

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

Danielle Lake, Gloria Mileva, Heather L. Carpenter, Dillon Carr, Paula Lancaster, Todd Yarbrough

### **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).



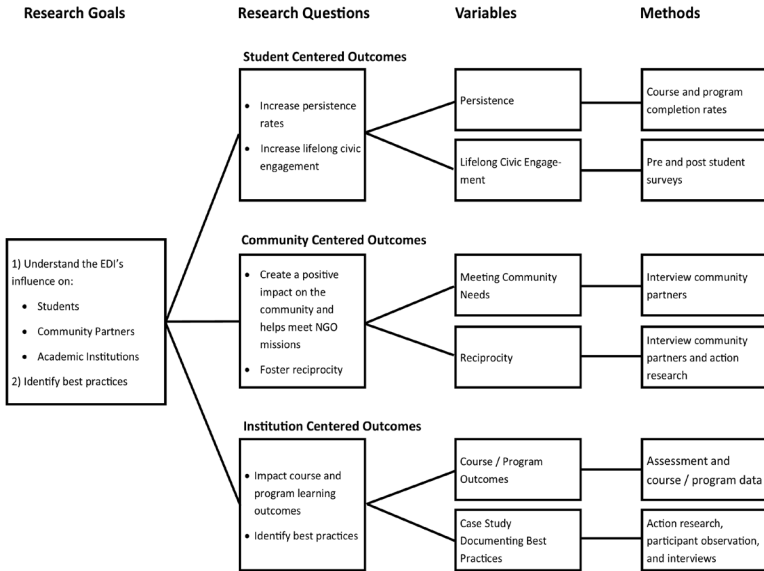


Figure 1. Research design

**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; Kecses, 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 & Eyles, 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.

## About the Authors

**Danielle Lake** is a faculty associate with the Division of Inclusion and Equity and an assistant professor of liberal studies at Grand Valley State University. Her interests as a public philosopher include wicked problems, feminist pragmatism, democratic engagement, and to span boundaries by engaging with, in, and through the public. Her Ph.D. is in philosophy from Michigan State University.



**Gloria Mileva** is an undergraduate research assistant majoring in biomedical sciences at Grand Valley State University. Her interests revolve around public health, health care, epidemiology in health care, international health, and community engagement. She will obtain her B.S. from Grand Valley State University.

**Heather L. Carpenter** is an assistant professor and program coordinator of the M.A. in nonprofit management in the Business Department at Notre Dame of Maryland University. Her research interests include talent management, experiential education, nonprofit management education, and nonprofit leadership. She earned her Ph.D. in leadership studies with a specialization in nonprofit/philanthropic leadership and management from the University of San Diego.

**Dillon Carr** is an assistant professor of anthropology at Grand Rapids Community College. His research interests are in the four-subfield approach common to North American anthropology, specializing in anthropological archaeology. He earned his Ph.D. in anthropology from Michigan State University.

**Paula Lancaster** is a professor and director of teacher education at Grand Valley State University. Her research interests lie within literacy, self-determination, and content-area instruction for adolescents and adults with learning disabilities and low achievement. She earned her Ph.D. in special education at the University of Kansas.

**Todd Yarbrough** is an assistant professor of economics at Aquinas College, where he is also the director of the school's Green Revolving Fund. His research interests focus around in state/local fiscal policy, environmental economics, sustainability, and applied econometrics. He earned his Ph.D. in economics from the University of Tennessee.