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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: (1) Research article (2) Reflective essay (3) Practice story from the field (4) Project with promise (5) Book review (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. Strategic planning and the role of community, search/recruitment of faculty and their professional development. CES activities regarding promotion and tenure.
(4) Outreach and partnership	Community use activities (outreach) and collaborative interactions and partnerships with institutions. 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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