditions shift, and what was once visible may recede into shadow. Returning to the Lens helps partnerships stay coherent as they adapt. In practice, the LAMP Lens becomes a habit, a way of asking across the life of a project whether the work is being shaped by a full field of light sources or a narrow beam.

PART TWO: Exploring the Lens

Consonance with the Consonants

In PART TWO of this guide, we move from theory and background into practice. Our community–academic partnerships must do more than simple inclusion; we must design spaces where these voices participate fully, collaborating, informing, and revising one another's understanding in real time. The LAMP Lens offers a structure that encourages the full spectrum to interact, and the strength of the work lies in this interaction.

Academic Expertise plays a key role here. As the only vowel in the acronym, it serves a connective function, helping link and tune the consonants. The real role of academia is facilitating consonance with the consonants, an intentional alignment where each form of wisdom contributes its distinct energy and sharpens the others in turn. Academic expertise, when activated correctly, can help ensure that these voices do more than coexist and genuinely co-create.

The sections that follow invite you to explore each dimension with this interplay in mind. We will look at the distinct contributions each offers, how to foster environments where these contributions are heard and valued, and how to move beyond token inclusion to real partnership.

Each section will include key considerations for:

- Recruitment: Who represents this domain of wisdom in your context, and what qualities or experiences should you seek beyond formal credentials or roles?
- Empowerment: How do you ensure this voice is not symbolic or extracted, but meaningfully shaping the work?
- Strengths and contributions: What does this form of wisdom tend to offer that others cannot, and what types of insight, energy, or legitimacy often arise from this source?
- Reflections and cautions: What are common pitfalls or missteps when engaging this dimension, and how can we better calibrate our posture or process to honor its contributions?

This approach ensures that each source of light is described and explored through a practical lens. We will consider how to build trust with people carrying Lived Wisdom, how to use Academic Expertise without overpowering other voices, how to make space for Moral Wisdom even when values diverge, and how to bring Professional Expertise into collaboration without reverting to technocratic control.

Lived Wisdom: The Value of Embodied Knowing

I remember sitting beside a mother moments before she was about to speak at an overdose awareness vigil. She had lost her son, and although she had told parts of his story in private, this was the first time she would share the full truth publicly with neighbors, church leaders, and strangers in the room. She stood behind the microphone and told the story of his death with clarity, love, and unflinching grief. No statistics. No blame. Just truth.

In that moment, her voice carried more wisdom about the crisis we were confronting than any white paper we had brought with us. She knew the pain of stigma, the exhaustion of navigating broken systems, and the daily calculations of when to hope and when to prepare for the worst. This is Lived Wisdom. It is often shaped by pain, yes, but also by deep resilience, memory, and meaning-making. People with lived experience of illness, loss, trauma, or marginalization carry insight into how systems function or fail to. They know the limitations of our maps because they have walked the terrain.

But Not Only This…

Lived wisdom can be much more than knowledge born of suffering. Often, public health has pigeonholed “lived experience” into testimonies of disease, death, and despair. However, this source of light is much broader. It is also the steady, often underrecognized expertise that comes from knowing a place intimately, including its patterns, constraints, workarounds, and social logic.

I once overheard an academic community development consultant marveling that a rural clinic expansion had been stalled by the limitations of the septic system. The team was surprised. I was not. I had grown up in a trailer on a dirt road in the foothills of North Carolina. Of course septic tanks matter. What baffled me was not the obstacle; it was that someone doing community health work had not anticipated it.

Lived wisdom is knowing what external actors tend to overlook. It is knowing who has the backhoe, which churches will let you use the fellowship hall without charging rent, and why the last three initiatives did not last more than a year. This kind of embodied, contextual knowledge is rarely catalogued, but it is indispensable. And too often, it is dismissed.

Finding Wisdom Beyond the Usual Suspects

Recognizing lived wisdom is a start, but to draw from its strength we must rethink how, and from whom, we recruit collaborators. Too often, public health initiatives default to familiar, credentialed representatives: the same advisory board members, organizational leaders, and “safe” spokespersons already elevated by institutions. These individuals often carry real insight, but relying only on them narrows and distorts the field of wisdom we claim to honor. The danger is not just omission; it is distortion.

Real lived wisdom often resides with those whose names do not appear on organizational charts: the neighbor who knows why past initiatives failed, the matriarch who has mentored generations from her front porch, the unofficial historian who can trace patterns of loss and

resilience that formal reports omit. It means looking beyond title and affiliation and asking who, in this place, carries trust, navigates its contradictions with grace, and understands not only what is said in public but what is whispered in kitchens, classrooms, and church basements.

Engaging these leaders demands more than extending an invitation; it requires reshaping the conditions of engagement through stipends, preparation, accessible meeting structures, and shared decision authority, so that experiential knowledge can genuinely shape the work.

Designing for Power and Capacitation

Co-creation requires capacitation. If we expect individuals with lived experience to contribute meaningfully, we must design processes that equip and empower them to do so. That means providing not just stipends, but training, preparatory information, accessible meeting formats, and emotional support. It also means being transparent about how decisions are made and who controls the agenda.

Burduladze et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of power-sharing frameworks in participatory partnerships. Without deliberate attention to power dynamics, calls for inclusion can reproduce the very inequities they aim to disrupt.

In our own work, we learned to ask questions such as:

- Are we valuing time and emotional labor equitably?
- Are we offering information in formats that support full participation?
- Are we preparing institutional partners to listen without defensiveness?

Questions like these help shift participation from symbolic presence to shared power.

Key Contributions of Lived Wisdom in Co-Creation

Lived wisdom brings embodied knowledge of how systems actually operate in real lives, knowledge often invisible to formal analyses. Clark et al. (2023) note that individuals with lived experience frequently carry essential understanding about the social realities and structural barriers that shape whether interventions succeed or stall. Their expertise is not hypothetical; it is tested daily against the friction of real-world conditions.

Perhaps most crucially, lived wisdom serves as a moral and emotional anchor. Mulvale et al. (2024) emphasize that lived experience can reframe public health work, shifting it from a technical exercise to a fundamentally relational endeavor. People with lived experience remind teams that programs and policies are not abstractions; they are encounters between human beings, shaped by histories of trust, betrayal, resilience, and hope. Their presence can recalibrate conversations, keeping empathy and urgency at the center when systems-level thinking threatens to drift toward abstraction.

Finally, lived wisdom sharpens strategic relevance. When initiatives are designed without meaningful input from those closest to the ground, they risk missing the mark, not because the strategies are poorly intentioned, but because they are poorly calibrated. Incorporating lived

wisdom helps ensure that interventions are not only theoretically effective, but contextually trusted, usable, and sustainable. It aligns design with lived priorities, strengthening both impact and legitimacy.

Key Points for Engaging Lived Wisdom in Community Health Work

- *Lived wisdom includes more than suffering*
  It encompasses deep knowledge of place, culture, systems, and everyday life—not just illness, trauma, or loss.
- *People with lived wisdom are often already leading*
  Look for the neighbor who knows everyone, the mom who built an informal support group, the elder who holds history, not just those with formal roles.
- *Engagement is not enough—capacitation is essential*
  Don't just invite people with lived experience to the table; prepare, support, and resource them to lead meaningfully.
- *Honor lived wisdom publicly and formally*
  Quote it. Fund it. Center it in meetings. Build space for it in evaluation. Make it visible to other partners, especially professionals and policymakers.
- *Protect against tokenism*
  Ensure that people with lived experience are not isolated, overburdened, or cast into "representative" roles. Design structures for collective voice and shared power.

