Biomedical Research

UC BRAID

Acceleration | Innovation | Development

Community Engagement Retreat

UC BRAID represents the consortium of the five clinical and translational science award (CTSA) campuses, UC Davis, UC Irvine, UC Los Angeles, UC San Diego, and UC San Francisco. UC BRAID is committed to building on the collective strengths of our member campuses and our sister campuses in the UC system.

In September 2025, UC BRAID hosted the first systemwide community engagement retreat, providing an opportunity for seven UC community engagement programs to meet, share current activities, brainstorm new collaborations, and consider funding opportunities and strategies.

The retreat was hosted by the UC BRAID Executive Committee and the UC Davis School of Medicine at the new UC Davis Aggie Square. The meeting included representatives from the five CTSA campuses as well as UC Riverside and UC Merced. Each campus program was accompanied by several of their respective community partners. In all, 59 attendees spent two days building connections across the state, sharing challenges and priorities, and brainstorming new ways of working together. Additionally, the attendees were able to hear from – and interact with – several distinguished speakers, including Dr. Michael Kurilla, MD, PhD, Division Director, National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences (NCATS), Dr. Joni Rutter, PhD, Director, NCATS, Dr. Sandra Hernandez, MD, President and CEO, California Health Care Foundation, and Dr. Sen Fernandez Poole, PhD, Program Officer, Community Initiatives and Public Health Sciences, California Breast Cancer Research Program.

RETREAT OBJECTIVES

- Establish new connections across California
- Learn about community engagement programs at sister campuses
- Brainstorm ideas to strengthen collaborations

- Consider funder perspectives
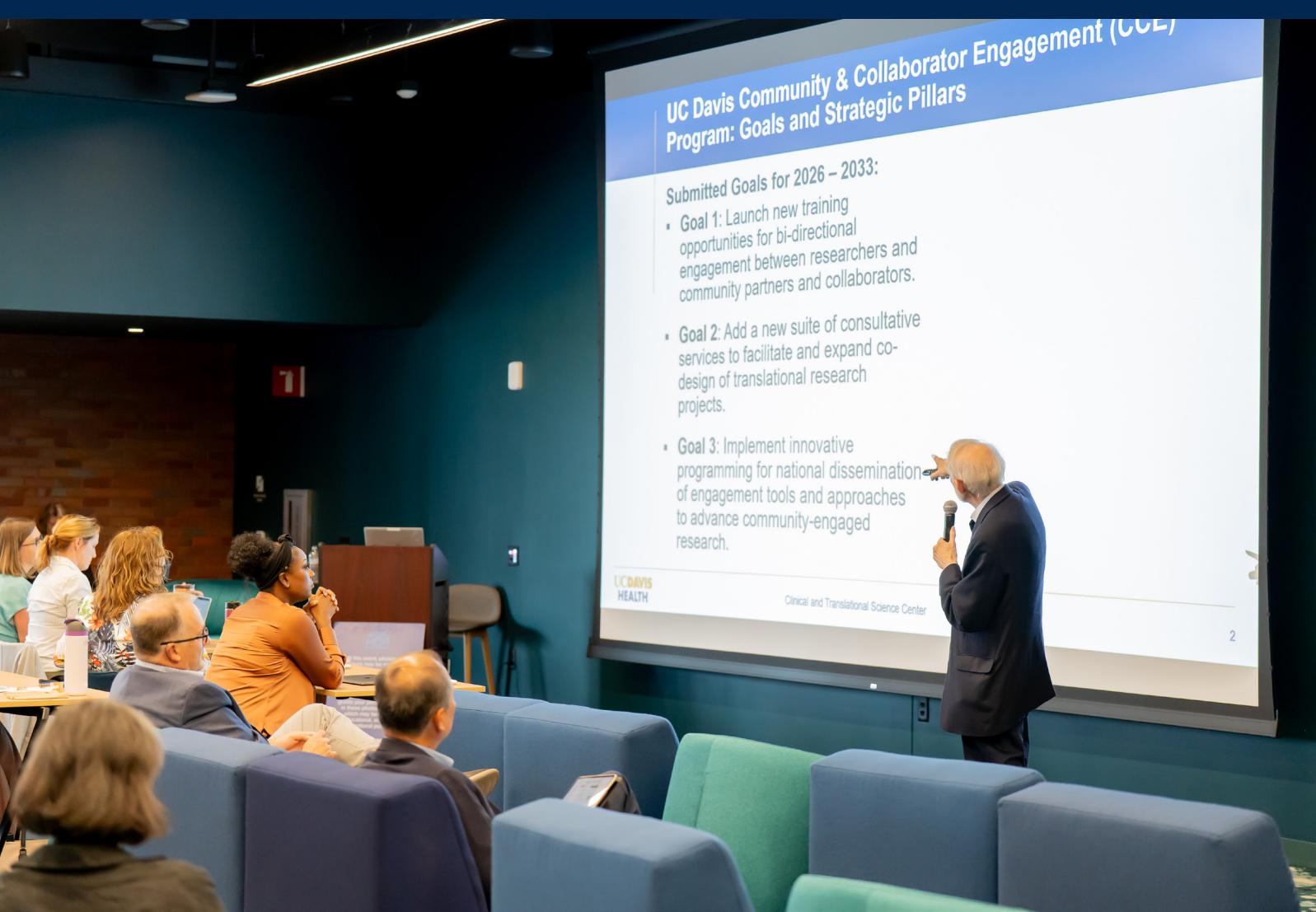- Strengthen efforts to advance community-engaged research

