© *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, Volume 21, Number 3, p. 97, (2017)
 eISSN 2164-8212

# *The Kemper History Project: From Historical Narrative to Institutional Legacy*

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## Abstract

An *institutional legacy* can be understood as knowledge, values, and shared experiences transmitted by or received from a college or university for the benefit of all who have taught, served, researched, and/or learned there. This article describes a year-long, collaborative writing project carried out by one university to chronicle two decades of an ongoing professional development school (PDS) partnership with 10 area schools. The final outcome of the project—a 155-page, informally published book—commemorated the partnership with a valuable historical record that also documented an institutional legacy. The article includes a discussion of implications for practice, including benefits of writing a historical narrative, challenges to anticipate, and suggestions for getting started.

*Keywords*: collaborative writing, historical narrative, institutiona legacy, professional development school (PDS), school-university partnership

## Introduction

In higher education, community engagement can take the form of service-learning, clinical experiences, teaching enhancement, scholarly research, or reciprocal partnerships. Professional development school (PDS) partnerships, one means of community engagement, encompass all five. Defined as mutually beneficial relationships between colleges or universities and PK-12 schools (pre-kindergarten through high school) to enhance teaching and learning for all involved, PDS partnerships engage university and school partners through activities such as providing and/or receiving professional development; supervising and/or completing clinical experiences; and planning, implementing, and/or participating in classroom, school, and community events. PDS work has been shown to increase student achievement, enhance teacher preparation and development, and provide authentic learning experiences for both school-age and college students *(Neville, 2010; Wong & Glass, 2011)*. However, like many forms of community engagement, PDS work often goes undocumented (*Miller & Billings, 2012)*.

One team of school–university collaboration scholars asked, "Beyond test scores and retention rates, what are the markers by which PDS work is deemed worthwhile for the lives of students?" *(James, Kobe, Shealey, Foretich, & Sabatini, 2015, p. 53)*. Writing a historical narrative of PDS projects, initiatives, and accomplishments can offer insight as well as validation. This article describes a yearlong collaborative writing project carried out by one university to chronicle two decades of an ongoing PDS partnership with 10 area schools. The final outcome of the project—a 155-page, informally published book—commemorated the partnership with a valuable historical record that also documented an institutional legacy.

## Theoretical Framework

Collaborative writing among college faculty has many advantages. Because collaborative writing holds writers accountable to one another, it is more likely to be productive than writing alone *(Ballard & Ballard, 2013)*. Due to its social nature, collaborative writing is often easier and more enjoyable than writing alone; due to multiple perspectives, it is likely to produce a richer outcome *(Ballard & Ballard, 2013; Stivers & Cramer, 2013)*. In addition to scholarly productivity, collaborative writing offers opportunities for professional growth and reflection, allowing individuals to refine writing and research skills that might not develop without influence from others *(Stivers & Cramer, 2013)*.

Research and writing collaborations between university faculty and school personnel also have proven fruitful. For example, after engaging in a schoolwide action research project exploring the topic of mentoring, teachers, administrators, and professors in one school–university partnership cowrote an edited book offering narrative accounts of their research experiences and outcomes *(Mullen, 2000; Mullen & Lick, 2001)*. In another project, a school–university research team of five people engaged in collaborations focused on civic mindfulness in children that evolved over time from teaching to action research to writing a research article *(James et al., 2015)*.

In addition to writing about specific community engagement projects, some colleges and universities take a holistic approach, writing about long-term and ongoing projects, initiatives, and accomplishments. To commemorate its 50th anniversary, one university's campus law enforcement agency designated an officer to research and write an account of the agency's history for internet and print publication, a process that took 4 years *(Fasl, 2008)*.

Thelin *(2009)* stated that "educational institutions that preserve, make known, and promote their history create a strong and lively institutional identity" *(p. 4)*. At the project level, documenting and publishing accounts of community engagement recognizes individuals for their service, research, and/or teaching efforts; establishes a holistic view of the efforts of many; reveals trends; provides data for project assessment; and informs strategic planning *(Miller & Billings, 2012)*. At the institutional level, demonstrating collective impact through published accounts of community engagement promotes awareness and generates community support, which in turn can bolster fund-raising efforts *(Miller & Billings, 2012; Winston, 2013)*.

Documenting institutional efforts and events over time also creates a sense of heritage *(Thelin, 2009)*. According to the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, legacy means "something transmitted by or received from an ancestor or predecessor or from the past" *("Legacy," 2015, definition 2)*. *Institution* means "an established organization or corporation (as a bank or university) especially of a public character" *("Institution," 2015, definition 2b)*. Based on these definitions, an *institutional legacy* can be understood as knowledge, values, and shared experiences transmitted by or received from a college or university for the benefit of all who have taught, served, researched, and/or learned there. Therefore, publishing a historical narrative of PDS work or other community engagement efforts is one way to document an institutional legacy.

## Background and Context

Bradley University is a comprehensive private university located in Peoria, Illinois. Founded in 1897, Bradley serves 4,500 undergraduate students and 900 graduate students in business, engineering and technology, communications and fine arts, liberal arts and sciences, and education and health sciences *(Bradley University, 2017a)*. The Bradley PDS Partnership was established in 1995 by Bradley's College of Education and Health Sciences to create an extended learning environment for PK-20 (pre-kindergarten through graduate school) learners. The partnership was led by a team of six College faculty and staff called the Bradley PDS Council, and it had the following goals: (1) supporting and improving student learning and achievement; (2) preparing aspiring professionals in education and health sciences; (3) providing lifelong learning experiences and leadership opportunities; (4) promoting best practices in teaching, learning, and leadership through professional development, action research, and scholarship; and

(5) supporting the health and well-being of students, their families, and the professionals who work with them *(Bradley University, 2017b)*. Generously funded by the William T. Kemper Foundation–Commerce Bank, Trustee, the Bradley PDS Partnership served 10 different schools in the Peoria area for over two decades.

Bradley's Kemper grant was first awarded in 1996 for a 5-year term to support release time from teaching duties for a William T. Kemper Fellow for Teaching Excellence to lead the College's efforts to develop school–university partnerships with area schools. The grant also designated funding to provide ongoing professional development for College faculty and staff as well as for teachers and administrators at the College's PDS sites. During its first 5 years, the Bradley PDS Partnership established five area schools as Bradley PDS sites, launched a teaching academy for College faculty and staff, and initiated a variety of site-based PDS projects, including studies of each school's learning environment, enhanced clinical experience placements for teacher education and nursing majors, and customized workshops for teachers. Several PDS projects focused directly on students, including a college simulation project, a customized health curriculum, and a variety of academic support efforts, especially in the area of reading.

Due to ongoing need for Bradley's PDS work, the Kemper grant was renewed in 2000, 2006, 2009, 2012, and 2014. Although the basic tenets of the project remained the same with each new award (i.e., a Kemper Fellow, school–university partnerships, professional development for College and PDS personnel, and services for students), the Bradley PDS Partnership was dynamic in adapting to the changing needs of the College and its partner schools over the years. In the early 2000s, integrated education and health services, assessment of PDS outcomes, and international connections were emphasized. In the late 2000s, science, engineering, and the arts were emphasized. In the early 2010s, full-service community schools, expansion of Bradley PDS sites, and reciprocal professional development were emphasized. But all good things must come to an end. Bradley's last Kemper grant concluded in December 2016.

A short time later, in February 2017, a historical narrative of Bradley's PDS work was published in an online book titled *Bradley University's Kemper Professional Development Schools (PDS) Project: 1995–2016 (Hunzicker & Sattler, 2017)*. The following pages describe how this year-long collaborative writing project was conceptualized, implemented, and accomplished.

## The Idea

The idea of collaboratively writing a historical narrative of Bradley's PDS work emerged during the completion of a long-overdue task: organizing 22 years of Kemper files. From December 2015 to February 2016, the project's current Kemper Fellow sorted through each PDS piece of paper that had been filed over the years. First, the papers were sorted into stacks by academic year. Next, the papers within each stack were organized chronologically. After duplicates were discarded and documents that did not relate directly to the Bradley PDS Partnership were set aside, the remaining archives were placed in plastic page protectors and filed into nine three-ring binders by academic year. The result was an impressive compilation of Bradley's PDS work over two decades' time. Yet even with the Kemper archives organized and accessible, it was unlikely that people would take the time to view them.

As the Bradley PDS Council pondered the usefulness of the archives, a vision began to take shape. What if we used the archives to write a project history? What if we asked people who actually had been there to write each chapter? What if we supplemented each chapter with scanned material from the archives and published the whole thing online? Such a project would allow Bradley to chronicle its PDS history, honor those who had contributed to the project over the years, and possibly attract new PDS funding sources. In February 2016, the Bradley PDS Council decided to move forward.

## Launch and Recruitment

The Kemper History Project (KHP) was launched in March 2016 with a new web page added to Bradley's PDS website. Describing the scope and intended outcome of the project, the web page called for three different levels of participation. Coauthors were needed to research the Kemper archives and write chapter histories by academic year. Contributors were needed to submit quotations and write personal reflections about their involvement in the partnership over the years. Proofreaders were needed to read for historical accuracy. Individuals interested in serving as coauthors or proofreaders were invited to e-mail the Kemper Fellow, who was also the KHP lead editor. Those interested in making shorter contributions could submit quotations and reflections via a link on the project's web page.

Immediately following publication of the KHP web page, the lead editor began reaching out to key individuals, inviting them to

serve as coauthors. All former Kemper Fellows were asked to write at least one chapter. A variety of Bradley PDS Partnership stakeholders who had been deeply involved in the project over the years were also approached. Personal invitations to these stakeholders, paired with thoughtful matching of coauthors to chapters, yielded 100% acceptance. The final roster of 15 chapter coauthors included 10 Kemper Fellows, two current and former Bradley PDS site coordinators, one Bradley PDS principal, the College's dean, and a former Kemper graduate assistant. Using the same personal invitation plus a thoughtful matching process, eight of the coauthors also were invited to serve as proofreaders. Again, 100% accepted.

With the coauthors and proofreaders in place, an e-mail message was sent to all College faculty in May 2016, announcing the names of the chapter coauthors and encouraging contributions of quotations and reflections. Around the same time, a similar e-mail and an article published in the Bradley PDS Partnership's spring newsletter encouraged teachers and administrators at Bradley's current and former PDS sites to contribute.

## The Writing Phase

The writing phase of the Kemper History Project took place between June and October 2016. During this time, the Kemper archives were made accessible to the project's coauthors using a check-out system monitored by one of the College's administrative support personnel. Coauthors were encouraged to review the archives while drafting and refining their chapters. They were welcomed to make photocopies, if needed, but were asked not to take the archives out of the building. For coauthors who no longer lived in the Peoria area, Kemper archives documents were photocopied and mailed through the U.S. Postal Service. Via e-mail attachment, all coauthors were provided with a sample chapter, coauthor instructions, and a list of key people, events, and projects related to the academic year(s) for their assigned chapter(s).

Throughout the summer, the coauthors individually and collaboratively wrote their chapters. They relied heavily on the Kemper archives, especially the partnership newsletters published each semester since 1996. The coauthors also relied on one another. For example, a few coauthors shared the research and writing tasks, with one person researching the archives and creating a chapter outline and another person using the chapter outline to write the assigned chapter. Other coauthors supplemented the history gleaned from the archives with personal reflections and reflections

from others. For example, at least two coauthors reached out to former colleagues as they wrote to ask for firsthand information that they could weave into their chapters. Still others referenced relevant research and/or world events that—even when not mentioned in the Kemper archives—impacted the project or its people at the time, such as the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

The original chapter submission deadline was August 1, 2016, and the first chapters started rolling in around mid-June. However, when several coauthors expressed a need for more time, the submission deadline was extended to early September. By early October, all 22 chapters had been submitted. Throughout the spring and summer months and into the fall, as the coauthors were writing, the KHP website link remained open for individuals to contribute quotations and reflections. Contributions, however, were slow in coming. Eventually, the lead editor began reaching out to key individuals to solicit contributions, and this turned out to be a much more fruitful approach than the website link. In the end, 11 reflections, two original poems, and 41 featured quotations focused on specific experiences, memories, and/or projects that had taken place over the years were gathered to supplement the chapter histories.

## The Polishing Phase

In early October 2016, the intensity of the Kemper History Project hit. Although the original plan was to publish the historical narrative online, several people had expressed an interest in print copies as well. Additionally, the Bradley PDS Council was asked to present the first printed copy to a representative from the William T. Kemper Foundation–Commerce Bank, Trustee during a special meeting in February 2017. With the fall semester ending in mid-December, this meant that the book had to be revised, edited, formatted, and proofread in 6 weeks' time!

The first stage of the polishing phase involved revision and editing of the chapters. An editing team of five Bradley PDS Council members began by reading through all 22 chapters to gain a holistic perspective as well as to identify unintentional omissions and unnecessary repetition. For example, a signature project or event might not have been mentioned in any chapter, or a signature project or event might have been described in detail across several chapters. Consistency in language was also a goal. For example, in some chapters individuals were identified by first name, and in others they were referred to by their formal title and last name.

Capitalization and punctuation also varied significantly from chapter to chapter. As the editing team completed the read-through during two face-to-face meetings, they took notes on needed revisions for each chapter; discussed how to consistently address details such as names, titles, and capitalization; and considered where to minimize or cut description and where to add more detail.

With a holistic view of the historical narrative in mind, and equipped with notes on needed revisions for each chapter, each member of the editing team took responsibility for revising and editing four to five chapters. To provide further support, two editing team members created a GoogleDoc listing project-specific editing rules and examples that was available for the entire editing team to reference and add to as they worked. From early October through the end of November 2016, members of the editing team revised and edited their assigned chapters. Upon completion, each chapter was sent to the lead editor for a second round of revision and editing, followed by formatting.

Revision, editing, and formatting by the lead editor took place from November 2016 through January 2017. During this stage of the process, omissions, repetition, and inconsistencies continued to be identified and addressed. In addition, each chapter was formatted to look like a book chapter and supplemented with photographs, scanned documents from the Kemper archives, reflections, and featured quotations. Another important aspect of formatting was ensuring that American Psychological Association guidelines *(APA, 2010)* were consistently employed. The final, formatted chapters, which ranged from three to eight pages in length, were saved in both Microsoft Word and Adobe Portable Document Format (PDF).

Once formatted, each chapter was returned to its coauthor for proofreading. At the same time, each coauthor received a customized copyright agreement letter to document consent to assign chapter copyright to the College. Contributors of reflections were also provided with a formatted proof and a copyright agreement letter. Around the same time, bundles of five to six consecutive chapters were provided to every two proofreaders. Selected for their firsthand experience with the project during the academic years represented in their assigned chapters, the proofreaders read the formatted chapters for accuracy, flow, and consistency.

While the chapters were being proofread, the lead editor created beginning pages, a table of contents, and four appendices with supplementary information about the Bradley PDS Partnership and

the Kemper History Project. In addition, the lead editor wrote the book's preface, the second editor wrote the book's afterword and acknowledgments, and a book cover was professionally designed. As the proofread chapters were returned with edits and other suggestions, the lead editor made all appropriate corrections. Once the third round of revision and editing was completed for all 22 chapters, the lead editor and the second editor proofread the book line by line from beginning to end to identify and address lingering discrepancies. In all, 38 unique individuals contributed to the successful completion of the project by authoring chapters, submitting reflections, and/or offering quotations or poems. Forty-five percent of the project's contributors were currently or formerly affiliated with Bradley's Department of Teacher Education, 31% were currently or formerly affiliated with other departments or units on Bradley's campus, and 24% were currently or formerly affiliated with one of Bradley's 10 PDS sites (see Figure 1). With final edits made, the book was prepared for publication.