Reflection Questions for Practitioners and Academic Partners

Identifying Lived Wisdom

- Have we looked beyond “usual suspects” to find neighborhood-level wisdom?
- Are we honoring place-based expertise, such as knowledge of rural infrastructure, community rhythms, and social trust?

Supporting Capacitation

- What supports have we put in place to ensure that participants with lived wisdom can contribute meaningfully (for example, stipends, transportation, orientation, prep time)?
- Have we explained processes clearly and invited feedback on how meetings or roles could be made more inclusive?

Making Wisdom Visible

- Are we quoting lived expertise in reports, briefs, and public presentations as we would a journal article?
- Are we creating moments for people with lived wisdom to lead, not just contribute?

Checking for Tokenism

- Is any one person being asked to carry the weight of “the community voice”?
- If they left the project tomorrow, would lived wisdom still have a structural role in the initiative?

Designing for Equity, Not Extraction

- Are we extracting stories for impact, or building strategies in partnership?
- Have we asked our lived experience partners what success would look like for them?

Academic Expertise: Leaders in Learning

I was standing in the back of a church fellowship hall, one of the first in-person gatherings we had held during our COVID outreach efforts with tribal communities. The room was filled with Southern Baptist pastors, most of whom identified as American Indian, and I had been invited to speak for a few minutes about the informational Q&A sessions we were co-hosting at local churches.

As I waited for my introduction, the moderator said, “We have Dr. David Tillman here from Campbell University’s Department of Public Health. Dr. Tillman—”

He turned to face me—“—sometimes we have a hard time hearing folks like you… because we still remember smallpox blankets.” Then he handed me the microphone.

That moment still echoes in me. It was not meant to shame; it was an act of honesty, a reminder that credentials do not cancel out history, that research cannot redeem what was taken without consent, and that even well-meaning outreach can evoke deep skepticism because of legacies of exploitation.

In the LAMP Lens, Academic Expertise is one of the four essential streams of wisdom, but it must arrive with awareness of its baggage. Public health researchers and educators have inherited institutions and methodologies that have too often been extractive. For academic expertise to serve community health, it must be unwrapped from its legacy of presumed authority and reoriented toward usefulness, humility, and co-learning

Catalysts of Curiosity

Academic expertise has much to offer, not only through research and theory but through what we might call learning design, the ability to scaffold reflection, guide inquiry, and facilitate the growth of others’ capacities. When academic expertise is activated for maximum benefit, the resources of the academy become catalysts for curiosity.

Faculty and students may contribute most meaningfully in co-creative partnerships not by being the experts in the room, but by helping make expertise more shareable across the room. We can support partners in interpreting data, thinking critically about strategy, building their own logic models, writing grants that support their community-based organizations, developing surveys, and creating learning experiences for the whole collaborative.

In this way, academic expertise becomes a force that strengthens others. It helps partners sharpen their thinking and put their own wisdom to work. Meredith and colleagues and Brock and colleagues describe this as a shift from bringing more knowledge into the room to making it easier for knowledge to move, to matter, and to grow.

We saw this clearly during our overdose prevention work, where students and faculty facilitated community listening sessions and helped local advocates use qualitative findings to shape messaging campaigns and policy recommendations. Our expertise was not in the story; we were there to help others tell it more clearly and audibly, and in ways that could move systems.

Carrying Power, Sharing Power

Academics carry power—symbolic, institutional, and procedural—and too often are still given default control over funding, evaluation, and authorship. If we want to use our expertise well, we must also work to redistribute the power that comes with it.

That involves preparing academic teams, not just communities, for collaboration. In our program, we teach students to analyze power in every meeting they enter, asking who sets the agenda, who has veto power, and who decides if something is “evidence-based.” These are more than academic questions; they are ethical ones.

The most valuable academic partners I have worked with are not those who arrive with answers, but those who know how to frame good questions. They are methodologists who also know how to host, analysts who can build both dashboards and relationships, and teachers who see community members as fellow learners, not passive recipients of knowledge. This is not about erasing academic identity; it is about redefining it as a posture of curiosity and service.

Key Contributions of Academic Expertise

When invited into co-creative partnerships, academic teams bring forms of support that can strengthen the work—if offered in the right spirit. One of these is strategic grounding. Faculty and researchers can help shape projects with evidence-informed methods while staying attuned to local context and open to adaptation.

Another is capacity-building. We can offer tools and training that make it easier for partners to work with data, navigate complex systems, and engage confidently in planning and evaluation. But the support is more than technical; it is also relational. At our best, we help create conditions where different ways of knowing can surface and circulate by designing learning spaces where interpretation, strategy, and reflection are shared work.

It also means confronting the structural advantages we carry. Academic partners often have disproportionate access to funding, authorship, and procedural control. Co-creation calls us to redistribute those forms of power intentionally and transparently. As we do this alongside our students, we help train future collaborators, not as experts to be deployed, but as bridge-builders and co-learners who understand the ethics of engagement and the value of listening.

Done well, academic expertise does not just inform the work. It helps make the work more inclusive, more legible, and more lasting. Academic expertise can be a powerful gift—but only when it is offered in service of something larger than the academy itself. When we use it to lift others’ voices, build shared understanding, and convene the full complexity of wisdom in a room, we begin to redeem its potential.

Key Points for Using Academic Expertise Responsibly and Creatively

- **Academic expertise is more than content knowledge**
  It includes skill in teaching, inquiry, analysis, communication, and reflection, tools that can support capacitation across all domains.
- **Academics often hold the convening power**
  Universities bring institutional legitimacy, space, students, and funding mechanisms, and that power can be used to share, not shape, the agenda.
- **Academic knowledge is powerful—but not neutral**
  The academy has a history of extractive research and epistemic domination. Academics must lead with humility, especially in communities that carry historical trauma.
- **Make learning reciprocal**
  If you are teaching others, build in structures for learning from them as well.
- **Don't over-design or over-own**
  Academia rewards project leadership, authorship, and innovation, but co-creation requires space, flexibility, and distributed authorship.

Reflection Questions for Academics and University Partners

Clarifying the Role of Academic Expertise

- What kinds of academic expertise are most useful here (e.g., research, evaluation, facilitation, teaching)?
- Am I assuming the academic lens is the most valid way to understand the issue at hand?

Power, Positionality, and Responsibility

- Have I acknowledged the historical baggage of research institutions in this community?
- What concrete steps are we taking to build or rebuild trust?

Modeling Scholarship as a Relational Practice

- Are we approaching the community as co-learners, not just subjects or partners of convenience?
- Where am I learning in this process? Who are my teachers?

Supporting Others Through Academic Tools

- Have we offered to help partners write grants, analyze data, or present their work in ways that benefit them?
- Are we using our teaching skills to support capacitation, and are students oriented toward humility and non-extractive work?

Reframing Dissemination

- Are community voices centered in the products of this work (articles, panels, briefs)?
- Are we returning findings in formats that are useful and accessible to the community?

Moral Wisdom: The Power of Meaning-Making

We had been working with the Coharie Tribe for several months when a tribal leader invited our team, including a group of graduate public health students, to join him on the Great Coharie River. The invitation was not to gather data or plan logistics; it was to listen, to feel.

“This river,” he said, “is medicine.”

