Learning Community Engaged Research

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Introduction

• Effective university-community research partnerships are critical for conducting successful and meaningful research.

• **Community Engaged Research (CER)** is collaboration between university and community in the design, implementation, and dissemination of a research project aimed at meeting community-identified needs.

• CER is seldom addressed directly in graduate research courses and training.

• The **purpose** was to address the gap in graduate research education by asking:

1. **What are the specific knowledge and skills that graduate students need in order to understand and conduct successful CER?**

2. **What are the effective strategies and methods needed to teach these skills to graduate students?**

• Teaching CER from the perspectives of constructivism and experiential education (Furco, 2002; Garcia et al., 2010) enhances student learning of academic content by engaging them in activities where they apply content to address real-life needs identified by the community.

Methodology

The study followed a mixed methods design and was conducted at the University of Victoria.

Fifteen key informant **qualitative interviews** were conducted with

| 8 | Community researchers |
| 7 | Faculty members |

asking the above research questions and:

What do you think are the most important things to know before you begin CER?

How have you or would you resolve conflicts that arise in CER?

What are specific strategies that you have used/experienced to teach/learn CER?

The interview results and themes were used to develop an online **survey** that was completed by 257 graduate students.

Results

• Key informants identified both benefits and challenges of CER.

• They acknowledged the value and positive potential of CER as well as the gap between what community members want in research partnerships and the experiences they have had.

• **Interviews were analyzed for relevant knowledge, skills, and strategies that facilitate the creation of effective and successful CER.**
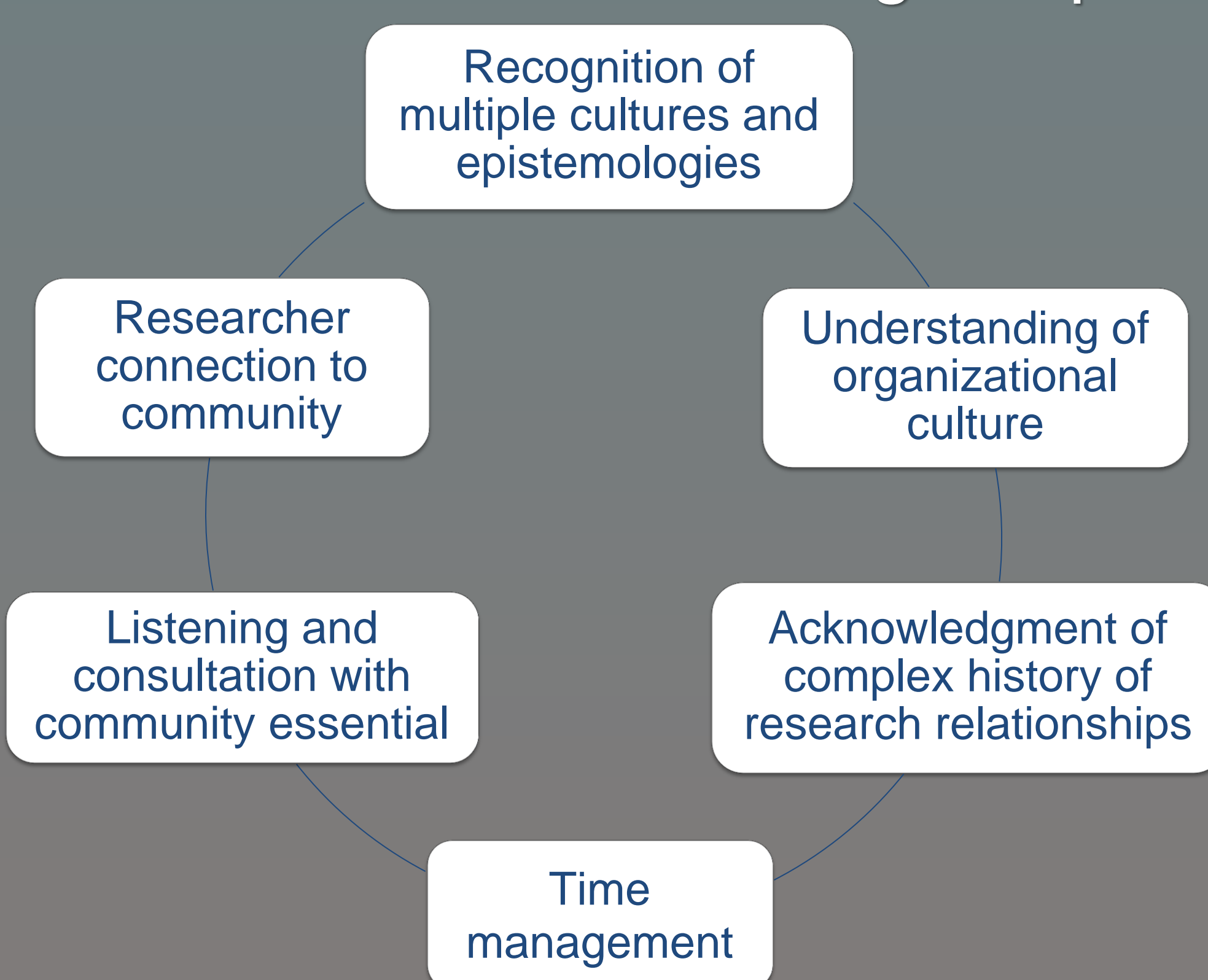
Reciprocity is key