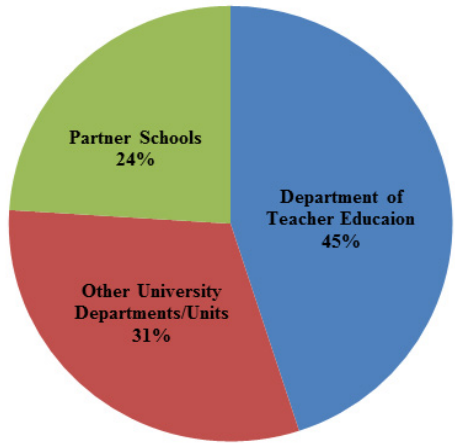


*Figure 1. Percentages of school and university contributors*

## Publication and Distribution

In early February 2017, the historical narrative of Bradley's PDS work was published on the Kemper History Project webpage *(Kemper History Project, 2017)*. In addition, 30 print copies of the book were produced. The online version of the book was distributed through an e-mail announcement with a link to the web page. Print copies were hand-delivered to Kemper, to the College, to each of the book's coauthors, and to the principals of Bradley's 10 cur-

rent and former PDS sites. One recipient of a print copy remarked, "What a great tribute to all of the years of service to the schools!" Another commented, "This has been a monster of a project, and I suspect, a bit like herding cats!" Both statements accurately portray the experience. The final section discusses the benefits of writing a historical narrative, challenges to anticipate, and suggestions for getting started.

## Implications for Practice

The year-long Kemper History Project was a lot of extra work by a lot of already-busy people. Why should colleges and universities even bother with such an add-on endeavor? For Bradley, the project chronicled the inception, development, and fruit of one college's rich and rewarding PDS work over many years. The book that resulted honored those who were involved in the partnership over the years and gathered the details together into one location. In addition, the book created an accessible record of the Bradley PDS Partnership's efforts and accomplishments, which positioned the College to serve as a PDS model for other institutions as well as to attract new funding sources for its own PDS work. Moreover, the process of collaboratively writing a historical narrative allowed the Bradley PDS Council and others to reflect holistically on the impact of the College's PDS work over the years, analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of the partnership and better understanding the dynamics of personnel and resources that kept it going for 22 years. The Kemper History Project reminded everyone who contributed to it—and will now remind everyone who takes time to read it—of the value of partnering with area schools for the benefit of all involved.

## Challenges and Suggestions for Getting Started

Despite the benefits, collaboratively writing a historical narrative can be fraught with challenges, but most challenges can be easily managed with a bit of planning. First, historical narratives are dependent on the existence of complete and accurate records. In addition to the types of archives previously mentioned, paper-based records may include accreditation reports, annual reports, university catalogs, faculty publications, student theses, university and local newspapers, and state-level archives *(Howick, 1986; Thelin, 2009)*. If paper-based records are not available, oral history interviews may render an alternative—or supplemental—source of information *(Thelin, 2009; Winston, 2013)*. If possible, writing teams

can prepare in advance by digitizing and indexing community engagement efforts as they occur *(Miller & Billings, 2012; Winston, 2013)*. It is especially important to translate unstable media sources, such as cassette tapes, to more stable formats, such as written transcripts *(Winston, 2013)*. For existing documentation, writing teams should develop an organized filing system that can be referenced and added to as new archives are accumulated *(Fasl, 2008)*.

Second, it may be difficult to convince people to participate in a large-scale collaborative writing project. Reasons individuals may resist include not wanting to revisit the past, not seeing the necessity, and not knowing where to begin *(Fasl, 2008)*. It is also possible that people will be reluctant to put forth effort when they are uncertain about the quality of the final product. Thoughtfully selecting coauthors based on their areas of experience and/or expertise and approaching each one with a personal invitation to participate is one way to encourage participation. In addition, the editor(s) must ensure that the project is well planned, organized, and implemented from beginning to end. Structuring the process with specific information such as project goals or intended outcomes, a project timeline, sample chapters, and a list of participants will allow everyone involved to know what to expect. Once participants are on board, providing regular updates, remaining accessible, and offering support as needed will keep them motivated and unruffled to completion.

Third, to ensure that people will actually read the historical narrative, it must be interesting, credible, and well written. To ensure that the historical narrative is interesting, coauthors should write as storytellers and use humor where appropriate *(Howick, 1986)*. Moreover, personal accounts and memoirs by students and faculty should be viewed as "central—not peripheral—sources of data" *(Thelin, 2009, p. 11)*. To keep length in check, coauthors can mention or provide a brief summary of mundane efforts and events while elaborating those that are most exciting.

To ensure that the historical narrative is credible, coauthors, proofreaders, and editors should rely heavily on historical records, checking and double-checking details during each phase of writing and polishing. In addition, no germane records or sources should be intentionally omitted *(Thelin, 2009)*, personal reflections should be substantiated with documentable facts *(Fasl, 2008)*, and formally collected oral histories (i.e., anything beyond a personal communication or voluntary contribution) should be approved by an institutional review board *(Winston, 2013)*. Multiple people should perform credibility checks during each phase of writing and polishing;

however, primary responsibility for ensuring historical accuracy and proper data collection procedures falls to the project editor(s).

To ensure a well-written historical narrative, each coauthor should be provided with writing instructions as well as a list of key people, events, or projects and/or a model chapter. In addition, clearly communicating a multiple-stage revision and editing process up front can motivate coauthors to do their best work and prepare them for the possibility of heavy revision and editing later. At the chapter level, editor(s) and proofreaders should scrutinize, revise, and edit to ensure that each chapter is easy to follow, cohesive from beginning to end, consistent in format and language usage, and free of spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors. At the book level, the editor(s) should scrutinize according to the same criteria a second time, making additional revisions and edits to ensure that the entire narrative is cohesive, consistent, and error-free from beginning to end. Again, primary responsibility for a well-written historical narrative falls on the shoulders of the project editor(s).

A fourth and final challenge of collaboratively writing a historical narrative is deciding how and where to publish it, as well as who holds the copyright. Although some historical narratives are worthy of a formal book contract, most can be informally published by simply printing and distributing copies. Depending on the number of pages, desired appearance, and budget, print copies can range from black-and-white or color photocopies to spiral bound or saddle stitched (i.e., stapled) booklets to perfect-bound paperback books *(Lenz, n.d.)*. If the appearance of formal publication is desired, subsidy publishing (commonly known as vanity publishing) may be an option. Although not likely to be profitable, advantages of subsidy publishing include print on demand technology and assignment of an International Standard Book Number *(ISBN; Bricker, 2013)*. For informal publication online, hypertext markup language (HTML) and/or PDF versions of the historical narrative can be posted via website or blog as open access publications, making them readily available and free of charge *(Miller & Billings, 2012)*.

If the historical narrative is collaboratively written, it is wise to require coauthors to sign over the copyright to the larger institution so that the historical narrative is preserved as a whole and future decisions about publication and distribution are the responsibility of one entity as opposed to multiple individuals. Copyright assignment can be accomplished with a letter, customized for each chapter and/or coauthor. The larger institution's office of grant

administration, publications, or institutional research should be able to assist with this process.

## Conclusion

When colleges and universities neglect to write and publish historical accounts of their community engagement work, "institutional amnesia" can result *(Thelin, 2009, p. 5)*. But "when people from across institutions come together authentically, to work democratically and to inquire . . . it is a story worth telling" *(James et al., 2015, p. 54)*. How does an institution begin the process of telling its community engagement story? Fasl *(2008)* suggests asking six questions: (1) Why should this history be written? (2) How do we begin? (3) When, or how soon, should the project begin? (4) Where can pertinent information be located? (5) What information should be (and should not be) included? (6) Who should do the writing? By collaboratively writing a historical narrative, colleges and universities can chronicle institutional history, honor those who have contributed, raise community awareness, provide a model for others, and attract new funding sources. Most important, collaboratively writing and publishing a historical narrative can document an institutional legacy of community engagement, a legacy that those who follow can read, savor, and carry forward.

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## Methodological Addendum

Aharonian *(2016)* recently asserted that writing about professional/life experiences, inviting others to read the writings, and engaging in interactive dialogue about the writings fosters deep

reflection and self-analysis for everyone involved. Through such collaborative inquiry, participants can "search for connections between the stories and their own practice" and "generate understandings, relevant to their unique professional contexts, in a dynamic ongoing process" *(p. 223)*. Narrative inquiry as a research method was first used by Connelly and Clandinin to describe the personal stories of teachers *(Wang & Geale, 2015; see Clandinin & Connelly, 2000)*. When Bradley University's College of Education and Health Sciences decided to collaboratively write a historical narrative chronicling 20 years of PDS work, narrative inquiry was the perfect choice.

The primary strength of this approach is the intimacy and authenticity of the narrative. On the other hand, some may consider such historical accounts to be subjective or biased because they are heavily based on participants' personal experiences. For the purposes of the Kemper History Project, however, narrative inquiry provided just the right balance of factual information and personal interpretation.

## About the Author

**Jana Hunzicker** is an associate professor of teacher education and associate dean for the College of Education and Health Sciences at Bradley University. Her research interests include effective teaching practices, teacher learning, professional development, professional development schools, and teacher leadership. She earned her Ed.D in curriculum and instruction from Illinois State University.

© *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, Volume 21, Number 3, p. 113, (2017)
 eISSN 2164-8212

# *Consolidating the Academic End of a Community-Based Participatory Research Venture to Address Health Disparities*

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## Abstract

Although there is strong support for community engagement and community-based participatory research (CBPR) from public health entities, medical organizations, and major grant-funding institutions, such endeavors often face challenges within academic institutions. Fostering the interest, skills, and partnerships to undertake participatory research projects and truly impact the community requires an interdisciplinary team with the competencies and values to engage in this type of research. Discussed in this article is how a CBPR-focused team evolved at a southern university, with emphasis on the activities that supported group identity, contributed to its evolution, and positioned the group to speak with authority in promoting CBPR as a tool for addressing health disparities.

*Keywords*: community-based participatory research, research team, health disparities, community-academic partnership

## Introduction

Addressing health disparities is a major challenge for researchers and health care providers in the United States. The health status of all populations, but particularly those that are culturally diverse and economically vulnerable, can be impaired by barriers involving quality of health care, access to health services, health literacy, location, language, and reduced economic and educational attainment *(Arrieta, Hanks, & Bryan, 2008)*. Inadequate progress toward eliminating health disparities makes it mandatory to use impactful approaches to disparities research *(Allen, Culhane-Pera, Pergament, & Call, 2010)*.

Specifically, community-based participatory research (CBPR) integrates collaborative partnerships between community members, health care providers, and researchers in conceptualizing and effecting change *(Israel, Eng, Schulz, & Parker, 2005)*. CBPR has

gained increased standing in health care and public health since the early 1990s because of its potential to facilitate understanding of individuals' health-related experiences and inform the creation of workable and appropriate services *(Heslop, Elsom, & Parker, 2000)*. Emphasis on CBPR from funders such as the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has generated a more favorable climate for its practice, as well as developing credibility for researchers building partnerships with community organizations and creating a body of research based on a participatory process. However, challenges remain for those working in the academic end of community-institutional partnerships. These include discipline-based traditionalism dictating who decides what research is needed, how research is conducted, and how research results are implemented; promotion and tenure guidelines that encourage discipline-based publications and presentations; concerns about the rigor of participatory research; and the considerable investment of time and resources needed to cultivate community–academic partnerships *(Kennedy, Vogel, Goldberg-Freeman, Kass, & Farfel, 2009; Nyden, 2003; Seifer, Shore, & Holmes, 2003)*.

The strong support of community engagement and CBPR by public health entities, medical organizations, and major grant-funding institutions has conferred clear acknowledgment of CBPR as a powerful tool to positively impact communities and achieve meaningful outcomes *(CTSA Community Engagement Key Function Committee & the CTSA Community Engagement Workshop Planning Committee, 2009; CTSA Community Engagement Key Function Committee Task Force on the Principles of Community Engagement, 2011; Gebbie, Rosenstock, Hernandez, Institute of Medicine, Board on Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, & Committee on Educating Public Health Professionals for the 21st Century, 2003; Horowitz, Robinson, & Seifer, 2009; Institute of Medicine, Committee on Assuring the Health of the Public in the 21st Century, 2003; Michener et al., 2012; Seifer et al., 2003)*. Nonetheless, "conducting community-based research requires a team with a unique set of knowledge, values and competencies that need to be cultivated and supported" *(Seifer et al., 2003, p. 39)*. In this article, we will discuss how a CBPR-focused team evolved at a southern university. We will outline and evaluate the activities that supported group identity, contributed to its evolution, and positioned the group to speak with authority in promoting CBPR as a tool for addressing health disparities.

## The University Research Group

A university research group, hereinafter referred to as URG, developed from the recognition that effectively addressing and impacting health disparities "requires a broad-based, multidisciplinary approach" *(Arrieta et al., 2008, p. 275)*. The purpose of URG is to enlighten faculty about health disparities and research methods used to address them, as well as connect faculty and staff from varied academic disciplines interested in finding solutions to health disparities. URG seeks to bring together a supportive group of researchers and community members that are capable of identifying and developing responses to the issues faced by health-disparate communities. The group's approach involves fostering an understanding of and engagement in CBPR as a primary methodology for the promotion of health equity. The group's members reflect its broad-based multidisciplinary character; they represent seven colleges within the university, incorporating the disciplines of public health, medicine, nursing, allied health, psychology, sociology, social work, political science, education, business, law, engineering, and library science. At the time of this writing, URG included 16 core members and 27 affiliates.

URG developed organically as relationships and partnerships between researchers and community members began to coalesce around shared concerns about health disparities and interest in CBPR. We present here a retrospective account of the group's genesis and evolution, based on a review of all activities undertaken by URG (see Table 1) from its inception in July 2005 through August 2015. We catalogued the activities into four major categories: (a) promotion of group identity and permanence, (b) fostering research capacity, (c) engagement in participatory research, and (d) dissemination of CBPR principles and practice. Activities will be discussed in terms of their impact on URG's development into a catalyst of CBPR activities on the university campus. Through each of these developmental steps the URG evolved into a cohesive force promoting the expansion of CBPR. An in-depth exploration of this process is instructive for reproducing similar multidisciplinary bodies in other similarly situated institutions of higher education.

**Table 1. University Research Group (URG) Activities and Their Impact on Consolidation**

| Activity | Outcome | Impact on Consolidation |
|---|---|---|
| Promotion of Group Identity and Permanence | | |
| Monthly meetings during spring and fall semesters, with brief notes distributed to all URG affiliates | • Strong relationships amoung core group members<br>• Space open for discussions around health disparities and CBR<br>• Amicable forum for faculty and/or community organizations to introduce initiatives and discuss projects | • URG meetings are an established feature of the univesity's academic landscape<br>• Meetings provide a venue for potential members to become acquainted with the group |
| Structured review of URG's vision, mission, and goals | • Vision and mission reaffirmed, streamlined goals | • A statement of the guiding principles of URG |
| Fostering Health Disparities Research Capacity | | |
| Internal awards to fund pilot projects | • 7 pilot projects fully funded<br>• 2 projects expanded into comprehensive independent proposals | • Increased capacity for health disparities research<br>• Community members involved as advisers to community-based projects |
| Internal Research Forum | • Increased understanding of internal capacity | • Opportunities for Collaboration |
| Qualitative analysis of focus groups with residents in a disadvantaged area regarding barriers to health care access | • 12 URG members formed three interdisciplinary analysis groups<br>• One publication disseminating the findings | • Practical experience working together<br>• Demonstrated how cross-disciplinary connections can be fruitful |
| Engagement in Participatory Research | | |
| Development & implementation of a participatory research project in partnership with a grassroots organization (Coalition–URG collaboration) | • Strong partnership with a grass-roots community organization<br>• Neighborhood-specific health data obtained<br>• Research apprenticeship approach developed and implemented<br>• Improved understanding of the potential and importance of community–university partnerships | • Synergistic relationships benefiting both the community partner and URG faculty<br>• Administrative university departments gained understanding of and appreciation for CBPR |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Fostering the research capacity of community-based partner (Pilot 7) | • Coalition demonstrated capacity to manage and field an experimental research project<br>• Twenty patients benefited from care provided in the framework of a pilot research project<br>• Funds procured through research contributed to the sustainability of a neighborhood clinic during its first year of operation | • Strong community–academia ties that support further partnership work<br>• Administrative university departments gain experience in the management and sup port of community–academia initiatives |
| Dissemination of CBPR Principles and Practice | | |
| Implementation of a CBPR dissemination initiative for the university and region | • Increased understanding of university-wide capacity for community-engagement and CBPR<br>• Effective contribution by URG to the university's expanded focus on community-engagement<br>• Capacity to catalyze the coalesence of community-engagement initiatives by university faculty | • Institutional recognition of the value of URG<br>• Direction, input, and collaboration from faculty to develop and execute a 5-year CBPR dissemination plan |

Since the activities and interactions described here align with the traditional mandates of higher education (in particular those of research and service), they are usual and customary and do not require Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. However, all pilot research projects sponsored by URG were reviewed and approved by the university IRB.