RETREAT OVERVIEW

DAY 1: SEPTEMBER 10, 2025

The retreat began with welcomes from the event hosts, including Dr. Susan Murin, MD, Dean of the UC Davis School of Medicine, members of the UC BRAID Executive Committee, and Norma Stoker Mtume, community partner at UCLA. An ice breaker activity helped attendees get to know each other. Each campus then presented an overview of its program. The day culminated with a World Café event that offered reflections and insights into program challenges and opportunities.

DAY 2: SEPTEMBER 11, 2025

The second day began with listening sessions presented by the NCATS team from NIH who offered a perspective from the federal government. Next, the participants heard insights from two California non-profit leaders. The rest of the day was spent in small group discussions, brainstorming the future of community-engaged research in and across California.

DAY 1: KEY THEMES FROM CAMPUS PROGRAM PRESENTATIONS

Each campus community engagement program and its community partners presented an overview of their activities, challenges, and opportunities, based on a modified SWOT framework, called RISE (Resources, Ideas, Struggles, and Exposures). Overall, each program has a rich and varied approach to community engagement and has nurtured important relationships and collaborations with community partners in their regions. Some key themes that emerged from the formal presentations include:

- Need for bi-directional, sustained engagement
- Desire to integrate community into the entire research cycle, from idea to design to analysis and dissemination
- Trust takes time to develop and ongoing effort to maintain
- Administrative structures of UC are burdensome and create real barriers to inclusiveness

- Many communities are missing from our partnerships
- Must move away from a transactional model driven by short-term projects and funding cycles
- Changing policies and priorities threaten our partnerships

SEPTEMBER 10, 2025 | WORLD CAFÉ: SHARING IDEAS & INSIGHTS

The afternoon concluded with a World Café event, based upon the day's earlier presentations.

The World Café is a structured conversational process that fosters inclusive dialogue. Participants rotate through small-group discussions, sharing ideas and insights that grow richer with each round. It's designed to connect diverse perspectives, uncover themes, and promote collaborative action.

The goal of the World Café event was to ensure meaningful interaction across all attending sites and participants, spark potential collaborations, and collectively identify **Resources, Ideas, Struggles, and Exposures (RISE)** related to community-engaged research.

RISE is an adapted version of the traditional SWOT analysis, reimagined to center equity, innovation, and collective action in the context of community-engaged research, tailored specifically for this retreat.

Resources – What assets, relationships, and capabilities support this work?
Internal assets and capacities that support successful community-engaged research (e.g., relationships, resources, institutional support).

Ideas – What new opportunities, innovations, or collaborations are emerging?
External factors or emerging trends that can be leveraged to enhance or expand community-engaged research (e.g., policy changes, partnerships, funding).