We launched our kayaks and drifted quietly beneath a thick canopy of trees. There were no formal introductions or facilitators that day, just the water, the silence, and a sense that we were being given access to something sacred. It was not a metaphor; it was a worldview.

In that moment, I watched our students begin to grasp something they had not encountered in textbooks: that health is never just technical. It is more than a question of risk or behavior; it is about connection, belonging, sacredness, and trust. It is always, in part, making meaning.

Defining Moral Wisdom

In the LAMP Lens, Moral Wisdom refers to the spiritual, ethical, and values-based knowledge that communities draw on to make sense of suffering, healing, justice, and health. It may be rooted in religious tradition—including Indigenous lifeways, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and other faith practices—but it also lives in cultural memory, secular ethics, and land-based practices. It informs how people respond to crises and how they define what is worth protecting. This kind of wisdom helps communities orient themselves to what matters, including what to hold on to, what to fight for, and what to grieve.

This wisdom does not disappear when religious affiliation declines. Many people describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” and others locate their moral commitments in civic, cultural, or philosophical traditions rather than formal faith communities. Yet across these differences, moral frameworks still guide how communities understand responsibility, legitimacy, and hope. Even those who do not claim a spiritual identity live within moral architectures shaped by inherited values that undergird laws, schools, social services, and neighborhood life. These frameworks often operate beneath the surface of public health and health systems, shaping what communities believe is good, just, or worthy of investment, even when those beliefs are rarely spoken aloud.

This became clear in our work with Indigenous communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Community members asked questions that could not be answered by science alone, including questions about divine protection, ancestral resilience, and the moral cost of isolation. When those conversations happened within relationships rooted in shared values, something shifted. Pastors blessed the immunologist before her vaccine Q&A, elders prayed over vaccination sites, and community members reframed the vaccine as a gift of love rather than a mandate of

fear. These were not public relations gestures; they were expressions of moral wisdom that created conditions for trust no amount of messaging alone could replicate. Recognizing the depth of moral wisdom is one thing; designing with it in mind is another.

Leading Causes of Life and the LAMP Lens

When working with Moral Wisdom, we need ways to move beyond vague appeals to values and actually design for meaning. The Leading Causes of Life (LCL) framework helps us do that. Developed by Gary Gunderson and Larry Pray, and expanded by Teresa Cutts, Jim Cochrane, and others, the LCL framework identifies five generative forces that help people survive hardship, make sense of suffering, and move toward healing: connection, coherence, agency, blessing, and hope.

These five forces are not abstract ideals; they are observable sources of vitality that sustain communities through hardship. Connection is the experience of belonging, knowing that your presence is noticed, your absence is felt, and your life is entangled with others in meaningful ways. Coherence is the capacity to make sense of difficulty, not by explaining it away, but by integrating it into a shared story, worldview, or tradition that helps people endure. Agency is the power to shape what happens next, and it appears when people are not merely consulted but actually have influence over decisions that affect their lives. Blessing is the unearned affirmation of worth, conveyed through rituals, words, and gestures that tell people they matter regardless of status, success, or history. Hope is the orientation toward possibility, persisting when people can imagine a future worth reaching for, even when the path is unclear or the odds are long.

The LCL framework helps surface the moral architecture that already exists in communities, but knowing what sustains life is different from knowing how to work with it. The LAMP Lens can help make LCL usable not only as a framework for reflection, but as a guide for practice. Each of the five life-giving forces named by LCL is most visible through Moral Wisdom, but they are strengthened when all four forms of knowledge—Lived Wisdom, Academic Expertise, Moral Wisdom, and Professional Expertise—work together.

Consider the rural overdose vigil described earlier in the guide. Connection was built as people from across the community gathered in grief and solidarity; coherence emerged through prayer and shared stories; agency was exercised by those organizing the event, including mothers who had lost children; blessing was offered by elders and ministers, not in abstract terms but by naming each person’s worth; and hope was sustained through action, offering naloxone, inviting new partnerships, and simply showing up.

Recruit and Design for Pluralism

Public moral wisdom lives in many forms—sacred texts and kitchen-table ethics, land-based rituals and civic ceremonies, whispered prayers and uncompromising protests. It carries meaning that sustains people through suffering and defines what is worth protecting. But this wisdom does not speak in a single voice or always follow institutional patterns. Designing with moral wisdom means learning to work pluralistically, across different faith traditions and secular moral worlds.

We saw the importance of this approach during the planning of the Recovering Hope Conference, a gathering designed to bring faith leaders into deeper partnership around overdose response. From the outset, we did not expect or assume shared beliefs or experiences. Instead, we invited a wide range of moral voices already active in harm reduction: a Muslim rapper whose advocacy is shaped by his recovery story, a biker preacher grounded in the 12 Steps, and a harm reductionist who sees her work as sacred care. These leaders did not just reflect diversity of backgrounds; they brought different ways of seeing healing, suffering, and responsibility.

That range of moral perspectives helped establish a culture where real dialogue could take root. Participants did not need to agree on doctrine to build trust, because they had already practiced listening across deep differences in belief. The same skills that allowed people to hold space for divergent theologies—honoring conviction without demanding consensus—became essential when the conversation turned to treatment. Long-standing tensions between abstinence-based recovery and medication-assisted treatment were not resolved by data alone, but because participants had exercised the muscle of pluralism, they could approach treatment “orthodoxies” with similar openness, not as a binary to win but as a moral question to discern together.

This is one of moral wisdom’s quiet strengths: it can hold deep conviction while softening the ground for collaboration. Convened well, it opens space for empathy without requiring consensus and makes unlikely partnerships possible, especially in work shaped by grief, stigma, and competing visions of care. If we want moral wisdom to shape the work, we must design for its full expression. That means resisting the urge to tokenize a single moral voice or to substitute one faith for pluralism. It means building teams and convenings where the moral logic of a neighborhood, congregation, or cultural tradition can be spoken aloud—and taken seriously.

Key Points for Recognizing and Honoring Moral Wisdom in Community Work

- **Moral wisdom is pluralistic by design**
  It includes faith-based traditions and nonreligious value systems—spiritual, cultural, civic, and ethical frameworks that guide behavior and collective meaning-making.
- **Moral wisdom shapes public life—whether we acknowledge it or not**
  Community norms, policies, and practices are influenced by inherited values. Even secular institutions are built upon deeply moral logics.
- **Faith leaders and moral elders hold relational authority**
  They often serve as interpreters of fear, grief, and hope. They make meaning in moments when technical answers fall short.
- **Engaging moral wisdom requires fluency and humility**
  Many academics feel underprepared to engage with faith communities or value-laden narratives. That’s okay. Start with questions, not scripts.
- **Moral wisdom doesn’t belong in the margins**
  It deserves a seat at the planning table, not just the invocation. It can help name the deeper “why” beneath community priorities.

Reflection Questions for Academics and University Partners

Recognizing the Moral Dimensions of Health Work

- What moral or spiritual frameworks are already shaping how this community thinks about health, justice, suffering, and responsibility?
- Are we acknowledging the communal values beneath the issue (e.g., dignity, compassion, sacredness of life)?
- Are we inviting conversations about why this work matters, not just what needs to be done?

Engaging Moral Leaders and Communities

- Have we included trusted moral voices—faith leaders, elders, ethicists, cultural storytellers—in our planning and decision-making?
- Do we know how to enter sacred spaces respectfully, and have we asked what that looks like?