## The Initial Process of URG

The formation and initial process for URG has been described *(Arrieta et al., 2008)*. In brief, we (1) convened a steering committee, (2) raised awareness of health disparities research through a university-wide kickoff meeting, (3) fostered faculty interest and knowledge through travel awards to national conferences on health disparities and CBPR, (4) involved members in the formulation of the initial vision, mission, goals, and objectives of URG, (5) awarded funds for three pilot projects by university faculty, and (6) initiated structured review of best practices to reduce disparities in cardiovascular disease in African Americans *(Crook et al., 2009)*.

URG's growth has been supported by a continuous funding stream beginning in 2004 with the award of a 3-year Project EXPORT grant *(Arrieta et al., 2008)*. Subsequently (2007–2012), a 5-year Center of Excellence in Health Disparities Award from

the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD) allowed URG to expand in number, develop its participatory focus, and undertake CBPR activities. By the time competitive renewal of the Center of Excellence Grant was due (2011), URG was poised to promote the dissemination of CBPR within the university and its service area. Once the continuation grant was awarded, URG initiated the implementation of its CBPR dissemination initiative, seeking to expand the university's capacity for community engagement and CBPR.

## Activities Leading to the Promotion of Group Identity and Permanence

Identity serves as a primary factor in developing group cohesion and fidelity to pursuing and achieving a goal *(Corley et al., 2006; Steffens, Haslam, Kerschreiter, Schuh, & van Dick, 2014)*. For this reason, URG leadership initiated activities that would solidify the group's identity around the purpose of conducting health disparities research through the CBPR lens. In so doing, the leadership acknowledged the many (and at times conflicting) demands on faculty time. Activities were designed to minimize the costs and maximize the value of membership in this multidisciplinary group through a modus operandi characterized by making limited demands on faculty time, restricting interactions to those judged of close relevance to the faculty members' areas of interest, and proposing activities with potential to advance the professional standing of its constituents.

**Monthly meetings.** Only an hour long, the gatherings allow core members to discuss current URG initiatives, issues, and opportunities related to CBPR. They are open to any interested community members, university faculty, staff, and students. Therefore, meetings also provide a venue where potential members can evaluate the group's objectives and work in progress. Attendance remains between 15 and 25 participants. However, meeting notes are disseminated via e-mail to ensure that all members are kept abreast of developments and activities. Ad hoc e-mail communication is also used to provide information about relevant initiatives. Regular monthly meetings and ad hoc communications have fostered strong relationships between the core URG members and provide a venue for the formation of new partnerships as potential research projects and opportunities are discussed and expanded.

**Review of guiding principles.** In order to verify continued relevance 4 years from their initial formulation, URG members gath-

ered in a retreat to evaluate the group's vision, mission, and goals. Nineteen members reaffirmed the original vision and mission and streamlined the goals to better reflect URG's capacity and resources (see Table 2). Regarding identity formation, this work provided a focal point for relationship building and group cohesiveness, while also delineating a framework for planning future activities in pursuit of objectives that will enable the group to realize its mission.

**Table 2. University Research Group: Review of Vision, Mission, and Goals**

| Item | Original (2006) | Revised (2010) |
|---|---|---|
| Vision | To become an integral facilitator in eliminating health disparities thorough partnerships with our community | Reaffirmed without modifications |
| Mission | To foster interdisciplinary, collaborative research toward eliminating health disparities. URG will realize its mission through the strengthening of faculty capabilities, the garnering of resources, the provision of an intellectual forum for disparities research, the engagement of the community as a partner in its endeavors, and the establishment of an interface with policymakers. | Reaffirmed without modifications |
| Goals | 1. Conduct and support health disparities research<br>2. Garner adequate esources for the URG to become self-sustaining<br>3. Engage community stakeholders in the pro cess of developing research and collaboration<br>4. Strengthen faculty capabilities to conduct health disparities research<br>5. Translate and disseminate research findings related to health disparities | 1. Conduct research on health disparities<br>2. Support research on health disparities<br>3. Engage the community with URG<br>4. Disseminate findings and activities |

## Activities to Foster Health Disparities Research Capacity

With a view to furthering faculty's capacity for health disparities research and multidisciplinary collaborations, URG leadership sought to impact individual faculty through the award of pilot project grants, to catalyze collaborations among faculty through an internal research forum, and to engage its members in collaborative projects through a multidisciplinary secondary data analysis project.

**Pilot projects.** A key mechanism for university faculty and staff to develop concrete experience with health disparities research and CBPR was the internal grant competition for pilot projects

that emphasized community engagement in the research design. The internal awards program was possible with funding streams provided by the Project EXPORT grant and the initial Center of Excellence in Health Disparities award. Seed funding supported seven pilot projects (see Table 3). Notably, two of the projects evolved into independent research proposals, and they were submitted as such at the time of competitive renewal of the Center of Excellence grant (Projects 3 and 4, Table 3).

**Table 3. Internally Funded Pilot Research Projects**

| Project Title | PI/Co-PI*: Academic Field |
|---|---|
| 1. A Family Based Approach to the Treatment of Obesity | Medicine: Pediatrics |
| 2. Community Based Asthma Intervention Consortium | Medicine: Pediatrics |
| 3. The Impact of Family Labor Force/Labor Market Status on Family Access to Health Care in a Southern City** | Sociology |
| 4. Heat Shock Protein 27 (HSP27) as a Marker for Atherosclerosis** | Medicine: Biochemistry/ Cardiology |
| 5. Uncovering Health Literacy: Developing a Remotely Administered Questionnaire for Determining Health Literacy Levels in Health Disparate Populations | Political Science |
| 6. Family Meal Barriers and Strategies That Promote Healthy Frequent Family Meals in African-American Families | Nursing |
| 7. Cultural and Spiritual Sensitivity as a Model for Individualized Diabetic Management | Nursing***/Public Health |

**PI: Principal investigator*

***Evolved into comprehensive research projects funded within the continuation of the Center of Excellence Award*

****Principal investigator was nurse practitioner from community-based organization; coinvestigators were two URG faculty from nursing and public health respectively*

**Research forum.** Twenty-four participants from a variety of disciplines attended the event consisting of research presentations followed by dialogue focusing on research interests, expertise, and potential avenues for collaboration. The forum provided an opportunity for university faculty to learn about the health disparities research undertaken by others and to build new relationships for future interdisciplinary research partnerships.

**Qualitative analysis project.** It is important to faculty, in particular junior faculty, that opportunities for academic productivity are available. To address the needs of its members while also expanding health disparities research competence, URG sought to exercise its multidisciplinary capacity by collaborating in the analysis of data from 43 focus groups originally conducted in 2006 to investigate and understand patients' perceptions of health prob-

lems, health care needs, the primary health care infrastructure, and barriers to health care access. Three data analysis teams were organized to analyze each of the central themes explored with the focus groups. Results of analysis related to community members' perceptions of the primary care infrastructure have been published *(Freed, Hansberry, & Arrieta, 2013)*.

## Activities Leading to Engagement in Participatory Research

Once a base of interested faculty had been cultivated and the principles of CBPR as an effective approach to health disparities had been recognized by URG members, the group was poised to engage in participatory research practice. An opportunity presented itself through the National Institutes of Health Partners in Research request for applications (2007), which stipulated that proposals should emanate from community–academia partnerships.

**The Coalition–URG collaboration.** URG sought a partnership with a grassroots community organization, herein referred to as the Coalition, for the purpose of responding to the request for applications. The partnership was formalized around the Coalition's articulated necessity to gather neighborhood health information that would be used to substantiate the need for a health clinic in their community. URG agreed to instruct Coalition members in basic health research methodology and to support them in the design, implementation, and analysis of a home environment survey and family respiratory health history in a local neighborhood. This work sought to test the hypothesis that the knowledge and attitudes of a health-disparate population regarding health science and medical research would be favorably influenced when community apprentices trained in research methods (i.e., research apprentices) conducted a research project relevant to their community.

The multidisciplinary capacity of URG was a cornerstone of the project, and all URG core members were invested as trainers and facilitators of a proposed curriculum including computing literacy, basic research methodology, and the ethics of research with human subjects. Training on survey design, implementation, and analysis were also included.

Even though this first CBPR proposal did not attain funding on two successive competitive submissions, URG members enthusiastically embraced the project and eventually implemented it on a smaller scale, based strictly on volunteer commitment from both URG and Coalition members. Although at a slow pace, the evolving

Coalition–URG collaboration grew strong and was ultimately successful in fielding a health status and access to care survey among local neighborhood residents. Details of the process and outcomes of the Coalition–URG collaboration (which ultimately spanned 3 years, from 2007 through 2010) have been published *(Bryan et al., 2014)*. Through the partnership URG built a strong synergistic relationship with the Coalition while positively contributing to a neighborhood within the university's service area. Moreover, URG's CBPR competencies strengthened significantly.

**Promoting research capacity of community partner.** Once the Coalition–URG collaboration completed the health survey of local neighborhood residents, URG actively sought to strengthen the Coalition's research capacity by involving its leadership in presentations at national participatory research conferences *(Arrieta et al., 2012a; Arrieta et al., 2012b; Arrieta et al., 2014; Fisher et al., 2012; Hudson et al., 2010)*, by supporting the Coalition in the submission of a successful grant proposal to foster heart health in their community, and by producing a short promotional video for the group *(Aggen, 2012)*. In January 2012, the Coalition realized its long-sought objective of establishing a neighborhood clinic to provide low-cost or free services to residents. Shortly thereafter, URG awarded the Coalition funds to conduct its own pilot research project testing a culturally and spiritually sensitive approach to the management of diabetes patients in the clinic *(Washington-Lewis et al., 2014)*. A member of the Coalition was the principal investigator, with two URG members as coinvestigators (see Table 3, Project 7).

## Activities Leading to the Dissemination of CBPR Principles and Practice

Once URG had exercised its CBPR capacity and had seen the actual impact of the approach for the promotion of health equity, it moved to begin dissemination efforts in order to expand understanding of these concepts and practices throughout the university and its service area. At this point (early 2012) we believed that a larger group of faculty and community organizations stood to benefit from a broader effort. To that end, two initial dissemination activities were conducted in 2013–2014: (1) conversations around the value of community engagement in general and CBPR in particular between URG leadership and college deans, university vice presidents, and the university president and (2) a university-wide faculty and staff survey inquiring about knowledge, participation, and interest in CBPR that garnered 232 respondents *(P. Dagenais, personal communication, June 18, 2014)*.

Insight from the aforementioned activities led to the preparation of a report by URG to the vice president for academic affairs on the value of community engagement *(S. Shelley-Tremblay, personal communication, September 24, 2015)*. It also led to the convening of the 2015 Faculty Forum on Engaged Scholarship, which was aimed at creating connections between university faculty engaged in CBPR and other community-engaged research activities but not formally connected to URG, and at eliciting input about a framework for CBPR dissemination within the university and its service area. The forum generated great interest among several researchers at the university, with an attendance of 57 persons representing all but two of the nine university colleges and schools.

Based on the comments by forum participants, URG leadership formulated a 5-year plan to disseminate CBPR throughout the university and its service area. URG is currently implementing the plan. The major objectives of the URG dissemination initiative are outlined in Figure 1.

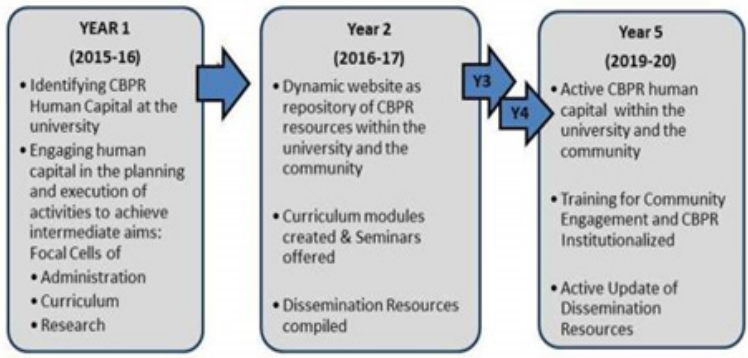


*Figure 1. University Research Group CBPR dissemination initiative objectives*

## Keys to Success in the Consolidation of URG

In narrating the evolution of URG, we realize that similarly situated groups will not necessarily have to progress through all the stages that constituted our experience. Most notably, the sustained promotion and endorsement by funding bodies, major public health and medical institutions, and other influential health stakeholders has moved community–academia partnerships, community engagement, and CBPR to the mainstream *(CTSA Committee & CTSA Committee, 2009; CTSA Committee Task Force, 2011; Gebbie et al., 2003; Horowitz et al., 2009; Institute of Medicine Committee on Assuring the Health of the Public in the 21st Century, 2003; Michener et al., 2012;*

*Seifer et al., 2003)*. Therefore, other groups seeking to establish a core of participatory research practice may need to invest substantially less time than did URG in promoting knowledge of both community engagement and CBPR as well as attaining buy-in from faculty and university administrators.

However, based on the URG experience, we have identified five elements that we believe were key to its evolution and consolidation and that may be prominent in the evolution of multidisciplinary participatory research groups: (1) unequivocal focus on participatory research, (2) sustained interaction with the community, (3) commitment to the partnership, (4) focusing on CBPR practice, and (5) adequate funding to support CBPR projects.

**Focus on participatory research.** As stated in its vision statement, URG's explicit approach to the elimination of health disparities through "partnerships with our community" attracted faculty inclined toward interaction with community members. Seifer et al. *(2003)* stressed the need to invest in the preparation of researchers "who have the knowledge, attitudes, values and competencies to successfully conduct community-based research" *(p. 39)*. By clearly defining an approach centered on academia–community partnerships, URG engendered a core membership open to the reality of participatory research, with requisite flexibility to understand that "you need to give up control, be flexible with your methodologies, cultural sensitivity, and even unlearn the old ways of doing research" *(p. 39)*.

**Sustained interaction with the community.** Sustained community presence by the overall Project EXPORT team initially and the nascent Center of Excellence subsequently was also important to the evolution of URG. Both of the competitive applications required community engagement activities and provided funds for academia–community interactions aimed at the promotion of health equity. Through such interactions, community organizations and their leaders were identified. They eventually became participatory research partners. Moreover, continuous university presence in the community (through health disparity awareness events and health promotion activities, as well as community-placed research projects) promoted acceptance of academic partners and contributed to the development of trust by community stakeholders and community members, leading to a favorable environment for participatory research.

Important lessons were learned through continued engagement with faculty and community. For example, we became aware

of the effort required to build the relationships with community partners in order to conduct CBPR. We learned how to address the academic needs of faculty to keep them invested in CBPR. Also, we learned that community members have the capacity to participate from beginning to end in research focused on their neighborhoods.