Struggles – What recurring or systemic barriers are limiting progress?
Current or recurring barriers that limit the scope or effectiveness of community-engaged research (e.g., time constraints, administrative burdens, inequitable structures).

Exposures – What external risks or forces could disrupt or challenge the work?
Factors that may undermine community-engaged research in the future (e.g., political shifts, resource scarcity, ethical concerns).

KEY POINTS ACROSS WORLD CAFÉ BREAKOUTS

Resources Exist, But Are Under-Leveraged or Inaccessible
There is a strong base of people, networks, and programs committed to meaningful community engagement —from Community Health Workers and patient experts to UC-wide platforms like UC BRAID, institutional funders, and nonprofit partnerships. However, access to and use of these resources are often limited by structural barriers, misaligned funding models, or siloed systems.

Innovative Ideas Are Emerging to Advance Collaboration
Participants proposed actionable strategies like leveraging AI ethically for community benefit, building equitable funding pipelines, increasing accessible dissemination, embedding community engagement into institutional infrastructure, and using the strength of the UC system to advocate for policy change.

Systemic Challenges Undermine Trust and Collaboration
Barriers include rigid reimbursement policies, power imbalances, lack of institutional support, and poor communication and follow-through. Many UC policies are not designed for true community partnership, creating tensions and missed opportunities for trust-building and long-term impact.

External Exposures Are Heightening Urgency and Risk
The broader climate—political polarization, misinformation, funding cuts, burnout among community-based organizations, and threats to academic freedom—is amplifying the need for resilient, values-based partnerships. These exposures pose threats, but also opportunities for aligned action and advocacy.

DAY 2: BRAINSTORMING THE FUTURE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Day 2 of the retreat began with a series of presentations from funders of community-based research representing different perspectives – the federal government, a California-based community foundation, the UC Office of the President, and CEAL, the Community Engagement Research Alliance. Each emphasized the critical importance of community engagement, the need for real and lasting relationships, and ideas for what lies ahead.

NCATS leadership, Dr. Joni Rutter and Dr. Michael Kurilla, addressed the evolution of NIH's mission and its focus on a unified strategy that includes training the next generation of biomedical scientists, focusing on solutions-oriented approaches to health disparities, and the national network of research hubs that have helped to drive the advancement of principles of community engagement in research. We are leaning into headwinds that come from several directions, including shifting federal priorities, health care shortages, and AI challenges.

Dr. Sandra Hernandez, President and CEO of the California Healthcare Foundation, underscored that community is our most important asset and stakeholder. Trust must not be taken for granted, but must be earned over time. She encouraged us to repair broken relationships, acknowledge historical patterns of bias and neglect, and focus on bi-directional communication, active listening, and open sharing of data and information.

Dr. Sen Fernandez Poole, Program Officer for Community Initiatives and Public Health Sciences at the California Breast Cancer Research Program, demonstrated how community can be centered in the grantmaking process, with awards specifically designed to address barriers to community-based participatory research and to promote capacity-building in our communities.

And finally, Dr. Arleen Brown and Mr. Paul Watson, representing CEAL, outlined the multiple ways that the NIH-sponsored program is building statewide academic-community partnerships, providing technical assistance and innovative social care through effective public service partnerships.

BREAKOUT DISCUSSIONS: BRAINSTORMING THE FUTURE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The afternoon session consisted of breakout discussion groups to generate actionable ideas for the future of community engagement in the UC system and across California. The goal was to develop concrete, forward-looking ideas for the coming months/years to guide community-engaged research efforts across key focus areas, fostering collaboration and shared impact.

Upon registration, participants selected two key topic areas for discussion from the seven that emerged out of the retreat planning survey. On Day 2, they participated in two facilitated dialogues to discuss the topics they selected.

These seven topics included:

- **Building Partnerships**

- **Translating Research into Policy**

- **Strategies for Building Trust**

- **New Collaborations**

- **Data-Sharing**

- **Sharing Stories and Impact**

- **Thinking BIG.**

KEY POINTS ACROSS BREAKOUTS

Build Trust Through Intentional, Long-Term Relationships:
Building deep and lasting partnerships requires more than one-time collaboration — it means investing time, presence, and care to form genuine relationships (i.e. researchers in community as a form of trust building and understanding). Trust is established through consistency, active listening, sincerity, and a long-term commitment to showing up for communities, not just during project timelines. These relationships must be nurtured with respect, cultural humility, and follow-through on promises.