• Benefits for both the community and the academic partner.
• Understanding and navigating power differences.
• Transform research results in new knowledge or action.
• Create alternate forms of effective and appropriate dissemination.
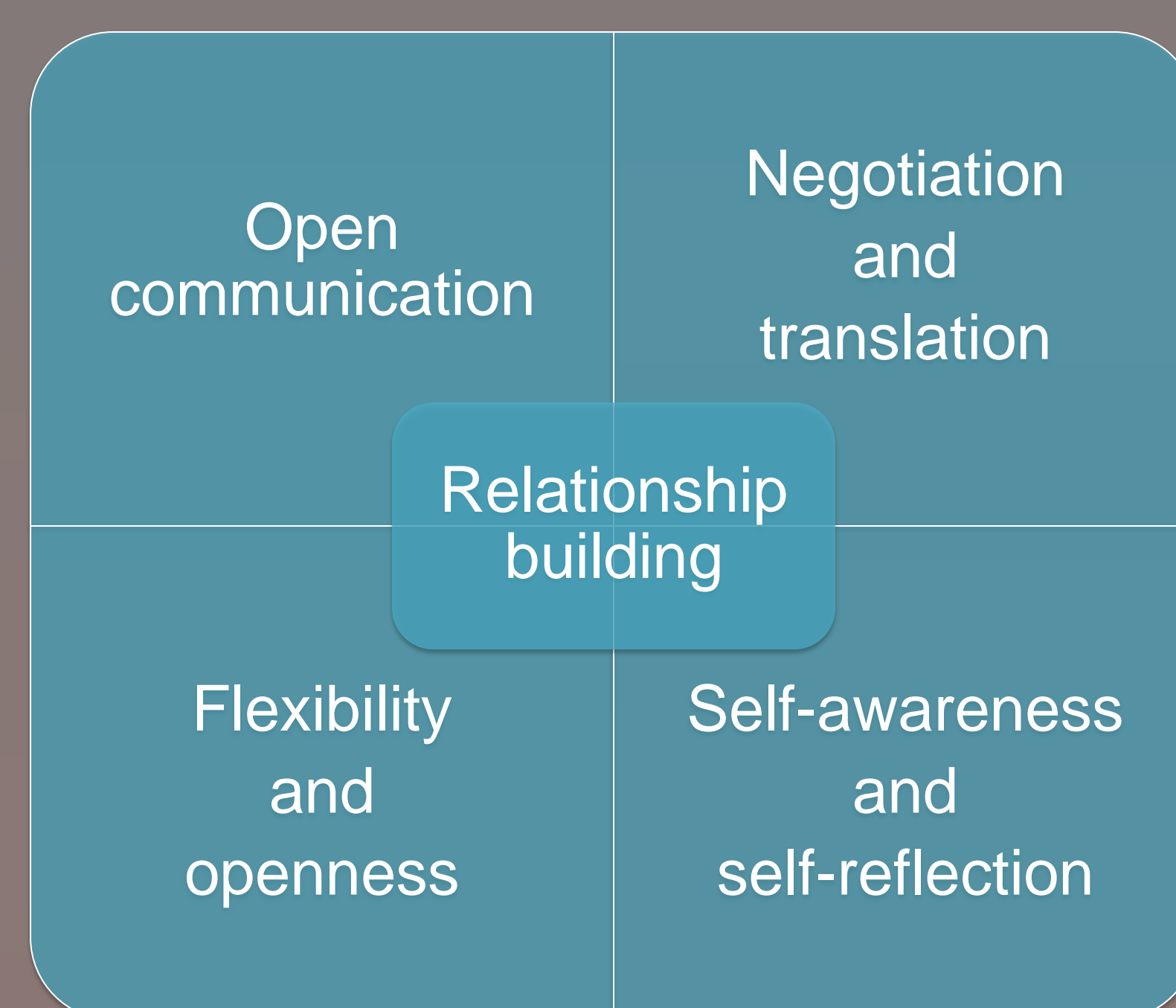
What we heard from the community