**Commitment to partnership.** As previously described, a turning point in the evolution of URG was the opportunity provided by the NIH Partners in Research Program. It afforded the group an opening to actually conceive and plan a participatory research project, thus testing its capacity for CBPR. Moreover, when no funds were garnered through the competitive process, it verified URG's commitment to its community partner. The fact that URG proceeded to complete the project, even in the face of a funding shortfall, solidified its partnership with the Coalition and demonstrated academia's allegiance to community objectives.

Moreover, the implementation of the Coalition–URG collaboration project served as a training ground by helping URG members and Coalition members understand the inner workings of a community–university partnership while furthering knowledge and expertise in CBPR to address health disparities. The focus on a specific community in the beginning proved important in building the tools and experiences necessary for URG members to expand their activities to other communities in our service area going forward.

**Focus on CBPR practice.** Through the actual practice of CBPR, URG experienced organic, grassroots development. It also had an impact on the university administrative structure. A favorable overall shift toward engaged research for the promotion of health equity at the national level had softened administrative barriers to CBPR at our institution. However, direct knowledge of project objectives and firsthand experience of the dedication and commitment of URG faculty to their community partners went a long way in promoting acceptance of CBPR-specific practices by the university research administration. As a result, URG was able to avoid one challenge that often affects community–academic partnerships: the lack of an institutional review board (IRB) covering research activities by community-based organizations. To implement Pilot Project 7 (see Table 3) the university IRB extended an unaffiliated investigator agreement to the community-based principal investigator. This was possible due to the credibility and trust built through URG's interaction with the IRB in previous projects and the strength of URG's relationship with the community partner.

Relatively quick progression to actual CBPR practice was critical to URG's evolution from a group aspiring to address health disparities through participatory research to a team with built-in, tangible CBPR capacity and accomplishments, capable of both influencing and supporting the university's shift toward community engagement. URG's CBPR expertise is now a recognized asset of the institution. In URG's experience, the practice of CBPR has generated both understanding and acceptance of participatory research by university administration. Traditional challenges to the value of CBPR, such as promotion and tenure guidelines favoring discipline-based publications, and the concerns about the rigor of participatory research *(Kennedy et al., 2009)* may be more easily overcome if institutional skepticism is confronted with the results of CBPR projects.

**Adequate funding to support CBPR projects.** Finally, funding played a key role in fostering URG's growth. The ongoing support from 2004 to the present—through continued funding from NIMHD—has provided URG leadership with resources to promote health disparities research and CBPR expertise within the university, most notably through seed funding for pilot projects (see Table 3). The importance of pilot project funding on the progression from learning about CBPR to the practice of participatory research cannot be overlooked. Seed funding has been shown to encourage faculty to undertake research in new areas, such as through community engagement *(Zuiches, 2013)*. Funding also provided resources for the cultivation of community partners and the promotion of research capacity in the community.

## Challenges Encountered and Responses Devised

**Limited time and competing responsibilities of faculty.** Although the group has grown its capacity to exercise broader influence, the path to consolidation and maturity has not been without its challenges. Perhaps the most difficult one relates to faculty responsibilities limiting available time for working on CBPR projects. The Coalition–URG partnership has been strong, but competing priorities among URG faculty members and leadership resulted in stop-and-start engagement in some aspects of implementing the Coalition–URG collaboration activities *(Bryan et al., 2014)*. This kind of slow progress can create strain in the relationships with community partners and hinder the implementation of research projects. The need for a dedicated advocate with the responsibility of furthering the vision, maintaining partnerships, and seeking ways to smooth over some of the challenges and road-

blocks peculiar to CBPR has been stressed *(Seifer et al., 2003)*. We too have learned that it is important to have dedicated staff members, trained in CBPR, to cultivate the community relationships and push projects forward.

**Administrative delays.** Administrative delays in approval of federal grant funding caused projects to stall and risked the disengagement of community partners. There is little that can be done at the local level to expedite federal grant procedures. However, URG exercised discreet pressure by contacting national program officers to explain how delays in approval would put pressure on the participatory research relationship. Given the present focus on community-engaged research by federal institutes and major foundations, streamlined grant procedures may be formulated that address the highly time-sensitive nature of academia–community interactions, while also taking into consideration the limited structural and organizational resources of many community-based partners.

There were instances of university bureaucracy delaying much-needed payments to community partners, which resulted in financial hardship for the organizations involved. To meet this challenge, a dedicated staff member was tasked with monitoring the progression of partner invoices through the various offices involved. In many cases, it was feasible to expedite paperwork through avoidance of simple delays. In other instances, we were able to provide advance notice to community partners of interruptions in the procedure as well as an estimate of when the payment would clear. There is a real cost to community-based organizations when delays in payment occur. Ensuring timely transfer of funds is key to the strengthening of partnerships.

**Sustainability.** A challenge unique to the URG experience has been the paucity of sustained engagement with local university students. We have been able to place some students in summer research experiences within URG's community-engaged research projects. Recently, the group has invited students and their mentors to present on community-based projects. Going forward, a major objective of URG's CBPR dissemination initiative is the establishment of CBPR seminars or curriculum modules that could be offered to students. URG faculty and other participatory researchers at the university will play a major role in curricular activities aimed at shaping students versed in community engagement and participatory research. We anticipate that student involvement will generate enthusiasm and momentum to expand

CBPR theory and practice at our university, thus contributing to the development of new researchers with a CBPR orientation.

## Discussion

In conducting this retrospective review of the URG's genesis and development, we illustrate how a multidisciplinary group of faculty and staff from a southern university met the challenge of creating a supportive environment for CBPR as a mechanism for increasing the institutional focus on the study of health disparities.

In describing the activities undertaken by URG, we show a clear progression from identity formation to evolutionary development to maturity. In reality, the group's identity transcended disciplinary lines by the intentional focus on community engagement and health disparities. The development of a vision, mission, and goals, as well as the exchange of experiences through regular meetings and a faculty research forum, all served to strengthen URG's identity.

With the foundation of identity firmly in place, URG quickly evolved into a group ready to undertake community-engaged research projects and tackle health disparities research. In terms of evolution, URG expanded to develop relationships with a strong community organization that held a similar vision of addressing health disparities and a willingness to partner with an academic institution. One impact of this evolutionary growth is the support URG provided to the Coalition to collect health data specific to their neighborhood. Concurrently, the seven pilot projects funded by URG's internal awards program added to the expansion of knowledge and expertise within the university while increasing the group's credibility.

Its evolutionary growth has resulted in URG's establishing a respected reputation throughout the university. This positions the group as a resource whose expertise and advocacy has fostered and encouraged the implementation of CBPR as a tool for addressing health disparities. The group's maturity is evident through its CBPR dissemination activities, particularly its advocacy for engagement activities as a core mission of the university.

URG is in a good position to move its objectives forward due to national and local factors. The national focus on community engagement by many funding agencies has sparked a renewed interest in engaged research. Within the university, the personal commitment to the promotion of community engagement by a newly inaugurated (2014) university president lends credibility to

URG's work. Consequently, other academic institutions may use our experience as a blueprint to build their capacity for community-engaged efforts focused on enhancing the resources of communities toward achieving health equity.

## Conclusion

As a result of years of focused work, URG occupies a unique place on the university campus. It provides a nexus of communication and partnership for faculty and staff who desire to see improvement in health disparities through engagement with community partners. As the grassroots, organic development of URG suggests, commitment to imagining, designing, and implementing impactful research in partnership with community members is a key ingredient to the group's evolutionary process and current positioning to disseminate CBPR.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to highlight the critical role of C. Kenneth Hudson, Ph.D., as principal investigator for the Coalition–URG collaboration. The project's success was in great part due to Dr. Hudson's commitment to the partnership, as well as to his professional capacity and disposition to connect with community members.

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## Methodological Addendum

In describing the consolidation of a University Research Group (URG) focused on Community-Based Participatory Research to address health disparities, this work sought to offer insight on both the challenges and the possibilities inherent in promoting and disseminating engaged research scholarship at an academic institution. In a retrospective manner, information was gathered from notes, minutes, administrative, and scholarly records of URG activities and projects. Existence of such detailed records was critical to the construction of the narrative. Concurrent and systematic collection of perspectives and accounts from URG members would have further enriched it.

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© *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, Volume 21, Number 3, p. 135, (2017)
 eISSN 2164-8212

# *Shifting Engagement Efforts Through Disciplinary Departments: A Mistake or a Starting Point? A Cross-Institutional, Multidepartment Analysis*

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## Abstract

This article documents the innovative practices and initial outcomes from the Grand Rapids Engaged Department Initiative, a cross-institutional collaboration designed in response to the failures of higher education to systematically engage in place. Created to incentivize and resource systemic and cultural shifts across three institutions of higher education in the region, the initiative seeks to increase faculty knowledge and skills in community-based teaching, foster inter- and intracollaborations, expand students' community-based learning opportunities, and enhance community partnerships. Initial outcomes and stakeholder perceptions are detailed using previous validated research instruments and systemic action research practices. An examination of the three institutions and the seven participating departments reveals how structural and cultural barriers pose heavy challenges to cross-institutional engagement; we also highlight promising countermeasures for effecting change, including inclusive visioning processes and accountability mechanisms. Recommendations aim to support others' efforts to generate and sustain collaborative engagement.

*Keywords:* engaged departments, community engagement, cross-institutional partnerships, place-based change

## Introduction

In an attempt to address the academy's failure to engage with and respond to the challenges of our time and place, engaged department initiatives have sprung up across the United States: in Oregon, Florida, California, and New England. In 2003, engaged departments were formally defined as those that shift from an emphasis on "individual faculty, courses, and curricular redesign to collective faculty culture" and demonstrate a core commitment to "public work" (*Battistoni, Gelmon, Saltmarsh, Wergin, & Zlotkowski, 2003, p. 13*). In general, engaged departments (along with a host of similar initiatives) seek to transform the culture of higher education by providing sustained and mutually ben-

eficial opportunities for students to learn in the real world. Campus Compact was created in 1985 as an umbrella organization designed to support similar efforts. It seeks to narrow the gap between the "ivory towers" of the academy and the community. Unsurprisingly, movements toward engagement have undergone several transformations over this time. For instance, upon encountering resistance at the campus level, efforts aimed at creating "the engaged campus" have shifted toward creating "engaged departments" (*Battistoni et al., 2003; Furco, Muller, & Ammon, 1998; Kecskes, 2004, 2006, 2015*). With a commitment to systemic and cultural change at the departmental level, *The Engaged Department Toolkit* was designed to move departments from individual engagement efforts (on a faculty or per course basis) through curricular redesign (*Battistoni et al., 2003*).

Thus far, reported outcomes from these initial engagement efforts have not focused enough on cultural and systemic change (*Battistoni, 2014; Howe, DePasquale, Hamshaw, & Westdijk, 2010; Vogelgesang & Misa, 2002*). With these gaps in mind, this article highlights particularly innovative aspects of the Grand Rapids Engaged Department Initiative (EDI) as well as the systemic challenges generated by its innovations. In particular, initial findings fill gaps within the current literature regarding the value of harnessing systemic action research practices for increasing the effectiveness of change efforts as they unfold. In addition to enhancing previous conclusions about the benefits and challenges of engaged departments, findings also extend research conclusions about the challenges to performing cross-institutional collaborative engagement and sustaining equitable community partner inclusion.

Launched in the summer of 2015, the EDI was an 18-month cross-institutional collaboration focused on place-based change in Grand Rapids, Michigan; the initiative sought to increase faculty knowledge and skills in community-based teaching, foster inter- and intracollaborations between three different institutions of higher education in the region, expand students' community-based (CB) learning opportunities, and enhance community partnerships. By documenting the long-term hope and short-term goals, the innovative practices, and the initial outcomes, this article touches upon (1) the challenges in its place-based, cross-institutional design, (2) the value behind (and challenges to) the inclusion of community partners as cocontributors in all phases of the initiative, and (3) consistent barriers to sustainable partnerships. As it was found to be critically important, the article also details the systemic action research approach *(Burns, 2014b)*. Given the commitment to action research, findings were reported back to both

initiative leaders and participants in real time so that the initiative could flexibly respond to unforeseen barriers and concerns as they emerged. Recommendations are offered to faculty, staff, and administrators seeking to bridge boundaries and work for place-based change in their own region. We begin by contextualizing this initiative within the literature.

## Why Strive for Engagement? A Brief Review

"Service learning is a long utilized pedagogical strategy for connecting student learning to organizations and communities" (*Norris-Tirrell, Lambert-Pennington, & Hyland, 2010, p. 172*). It is also "a dynamic process, through which students' personal and social growth is tightly interwoven into their academic and cognitive development" (*DeMuth & Dernberger, 2014, p. 47*). Research verifies that high-impact practices—such as service-learning, research with faculty, and internships—enhance GPA, increase likelihood of graduating, and lessen time needed to obtain a degree (*Huber, 2010*). A wealth of evidence has documented that students emerge from service-learning courses with a higher level of social, ethical, and academic skills (*Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011; Gallini & Moely, 2003; Peters, 2011*). Evidently, service does not detract from learning; it sustains and enhances it (*Astin et al., 2000; Norris-Tirrell et al., 2010; Waliczek & Zajicek, 2010*). Additionally, service projects encourage students to take on a leadership role, preparing them to be the "community leaders of tomorrow today" (*Wurr & Hamilton, 2012, p. 231*).

In addition to benefiting students, engaged courses often have long-term benefits in the surrounding community (*Peters, 2011*). Despite these well-documented benefits, few departments pursue sustained and systemic community engagement (CE). Mugabi (*2015*) identifies the main cause as a lack of institutional support as well as a lack of committed staff members for community-engaged protocols. Efforts to integrate CE into research, teaching, and service have been shown to increase faculty's willingness to engage with the community's needs (*Crookes, Else, & Smith, 2015*). In addition, integrating service into the mission statement of the university (*Mugabi, 2015*), building on initial efforts (*Matthews, Karls, Doberneck, & Springer, 2015*), and creating service-integrated programs (*Norris-Tirrell et al., 2010*) are tried and true practices for increasing community-engaged learning. Thus, for the purposes of this article, *service-learning* is understood as an umbrella term that encompasses a range of active pedagogical practices intended to connect academic work with community engagement and

grounded in respect, reciprocity, relevance, and reflection (*Bringle & Hatcher, 2003; Butin, 2010*).

Actually, the expansion in service-learning over the past 25 years has led to development of a wide variety of terminology, as well as contention over what counts, for whom, and to what end. Recognizing the need to clarify and better classify these practices, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching created criteria in 2006 that institutions can use to clarify how they engage in service-learning practices (*NERCHE, 2017*). The Carnegie classification process has motivated higher education institutions to develop models for "real social progress" *(p. 104)*, yielding seemingly contagious results (*Norris-Tirrell et al., 2010; Sandmann, Thornton, & Jaeger, 2009*). Many of the emerging engagement efforts have provided essential resources to the community, leading to studies that support community development programs and yielding effective responses to real-world, complex problems (*Mitchell et al., 2015; Sandmann et al., 2009; Tyron & Ross, 2012*). These findings demonstrate that mutually beneficial partnerships are most likely to yield long-term systemic impact. Beere (*2009*) argues that such partnerships emerge from a shared "commitment to an agreed-on goal or purpose" (*p. 56*). Effective university-to-community partnerships should be supported by interactive dialogue that provides opportunities to challenge values and uncover assumptions, ultimately generating reciprocity (*d'Arlach, Sánchez, & Feuer, 2009; Jacoby, 2010; Maidment & Brook, 2014; Michael, Neubert, & Michael, 2012*). According to Longo and Gibson *(2016)*, such collaborative engagement efforts move beyond the traditional boundaries of higher education, "integrating the full ecology of educational opportunities" *(p. 62)*. They should involve the cocreation of knowledge with a "wide range of actors" (*p. 62*) and incorporate "participatory action research and democratic education" (*p. 63*). Such engagement initiatives can be seen as an effort to shift dominant conceptualizations of the role of the academy, motivating faculty to see the value of shifting from a focus on "my work" to "our work" (*Kecskes, 2015, p. 56*). The move toward engaging *departments* reflects the recognition that within the current infrastructures of higher education, departments are where power and accountability lie and thus may be a critical first step toward fostering collaborative and sustainable engagement practices and cultures (*Kecskes, 2006*).