Embracing Pluralism with Integrity

- Are we creating space for both faith-rooted and nonreligious moral narratives to contribute meaningfully?
- Have we taken seriously the wisdom of those who don't identify as religious but carry deep commitments to justice, healing, or stewardship?

Making Meaning Together

- Have we allowed space to reflect on grief, hope, or moral injury in this work?
- What stories, symbols, or rituals might help communities cohere around this work?

Reflecting on Your Own Moral Commitments

- What convictions or guiding values brought you to this work?
- Are those values reflected in how you lead, teach, and engage others?

Professional Expertise: Knowledge Earned Through Practice

Public health partnerships bring together many ways of knowing, and professional expertise is the stream that grounds collaboration in what is technically sound and operationally possible. While academics may lead by convening and community members bring critical insight and moral authority, professionals contribute applied mastery, the kind of knowledge earned through training, repetition, and responsibility for real people in real systems.

In the LAMP Lens, Professional Expertise refers to the deep, specialized knowledge held by clinicians, pharmacists, public health officers, immunologists, case managers, nonprofit directors, and others whose daily work is embedded in care delivery and system navigation. This dimension is the disciplined application of knowledge in real time, formed through practice, accountability, and repeated judgment under pressure. It reflects not just what we know, but what we can do consistently, safely, and credibly.

During our overdose prevention work, for example, community paramedics and harm reduction staff knew which motels were most critical, which populations would welcome the cheaper intramuscular naloxone, and how to talk to law enforcement about crisis intervention. Their decisions about route planning, dosage training, and follow-up protocols translated shared intentions into concrete action. Without that expertise, our plans would have remained aspirational.

In LAMP terms, professional expertise often acts as the bridge between moral intention and operational design. It can turn lived wisdom into safety procedures, and academic insight into feasible workflows and protocols. When Professional Expertise is invited in as a co-creator—not just an implementer—it helps partnerships choose strategies that are not only inspiring and evidence-informed, but workable within the constraints of staffing, regulation, and time.

Expertise That Changes the Conversation

Professional expertise often matters most when the conversation is complex or polarized. During an overdose prevention strategy session, a diverse group that included recovery advocates, pastors, and policymakers was discussing medication for opioid use disorder, and predictably, methadone sparked tension as familiar lines were drawn, myths re-emerged, and judgment hung in the air.

Then a physician who runs a methadone clinic offered his voice. He had built trust over time by listening first and showing up consistently, and that day he shared data, but more importantly, he shared stories about patients rebuilding their lives, about day-to-day clinical decision-making that keeps people alive, and about what hope looks like in practice. His legitimacy was not just institutional; it was earned, because he had seen this work succeed with real people—and because of that, people listened.

Good Answers Matter

Co-creation requires humble convening with curiosity, creating space where any question can be asked and every question will be honored. But that space is strongest when subject matter experts are present who can offer trustworthy, well-prepared answers.

When my colleague Dr. Amy Hinkelman and I were invited into a talking circle with members of the Waccamaw-Siouan Tribe to discuss COVID-19 and vaccines, we brought open hearts—and rigorous preparation. Amy's expertise was honed over years in laboratories with pipettes, microscopes, and influenza-infected lab rats; she knows viruses, understands the mechanics of vaccine development, and can explain things most of us never learned to ask.

That night, we were also joined by Dr. Linwood Watson, a physician and member of the Haliwa-Saponi Tribe, whose presence added clinical confidence alongside cultural resonance. He embodied two-eyed seeing, bringing both Indigenous knowledge and Western medicine into the room with equal fluency and care. The community heard from a scientific expert and a clinical expert, each deeply prepared, deeply human, and deeply trusted. They did not just receive empathy; they received good information, grounded in science and medicine, from people who understood both the content and the context.

The Value of Specialized Knowledge

Professional expertise brings to the table what no other stream of wisdom can. It offers disciplined, specialized capacities that are necessary alongside lived, moral, and academic ways of knowing.

Scientific understanding
Professional experts draw on deep training in fields such as virology, pharmacology, epidemiology, immunology, and sociology, bringing detailed knowledge of how bodies, bureaucracies, societies, and diseases work. This understanding helps teams distinguish plausible risks from myths and align strategies with what is biologically and socially possible.

Clinical decision-making
Clinicians develop judgment through years of working with patients, balancing risk and benefit, and navigating imperfect systems. Their decisions about dosing, follow-up, and safety protocols are grounded in patterns they have seen succeed or fail in real time, under real pressure.

System fluency
Public health officers, case managers, and administrators understand policies, workflows, billing structures, regulatory constraints, and practical limitations. They know which forms stall on which desks, which approvals are essential, and where a promising idea will get stuck unless the process is designed differently.

Technical precision
Professionals can translate cutting-edge research into actionable steps while avoiding misinformation or oversimplification. They help partnerships decide which recommendations are feasible, which require adaptation, and how to communicate nuance without losing clarity.

These dimensions of mastery often surface in quiet moments—a physician answering a hard question, a case manager flagging an overlooked risk. They are not general insights; they are disciplinary commitments, grounded in licensure, accountability, and continuous professional

development. Community members and collaborators benefit from this kind of expertise not because it is more valuable than lived or moral wisdom, but because it is different and essential.

Recruiting the Right Pros

The most effective professionals in community health are those who carry their expertise with humility and speak in ways others can understand. Their value shows when they explain complex issues without losing the audience or the moment, bringing clarity without dismissal and steadiness without superiority when meetings grow tense or questions are shaped by fear or mistrust.

This kind of presence is powerful—and rare. Many professionals were trained to deliver answers, not to build relationships, and years of education often emphasized accuracy over accessibility. Some feel unprepared for the kind of listening and shared leadership that community health work now requires; they may care deeply, yet struggle to show it through the formal language or posture their field has rewarded.

Collaborative work depends on making space for professionals to grow alongside others. When they are supported to engage differently, many rise to the occasion: they learn to translate their knowledge into resonant stories, pause before responding, and begin to value questions as much as conclusions. A professional with that kind of presence can become a bridge, connecting systems to people and anchoring the work in both credibility and care.

Key Contributions of Professional Expertise in Co-Creation

Professional expertise combines scientific knowledge, clinical judgment, and operational awareness, honed through years of practice and accountability. Professionals respond to complex health challenges with answers shaped by both evidence and experience, and in moments of uncertainty their clarity can become a source of reassurance. Communities can more easily trust these voices when they carry knowledge with humility and speak from real encounters with risk, recovery, and care.

Professionals can be invaluable in translating ideas into action, aligning strategies with policies, staffing structures, and regulatory frameworks to ensure feasibility and follow-through. Beyond technical contributions, they help build future capacity: through mentorship and collaboration, they equip emerging leaders to navigate systems with confidence and skill, strengthening the shared ability to act with purpose and precision.

Key Points for Engaging and Honoring Professional Expertise

- **Professional expertise is disciplined, accountable, and earned**
  It includes clinical judgment, technical mastery, system fluency, and years of real-world decision-making under constraints.
- **Professional expertise makes complex things doable**
  Professionals help bridge the gap between aspiration and implementation, ensuring strategies are sound, legal, and scalable.

- **Professional expertise is more than data—it's credibility**
  When trusted professionals speak clearly and humbly, they can soften polarization and stabilize fragile conversations.
- **Invite professionals to lead from humility, not authority.**
  Professional expertise is most effective when it complements--rather than eclipses--lived, moral, and academic wisdom.