Center Equity, Reciprocity, and Shared Power:
Effective partnerships must be grounded in fairness and mutual respect. This means recognizing community partners as equal collaborators rather than passive subjects. Equity involves fair compensation, inclusive decision-making, and co-ownership of outcomes — including data and impact narratives. Reciprocity ensures that both academic and community partners benefit from the relationship, learning from one another and working toward shared goals.

Communicate Clearly, Accessibly, and Inclusively:
Successful partnerships depend on communication that is honest, jargon-free, and tailored to different audiences. Whether discussing research findings, data use, or project goals, language should be clear, culturally relevant, and translated where needed. Using tools like storytelling, visuals, and community voices helps demystify complex topics and ensures all stakeholders — from community members to policymakers — can engage meaningfully.

Sustain Impact Through Policy, Infrastructure, and Innovation:
To move from short-term projects to long-lasting change, partnerships must be supported by strong infrastructure and aligned with policy and funding systems. This includes building capacity (e.g., staff, tech, funding), creating clear governance for data sharing, and advocating for institutional policies that support community-driven goals. Leveraging innovation — like AI, technology, and new collaboration models — helps expand the reach and effectiveness of community-engaged research.

At this event, photos
videos may be record

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The retreat concluded with a group discussion of specific, concrete actions that we can collectively endorse and focus on in the upcoming year.

Institutionalize Community Engagement Across UC Systems
- Create or elevate Departments or Offices of Community Engagement at each UC with dedicated staff, budgets, and authority.
- Standardize policies and practices for working with community partners across finance, procurement, IRB, and administration.
- Ensure this work is valued and rewarded within academic promotion and research structures.

Funding and Financing Models
Redesign funding and grant structures to:
- Allow for pre-payment to CBOs
- Enable shared or dual budgets between academic and community partners
- Increase indirect cost rates or flexible funding for relationship-building
- Pilot alternative grant roles (e.g., CBO as lead, UC as subcontractor)
- These changes are critical to address power imbalances and make collaboration sustainable.

Build Shared Infrastructure for Cross-UC and Community Collaboration
Expand platforms like UC BRAID and develop a centralized collaboration hub to:
- Share best practices and reduce duplication
- Host community engagement resources (dashboards, policies, trainings)
- Coordinate efforts across UCs and sectors
- Support both internal alignment and stronger partnerships with CBOs, funders, and government.

Prioritize Accessible, Trust-Building Communication
- Invest in plain language, multilingual, and culturally grounded communication.
- Support science storytelling across platforms (e.g., social media, community radio, TikTok).
- Build processes for sharing findings back with communities in ways that are meaningful, timely, and reciprocal.
- Acknowledge historical harms and promote honest, transparent engagement.

Engage in Collective Advocacy and Pipeline Protection: UCs must leverage their collective power to:
- Advocate for state and federal support for community engagement
- Solidify and expand partnerships with key statewide organizations, like CEAL and the UC Engagement Network to form a foundation for continued collaboration
- Protect and expand research and community career pathways
- Stand with partners during external crises (e.g., ICE raids, funding cuts)
- Push for ballot measures (e.g., Senate Bill 607)
- Educate funders and legislators on why community engagement matters
- Collaborative leadership, unified messaging, and a commitment beyond institutional self-interest.

ACTION ITEMS

The retreat produced many important recommendations for elevating and advancing community-engaged research across the state. To advance this initiative in a thoughtful and impactful way, a strategic approach will need to be developed, ideas and priorities will need to be defined, and specific projects will need to be scoped and resources identified. As the first step in this work, in collaboration with the UC BRAID Executive Committee, **UC BRAID will facilitate the development of a systemwide community engagement steering committee.** The group will be charged with developing a plan to identify and prioritize 2-4 specific areas of focus for the upcoming 12-18 months, including ways to engage with the UC Engagement Network and CEAL. UC BRAID core staff will provide administrative support to the steering committee.