# The Grand Rapids Engaged Department Initiative

## Theoretical Framework

Within this evolving milieu, the Grand Rapids Engaged Department Initiative was born, situating itself through a commitment to integrate community-based (CB) learning as a way to achieve key academic goals for students and faculty, scaffold CB opportunities, support collaborative approaches to community partnerships, and establish a culture that supports and rewards CB work. In alignment with scholars in the field, this initiative defined collaborative engagement as an inherently relational, context-bound, and experiential learning process in which all participants are seen as "*cocreators* of knowledge through *democratic engagement*" practices aimed at addressing "real-world problems" (*Longo & Gibson, 2016, p. 62*). Initiative leaders—well aware of both the current scholarship around service-learning and community engagement and the complexity of systems in play (i.e., the relationships, people, processes, and range of institutions, as well as the surrounding environment)—aspired to catalyze systems change through training, resources, a community of practice, assessment loops, and general oversight. For these three institutions of higher education sharing geographical space in an urban setting, the potential to both better meet the needs of a diverse, contemporary student body and have long-term, sustainable, and systemic impact across the region was a compelling reason to commit. They also acknowledged that achieving these goals would require (1) resources (training, funding, mentorship, assessment, etc.), (2) an emphasis on community partner voice, and (3) a community of practice. Committed to soft systems thinking as the most effective theory of change (*Checkland & Scholes, 1990*), leaders believed departments would prove to be a pivotal unit of transformation for fostering a collaborative culture critical to scaffolding community-based (CB) learning, deepening and sustaining community partnerships, and supporting and rewarding engagement.

## The Place and the Players

The desire for collaborative engagement and systems change led to a shared partnership between (1) Michigan Campus Compact (MiCC), (2) Grand Valley State University, a large public institution with over 200 areas of study and more than 25,000 students, whose Office for Community Engagement has been the catalyst

for the EDI; (3) Grand Rapids Community College—founded in 1914—which now enrolls over 17,000 students, and whose mission is to be an open access college that encourages students to pursue their dreams and contribute to the community through their education; and (4) Aquinas College, a small private Catholic college with almost 2,000 students, whose history of curricula in CE provides a vision for sustainable partnerships across the three institutions. Located in Western Michigan, Grand Rapids has undergone rapid transformation and revitalization in the past decade and was named the most sustainable midsized city in the United States in 2010. In 2012, the *New York Times* wrote that the city's growth could be directly attributed to "partnerships between this city's redevelopment agencies and wealthy industrialists and philanthropists" (*Schneider, 2012*). Such growth has come at a cost. The median income in Grand Rapids has dropped 8%, 27% of the population is struggling with poverty, and homelessness is on the rise (*Bunte, 2015*). Rapid development has led to widespread housing shortages and gentrification.

Hoping to spark cross-institutional place-based engagement in this region, community engagement leaders from across these institutions applied for and received grant funding from the Grand Rapids Community Foundation, MiCC, and the Michigan Nonprofit Association, along with a funding-in-kind match from all three academic institutions. The cross-institutional leadership team for the initiative was originally composed of midlevel academic administrators from each institution (the director of the Office for Community Engagement, the manager of the Academic Service Learning Center, and the dean of curriculum) as well as the executive director of MiCC. This team sent out two calls for applications in winter 2015, seeking departments interested in *participating* in the initiative as well as a range of faculty interested in *researching* the initiative.

Selection to participate occurred through a competitive grant process seeking departments with previous community engagement experience and interest in moving their efforts toward collaborative engagement across their curriculum. Selected departments were asked to develop, implement, and evaluate a plan that would integrate community-based teaching, learning, and scholarship into their curriculum and culture. In practice, this meant teams attended a 2-day Engaged Department Training Institute facilitated by a national leader in community engagement best practices; developed a plan for institutionalizing the department's engagement; implemented the plan during the following 18 months;

attended three community of practice meetings (one per semester) and a full-day review of progress meeting in May 2016; participated with the cross-institutional research team to gather data required to evaluate the impact of the project on faculty, students, and community; and completed required reports in a timely manner. In return, each team received $5,000 in funding to support its efforts.

In total 11 departments across the three institutions applied to be a part of this initiative. Of these applicants, 7 EDI departmental teams were selected. Departments from the fields of biology (2), exercise science, sociology, anthropology, hospitality, and geography were ultimately selected to participate. Each EDI team consisted of four to five members, including two or three faculty and the chair of the department, the community partner, and optional support staff. Of the departments not selected to participate, one is no longer pursuing the initiative, the second has committed to a 2.0 initiative, and the third has demonstrated interest in becoming involved in the upcoming academic year. Although leaders recommended that teams invite community partners with which they had already established relationships, no formal approvals were required. Committed community partners came from a range of local organizations, including directors from the local refugee agency, environmental action council, and county lodging association, as well as community coordinators for a mental health outreach agency, a local food bank, and two local K-12 schoolteachers. In two cases the community partnerships were new, and in another the community representative was a graduate of the institution's academic program and current adjunct faculty member.

In addition, leaders used a competitive application process to create a transdisciplinary, cross-institutional five-person research team. The research team selected to study this initiative had expertise in education, anthropology, economics, nonprofit management, and public philosophy, bringing a wide range of methodological backgrounds to the study (both quantitative and qualitative). From the beginning, the research team was committed to uncovering the barriers to, and practices supportive of, fostering collaborative engagement across institutions of higher education within the same region. Tasked with uncovering the initiative's effect on student learning outcomes, civic engagement practices, retention and graduation rates, and community impact, the research team was also eager to design and implement research that built on and enhanced current practices within the service-learning community engagement field and yielded real-time findings valuable to the participants of this EDI. With each team member responsible

for different aspects of the study (e.g., Dr. Lancaster for student surveys, Dr. Carpenter for institutional surveys, Dr. Carr for faculty interviews), the team met regularly to discuss findings and connections between the research and their respective academic disciplines. The diverse disciplinary backgrounds fostered valuable cross-disciplinary insights noted in the analysis below.

## Methods and Measures of Impact

Recognizing the complexity and challenges of shifting university structures, processes, and culture, the research plan employed systemic action research practices (*Burns, 2014b*) to not only document, but also impact the processes, programs, activities, and systems of support engaged throughout each stage of the collaboration. The goals were to identify and disseminate best practices across the seven participating departments over the course of the initiative. We thus ultimately designed a series of qualitative and quantitative measurements that (1) aligned with the breadth of our expertise as a multidisciplinary research team, (2) expanded the current research on engaged departments (*Howe et al., 2010; Vogelgesang & Misa, 2002*), and (3) illuminated a complex systems view of the project as it unfolded (*Checkland, 1999; Ison, 2008*).

Thus, as a part of the systemic action research process the team sought to evaluate the initiative across stakeholder groups and provide real-time assessment feedback. The research processes were built around project cycles and employed a range of measurements, including (1) student and faculty surveys; (2) interviews with community partners, EDI leadership, and participating faculty; and (3) observation, open dialogues, story collection, and analysis of reporting documents. At its core, systemic action research practices commit both project participants and researchers to participatory, reflective action over the course of the initiative (*Reason & Bradbury, 2013*), requiring "multiple parallel inquiries" that seek to impact the initiative as it unfolds (*Burns, 2014b, p. 8*). This multimethod approach acknowledges the reality that collaborative projects like this one involve stakeholders who come to the table with different needs, concerns, and perspectives (*Bradbury-Huang & Reason, 2013; Wadsworth, 2011*). In this initiative, for instance, students are interacting with the project in a developmental manner, whereas community partners are approaching the project from the perspective of satisfying their organization's mission. This approach, documented in Figure 1, is a uniquely valuable counterpoint to typical engagement efforts that simply aim to count things through "often meaningless 'pre-post' surveys" (*Battistoni, 2014, p. 55*).

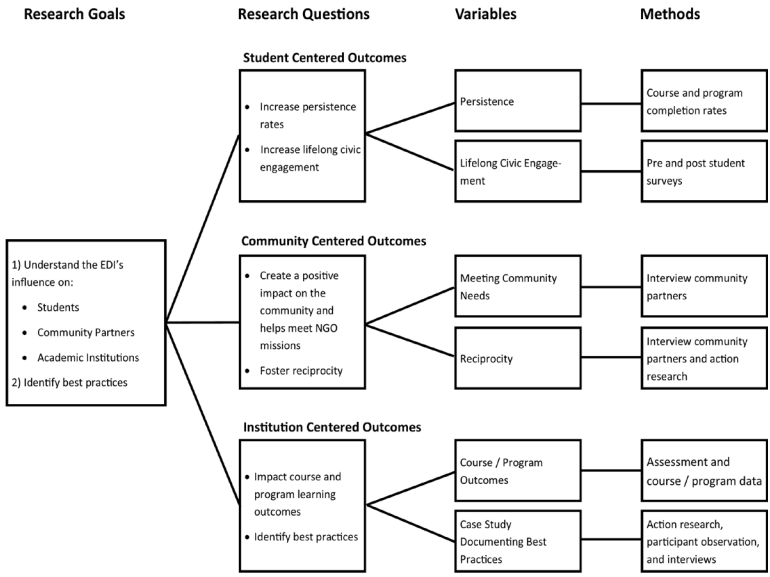


**Figure 1. Research design**

**Student-centered measurements (surveys and retention data).** Pre- and post-project surveys were administered to assess student development as well as changes in student attitudes regarding civic engagement and coursework. The surveys included 107 questions about students' perceptions of community engagement, documenting their previous community service efforts, their opinions about community issues, and their participation in civic matters. Although how many students received the survey across the seven participating departments is unknown, 198 students responded. The data was analyzed using Microsoft Excel.

**Community partner–centered measurements (surveys and interviews).** Occurring each semester, semistructured ethnographic interviews with community partners were designed to track the community partners' sense of reciprocity, along with their assessment of the effectiveness of the collaboration over time (*Bernard, 2002, p. 205*). Interview questions adapted from community impact surveys (*Miron & Moely, 2006*) asked partners to consider the time and space they were given to articulate their hopes and concerns, how consistent and open communication was, to what extent the work unfolding aligns with or deviates from their organization's mission, and the cost-benefit analysis of the partnership to date. Partners were also encouraged to provide recommen-

dations for ensuring reciprocal and equitable processes. Responses from the seven partners were then compared to one another and to previous research describing the challenges of university and community organization collaborations (*Basinger & Bartholomew, 2006*).

**Institution-centered measurements.** Assessment tools employed to measure institutional findings were designed to uncover and evaluate changes, identify barriers affecting such changes, and ascertain best practices for overcoming such barriers. Assessments included departmental surveys, semistructured interviews with faculty and administration, and ethnographic research. A pre-, mid-, and post-project survey was distributed to faculty members from the seven engaged departments. The surveys, adapted from Gelmon, Seifer, Kauper-Brown, and Mikkelsen (*2005*), included 28 questions across four dimensions: (1) definition and application of community engagement, (2) faculty support for and involvement in community engagement, (3) student support for and involvement in community engagement, and (4) community support for and involvement in institutional community engagement. Each respondent was asked to rate their department and their institution with a 1, 2, 3, 4, or unable to assess (indicating their perception of the level of community engagement within their department and at their institution). To gauge any potential institutional specific attitudes or concerns, the data was also analyzed by comparing survey results across the three institutions. Administered using a schedule specific to each stakeholder group, interviews were organized with questions targeting broad categories relevant to the research framework and conducted in an open-ended manner to solicit as much context surrounding individual answers as possible. Once complete, data from these semi-structured interviews underwent analysis using a qualitative, thematic analysis approach (*Ryan & Bernard, 2003*).

**Observation notes.** To determine and support the mutuality of planning efforts and level of reciprocity by community organizations and university departments over the course of the initiative, in-depth multisite ethnographic research was also conducted (*Creswell & Clark, 2007*). This involved collecting observational data in meetings between faculty, students, and community partners. Given that departmental interventions are likely to yield unforeseen or unintended consequences, these practices allowed us to record changes in real time, assess the complexities of inter- and intradepartmental relationships, and thus provide additional findings of value to this project and others. As a part of our systemic action research, findings were aggregated and shared with both the

leadership team and faculty in community of practice meetings each semester, yielding real-time feedback loops (*Burns, 2014a*) that led to adjustments in EDI team plans. These practices are countermeasures to current standards that focus on short-term, quantitative measures and yield little real value. According to Battistoni (*2014*), "one of the problems in the field . . . has been that important concepts and research do not find their way to practitioners and researchers" (*p. 62*). Our initial findings suggest that these research practices are a particularly promising shift in standard service-learning and community engagement research practices.

## Research Design Merits and Limitations

The leadership and research teams valued a range of measurements because of the commitment to systems change *and* the development of institutional structures necessary to support these changes. The varied backgrounds and experiences of the team members provided key opportunities to minimize potential bias. For example, all study materials were reviewed by the entire group before finalizing decisions to move forward in collection, analysis, and report writing. In addition, with extensive experience conducting research on community and engagement projects, one of the research team members brought in foundational literature at the beginning of the project.

Although the findings provide a framework for what could happen within an engaged department, they cannot be generalized to every department at each of the three universities, nor generalized to every university of similar size and type. The recommendations provided to the departments and community engagement leaders at each university are prescriptive in nature and attempt to address the complexity of the relationship between departments and community organizations. That is, due to the nature of systemic action research, the recommendations should not and cannot be generalized to all community partner and university partnerships.

After considerable difficulties meeting the disparate requirements for institutional review board (IRB) approval across the participating institutions, the IRBs from all three settings approved the research plan as covered human subjects research, concluding it meets requirements for exemption under Category 2, 45 CFR 46.101.

Although this project is only in its infancy, key findings have emerged from the initial analysis. In order for the reader to retrace the journey of the initiative over the course of its first year, find-

ings are detailed below in chronological order. We thus begin in spring 2015.

## Findings

Analysis of surveys, interviews, reports, and observation notes were completed and shared with EDI leadership in brief one-to-two page reports that summarized the most recent key findings. These findings were then compared to best practice recommendations within the field and, in collaboration with project leadership, possible next step recommendations for discussion were woven into reports. Reports were then used to frame discussion with EDI teams at community of practice meetings each semester.

## Spring 2015: Initial Training and High Hopes

Community partner empowerment was a goal of the initiative from its conception. This goal manifested through (1) a $500 community partner stipend for participation, (2) a community partner panel presented to all participating departments at the initial 2-day training institute, (3) pre- and mid-initiative community partner lunches with the leadership team, and (4) the dissemination of partner concerns and recommendations to participating faculty from interviews conducted each semester. Strategies for supporting community partners emerged from the leadership and research team's previous experience in volunteer and nonprofit management, their awareness of best practices for community engagement, and an awareness of the strong commitment this initiative would require of partners. These strategies also reflected the belief that partner agencies would be more invested if the EDI demonstrated meaningful validation of their time and respect for the value they bring to the conversation.

Community partner lunches with the leadership team were intended to (1) ensure a strong understanding of the EDI mission, (2) elicit partners' hopes and concerns for this initiative, and (3) encourage partners to operate as full members of their department teams. The collective insights emerging from these lunches were then leveraged through a strategic community partner panel at the initial training institute as well as through research team presentations to participating departments. In their narratives, community partners emphasized the most consistent problems with community-to-campus partnerships as well as a list of best practices for long-term success. They also collectively noted the importance of intentionality in design and a structured starting point, arguing for

the need to tier engagement opportunities, foster student readiness, and leverage student leadership. Partners additionally valued incentivizing and resourcing the work as a part of everyone's workload expectations and designing a meaningful and consistent feedback loop. The most prominent concerns revolved around a lack of student preparedness, structure, flexibility, follow-through, reciprocity, alignment of curricula with real-world needs, poor communication, and incompatible timelines. Partner concerns and recommendations persistently align with previous research findings (*Howe, Coleman, Hamshaw, & Westdijk, 2014; Kecskes, 2015*).