Reflection Questions

Recognizing the Value of Professional Expertise

- Have we made space for those with clinical, operational, or technical knowledge to shape implementation?
- Are we drawing on professionals who not only understand how systems work but also why they often don't?
- Are we recruiting professionals who carry relational credibility—not just degrees or titles?

Understanding What They Bring

- What forms of professional expertise are most needed here (e.g., clinical care, behavioral health, epidemiology, case management, nonprofit logistics)?
- Do our plans reflect realistic constraints—funding cycles, staffing patterns, licensing requirements?

Elevating Professional Voices in Collaborative Settings

- Have we created space for them to share what they're seeing on the ground, not just data points?
- Are we encouraging professionals to use storytelling alongside statistics to shape understanding?

Protecting Against Overreach or Domination

- Have we named the value of multiple forms of knowledge—and ensured professionals don't become the default "deciders"?
- Are we checking for jargon or hierarchical language that might alienate other partners?

Building Trust Around Expertise

- Have we built the kind of relationships where a professional expert can say, "We don't know yet," and still be trusted?
- Are we helping community members understand why professional expertise matters—and what it offers beyond general experience?

PART THREE: Lessons We Learned the Hard Way

By the time you reach this section, you have seen the LAMP Lens at work: how Lived Wisdom, Academic Expertise, Moral Wisdom, and Professional Expertise can illuminate complex challenges when they are intentionally held together.

Part Three turns to the moments when that did not happen, or did not happen fully. These are not dramatic failures. They are the quieter ways good intentions, institutional habits, and unexamined assumptions bend partnerships away from the very wisdom they were meant to honor.

Each chapter names a familiar inflection point: a hospitality problem that mutes honest feedback; a habit of counting that leaves certain forms of wisdom off the page; a prayer that unsettles a researcher trained to separate prayer and practice; a decision shaped in the wrong room; a campus clock that begins to dictate community time; a service opportunity that should have remained a chance to learn.

Seen through the LAMP Lens, a pattern emerges. In each story, dimensions of wisdom are dimmed by the others, often quite unintentionally. Lived and Moral wisdom are muted by deference to Academic and Professional authority. Academic and Professional habits quietly define what counts as legitimate knowledge. Moral Wisdom surfaces in spaces we assumed would remain technical. Institutional timelines and shared professional culture redraw who decides, how quickly, and on whose terms.

Each chapter follows a simple rhythm: a story, what we overlooked, why it mattered, and how we adjusted. You do not need to read them in order. As with the rest of this guide, the hope is that you can turn to the tension that feels closest to your own situation, learn from our mistakes, and continue the work with greater intention.

The Hospitality Problem

We had a beautiful mobile unit. Shiny, well-equipped, university-branded. Our medical school had just acquired it, and we were eager to put it to use. When it came time to draft a proposal for COVID-19 vaccine outreach with the Coharie Tribe, it seemed like the perfect fit: rural county, transportation challenges, vaccine hesitancy. Bring the service to the people.

Our tribal partners didn't object. They nodded. They welcomed the unit. Smiled at the plan. We rolled out the Medi-Bus, parked it in a high-visibility spot, prepped our materials, and waited.

Almost no one came.

It was a quiet failure. No controversy, no angry phone calls. Just an almost empty parking lot and very polite appreciation for a service no one had asked for in that way. Months later, after the relationships had deepened, our partners finally said what they had known from the beginning: the mobile unit was never going to solve the real problem. Transportation wasn't the barrier. Trust was.

They hadn't felt comfortable telling us that at the time.

Realizing that our partners had protected us from discomfort unsettled me more than the empty parking lot.

What We Missed

In the moment, the plan felt solid. We had aligned an available resource with a familiar problem frame and a pressing need. From an academic and professional standpoint, it looked like smart design.

What we missed was how early-stage trust was shaping the conversation. Our partners were not disengaged. They were being hospitable. They were extending kindness, deferring to our perceived expertise, and protecting a fragile new partnership. Saying "no" to the bus could easily have felt like rejecting us.

Through the LAMP Lens, this is what muted Lived and Moral wisdom looks like. Community members understood the real barriers of historical mistrust, spiritual questions, and local narratives about avoiding illness. However, those insights stayed under the surface out of deference to Academic and Professional authority. Everyone's intentions were good, but the result was still misalignment.

Why It Mattered

On paper, the project was a minor misstep. We could log our hours, document the outreach, even take a few photos of the mobile unit in place. But in practice, it was a missed opportunity at a critical stage of the relationship.

When early plans do not fit community realities, people often respond with silence rather than confrontation. They simply do not show up. If we interpret that as "lack of engagement" rather

than “misfit we made hard to name,” we can double down on the wrong strategies or quietly conclude that “this community is hard to reach.”

The deeper cost is trust. If early experiences of collaboration teach partners to expect that Academic and Professional voices will set the agenda, voicing dissent may feel awkward or risky. The partnership may be polite, but it will lack the power of braided insight.

How We Changed

After the mobile-unit experience, we decided to stop arriving with a single polished solution. Instead, we began bringing multiple possibilities to the table rather than a single polished idea. We realized that our effort to bring value to the partnership was slightly misplaced.

Practically, that meant investing our preparation into generating multiple sketched options rather than one fully formed proposal; asking questions that assumed revision (“Which version feels closest to what you would actually use?” rather than “Does this work for you?”); and creating lower-stakes spaces for feedback where disagreement felt safer.

We also began naming explicitly that disagreement was welcome and would not be interpreted as disrespect.

Those small shifts made it easier for partners to bring their full experience and moral insight into the room. The ideas did not necessarily become more clever on paper. But they became more honest, more grounded, and more likely to work.

Reflection Questions

- Where might hospitality, deference, or respect for our roles be muting what partners really think about our current plans?
- How are we signaling—explicitly or implicitly—that saying “no” or “this won’t work here” is welcome, not disloyal?
- In our next meeting, what would it look like to bring a menu of options rather than a single polished idea?
- If we look at our last major decision, whose Lived or Moral wisdom may have stayed quiet out of respect for Academic or Professional authority?

Counting and Dis-Counting

I was walking through a rural Haitian community with a group of local health promoters, conducting a transect walk, a type of community asset mapping exercise. We had clipboards, structured forms, and clear categories: health facilities, schools, water sources, transportation. The goal was to identify resources that could support a maternal health intervention we were designing.

As we moved through the neighborhood, community members pointed out the obvious assets: the small clinic, the school, the well. Then we approached a crowded, noisy area where men had gathered in a circle, shouting and cheering. Money was changing hands. Roosters were fighting.

“This is important for health,” one of the community members said, gesturing toward the cockfighting ring.

I paused, pen hovering over my clipboard. Cockfighting was not on my list. From my public health training, I might even have classified it as a risk factor: gambling, potential violence, animal cruelty.

“Help me understand…how is this a health asset?” I asked.

“This is where men come when they are stressed,” she explained. “When there are problems at home, when they cannot find work, when they are worried about money. They come here, they talk to other men. Without this place, they drink more. They fight at home more.”

I did not write it down.

Years later, I was in rural Michigan, facilitating a strategic planning session with a coalition of faith leaders, health professionals, and community advocates working on the opioid crisis. We were brainstorming potential interventions. The usual options emerged: increased treatment access, naloxone distribution, harm reduction programs, policy advocacy.

Then, an elderly minister whose congregation had been devastated by overdoses, raised his hand quietly.

“The most powerful thing we could do,” he said slowly, “is pray. Together. Regular prayer for our community, for the people who are struggling. That is what would make the biggest difference.”

