From the Guest Editor—Shannon O. Wilder

Exploring the Tension Between Access and Engagement

Hanging above the couch in my office is designer Saul Bass's iconic movie poster for Hitchcock's film *Vertigo (1958)*. The image is one of the most famous and recognizable movie posters of all time, with its stark silhouette of a man and woman struggling against a geometric white vortex and vivid orange background. In the decade I have spent working in community engagement at the University of Georgia (UGA), more people than I can count have sat on that couch—vortex spiraling above their heads—sharing their aspirations for engaging with the community, as well as the challenges and new questions they are facing in their work. For many, reflecting on their work as engaged scholars induces a sort of "academic vertigo" or disequilibrium as they explore ways of working with and in communities, how scholarship is shaped by this interaction, and the ways institutional approaches to engagement are articulated and implemented—sometimes in contradictory ways. As these scholars find their footing, they are asking provocative questions inspired by the tensions experienced in "doing" outreach and engagement, none more common than the question of access, a theme I hear about almost daily both from community partners looking for a "way in" to access university resources, and from scholars and practitioners unsure of how to partner with diverse communities.

The question of access—which can have multiple meanings, from admissions to building trust for truly bidirectional partnerships—is fundamental to the work we do in the Office of Service-Learning. It is also often a central point of tension because like most universities, we are enmeshed in an institutional and community context that is both encumbered and empowered by a long history. As a public university, we do not have a walled or gated campus. In fact, the logo of the university is the Arch, a symbol based on an iron arch that is perched at the intersection of downtown Athens and the most historic part of our campus. The Arch, unlike a door or gate, is literally and figuratively always open. It is a symbol of access to higher education and is also used as a metaphor when we talk about community engagement as an institution, both for university students and faculty who become engaged "beyond the Arch" and for communities and prospective students who pass this access point as they are symbolically welcomed onto campus. As

a highly selective institution with a steadily growing percentage of students from underrepresented groups, we must acknowledge that our commitment to engagement asks us to consider our role in promoting college access equitably and whether the Arch is truly open to all, especially those in our local community where, for historical reasons, the university may be perceived as a closed, inaccessible, and sometimes unwelcoming environment.

Athens, Georgia—home of the University of Georgia—is one of the poorest counties of its size in the nation, with a nearly 38% poverty rate. Years of joint community–university efforts have developed programs such as the Professional Development School Partnership between the Clarke County School District (CCSD) and UGA's College of Education, which was recognized in 2014 as an exemplary project for the W. K. Kellogg Foundation Community Engagement Scholarship Award presented by APLU. Dr. Philip Lanoue, CCSD's superintendent, was honored by AASA, the School Superintendents Association, as this year's National Superintendent of the Year. He cites partnerships as a key to CCSD's rising graduation rates (which have now topped the state average) and a rapidly closing achievement gap between students at vastly different ends of the socioeconomic spectrum, all while dealing with very real demographic challenges that translate to many individual students with enormous needs.

Despite the successes in our local school system and the university's contributions to them, I am frequently reminded of a comment by a school counselor at a community planning meeting a few years ago: "For most of the students in this community, the university might as well be Paris, France." So many have never stepped foot on this campus, convinced they do not belong here. For them, the Arch is not a gateway to opportunity. What are we doing to help them walk through that Arch? As a community-engaged institution, what responsibility do we have to all students in the K-12 to higher education pipeline to not only introduce them to opportunities, but also make sure they have the tools and preparation needed to make college an attainable goal? And for higher education generally, how does this relate to the larger questions of how we more closely align our aspirations to become open, responsive, and community-engaged institutions with an often "messy" process of engaging with complex issues and grappling with the conflicting messages we sometimes send about our institutional commitment to community engagement?

The opening essay for this issue of the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* beautifully adopts this theme

of the tension between access and engagement in a different context as Phoebe Haddon, chancellor at Rutgers University–Camden, and Nyeema Watson, assistant chancellor for civic engagement, ask us to consider how a university and local community's uniquely intertwined history can serve as a catalyst for engagement, often successfully around the most complex and troubled issues we share—those spaces where the tension between our ideals of access and the practicalities of engaging with enormous social and community challenges collide. Haddon and Watson explore the barriers to college access, an almost universal point of tension between universities and underrepresented communities. Reminding us this is not just a local concern, they present research that frames the importance of this debate nationally, particularly for low-income students who face much higher barriers to college access than their peers with higher socioeconomic status *(Executive Office of the President, 2014)*. As a result, Rutgers–Camden has fostered partnerships that are filling gaps in the local education system and providing important resources for more students to explore college opportunities and learn how college can be an attainable goal. This systematic approach to breaking down barriers to college access is possible only because Rutgers–Camden has embraced the principles of anchor institutions to become "a change agent and engine of socioeconomic development" *(Taylor & Luter, 2013, p. 7),* leading to an institutional focus on creating pathways for better college access in the local community of Camden. Through these examples, they also remind us that an institutional approach to engagement requires moving beyond "simply spaces for our faculty and students to 'serve' and develop civic-mindedness," an approach that merely serves to perpetuate paternalism and exploitation of vulnerable communities. Instead, Haddon and Watson challenge us to push toward creating new spaces for collaboration and engagement—despite the attendant tensions, conflicts, "messiness," and the disequilbrium this work can inspire in those who undertake it—in order to make the most troublesome and lingering issues in the community true campus priorities.

In this issue of *JHEOE*, I invite you to consider how "engagement" is not an ending point but instead a process of becoming and discovery where we are challenged to be nimble, responsive, and invested in the deepest needs of our community partners. It requires us to embrace the imbalance, the tension, and the risk that is generated by sharing responsibility and ownership of those needs. It calls us to be uncomfortable in our practice and scholarship. In the pages that follow, we see how these conflicted spaces

create new opportunities for scholarship, teaching, and outreach through engagement. The process is one of disruption that asks us to change—individually and institutionally—as we create more open and accessible systems within what has been a traditionally closed ecosystem in higher education and in so doing, move our values and ideals one step closer to reality.

References

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About the Guest Editor

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