Given that community partners would ultimately be outnumbered by departmental faculty, gathering partners together and encouraging them to see themselves as equal participants in the design of their team initiative over the course of the project was important. As one possible strategy for community partner empowerment, such meetings can forestall and disrupt problematic practices between partners and faculty; they can propel shifts in traditional academic epistemological frameworks that privilege expert knowledge over community knowledge (*Barker, 2008; Giles & Eyler, 1994; Mitchell, 2008*). This is especially true when such practices are combined with systemic action research practices that ensure findings are reported back to participants as the initiative unfolds.

The initial faculty survey was adapted from Gelmon et al. (*2005*) and distributed at the 2-day training in May 2015. This survey included 28 items focusing on definitions of—and perceived institutional support for—community engagement, and it uncovered both opportunities and risks for participating departments. Although each department indicated that institutional community engagement is important, concerns about consistency of message, research opportunities, and the meeting of community goals were noted. Respondents generally felt that community engagement is a defined concept at their institution, but also felt the definition lacked consistency. In addition, respondents noted that opportunities to foster relationships with community partners were lacking and that community partner voices were not heard on campus. With these results in mind, we speculated that CE was likely to be partially stymied by unclear and inconsistent messaging across institutions and departments. Community of practice meetings provided an avenue for reminding participating teams to generate touch points with community partners.

An additional common response from the faculty survey was a general feeling of low institutional support. Specifically, respondents at institutions with a stronger research commitment indicated

that CE is not valued highly by their department and/or institution, whereas community college respondents perceived their institution to more broadly define and support CE. In general, faculty across all three institutions felt there was little recognition or motivating incentive for CE. These findings align with research verifying that CE is frequently the least incentivized component of faculty workload expectations (*Crookes et al., 2015*). They also highlight an opportunity for academic institutions with a research requirement to consider how their institutional incentive structures could better inspire and motivate community engagement. Survey findings also impacted the initiative itself: Upon reviewing the results, the leadership team adjusted their own practices, increasing their outreach efforts on their respective campuses, creating award processes that are linked to resources, and developing mechanisms designed to harness community partner voice within the university.

## Summer 2015: Hard Work and Lagging Communication

The seven team plans were finalized prior to the fall semester and included an overview of each team's strategy, goals, plans for achieving their goals, and a budget describing how they would use the $5,000 grant. An analysis of these plans indicated that each department intended to institutionalize engagement at the departmental level. All teams also noted a commitment to better scaffolding their curriculum; developing mutually beneficial, long-term partnerships; and moving students from initial CE activities (i.e., guest lectures and tours) to more advanced engagement (internships, practicums, and projects with leadership components). Every plan articulated desires to foster student awareness of community issues and responsibility toward social issues. Some divergence between plans was also noted. Specifically, smaller departments (those with five or fewer faculty) felt they most needed more time and money, whereas bigger departments were more concerned about coordination and results. In addition, smaller departments were more focused on and interested in building partnerships and maintaining relationships with the community; bigger departments were more focused on revising curriculum and integrating CE into courses.

Given the siloed nature of each plan, opportunities for place-based, interdisciplinary, and cross-institutional partnerships have been unrealized and are unlikely to emerge from this initiative. The insular framing of the team plans aligns with previous EDI research findings and the history and culture of academia more broadly.

According to Kecskes (*2015*), faculty focus on "'my courses,' 'my scholarly agenda,' 'my students,' even 'my community partner(s)'" (*p. 58*). On the other hand, evidence from this initiative suggests the intensive departmental work expanded this notion of "my work" from the individual faculty member to participating faculty members within the department. That is, although the EDI did not directly engage with other university structures on these campuses, its concentrated efforts at the departmental level led to clear measures of success across all participating departments within a short period of time (one academic year).

Initial community partner interviews, conducted in July and August 2015, examined the mutuality of planning efforts and asked partners to discuss the alignment between the team plan and the organization's mission as well as the costs and benefits of the partnership to date. Analysis of these seven interviews yielded three key insights. First, partners consistently articulated an initial skepticism of the initiative, noting that the $500 stipend for partner organizations was critical for mitigating concerns about the viability of the initiative and justifying the upfront time investment. Second, partners consistently articulated concerns about fragmented communication and a failure to follow through on team planning over the summer months. On the other hand, all partners said that their perspectives were considered and that the planning process was genuinely reciprocal. All partners also remained hopeful that the plans would unfold in mutually beneficial ways. Recommendations based on these interview findings were made to departments through research team attendance at project meetings. All interventions were to shift or align the work of the departments to the needs of the community organizations.

## Fall 2015: Interinstitutional Barriers and Relationship Building

Initial leadership interviews were conducted in September 2015. Leadership team members were asked about the biggest challenges they faced in their efforts to date, how those challenges had been addressed, and what had gone better than expected. Leaders were also asked what they felt was most innovative about the initiative and how initial findings shaped their subsequent efforts.

These interviews yielded several interesting findings. Aligning with research on engaged initiatives, they indicated that key personnel—including department chairs, faculty leaders/mentors, and top-level administrators—tend to play critical roles in trans-

forming institutional policies and culture (*Vogelgesang & Misa, 2002*). Across the board, the leadership team noted the importance of key personnel in maintaining a shared vision, accountability, and momentum. The loss of core contributors throughout the vision, drafting, and initial EDI processes on almost every participating team—including the loss of one key member of the leadership team—created additional challenges, leading to a lack of continuity, shifting competencies, and varying commitments.

These interviews also revealed that issues emerged from both intra- and interinstitutional barriers, including challenges stemming from the individual autonomy of departments. The leadership team—given that it was composed of midlevel administrators operating outside faculty governance (especially after the loss of a dean of curriculum)—had little experience with or power over ensuring curriculum redesign. The leadership team also identified a variety of noteworthy interinstitutional barriers, such as challenges to collaboration posed by differences in the scope and mission of the different institutions (e.g., 2-year versus 4-year institutions, public versus private, different community partners and foci) and physical distance. Just as being located in different buildings across campus makes cross-departmental collaboration challenging, being housed in different institutions across the city has made interinstitutional interaction arduous. Vastly differing procedures have also caused temporary roadblocks. For example, IRB procedures on each campus are quite particular, with divergent expectations complicating the approval process. In addition, different curriculum development expectations, community partnership practices, compensation procedures, and research expectations were also noted as particularly challenging.

The initial student survey provided baseline data and insights about the local student population from which future comparisons could be made. The survey demonstrated that students from across the institutions felt that there were few community-based learning opportunities available to them, that they had little leisure time to engage in community issues, but that they felt such engagement was valuable. In addition, the design and dissemination of the survey fostered opportunities for action research. It elicited concerns about value-laden survey items from one of the engaged departments in the first community of practice meeting, sparking opportunities to talk about the framework under which the initiative is operating. It also led the research team to collect, review, and share literature on CE practices with the department. After reviewing this literature, coming to their own definition of CE, and

situating CE within the larger framework, this team felt more at ease about the student survey. Opportunities for such interventions illustrate how systemic action research can transform and expand ingrained and often unconscious disciplinary frameworks.

## Winter 2016: Initial Dream Versus Current Realities

Community partner follow-up interviews were conducted in January and February 2016 to document community partner perspectives midway through the 18-month initiative. These second-round interviews asked partners to describe (1) the overall partnership, (2) the first-semester interactions and CE activities, (3) how their initial vision either remained consistent or underwent change, as well as (4) how and to what extent the partnership was unfolding in a mutually beneficial way; partners were also asked to (5) articulate a cost-benefit analysis of the partnership thus far, (6) consider how motivation and enthusiasm had waxed, waned, or remained constant, and (7) provide any other emerging insights or recommendations.

After analyzing the seven community partner interviews, we learned that project costs for partners—measured by time, money, and resources—were generally perceived as low. In addition, we found that first-semester interactions between participating departments and their community partners mostly occurred through e-mail and that service-learning activities largely involved in-class guest lectures and volunteer requirements for students. Five of the seven community partners described the partnership as mutually beneficial. Midway through the 18-month initiative, community partners also suggested creating an infrastructure to support volunteer practices, meeting face-to-face with participating departmental faculty and staff (getting everyone on the same page), incentivizing the project for all members in the department, and pushing for more intracollaboration by bringing more departments to the table.

Community of practice meetings occurred once each semester, bringing together participants from all participating teams with the EDI leadership and research teams in a space where transdisciplinary and cross-institutional collaboration could emerge. As boundary-spanning spaces, community of practice meetings have also become key places for enacting participatory action practices. For example, a "Sustain the Partnership" handout was developed and provided to participating teams after community partner

interviews uncovered issues with a lack of consistent engagement between faculty and partners. These meetings harnessed action research processes; for instance, they often began with a bridge-building activity encouraging interaction between teams, asking participants to consider what is going well and what their concerns are at this point. An update on emerging findings was then given by members of the research team. In the second-semester meeting all teams completed a benchmark review of their engagement efforts, and two teams shared their action efforts thus far, highlighting what had and had not worked for them and answering questions from other teams. These practices increase the possibility for both the leadership and the participating EDI teams to understand the work each is doing, wrestle with any roadblocks, and adjust their practices in real time.

This community of practice meeting also yielded an important snapshot of current progress across the seven teams. Each team was asked to complete a benchmark review, an analysis of which generated several interesting findings. For example, efforts to design scaffolded curriculum have largely consumed the time of the teams at the two 4-year institutions, but the community college teams failed to make progress toward this goal. Absent the intensive curricular revisions, community college faculty spent far more time creating and enacting community-based partnership projects. Separately, an analysis of the benchmark reviews found that the EDI has not been made a departmental agenda item for most departments. We speculate that departmental EDI updates could be a critical component of the process; by keeping the initiative on faculty minds, such updates could encourage accountability, help to maintain momentum, and thus further contribute to cultural change.

Leadership team follow-up interviews were conducted in February and March 2016. This time around, the leadership team was asked (1) how they would define the initiative, (2) what they have learned, (3) how their expectations have changed, (4) what they thought were the biggest challenges and how they have dealt with them, (5) how this has affected their institutions and what they hope to do in the future, and finally (6) what advice they would like to give. Key themes from this round of interviews focused on a number of hard lessons learned: (1) the gap between idealistic hopes for change and the reality of shifting departmental practices and culture, (2) an initial unrealistic time frame for fostering change, (3) the challenges caused by the distance and differences between the three institutions, (4) the debilitating consequences of losing key personnel on both the leadership and participating EDI

teams, and (5) difficulties in tracking what was happening within the seven teams and their departments.

Despite the challenges, interest in this initiative has spread across both Western Michigan and the state more broadly; other institutions are exploring this initiative as they consider how to engage their own faculty in CE best practices. In addition, leaders from all three institutions noted that they plan to harness the lessons learned to leverage engagement across their respective institutions. Although some recommendations could not be made within the confines of this initiative, they have yielded changes for other initiatives. For instance, the need for more intentional curricular scaffolding prior to community partner commitments was a noted finding harnessed in a second-round initiative on one of the campuses.

Leaders also consistently recommended that initiatives carefully scaffold the workload, creating consistent, iterative feedback loops in order to foster accountability and maintain momentum. To do so, they recommended at least doubling the time frame for the initiative (from 18 months to 3 or 5 years). At this point, explicit support from top leadership at each institution was also highlighted as an essential dimension of effective change.

## How Does the EDI Measure Up to Its Own Goals? A Review

By comparing these initial research findings with the overarching goals of the initiative and recommendations from the literature, more and less effective practices can be identified. With a commitment to extend the reach of initial lessons learned, we next enumerate the initiative's goals and briefly document how the initiative met (or did not meet) each goal. This comparison analysis was valuable to the EDI as it unfolded and is also instrumental to support efforts by MiCC as they consider how they might expand the program model statewide.

**Goal 1: Increasing faculty knowledge and skills.** An anonymous survey given to EDI participants immediately following the 2-day training strongly affirmed its merit on a variety of fronts. On a 1–5 scale (poor to excellent), participants rated the usefulness of the resources provided as very good (3.96) and the facilitation as excellent (4.27). Enthusiasm for the initiative went up after the event (from 3.64 to 4.56). These findings further affirm the merit and effects of such trainings, which have been shown to increase faculty knowledge and implementation of service-ori-

ented teaching strategies *(Jameson, Jaeger, Clayton, & Bringle, 2012)*. However, the extent to which high-impact engaged teaching practices have been *successfully* integrated into the curriculum is limited. The implementation of an intensive 2-day training for faculty at the beginning of the 18-month initiative has left faculty largely to their own devices and reduced opportunities for iterative feedback loops. Increasing the quantity and consistency of trainings and decreasing the duration of individual sessions could further support faculty development and enable flexibly responding to faculty concerns as they emerge.

**Goal 2: Foster inter- and intracollaboration.** The post-training survey indicated that EDI participants were quite confident that strong collaborations would emerge, and community partners consistently indicated they desired cross-departmental partnerships; however, little collaboration has materialized. Initial results do show that intracollaboration has occurred on three of the seven participating teams. For example, the two community college EDI teams collaborated to offer an interdepartmental faculty training designed to prepare their faculty for implementing CBL changes. In addition, another EDI team from biology partnered with its institution's chemistry department in order to engage local high school students in nature-based science research. In general, however, heavy barriers to collaboration were apparent, tending to emerge from a lack of time, space, and incentive as well the challenges of interdepartmental collaboration (especially true for large departments with a wide range of disciplinary expertise).

**Goal 3: Expand students' community-based opportunities and enhance partnerships.** Respondents said they were confident that their department would meet both student- and community-focused goals by the end of the pilot. Initial plans indicated that teams intended to do this work through training and actively mentoring students, meeting with the community partners to align curriculum, providing internship opportunities, and hosting events. Although respondents also said they were confident that their plan would positively impact the departments' other partnerships, little in the team plans indicates this goal is being explicitly pursued. A review of team final reports demonstrates that participating departments were successful in expanding opportunities for students to engage in community-based learning, but far less successful in enhancing and sustaining community partnerships.

**Goal 4: Shift departmental and campus culture.** Final reports, faculty interviews and surveys, and observational notes consistently demonstrate that departmental culture was impacted

to some extent by the initiative on all participating teams. For instance, one EDI team has gained unanimous support for their curricular revision plans from their department. On the other hand, some initial areas of resistance have also emerged. A review of the findings showed that preexisting disciplinary frameworks and departmental structures affected the way departments are proceeding. For example, in place of transforming their CE practices, some teams have simply increased the quantity of activity already in place. Resistance has also emerged when CE recommendations do not align with the disciplinary framework.

In addition, the nature of this work and the buzz around it has had at least some impact on all three campuses. For example, several participating departments have been upheld as a model for other departments within individual colleges. EDI impact across the campuses varied, correlating with the level of leadership support, resources, and the addition of other community-based initiatives and support structures.

## Conclusions and Implications

The EDI sought to effect change by operating within the current frameworks of the respective institutions. Given both that traditional educational frameworks generally stymie collaborative engagement efforts and that the institutions involved have vastly different structures and cultures, it is not surprising that cross-institutional, place-based engagement did not emerge; a more radical form of engagement might call on academics to not simply question their methods, but also to engage in "cultural and philosophical" critique and to "rethink . . . the functions and institutions of knowledge" (*Frodeman, 2013, p. 70*). A metareview of the situation yields two clear findings: (1) structural and cultural *difference* and (2) physical, temporal, and epistemological *distance* between the institutions and the participating departments prevented genuinely collaborative efforts. These two insights are detailed below.