I felt that familiar pause. Prayer was not on my list of evidence based interventions. It could not be measured, evaluated, or replicated with fidelity. It did not fit into any logic model I knew how to construct.

But I also remembered Haiti.

This time, we wrote it down.

What We Missed

In both moments, the problem was not that communities lacked ideas. It was that their ideas did not fit our categories. Our tools, such as asset maps, evidence based intervention lists, and logic models, had quietly become filters. If an insight did not slide easily into those boxes, it remained invisible.

We were not rejecting community input outright. We were doing something subtler. We were letting our epistemic assumptions decide what counted as real. In Haiti, a men's gathering place that functioned as an informal mental health resource became a "non asset" because it violated our expectations. In Michigan, prayer initially sat outside the boundary of what we considered a legitimate intervention.

Through the LAMP Lens, Counting and Dis-Counting is what happens when Academic and Professional habits quietly govern the ledger. Lived and Moral wisdom are present and vocal, naming spaces, practices, and relationships that sustain health. When they cannot be easily coded, billed, or evaluated, they are at risk of being left off the page.

Why It Mattered

When we do not count what communities count, we do more than miss opportunities. We risk undermining the very systems that are already holding people together.

In Haiti, ignoring the cockfighting ring would not have made it disappear. It would simply have blinded us to a key site of social support. In Michigan, if we had ignored prayer, we might have designed a technically sound plan that felt hollow to the very people charged with carrying it forward.

Unexamined assumptions about what "counts" can also fracture trust. Communities learn quickly what we are willing to name and fund. When we repeatedly validate Academic and Professional forms of knowledge while leaving Lived and Moral wisdom unrecorded, we teach people that their deepest practices, including spiritual, cultural, and relational ones, are secondary at best. Over time, that can make partnerships feel extractive, even when our intentions are collaborative.

How We Changed

After those experiences, we are becoming more suspicious of our own boxes. We began treating our categories and evidence hierarchies as starting points, not boundaries.

In assessment, that means shifting from extraction by form to discovery by question. Instead of asking only about clinics, programs, and facilities, we work from asking open-ended questions such as, “What keeps people healthy here?” and “What practices help people cope with stress or grief?”

We began noticing our reflex to reach for familiar evidence first and to hesitate around practices we could not easily measure. We started naming those reflexes with partners and students, not to shame ourselves, but to make the pattern visible. Naming those reflexes with partners and students does more than keep us from dismissing community wisdom. It allows us to be honestly surprised by what our blind spots had been hiding: not only informal networks of support, but whole ways of understanding health, healing, and change that rarely appear in our categories at all.

Reflection Questions

- What assets, spaces, or practices are community members naming that do not fit our existing categories
- Where are our tools and templates quietly deciding what counts as a “real” resource
- If we started planning from the assets communities name, how would our current strategy change
- How might we document the value of spiritual, cultural, and relational practices in ways that are credible in our institutions without flattening them

The Prayer Test

I was sitting in a circle with members of a rural environmental justice group in eastern North Carolina. We had spent the evening discussing industrial hog operations: water contamination data, health impact studies, regulatory strategies. It was technical, policy-focused work. As we prepared to close, one of the leaders looked around the circle and said, “Before we go, let us join hands and pray for strength in this fight.”

I joined the circle. My own church background made this feel natural. Afterward, though, the leader who’d led the prayer shared a story that bothered me. Another researcher from a prominent university had visited their group. When they invited him to pray, he declined.

“We did not work with him much after that,” she said.

I felt uncomfortable, because I realized how easily I could have been that other researcher. Or, my colleagues or students. I had prepared for policy discussions and data analysis, not for prayer. And our university welcomes all sorts of folks of different faith and no faith commitments at all. My background just happened to align with theirs. I moved through the moment without having to decide.

But what about researchers and students who don’t share that identityl? What happens when the spiritual life of a community appears inside the work and catches us unprepared?

What We Missed

Most academic and professional spaces train us to separate prayer and practice. Even people with deep personal faith are accustomed to keeping spiritual language and ritual outside “secular” work. We learn to treat prayer as private and policy as public.

In this community, that separation did not exist. Environmental justice was not only about regulation and data. It was also about the sacredness of land, the dignity of children, and the conviction that God cared about polluted air and water, and about the people forced to live with them. Prayer was not an interruption. It was part of the work.

This moment, which I began discussing with my students as the “Prayer Test,” reveals what happens when Academic and Professional habits of compartmentalization meet a context where Moral Wisdom is woven into advocacy itself. The community was not inserting faith into a neutral space. They were doing environmental justice as they had always done it, drawing on Lived and Moral wisdom alongside research and legal strategy. The only people surprised were the researchers.

Why It Mattered

The earlier researcher faced a litmus test that felt theological but was probably more about trust. The group was watching to see whether he could respect the way they held the work together.

When a researcher declines prayer without context or preparation, communities may hear it as a rejection of their deepest commitments, even if the intent is simply to maintain professional

boundaries or personal convictions. It signals that the spiritual dimension of their struggle is something the academic partner would prefer not to acknowledge.

For those of us in academic and professional roles, this creates real tension. We do not want faith to become a litmus test. We do not want students or colleagues to feel pressured into inauthentic participation. But neither can we assume that spirituality will remain outside the work. In many faith and health partnerships, it will appear naturally and often.

How We Changed

The first shift was expectation and preparation. We stopped treating integrated spiritual practice as an exception. In many community settings, especially in faith-rooted and justice-oriented work, Moral Wisdom is not adjacent to the work. It is embedded in it.

That recognition changed how we prepared ourselves and our students. Instead of assuming meetings would remain purely technical, we began acknowledging in advance that prayer, blessing, or spiritual language might arise. We talked openly about what respectful presence could look like across difference. Not agreement. Not conversion. Respect.

We also became more transparent with community partners early in partnerships. We acknowledged that our teams would include people from varied religious backgrounds, including some with no faith tradition. Naming that diversity ahead of time made sacred moments less surprising and less fragile.

Most importantly, we examined our own reflexes. We noticed how often we entered rooms expecting compartmentalization, even in explicitly faith-health contexts. Naming that expectation did more than prevent awkward moments. It reminded us that our partners were not blending categories improperly. They were living in an integrated moral world where prayer and policy belonged together.

Reflection Questions

- Where are we assuming that community work will remain purely technical, even when partners have signaled that faith or spirituality matters to them?

- How are we preparing students and colleagues for the possibility that spiritual practices may arise within meetings?

- What does respectful presence look like for people who do not share the community's beliefs?

- How might we name spiritual diversity early in a partnership in ways that strengthen trust rather than strain it?

The Room Where It Happens

I co-chair a community overdose prevention committee with a local pastor. The committee includes people with lived experience of overdose, health professionals, clergy, and nonprofit leaders. We meet regularly to shape strategy, review projects, and recommend how local funds are used.

One afternoon, I met with the director of a nonprofit that also sits on the committee. The purpose was simple and legitimate. We were exploring practicum opportunities for our public health students with their organization. We talked about supervision, types of projects, and how students might be helpful.

As the conversation unfolded, we drifted into related topics. We began imagining how student projects could connect with the committee's work. We discussed outreach ideas, possible evaluation questions, and ways the nonprofit's programs might intersect with emerging priorities. It was a good conversation. It felt efficient and generative.

