

From the Guest Editor...

Expanding Notions of the Community Engagement Professional: Introduction to the Special Issue

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I first considered exploring the role of staff in supporting community engagement in higher education for my dissertation topic. Instead, mentors in the field of community engagement urged me to investigate questions of those who directly engaged one another and the outcomes of engagement. I ended up studying community–campus partnerships that exhibit qualities of democratic engagement. I don't regret it: Learning how democratic engagement (*Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009*) is expressed through the qualities and processes of partnership has deeply informed my work over these years; this area is foundational to the practice of community engagement in higher education. I now hold a leadership position in which supporting the University of Pittsburgh's place-based community engagement and its myriad partnerships is part of my responsibilities. These efforts are guided by the ethics of democratic engagement, mutual benefit, and the processes and qualities I observed in that initial research (*Dostilio, 2014*). However, the mechanisms of support that enable and influence high-quality community engagement, including the influence of support personnel, are still very compelling to me.

The people who support others involved in community engagement are fairly influential (*Dostilio, 2017b*), though typically not through positional authority but through relational leadership and practice. They have diverse touchpoints throughout the campus and in various communities. For example, many staff are in roles that facilitate faculty development, student civic development, community partnership development, and assessment. As they introduce people to campus–community engagement and resource them, they guide the practice of those stakeholders in ways that advance whatever ethics of community engagement are valued by the support person. Because their positions are typically housed in a central location within the organization (outside any one school), they often have a systemic vantage point that positions them to maximize opportunities to advance engagement across the institution. They are also typically members of community engagement associations and networks and read community engagement jour-

nals, thereby staying abreast of leading-edge practices and bringing them back to their local environments. In short, they shape community-campus engagement in ways that few others might within an institution of higher education.

Late in 2014, I had the opportunity to partner with Campus Compact in establishing the Project on the Community Engagement Professional. The goal of the project was to advance community engagement across Campus Compact member institutions by better supporting personnel to practice second-generation community engagement (*Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013*), based on democratic engagement and an unapologetic commitment to equity and inclusion. We recruited a group of 15 research fellows from across the country who shared an interest in learning more about engagement support. They included Jodi Benenson, Shannon Chamberlin, Sean Crossland, Ashley Farmer-Hanson, Keven Hemer, Kortney Hernandez, Romy Hübler, Tait Kellogg, Laura Martin, Kira Pasquesi, Lane Perry, Johanna Phelps-Hillen, Melissa Quan, Kara Trebil, and Laura Weaver.

Our initial goal was simple: Uncover and name the work of people who have formal administrative responsibilities to support community engagement on campuses of higher education, people we chose to call *community engagement professionals* (*Dostilio & Perry, 2017*). The project built on previous work that described the roles of support personnel or intermediaries (*Bartha, Carney, Gale, Goodhue, & Howard, 2014; Jacoby & Mutascio, 2010; McReynolds & Shields, 2015*).

The project began with a systematic literature review of more than 460 pieces of scholarly literature, and from this literature review the team articulated a list of knowledge, skills, dispositions, and critical commitments important for CEPs to develop across six areas: (1) leading change to advance community engagement within higher education, (2) institutionalizing community engagement on a campus, (3) facilitating students' civic learning and development, (4) administering community engagement programs, (5) facilitating faculty development and support, and (6) cultivating high quality partnerships.

That list was then pilot-tested for reciprocal validity (*Welch, Miller, & Davies, 2005*) via survey and focus groups at national conferences of community engagement and service-learning audiences. The refined list of qualities was then further refined and validated through a national survey of self-identified community engagement professionals. More about the model and methods

used to construct the literature review, pilot testing, national survey, and the findings of each can be found within *The Community Engagement Professional in Higher Education: A Competency Model for an Emerging Field* (Dostilio, 2017a).