### Difference in Mission and Vision

The lack of a singular and collective vision halted the potential for in-depth, place-based, and cross-institutional engagement, and with no singular focus, no coherent mission beyond scaffolding engagement within the departments, separate and largely isolated projects emerged. In addition, a loss of key team members hampered efforts to develop and maintain a singular vision. The initiative began with widely disparate projects: partnerships with local

high schools, refugees, the local environmental action council, and work on food insecurity. Others studying similar initiatives have noted how vastly different missions frustrate attempts to collaborate. According to Howe et al. (*2010*), some of the emergent challenges highlighted thus far may be alleviated by creating shared ownership of the project (get everyone involved), building in staff support, connecting the EDI mission to the department and institutional mission, continuing to disseminate initiative efforts as a teaching and research goal, considering further incentives, codeveloping and reinforcing a common definition of community and community engagement, ensuring use of all available resources, and reinforcing the necessity of curriculum scaffolding. If the goal is systemic, place-based engagement, then focusing on one singular issue and bringing together the appropriate faculty suited to take on this project is a necessary approach (*Kecskes, 2015*).

Efforts to collaborate were stymied by a host of cultural and structural differences between the institutions. For example, intentional curricular scaffolding does not easily fit within a 2-year community college setting. In contrast, the private Catholic institution's vision of service most strongly aligns with its efforts to sustain and enhance its pipeline from the local Catholic high schools; with significantly larger departments and more students, the large public university focused heavily on scaffolding its curriculum and gaining departmental buy-in. As noted, structural differences from different policies and procedures within each institution also hampered collaborative efforts.

## Physical, Temporal, and Epistemological Distance

Institutional towering and disciplinary siloes hamper efforts to collaborate. For instance, although the physical distance between campuses is minimal (a 10- to 15-minute walk), faculty often find it hard to take the stairs to the next floor or to cross the sidewalk to the building next door on their *own* campus. In addition, gaps between meetings—such as between the initial training and community of practice meetings—decreased momentum, minimized opportunities to connect, and provided few opportunities for reinforcement and accountability. Furthermore, opportunities to bridge the epistemological distance between the departments and institutions were often forgone because of a lack of interaction.

## Recommendations

**Iterative and inclusive visioning (expanding who and what counts).** When initiatives begin by taking stock of what is already happening, interested faculty can visualize how their work may align with place-based needs and opportunities (*Kecskes, 2015*). Howe et al. (*2010*) recommend that everyone involved in an engagement initiative take the time to define what CE is for them, what their goals will be, and how to integrate these goals into the curriculum. Efforts to empower community partner voice throughout this initiative encouraged accountability toward partner concerns. These findings lead us to conclude that initiatives like the EDI should do more to explicitly include all stakeholder voices in the early-stage planning process. Students completing their program of study, for example, deeply understand the curriculum. In addition, the organization's desires are not always representative of the organizational users' goals. Engaging both students and community members is essential to systemic engagement aimed to transform institutions. According to systemic engagement practitioners, such efforts must draw more explicitly "on both local and indigenous knowledge as well as generalized university-based knowledge to understand problems and to generate strategies for managing them more effectively" (*McNall, Barnes-Najor, Brown, Doberneck, & Fitzgerald, 2015, p. 4*).

**Close the distance between.** Building in interactive feedback loops; offering short training sessions with outputs and revisions; and creating a shared space for meetings that brings together instructors, students, and the community would help integrate CE more effectively. For instance, the creation of boundary-spanning meeting places—spaces for faculty, students, community partners, and community members to consistently come together—would foster opportunities to engage across differences on local issues. Efforts aimed at resourcing such practices should consider how to design them in such a way that they are not an additional burden on already cumbersome workload plans. Initiative leaders must consider both what other obligations might be minimized or removed and how to reframe current practices so such new procedures can be integrated into current structures. Systemic action research and community of practice meetings are particularly effective means for fostering such inclusive, real-time transformation.

## Areas for Future Research

Initial findings have yielded a number of avenues for future research, including explicating vastly divergent outcomes across the three institutions, as well as a range of findings on departmental and disciplinary differences. In addition, efforts toward tracking the long-term outcomes of the initiative are likely to yield additional findings about the potential merits and drawbacks of short-term, intensive EDI work. Additional analysis focused on identifying the most effective mechanisms for catalyzing departmental and institutional change is under way. This includes efforts to study the impact of institutional structures, process, and cultures on the outcomes across the participating institutions. In general, more research is needed on the influence of disciplinary framing, the tangible and intangible landscape of departments (size, budget, processes, mission), and the role of external resourcing and recognition in effecting cultural and systemic change.

## Final Thoughts: From an Engaged Department Initiative to an Engaged Mission?

In large measure, the EDI's cross-institutional place-based advantage was unrealized. The focus on departmental—and thus disciplinary—collaboration is a narrow-framing from which to advance systemic place-based change. Given that many of our public problems are intractable, systemic, interconnected messes, they cannot be successfully bound by a single institution or department. For examples of such problems we can turn to the community partnerships involved in this very initiative: refugee resettlement, food insecurity, environmental action, and educational reform. Expecting disciplinary departments—as they are currently structured— to address social, political, environmental, and economic messes like those described above is most likely a mistake. Cross-institutional, place-based initiatives must be created around an issue. The context for such initiatives should emerge from the situation and the community itself (*Whipps, 2014*). Mission- and place-based engagement could, for instance, focus on wellness care, housing and homelessness, or education and empowerment. Such initiatives would allow faculty to engage the public with a purpose, more consistently connect with one another across their divergent areas of expertise, and collaboratively design more flexibly responsive curriculum. Indeed, a mission-focused initiative could serve as the backbone needed for transdisciplinary and cross-institutional collaboration.

The lingering question, then, is whether a focus on shifting engagement efforts with and through disciplinary departments is a *mistake* or a *starting point*? To the extent that the EDI shifts the momentum behind theory-driven, classroom-bound practices and habits toward community-engaged, experiential learning, it can easily be read as a step in the right direction. And to the extent that the differences and the distance between faculty within the same department are often less vast than across departments and institutions, departmental collaboration can be read as an effective point of entry for shifting "my" work to "our" work. We conclude that in just 18 months the EDI contributed to "un-stalling the community engagement movement" at all three institutions (*Kecskes, 2015, p. 56*). It appears to be moving faculty from the isolated, expert-driven model of engagement toward a recognition of the need for collaborative ownership of engagement projects across the department. As one initiative among others, it opened (limited) space for reconsidering the paradigms under which higher education functions. On this front, the systemic and participatory research practices and the boundary-spanning community of practice spaces were invaluable components of the EDI, fostering opportunities for the expansion of narrow disciplinary frameworks as well as flexible and quick responses to emergent roadblocks. In general, efforts to shift the dominant status quo through a variety of intervention strategies should be valued. Initiatives can, for instance, focus on replacing one or more variables within the current situation (e.g., by providing funds); they can seek to dampen the effects of current practices (by empowering community partners); they can also limit the factors that contribute to the current feedback loops or add negative feedback into the system (as systemic action research does). Such measures have yielded genuine community improvements, offered valuable lessons that can be harnessed in future endeavors, and contributed to tipping points aimed at more systemic and sustainable place-based change.

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## Methodological Addendum

This study relied upon systemic action research practices as well as a series of qualitative and quantitative measurements that aligned with the breadth of our expertise as a multi-disciplinary research team, expanded the current research on engaged departments, and illuminated a complex systems view of the project as it unfolded. This multi-method approach employed a systemic action research approach and acknowledged that collaborative projects like this one involve stakeholders who come to the table with different needs, concerns, and perspectives. This approach was chosen because of its focus on not simply studying, but also collaboratively responding to the challenges of shifting university structures, processes, and cultures. As a counterpoint to traditional research practices, it is also emergent and messy, requiring researchers critically examine their own and others positionality, share power, and shift relevant structures.

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© *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, Volume 21, Number 3, p. 165, (2017)
 eISSN 2164-8212

# *A Decade of Community Engagement Literature: Exploring Past Trends and Future Implications*

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## Abstract

Academic journals play a lead role in disseminating community–campus engagement scholarship. However, assessment of the content, methodologies, and authorship of this published body of works is lacking. This study was performed to review publication trends in the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement (JHEOE)*, an academic journal focused on community engagement and outreach, during a 10-year time span. A content analysis framework was used to incorporate descriptive and correlational analyses. Two findings were of particular note. One was the increased prominence of articles on service-learning in the most recent years examined. Another was the absence of articles treating finance, strategic planning, community voice, and faculty promotion and tenure. Because these topics have significance for institutionalizing community engagement in higher education, this trend suggests an opportunity to broaden the topics published in the *Journal* and the field.

*Keywords:* community engagement, academic journals, publication trends

## Introduction

In 2016, the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement (JHEOE)* celebrated its 20th anniversary, making it the longest published academic journal focused on community engagement and outreach. In the early days of the *Journal* (then titled the *Journal of Public Service and Outreach*), S. Eugene Younts (*2000*), the founding editor, discussed the growing global interest surrounding higher education's role in "looking for answers to contemporary problems" (*p. 3*). The first issue published Ernest Boyer's (*1996*) often-cited article, "The Scholarship of Engagement," which acted as a rallying call for higher education to take a more proactive role in addressing the public's concern for more relevancy in responding to a changing society. Boyer (*1996*) also called attention to the lack of a forum for interdisciplinary scholarly research that focused on public service. Further, in this same issue, James C. Votruba (*1996*), a community engagement champion, supported the need for a new type of academic journal that espoused inter-

disciplinary problem solving. He warned that if higher education did not adapt to a rapidly changing learner-driven market fueled by technological advances, it risked losing public support by not demonstrating any additional value. Therefore, it was the responsibility of higher education institutions to change their practices to more effectively address these concerns. Thus, the *Journal* was initiated to serve as a purveyor of engaged scholarship by publishing content demonstrating the breadth and effectiveness of this community-engaged activity. The goal was to publish diverse articles "that would promote excellence in academic outreach" (*Younts, 1996, p. 3*). The *Journal's* mission to "advance theory and practice related to all forms of outreach and engagement between higher education institutions and communities" continues today (*JHEOE, n.d., para. 1*).

Have this goal and mission been achieved? If the *JHEOE*'s mission was to contribute significantly in sharing and advancing knowledge, then what type of knowledge has been published? In recognition of its 20th anniversary year, the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* published 11 past articles that were selected through a Delphi survey seeking articles that reflected the "evolution of the field of outreach and community engagement and maturation of the "scholarship of engagement"" (*Sandmann, Furco, & Adams, 2016, p. 1*). These articles, however, represent a small fraction of the material that has appeared in the *Journal*. What could be learned from the numerous *JHEOE* articles not so recognized? We wondered specifically about the trends of the recent *JHEOE* publications; for example, what were their content, methodology, authorship, and other characteristics over a recent 10-year span? Using a content analysis framework to incorporate descriptive and correlational analyses, this technical report identified the trends found in a review of such publications. Our objectives were (a) to develop a better understanding of the types of community-engaged scholarship that were being published and to identify differences occurring over time, (b) to inform community engagement scholars regarding underrepresented areas needing research, and (c) to encourage editors and their boards to conduct their own trend analyses of submissions and published articles to reveal the result of editorial decisions and for improvement in community-engaged research. Since minimal research existed in this area, the goal of this work was to gain insight from one community engagement journal to be used as a possible framework for trend analysis in a meta-analysis involving other academic journals focused on community-engaged scholarship (CES).

## Community Engagement Journals

Community engagement journals provide a niche to serve the community of scholars and individuals beyond the academy, two groups committed to advancing the field and contributing to the movement for change. Sandmann (*2012*) identified 38 global publication sources that focused specifically on some form of community engagement and recognized CES as legitimate academic work. Further, Loyola University Chicago (*n.d.*) identified 67 "journals publishing community-engaged scholarship" in their publication *Engaged Learning: Finding Publishing Opportunities.*

Concentrating the research within a niche journal provides multiple benefits: (1) It makes the scholarship easier to access, (2) it creates opportunities for further dialogue, and (3) it advances the knowledge needed to continue creating community-engaged scholarship (*Jordan, 2010*). Further, because community engagement is not yet institutionalized within most higher education institutions, identifying and recognizing CES is vital to retaining the momentum for further institutionalization. This momentum becomes even more important in the face of devaluation by those who perceive CES as less rigorous than traditionally generated research (*Sobrero & Jayaratne, 2014*). Peer-reviewed academic journals in this field contribute to the promotion of CES as high quality, credible, and relevant. Their adherence to rigorous empirical standards marks CES research as scholarship, positioning the field for increased academic stature.

Despite their peer-reviewed standing, however, the collective content of these journals remains unstudied. For example, what are the publications of choice for those researchers focused on the community engagement field? What is actually published in these community engagement journals? Little is known about publishing trends relating to the types of research, methodology, topics, and other characteristics. How has the research changed, if at all, from earlier to more recent work? What could be learned on a cumulative basis about community engagement research in the past 10 years? To begin to answer these questions, this article reports on the analysis of the content, authorship, and methodologies used in articles published in the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* in the last 10 years (as of 2015).

## Methodology

The goal of this investigation was to determine *what*, *how*, *where*, and *by whom* of articles *JHEOE* published. The time period

under review was the 10 years 2005–2014. Of special note, although this is a 10-year time period, nine years of data were collected. The year 2006 was a non-publishing year for the *JHEOE*. This decade provided sufficient relevant data to conduct a recent trend analysis. A three-stage process was employed for this exploratory study: (1) creating a data collection frame, (2) collecting the data, and (3) analyzing the data. As a delimiting point, this study was a trend analysis of *published* articles within a 10-year period. A decision was made not to include all submissions; therefore, the study's parameters did not include submissions that had been desk- or peer-reviewed rejections nor revisions. Study of those works relative to those published could be another study.

Publications determined to be *research articles* (RA) were "quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method studies that demonstrate the long-term impact of a university–community engagement project on the community, students, faculty and staff, or the institution" *("Research articles," n.d., "Submission guidelines," para. 1)*. They adhered to a format customary in research studies, characterized by sections such as a literature review, methodology, findings, conclusions, discussion, and implications

## Stage 1—Creating a Data Collection Frame

The analysis undertaken was similar to that of a literature review study (*Callahan, 2014*). To create a data collection framework, seven categories were selected: (1) type of scholarly publication, (2) subject, (3) methodological approach, (4) research method, (5) region of origin, (6) position of primary author, and (7) Carnegie Foundation community engagement classification of primary author's institution. Because *JHEOE* puts an emphasis on empirically-driven research articles, this study most thoroughly analyzed those articles. However, *JHEOE* also publishes other types of scholarly, evidence-based work: reflective essays, practice stories from the field, projects with promise, book reviews, and dissertation overviews. Data on all publication types were used solely for analysis of trends on number of publications across the decade under review.

Before collecting data, we recorded whether the primary author's institution was currently (2015) Carnegie classified for community engagement. Since the community engagement movement has the broader goal of institutionalization within higher education institutions, we wished to ascertain whether any relationship existed between publication of CES research articles

and institutions having this designation. Additionally, we needed a way to organize the data not only for this study but also for potential future studies. Therefore, we used the uniform Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching Elective Community Engagement Classification's categories and topics from their application (*NERCHE, 2017*). Thus, the primary author's institution may not have been a designee at the time of publication; however, if the institution had this designation in the 2015 list, we classified it accordingly.

Table 1 summarizes the categories with definitions or clarifications added as appropriate.