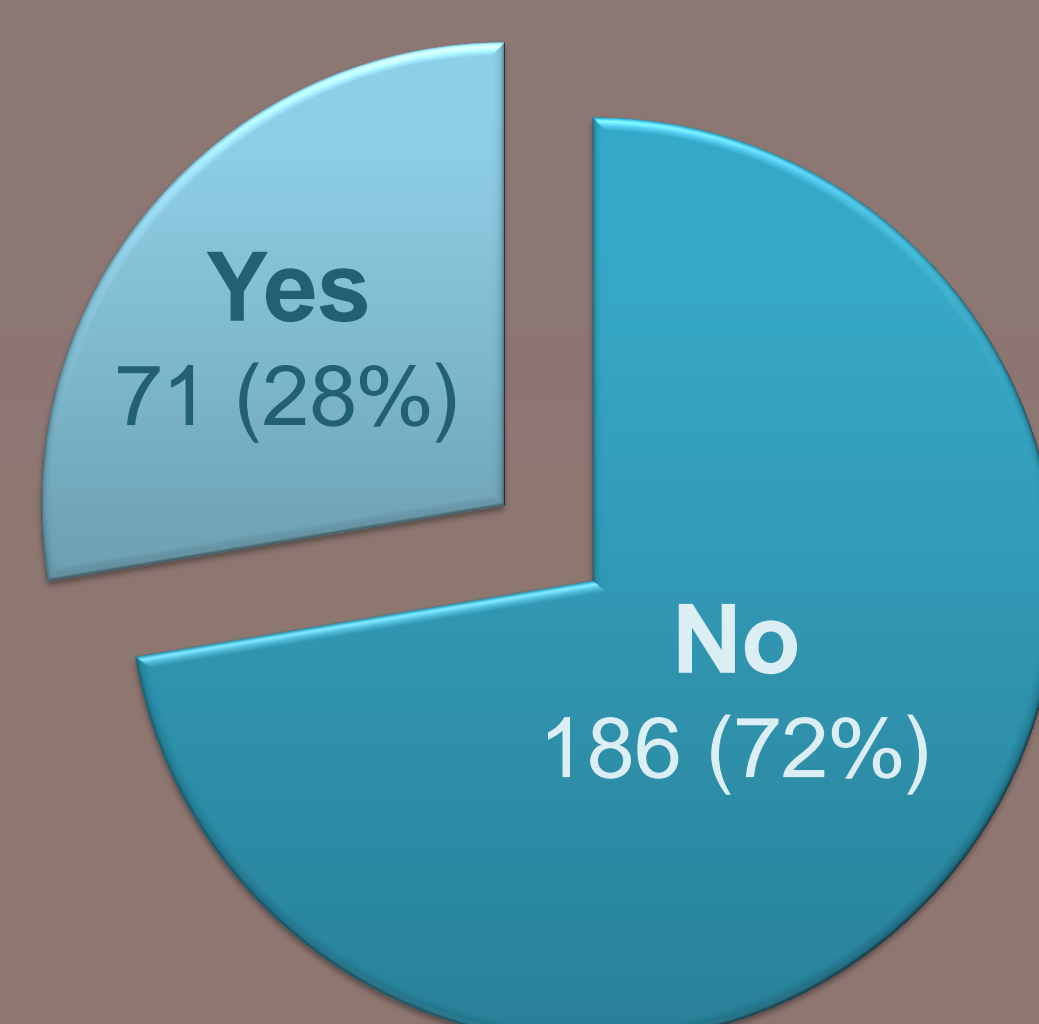| ON COMMUNITY ENGAGED RESEARCH	ON STUDENTS
"… to learn from each other, when you start to understand the other – strength happens."	"Intuitive and independent."
"It is not so easy diving into community when you come from a different place."	"Biggest asset: resourceful / can think on their feet."
	"The minute anyone feels that you're taking over, the process is over."

Knowledge required

- Recognition of multiple cultures and epistemologies
- Understanding of organizational culture
- Acknowledgment of complex history of research relationships
- Time management
- Listening and consultation with community essential
- Researcher connection to community

Skills needed

- Open communication
- Negotiation and translation
- Relationship building
- Flexibility and openness
- Self-awareness and self-reflection

Key strategies

- Build relationships from the beginning
- Get to know the community
- Establish mentorship and apprenticeship opportunities
- Maintain the stance of a learner in relation to the experience of the community
- Avoid assumptions
- Ask permission and engage respectfully

CER experience

Yes 71 (28%)
No 186 (72%)