In each stage, participants and respondents expressed a hunger for the subject and found the list of knowledge, skills, dispositions, and critical commitments validating of them and their work. For some, having a model was a tool of change: a tool to help develop job descriptions, advocate with supervisors for professional development, structure learning communities, and inform mentoring relationships. Since its publication, the model has been used to inform various collective professional development efforts (among staff who work together in community engagement centers, among professionals who learn together and support each other across institutions, and some facilitated by state/regional Campus Compacts for CEPs across member institutions). As a means to further encourage professional development using the model, Marshall Welch and I wrote a self-directed professional development guidebook as a companion to the model (Dostilio & Welch, 2019).

The research group realized that a second objective of the project was emerging: to advance the identity and continuous learning of community engagement professionals. The word *professional* elicits many different reactions—for some, reactions of concern. Some people fear that when work is professionalized it becomes technocratic (Mathews, 1996) and pathways into the work become exclusionary (Dingwall, 2008). The project on the CEP offers a counterinterpretation of *profession* and *professional*, one in which expertise is a coconstructed and evolving idea (Palonen, Boshuizen, & Lehtinen, 2014); a professional is always developing, always learning and deepening one's practice, iteratively (Scanlon, 2011). In this way, the concept of *professional* advanced within the project rejects the idea of a linear progression between novice and expert and instead promotes continual reflective development.

Even as the initial competency model was developed, the research group saw it as a preliminary offering, one that would need to be continually refined and expanded, just as other competency models are. Thus, a third objective of the project became apparent: The model needed to be continually problematized, expanded, and refined. This special issue does just that: It offers another venue in which to complicate the notion of the community engagement professional and raise additional avenues of knowledge, skill, disposition, and critical commitment. The articles in this special issue

offer an array of new inquiry and insight. It is my hope that these articles spark additional work on the topic of community engagement professionals.

Some articles offer domains of work not included in the initial model (or not addressed in sufficient depth). These include place-based engagement, working with Cooperative Extension, strategic planning, conflict resolution, and resource generation. Yamamura and Koth offer the leadership competencies associated with supporting place-based community engagement. Kuttner, Byrne, Schmit, and Munro lay out partnership management practices key to place-based community engagement and anchor institution work. Atilas describes the practices of Cooperative Extension, including the ways competencies have been developed for Extension staff and faculty, positing that campus-based CEPs would benefit from working collaboratively with their community-based Extension colleagues. Reflecting on interviews with CEPs involved in the development of their campus's civic action plan, Farmer-Hanson, Gassman, and Shields offer insights on the capacities needed for CEPs to support or undertake strategic planning. Janke and Dumlao detail communication capacities that can help CEPs manage the conflict that may arise from interpersonal, organizational, cultural, and other differences. Weerts suggests sense-making and organizational learning as tools that can help CEPs establish community engagement as a strategy for sustained institutional support, such as resource generation and public support.

Other articles provide deeper exploration of practices within the initial model, such as actualizing critical commitments and assessment. Tryon and Madden reflect on community partner feedback, which underscores the need for students to have significant preparation for community-engaged work. They explain that before offering students and faculty preparatory experiences, CEPs must first attend to their own development of skills and dispositions that prioritize equity and inclusion. Gale, Dolson, and Howard share the practice of data labs as a means to collaboratively interpret data resulting from community engagements and spur democratic organizational change. Weiss and Norris suggest the competency areas generically described as assessment might be better reoriented toward organizational learning, an approach that focuses on improvement and informing community-engaged practices and organizational change.

Finally, a few of the articles offer insights into CEPs and their practice. Pasquesi, Perry, and Kellogg examined qualitative data of CEPs' long-term career aspirations and describe the diverse career

trajectories CEPs expect they will pursue. Trebil-Smith provides an overview of her dissertation, sharing a case study of the ways in which CEPs build their capacity to practice inclusion of racially minoritized students.

Naming and describing the work of CEPs offers the opportunity to develop research agendas that promote theories of effective practice and continue to socialize the field to democratic and inclusive practices. This issue of the *JHEOE* is an important next step in that trajectory, and the articles within this special issue help to bring complexity and add a diversity of practices to the existing work on community engagement professionals.

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