At the next committee meeting, we shared some of these ideas with the full group. People listened. They asked a few questions. The room was polite and appreciative. Afterward, my co-chair pulled me aside.

"It felt," he said quietly, "like the important meeting had already happened, and I was not in the room."

What We Missed
Nothing about that one-on-one meeting with the nonprofit felt secretive or inappropriate. In academic and professional culture, that kind of meeting is normal. It is how work often moves forward.

What we missed was how it altered the shape of shared leadership. Our committee had been structured intentionally so that different forms of wisdom would shape decisions together. Co-chairs were not symbolic. They carried real authority. When substantial ideas emerged in a side conversation and arrived at the committee as mostly formed suggestions, the ground shifted.

Through the LAMP Lens, this is what happens when Academic and Professional relationships dominate the informal life of a partnership. I had access to the nonprofit director because of my institutional role. We shared a professional language of practicum design and program planning. That shared culture made it easy to generate ideas outside the full group, and it meant that Lived and Moral wisdom were not present at the moment those ideas first took shape.

Why It Mattered
On the surface, nothing had been imposed. The committee could still critique or redirect. In practice, the center of gravity had moved. Instead of ideas emerging from the full committee, they arrived with the subtle weight of alignment already formed.

For my co-chair, the issue was not personal offense. It was structural integrity. If the important thinking happens in smaller circles between Academic and Professional actors, the larger group becomes reactive rather than generative. People with Lived experience and Moral leadership may still be invited to comment, but they are no longer shaping the options from the beginning.

Over time, that pattern erodes trust. Partners begin to wonder which decisions are truly open and which have effectively been settled elsewhere. Even without intent, the process begins to reproduce the very hierarchies it was designed to soften.

How We Changed

We did not stop having one-on-one conversations. Those relationships remain essential. What changed was our awareness of when informal dialogue crossed into agenda-setting.

When ideas began to take shape between meetings, we treated them as threads rather than proposals. Instead of presenting finished concepts to the full group, we brought questions back to the co-chairs first. We asked how a possibility should be framed so that everyone could shape it from the beginning.

We also worked to make decision points more visible. Rather than letting substantive choices hide inside updates, we named them explicitly. That made it clearer when voices could materially change direction.

The deeper shift was internal. I had to notice how natural it felt to let Academic and Professional networks carry momentum between meetings. Efficiency can feel virtuous. But shared leadership requires resisting the urge to arrive with conclusions already half-formed.

Before and after informal meetings, I began asking myself, “If this conversation had happened with my co-chair present, would it have unfolded differently?” When the answer was yes, that was a signal to widen the circle.

Reflection Questions

- Where are side conversations between Academic and Professional partners shaping decisions before the full group engages them?
- How do we distinguish between relationship building and agenda setting?
- In our current structures, when do people with Lived and Moral wisdom shape options rather than respond to them?
- What would make decision points more visible, so that no one feels the real meeting happened somewhere else?

Nobody Cares About a Provost

A good friend of mine once hosted the provost from another university. He was scrambling, nervously prepping the space, checking logistics, making sure everything reflected well on his institution. Watching him rush around, I finally said, “You know, 99% pf people don’t know what a provost is. And they couldn’t care less.”

We both laughed. It was a reminder that the world outside our institutions does not organize itself around our titles, calendars, or reward systems. Yet those systems quietly organize us. If we are not careful, they begin to organize our partnerships too.

I notice it most when I catch myself saying, “We need to have this meeting before the semester ends,” or “We have to submit this before the grant deadline.” Those pressures are real. They shape my days. But they are not the clocks most communities are using.

What We Missed

Early in my community work, I rarely named those academic clocks out loud. I also rarely questioned them. Semester schedules, grant cycles, fiscal years, and tenure timelines felt like the natural pace of things.

The problem was not that these structures existed. It was that I treated them as neutral. When a project timeline tightened because of an internal deadline, I expected partners to move faster without always explaining why. When an initiative paused for institutional review, I assumed the community would understand. When a student project ended abruptly at graduation, it was just the way things go with student projects.

The LAMP lens can help us better see what happens when Academic and Professional structures quietly set the tempo. Lived realities and Moral commitments remain present, but they are asked to conform to rhythms they did not choose. Over time, the expectation becomes subtle but clear: the community adjusts to us.

Why It Mattered

At first, the misalignment showed up as inconvenience. Meetings scheduled around exam periods or conference travel were harder for community partners to attend. Promising efforts stalled when funding cycles shifted. Reports were delivered on timelines that satisfied funders but did not match when the community was ready to reflect.

Over time, the stakes became clearer. When conversations that should have unfolded slowly were compressed to meet internal deadlines, important discernment was lost. When initiatives ended because my role changed or a grant expired, it sometimes communicated that the university’s priorities ultimately governed the relationship.

Unexamined institutional timelines can distort both the work and the trust that sustains it. They can make it appear as if communities exist to fit our cycles of productivity rather than as partners whose own crises, commitments, and rhythms should shape the pace.

How We Changed

The first change was simple but uncomfortable. We began naming our clocks. When a semester break, fiscal year, or grant deadline shaped a decision, we said so directly. That did not eliminate the pressure, but it made the constraint visible and open to discussion.

We also began asking a different question when planning: “Whose time are we on, and who set this pace?” Instead of anchoring every milestone to academic calendars, we tried to align key moments with community rhythms such as seasonal events, local decision cycles, or the time required to build trust. When misalignment was unavoidable, we named it and looked for ways to reduce the burden.

The deeper shift was internal. Academic and Professional cultures reward speed, productivity, and measurable output. Slowing down can feel irresponsible. I had to confront how often I equated pace with effectiveness.

I began paying attention to moments when impatience surfaced. Often, those were the moments when Lived and Moral wisdom were asking for more time. People needed space to consult family, discern within their organizations, or allow an idea to mature. Learning to honor that time, even when it meant missing a deadline or postponing a deliverable, became part of letting the LAMP Lens shape my leadership.

Reflection Questions

- Where are academic or institutional timelines quietly setting the pace of our community work?
- How often do we name those internal pressures with partners rather than treating them as fixed realities?
- What would it look like to anchor key decisions in community rhythms instead of semesters or grant cycles?
- When has the desire to stay “on schedule” limited the time needed for trust, discernment, or shared decision making?

Presence, Not Charity

We had been invited to set up health education tables at the annual Pow Wow, a generous invitation that felt like recognition of the trust we had been building with the tribal community over many months. I brought a small team of public health students and a colleague from the medical school who had volunteered to help. We arrived early, set up our materials, and waited: blood pressure cuffs, informational brochures, naloxone kits, all neatly arranged.

The grounds filled with families, elders, and visitors from across the region. The Grand Entry was breathtaking. Dancers moved in careful ceremony, drums echoed across the field, and children ran between booths selling fry bread and jewelry. It was beautiful. It was sacred. And it was not particularly focused on our health education table.

People were kind. A few stopped by, asked questions, accepted materials. But mostly, the day flowed around us. My students watched the dances, spoke with vendors, asked respectful questions about regalia. They were learning, just not in the way we had planned.

My colleague grew restless. “This is not working,” he said quietly. “We have all these volunteers standing around. We are wasting an opportunity for them to serve. Maybe we should walk around and approach people directly.”

I felt the tension immediately. He was not wrong that our “health fair” was not functioning like a typical health fair. But he was missing something essential about where we were.

“They invited us to be here,” I said. “That does not mean they invited us to interrupt.”