72% of respondents have not received any instruction at UVic on the theory and practice of CER.
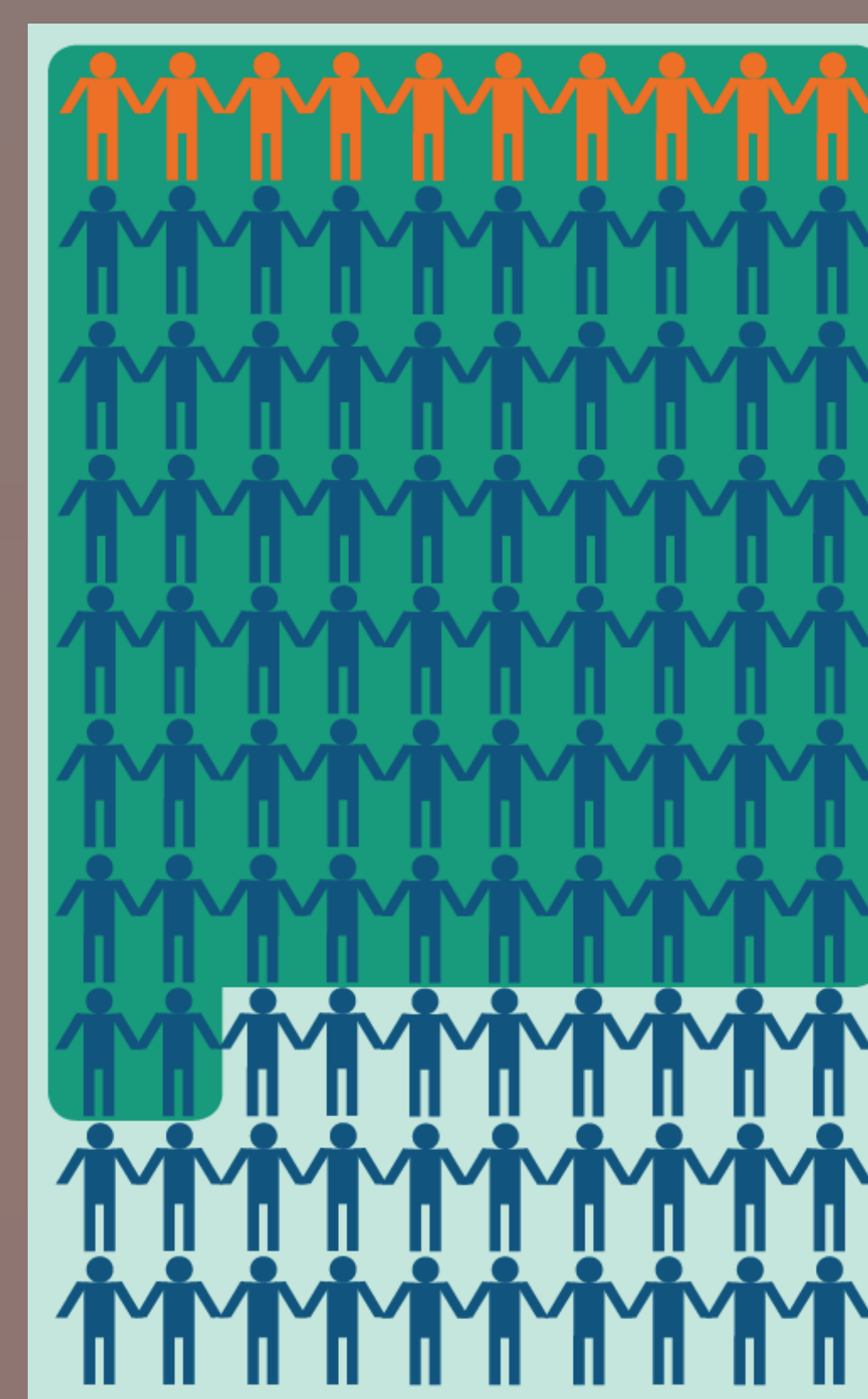
CER interest

90% of students surveyed (n= 229) were interested in learning about CER.

Only 10% of students (n= 26) were not.

72% of students (n= 186) have not received any CER instruction at UVic

Conclusions

• The exploratory analysis revealed several common themes centering around ethics, situational awareness, and reflective practice. There was agreement on the importance of student understanding of the potential harm of ill-conceived research projects and of making a contribution or "giving back" to the community.

• Although there was very strong interest in and value placed on CER, our results indicated that there was little organized instruction available that explained basic principles and practices of CER.

• The ultimate goal of CER is to strengthen graduate students' capacity to develop and maintain respectful community engagement research practices so they can contribute meaningfully to society.

• The findings from our study suggest that learning CER is both a science and an art. Particular contexts in community organizations often require experience and creative solutions that are not likely to be found in guidelines– therein lies the art of making a contribution to community well-being.

References

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