In parallel, as the steering committee begins its work, **UC BRAID core staff will convene a systemwide meeting of stakeholders from finance, research administration, compliance, and research policy to review university policies that prohibit or inhibit timely, transparent, and efficient contracting with and compensation of community partners.** The goal of this group will be to recommend and advocate for policy changes to address this significant barrier to community involvement in research.

Finally, in concert with the steering committee, **UC BRAID core staff will begin exploring opportunities for a next in-person gathering.**

Progress on each of these items will be shared with the participants through email and website updates.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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September 10, 2025	Topic	Speaker
10:00 am – 11:00 am	Check-in and light buffet Sign up for Day 2 breakout groups	
11:00 am – 11:15 am	Welcome from our host, the UC Davis School of Medicine, the Sacramento community, and the UC BRAID Executive Committee	**Susan Murin**, MD, MSc, MBA Dean, UC Davis School of Medicine **Pastor Mark Meeks**, City Church Sacramento, UC Davis community partner **Arleen Brown**, MD, PhD, UC Los Angeles **Tung Nguyen**, MD, UC San Francisco
11:15 am – 11:25 am	Goals for the retreat, recognition & thanks, housekeeping; words of gratitude and care	**Elizabeth Boyd**, PhD, UC BRAID **Norma Stoker Mtume**, Associate Director & Chief Financial Officer, SHIELDS for Families; Community Partner for UCLA
11:25 am – 12:30 pm	Introductions – Getting to know each other	**Paul Watson**, CEO, Global Action Research Center, San Diego
12:30 pm – 1:30 pm	Partners & Programs presentations – RISE: Resources, Ideas, Struggles, Exposures (Part 1)	**Courtney Lyles**, PhD, UC Davis, Facilitator
1:30 pm – 2:10 pm	Lunch	
2:10 pm – 3:15 pm	Partners & Programs presentations – RISE: Resources, Ideas, Struggles, Exposures (Part 2)	**Courtney Lyles**, PhD, UC Davis, Facilitator
3:15 pm – 3:30 pm	Break	
3:30 pm – 5:30 pm	World Café: Sharing ideas & insights	**Cynthia Gonzalez**, PhD, Charles R. Drew University, Los Angeles
5:30 pm – 5:45 pm	Summary and wrap-up	**Sergio Aguilar-Gaxiola**, MD, PhD, UC Davis
5:45 pm – 6:30 pm	Reception	

September 11, 2025	Topic	Speaker
7:30 am – 8:15 am	Check-in and breakfast Final sign up for breakout groups	
8:15 am – 8:30 am	Welcome back & focusing on the day ahead	Elizabeth Boyd, UC BRAID Dara Sorkin, PhD, UC Irvine Pamela Pimentel, RN, former CEO MOMS Orange County
8:30 am – 9:15 am	Community engagement: Priorities from the federal perspective	Introduction and Facilitator: Ted Wun, MD, FACP, UC Davis Joni Rutter, PhD, Director, NCATS Michael Kurilla, MD, PhD, Division Director, National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences (NCATS)
9:15 am – 10:15 am	Community engagement in action: Perspectives from around California	Introduction and Facilitator: Borsika A. Rabin, Ph.D., M.P.H., Pharm.D., UC San Diego Sandra Hernandez, MD, President & CEO, California Health Care Foundation Sen Fernandez Poole, PhD, Program Officer Community Initiatives and Public Health Sciences, California Breast Cancer Research Program Arleen Brown, MD, PhD, UC Los Angeles and NIH Community Engagement Alliance (CEAL) Paul Watson, CEO, Global Action Research Center, San Diego and NIH Community Engagement Alliance (CEAL)
10:15 am – 12:00 pm	Brainstorming the future of community engagement	Tung Nguyen, MD, UC San Francisco, Facilitator
12:00 pm – 12: 45 pm	Lunch	
12:45 pm – 1:45 pm	Where do we go from here? Report outs and action plans	Tung Nguyen, MD, UC San Francisco, Facilitator
1:45 pm – 2:00 pm	Wrap-up and next steps	Sergio Aguilar-Gaxiola, MD, PhD, UC Davis Courtney Lyles, PhD, UC Davis Debra Oto-Kent, Founder & Executive Director, Health Education Council, Sacramento