Later, as we packed up, a student approached me. “I learned more today than I have in any classroom,” she said. “Just watching. Just being part of everything.”

What We Missed

In our planning, we had framed the Pow Wow as a service opportunity. We imagined our primary task as delivering screenings and information. The gathering would provide access to people; we would provide care.

What we missed was that we had been invited first as guests. The Pow Wow was not a health event with cultural elements attached. It was a sacred cultural gathering that had made space for us at its edges. In that setting, presence, not productivity, was the primary posture.

Through the LAMP Lens, this is what happens when Academic and Professional expectations about service overshadow invitations shaped by Lived and Moral wisdom. We saw students as volunteers and ourselves as providers. The community saw us as guests. Our instinct to demonstrate usefulness through visible activity made it difficult to recognize that listening and learning might be the most faithful form of participation.

Why It Mattered

The stakes that day seemed small. No one complained. No one corrected us. But the tension revealed a deeper risk.

When we insist on doing something in a space that has not asked for our activity, we risk turning relationship into project. We center our need to feel useful over the community's right to set the tone of their own gathering. Had we followed the impulse to circulate aggressively with materials, we might have met internal expectations and quietly eroded the trust that led to the invitation.

For students, the lesson was formative. If every engagement must produce measurable output, they learn to equate worth with visible service. They miss the chance to experience what it means to be a respectful guest and to recognize that health is already embedded in culture, ceremony, and relationship.

How We Changed

We began to speak differently about showing up. Instead of assuming service as the default, we asked communities, "What kind of presence would be most helpful from us in this space?" Sometimes the answer was active. Other times, especially in sacred or ceremonial settings, it was quieter.

We adjusted how we prepared students. Before events like the Pow Wow, we named explicitly that their primary work might be observation, relationship building, and reflection. Afterward, our debrief questions shifted from "How many people did you serve?" to "What did you notice?" and "How did it feel to be a guest?"

I also began examining my own discomfort when students were not visibly busy. Academic and Professional cultures reward activity and output. Standing at the edges can feel inefficient. Naming that impulse helped me see how deeply the drive to prove usefulness had shaped my expectations.

Over time, we learned to trust that presence offered with humility is not lesser engagement. It is often the groundwork that makes future collaboration possible. At the Pow Wow, what mattered most was not our capacity to provide services. It was our willingness to let the community's rhythms, not ours, define what meaningful participation looked like.

Reflection Questions

- Where are we treating community spaces as service opportunities when we have actually been invited as guests?
- How are we defining "success" in ways that privilege visible activity over learning and relationship?
- What would it look like to ask communities directly what kind of presence would be most helpful?
- When have we felt uncomfortable with "just being there," and what might that discomfort reveal about our own need to feel useful?

Conclusion: Just Get You Some Potatoes

I was standing at the edge of a freshly turned field, holding a stack of grocery bags and feeling quietly proud of our preparation. The Coharie Tribe had invited us to their annual potato harvest, a day each summer when the community gathers to turn up the field and collect what they need. It sounded to me like the perfect service project.

We were ready to work. We brought bags. We brought the assumptions we had learned at food banks and highly organized service days: there would be coordination, a system, maybe even a sign-in sheet. Instead, there were none of that. Simply people in the field, bending down, filling plastic grocery bags, and talking as they worked.

So we did what we knew how to do. We began filling bags. After a while, one of the tribal leaders came by. We asked where we should place the bags for the food pantry.

“For what?” she asked.

“For distribution,” I replied.

There was a moment of kind confusion. “Oh. Okay,” she said gently.

I realized I had misunderstood the plan.

“Is that not the idea?” I asked.

She smiled and shook her head. “No, not really. Just go get you some potatoes.”

I had assumed the day was about organized giving. The day was about shared bounty. The point was not to create an efficient system where outside volunteers could feel useful taking care of the needy. The point was that anyone, from the poorest family to the most high-falutin professor, could walk the field with their neighbors and take home potatoes.

We had come ready to distribute. They had invited us to receive.

LAMP as an Invitation to Practice Differently

If there is a thread running through this guide, it is that moment in the field. Again and again, our habits as academics and professionals led us to assume the work was about what we could organize, deliver, or fix. Again and again, communities were inviting us into something different.

In Part One, we named the Lens and its lineage, and we watched it emerge in a real overdose initiative. In Part Two, we walked more slowly through each dimension of LAMP and considered what it means to recruit, capacitate, and honor the people who carry those ways of knowing. In Part Three, we told on ourselves, tracing how habits and blind spots bent good intentions off course and how small shifts brought us closer to what we had hoped to practice.

The LAMP Lens is not asking you to become a different kind of scholar. It is asking you to practice scholarship differently in community. You will still care about rigor. You will still build models and read evidence. The Lens simply refuses to let those forms of wisdom be the only light in the room. It keeps asking whether Lived Wisdom, Moral Wisdom, and Professional Expertise are also shining on the work, so that the picture we are working from is less washed out and more true to the depth that is actually there.

For many of us, that requires a season of unlearning. It means loosening our grip on the assumption that a well designed plan is the same as a well discerned one. It means allowing questions that are not ours to lead, even when we have a beautiful framework prepared and ready to go. It means accepting that academic timelines are not the same timelines that govern grief, distrust, or hope in a neighborhood. And it means being willing, at least some of the time, to be the person with the least to say.

The Lens will not do this work for you. What it offers is a way to notice when your training is about to repeat patterns you say you want to resist: designing before listening, counting before asking what counts, moving faster than the relationship can sustain. If you are an academic reading this, the invitation is not to become less excellent. It is to let your excellence be braided with other forms of wisdom, on purpose, even when that complicates your plans or redistributes control. That is not a diminishment of your role. It is a different way of being necessary.

Field Notes, Not Final Answers

This guide does not pretend to offer final answers. It offers field notes from a set of partnerships and classrooms, written from within the work rather than above it. It also offers something smaller and more stubborn than an answer: a rule of thumb.

Count to four is one way of naming that rule. On its own, it will never tell you what to do. What it can do is give you a simple, almost mechanical move to make at the very moment your old habits are most likely to take over. Habits rarely shift because we have learned something new; they shift because, in the middle of doing what we always do, something interrupts us and asks for a different kind of attention.

That is the quiet value of a rule of thumb. Instead of waiting until you have time for a full retreat or a perfect process, you have a small practice, ready at hand, that nudges you to pause, to look again, and to ask a different kind of question before you move. Over time, that small interruption can do more to change how you show up in community than any elegant framework you only remember after the meeting is over. My hope is that you will take this one with you, try it in your own meetings and projects, and see what it reveals. I am deeply grateful to the colleagues and community members whose patience, questions, and courage first brought this simple heuristic into my own life and work.

Just Get You Some Potatoes

Back in the field, once we understood, we stopped organizing the harvest. We picked up our own bags, walked the rows with everyone else, and dug for potatoes. We laughed, compared our finds, and carried our bags to the car like everyone around us.

It was not a service project. It was not a practicum. It was a shared act of receiving.

Professors, students, elders, parents, and children all bent over the same rows, under the same sun, taking home the same gift.

If the LAMP Lens does anything useful, I hope it helps us notice when we are about to turn someone else’s field into our project, and instead invites us to join the work and the bounty

already there. Sometimes the most faithful thing we can do, as academics and professionals, is to stop organizing long enough to hear what the community has actually said.

And when they tell you, “Just go get you some potatoes,” try to accept the invitation and enjoy the abundance.