**Table 1. Data Collection Categories**

| | |
|---|---|
| Type of scholarly publication by *JHEOE* submission categories and characteristics:<br>(1) Research article<br>(2) Reflective essay<br>(3) Practice story from the field<br>(4) Project with promise<br>(5) Book review<br>(6) Dissertation overview | |
| Subject category (from Carnegie Elective Community Engagement application) | |
| (1) Curricular engagement | Process of identifying service-learning courses, their integration into curricular activities, learning outcomes, and the faculty's scholarship. |
| (2) Foundational indicators | Institutional commitment specific to identity and culture, promotion and marketing, awards and celebrations, leadership involvement, and the use of systematic assessment mechanisms to measure progress. |
| (3) Institutional commitment (largest section of application) | Infrastructure, financial evidence, the use of systematic assessment mechanisms to measure impact on the institution, community, students, and faculty.<br>Strategic planning and the role of community, search/recruitment of faculty and their professional development.<br>CES activities regarding promotion and tenure. |
| (4) Outreach and partnership | Community use activities (outreach) and collaborative interactions and partnerships with institutions.<br>Systematic mechanisms to collect and share data and faculty scholarship. |

| | |
|---|---|
| Methodological approach | |
| (1) | Qualitative |
| (2) | Quantitative |
| (3) | Mixed methodologies |
| Research method (case study, survey, grounded theory, etc.) | |
| Region of origin | |
| (1) | Northeast: New England, Mid-Atlantic |
| (2) | Midwest: East north central, West north central |
| (3) | South: South Atlantic, East south central, West south central |
| (4) | West: Mountain, Pacific |
| Position of primary author: Primary author's current job or position | |
| (1) | Faculty: assistant professor, associate professor, professor, lecturer |
| (2) | Administrator: advisor in university, program officer, deputy director |
| (3) | Community: founders, owners, or CEO |
| (4) | Department head: chair, dean |
| (5) | Executive leadership: president, vice president, provost, chancellor |
| (6) | Individuals in community engagement: director of research centers or programs in universities, coordinator, agent, specialist |
| (7) | Researcher: researchers in universities or research-related institutions |
| (8) | Student: doctoral students, doctoral candidates, graduate assistant, undergraduate students |
| Carnegie Community Engagement Classification | |

The four main subject categories were established to divide the articles into an appropriate topical area. In reviewing the specific questions within these subject categories, general topics were established, as summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2. Topics**

| Indicator | Topic | Definition |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Assessment, processes, and measurements | Any type of research to provide a tool for assessing and measuring |
| 2 | Mission, awards, leadership, and advancement | The broad picture of scholarship of engagement. Perspectives from exemplars, the role of higher education |
| 3 | Finance—budget and funding | |
| 4 | Strategic planning | |
| 5 | Community voice | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 6 | Faculty—promtion and tenure | Includes professional development support, perceptions, motivations related to P&T |
| 7 | Faculty—scholarship | Research related to faculty involvement in community engagement scholarship or other types of scholarly acts |
| 8 | Professional development | Faculty and others, perceptions, motivations |
| 9 | Service-learning experiences | |
| 10 | Service-learning curriculum | Articles relating to specific areas such as graduate education. Service-learning curriculum encompasses CES, civic engagement, public engagement, and democracy |
| 11 | Service-learning outcomes | |
| 12 | Outreach | Programs, institutional resources |
| 13 | Institution and community partnerships | Includes institution and/or dept. promotion of mutuality and reciprocity, stories in the field |

## Stage 2—Data Collection

Data were collected by reviewing the articles' titles and abstracts. If necessary, the body of the article was also reviewed. In most instances, this was performed to determine the methodological approach and the research method. Additionally, it was also used to verify the category and topic of the article when necessary.

To ensure the reliability of the results and the data collection process, two researchers independently conducted this classification process. After categorizing the articles, we compared the results. If there were differences in interpretation between the two researchers, the final categorization was resolved through a discussion between them. The remaining categories were accessed in the article and/or via the New England Resource Center for Higher Education's website *(http://www.nerche.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=341&Itemid=92)*.

## Stage 3—Data Analysis

To facilitate the data analysis, the data were imported into SPSS 18, a statistical analysis software package commonly used among social science researchers. Frequencies and cross-tabulations were run on a majority of the variables in the data. Examining the fre-

quency distributions of the data allowed for a comprehensive understanding of article trends during this 10-year period.

## Results

The findings resulted from the data collection and analysis. Additionally, key learnings emerged that will support understanding what worked and what did not for application in conducting future studies.

### What—Publication Types, Subject Categories, and Topics

**Publication type.** Comparing the publication year and the type of publication (research article, essay, etc.), there was no significant change observed in the balance of publication types produced between the earlier and later years of our study. Of the 328 publications we examined, research articles remained the most common publication type, at 24% ($n$ = 80) of the total. This was followed by book reviews (22%, $n$ = 71), reflective essays (21%, $n$ = 69), practice stories from the field (19%, $n$ = 61), projects with promise (12%, $n$ = 40), and dissertation overviews (2%, $n$ = 7). However, in the 2013 and 2014 publication years, the percentage of research articles, reflective essays, and book reviews increased compared to the other types.

**Subject categories.** Of the publications examined, more than 50% ($n$ = 205) addressed the subject categories *outreach and partnership* ($n$ = 117) and *curricular engagement* ($n$ = 88). The remaining publications fell in the categories *institutional commitment* (19%, $n$ = 63) and *foundational indicators* (18%, $n$ = 60). As Table 3 shows, the number of articles on curricular engagement increased in the years 2013 and 2014. Prior to these years (2005–2012), articles in the outreach and partnership category predominated.

**Table 3. Research Categories**

| Categories | Year | | | | | | | | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 2005 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | |
| Curricular engagement | 7 | 13 | 5 | 8 | 4 | 8 | 7 | 12 | 24 | 88 |
| Foundational indicators | 1 | 4 | 5 | 7 | 3 | 9 | 9 | 13 | 9 | 60 |
| Institutional commitment | 2 | 11 | 9 | 6 | 5 | 6 | 14 | 6 | 4 | 63 |
| Outreach and partnership | 10 | 18 | 15 | 10 | 13 | 13 | 12 | 9 | 17 | 117 |
| Total | 20 | 46 | 34 | 31 | 25 | 36 | 42 | 40 | 54 | 328 |

*Note*. 2006 was a non-publishing year.

**Topics.** Topics within these four research categories confirmed a similar trend. *Service-learning experiences*, s*ervice-learning curriculum*, and *service-learning outcomes* (22.9%, $n = 75$), taken collectively, were the most frequently studied topics. These articles' subject matter focused on higher education students and their experiences inside and outside their classroom environments (i.e., curricular and cocurricular experiences).

Additionally, although *institution and community partnerships* (20.4%, $n = 67$) was the topic with the second highest number of articles, this number trended downward during the 10 years examined. This trend reflected the diminishing number of publications in the broader research category *outreach and partnership*, which included articles that addressed one-way relationships between higher education institutions and community.

*Assessment, processes, and measurements* (15.9%, $n = 52$) was the third highest ranking topic. The largest number of articles in this topic were published in the most recent two years examined (2013 and 2014), supporting the finding that *curricular engagement* was the dominant category. Another recent trend was the increase in outcome-related articles; these constitute a subset of *assessment, processes, and measurements*, making up 60% of articles in the category. Even with some variation per year, there was consistency in annual number of articles in this subject area throughout the 10 years examined.

*Mission, awards, leadership, and advancement* (14.6%, $n = 48$) included perspectives and reflections regarding community engagement, its promotion, and its controversies. Many of the articles were not empirically-based studies but essays. The majority of articles in this topic (69%) were published in the years

2010 and 2011. The reason for this spike is unknown. Moreover, there were no publications fitting this description in the last two years of the study (2013 and 2014). The small number of articles in the remaining four topics (*finance—budget and funding, strategic planning, community voice, and faculty—promotion and tenure*) precluded any analysis of publication trends.

## How—Methodological Approach and Research Method

The majority of research articles used a qualitative research methodology (61%, $n = 48$). Although there was no trend identified within the 10 years examined, a noticeably higher number of quantitative studies were published in 2014 than in previous years ($n = 8$; 38% of the quantitative total number). Overall, the results indicated that aside from multiple methods (23%, $n = 18$), the most commonly used single methodologies were case study (24%, $n = 19$) and survey (20%, $n = 16$). It should be noted that we found classification of articles in the methodological approach category problematic. Arguably, case study was a methodology and interviews, focus groups, and historical study were methods for conducting a case study; however, we were reluctant to classify an article as a case study if the author(s) did not explicitly label it as such.

## Where and Who—Regions and Authors

As Table 4 illustrates, when using institutions and their geographic location as a unit of analysis, we found the Southern region produced more publications than others did. However, the Midwest was within 4.9 percentage points and the Northeast was within 7.3 percentage points of the South. The West provided the smallest number of publications.

**Table 4. Region of Publication**

| Regions | # | % |
|---|---|---|
| South | 96 | 33.0% |
| Midwest | 74 | 25.4% |
| Northeast | 81 | 27.8% |
| West | 40 | 13.7% |
| Total | 291 | 100% |

*Note*. Other countries were excluded due to the small number.

**Primary authors.** Classification of primary authors was derived from how the writers titled themselves and explained their position. Although the definition of *community engagement*, as well as *JHEOE*'s mission, broaden scholarship to include scholarly acts inside and outside the academy, faculty members claimed first authorship on most publications ($n$ = 189; 58% of the total generated from this group). In reviewing the coauthors, we found no material indications of community-affiliated researchers other than their participation in the projects or research conducted by a faculty individual.

**Community Engagement Classified institution.** We found that an overwhelming number of publications were generated by primary authors affiliated with institutions identified as a designee of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching Elective Community Engagement Classification. As noted previously, we looked only at institutions' classification status as of 2015.

## Discussion

*JHEOE*'s mission is to "advance theory and practice related to all forms of outreach and engagement between higher education institutions and communities" (*JHEOE, n.d., para. 1*). Our findings suggest that the articles published in the time span examined align with its mission. However, there is a need to implement a process to monitor the submissions and publications with the type of data collected and analyzed for this study. Then, we would have a consistent method to measure the *Journal's* progress towards achieving its mission.

## What—Publication Types and Topics

The types of articles accepted for publication have remained constant during the 10-year period of study. This may reflect editorial decisions on achieving a balance among articles in a given issue, the number of submissions and their acceptance rates, and publication of special issues highlighting specific themes. One noteworthy finding was that 2014 had the largest number of research articles in a given year ($n$ = 16). One of the authors of this article, as a managing editor for the *JHEOE*, was aware that this increase reflected an intentional strategy to emphasize empirically-based studies as the predominant focus of the *Journal*.

**Research categories and topics.** The dominance of service-learning as a topic was not unexpected. Although there have been advancements in researching community engagement, there were

noted limitations, one being the predominance of service-learning studies that were more student-centered and less focused on the two-way reciprocity inherent in the Carnegie definition of community engagement (*Furco & Holland, 2013*). What was surprising was the lack of a consistent flow of service-learning research published in the *JHEOE* before 2013 and 2014. Until then the dominant topics involved community partnership and foundational community engagement work. This suggested that in the earlier years of the *Journal*, there were more publications attempting to increase awareness of community engagement and exemplify how it worked in actual practice. As awareness and acceptance of community engagement became more widespread, research in other areas gained traction in the *Journal*.

**Absence of certain topics.** A key finding was the absence or minimal presence of topics relating to finance (budget and funding), strategic planning, community voice, and faculty promotion and tenure. In reviewing many of the self-assessment models, matrices, and tools designed to support higher education institutions and individuals working to institutionalize community engagement, we noted that all these topics were listed as important indicators in achieving this goal (*Beere, Votruba, & Wells, 2011; Bringle, Games, & Malloy, 1999; Furco, 2002; Gelmon, Seifer, Kauper-Brown, & Mikkelson, 2005; Holland, 1997, 2006; Kecskes, 2013; Wade & Demb, 2009*). Therefore, the absence of these topics was not only noteworthy but surfaced the question, was research on these topics in relationship to community engagement being published elsewhere? If so, these publications were not reflected in our study exploring one well-reputed community engagement journal.

## How—Methodological Approach and Research Method

The data collection and analysis on methodological approach and research method in the research articles presented difficulties. Methodology was identified as qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods based on the description of the study and the results; however, determining the type of methodology within these broad categories was problematic. One potential explanation is reflected in the discussions in the literature about the need for more rigor in community engagement research practices. For example, Furco and Holland (*2013*), in exploring the type of future research needed to advance institutionalization work for community engagement, suggested the following:

- Conduct larger scale, multi-institutional studies with larger samples.
- Strengthen data collection procedures.
- Focus studies on securing evidence-based data.
- Strengthen the theoretical base of inquiry.

We believe these recommendations would strengthen community engagement research beyond institutionalization studies.

Additionally, the significant increase in quantitative research in 2014 was noteworthy. Because there was not a trend to reference, this could indicate that a trend will emerge to balance the methodologies in prior research that emphasized a qualitative approach for community engagement research.

## Who and Where—Regions, States, and Authors

The Southern region and its number of publications were of particular interest. Although affiliated with the University of Georgia, a Southern-based university, the *JHEOE* employed (as it still does) a double-blind peer-review process. Therefore, the reviewers did not know the origin of manuscripts submitted. Additionally, the initial reviews to decide whether to proceed to a peer review were conducted by associate editors dispersed throughout the United States and Canada, except for one University of Georgia associate editor for essays in years 2013–2015. However, there was no associate editor from the Western region. It was unknown if this had any impact. Furthermore, without a review of submission activity during this decade to compare this result, we were unable to analyze this further.

Jaeger, Tuchmayer, and Morin's (*2014*) study, which explored dissertation publications, offers a potential explanation. In their study, contrary to our results, the West region produced the most dissertations (32.6%) within an 11-year time period (2001–2011). However, within this region, Portland State University dominated the result, with 27.1% of the total and 83.3% of dissertations originating in the West. The researchers suggested that Portland State University appeared to "be a standard bearer for the community engagement movement attracting doctoral students interested in engaged scholarship" *(Jaeger et al., 2014, p. 86)*. In examining our Western region result, a similar pattern emerged, with 62.5% of this region's total publications being generated not only from the state of Oregon, but from Portland State University specifically.

**Authorship.** *Who* was publishing needs further exploration. Sobrero and Jayaratne's (*2014*) study found that nontenured aca-

demics would most likely not achieve promotion or tenure if they were not published in what the decision makers considered a prestigious journal. In our study, the majority of the primary authors were tenured. Further research may provide support to Sobrero and Jayaratne's finding that nontenured academics would not choose to publish in a community engagement journal. Similarly, Jaeger et al.'s *(2014)* study on dissertations surfaced a need for future research on where new scholars ultimately submit and publish the community engagement articles that may be generated from their dissertations. If community engagement journals were perceived as having lower prestige, then where might these publications, if any, appear? Future research is needed to explore this broad topic of the *who* and *where* of publishing community engagement work.

## Conclusions

In reviewing publication trends in the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* (*JHEOE*), this study answered some preliminary questions but raised more. Using a quantitative research approach was necessary, but without the use of qualitative methods to collect data from the authors, peer reviewers, associate editors, and editors, our study was limited. We consider this study a step toward better understanding an important element of community engagement scholarship—publishing in academic journals. We hope this will form a foundation for further research exploring the amount and type of knowledge being promulgated through academic publications. Greater awareness in this area will give us more solid ground for work to advance community engagement as an interdisciplinary, complex field of study.

In the 10-year span that we examined, we found a number of trends: an increase in the number of articles on service-learning topics; more contributions from some geographical regions than from others; and a lack of attention to a number of topics, including finance, strategic planning, community voice, and faculty promotion and tenure. Do these trends indicate a lack of progress in these areas or a lack of appreciation for the importance of these topics? Another relevant line of inquiry might be ascertaining whether these topics are published in other types of academic journals. The community engagement field is evolving, and it will continue to do so as we use these questions and others to provide opportunities for further research. As an academic journal with a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary focus, the *JHEOE* is evolving as well, making these types of studies and periodic reviews an important practice for us to continue.

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## Methodological Addendum

Because the goal was to determine *who*, *what*, and *where* the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* was publishing over a ten year period of time, the chosen methodology described was a trend analysis achieved thorough a descriptive statistics approach using a statistical analysis software package. This method was appropriate as a necessary first step; however, the findings surfaced the need for future research and suggested the value of a mixed methods study to add *why* and *how* inquiries related to community engagement publishing.

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