Community Engagement Professionals at Play: Collaborative Assessment as Culture Change

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Abstract

This article describes the data lab, an assessment method that could, the authors argue, help community engagement professionals (CEPs) align their assessment efforts with commitments and capacities named in the community engagement professionals competency model, contributing to democratic engagement and helping to resist neoliberal pressures in higher education. The data lab method employs a playful approach to making sense of data, utilizing extended and applied metaphors and involving all stakeholders in community-engaged work in collaborative meaning-making. Through the ongoing and iterative practice of data labs, stakeholders are invited to better understand and make changes to their collective work in implementing more democratic practices in the institution. *Keywords:* assessment, democratic engagement, culture change, Community Engagement Professionals (CEPs), data lab

Introduction

*I*n her review of literature about the community engagement professional (CEP) competency model and program administration and evaluation, Farmer-Hanson *(2017)* notes that although "[k]nowing how to measure community engagement efforts, how to involve others in that measurement, and how to leverage the results is vital for CEPS," it is also clearly "an area of struggle" *(p. 89)*. Our experiences developing and implementing assessment of community engagement at varying scales at a center for civic engagement at a small liberal arts university have taught us that the question of how to involve others in our assessment work is central to addressing this struggle. If we effectively involve others in and across the various stages of assessment (planning, design, implementation, analysis, and dissemination), we are better positioned to measure what we care about and to use these results to inform action. In this article, we will explore the *data lab*, a method we have developed and used with colleagues at our university over the past 7 years in order to make meaning of data together, primarily in the data analysis portion of our assessment cycle. As part of a larger assessment ecosystem, we have found data labs especially beneficial in that they help to catalyze an inclusive, collaborative, and ongoing practice of meaning-making.

The data lab method is in keeping with the CEP competency model in that it encourages CEPs to engage with assessment in a way that amplifies what the model names as one of our key "critical commitments," namely, "developing critical consciousness through meaningful praxis" *(Dostilio et al., 2016, p. 46)*. We have also found that the lab can support CEPs in their role as "change-oriented leaders" who "[use] their positions within the middle spaces of their organizations to catalyze change and greater realization of postsecondary education's civic purpose" *(Dostilio & Perry, 2017, p. 2)*. Specifically, data labs build a collaborative culture of inquiry through an inclusive, invitational, and cocreative approach. No matter what its focus, the invitation of the lab is to make meaning together, rather than to digest meaning that has been made. This kind of meaning-making is, we argue here, a democratic practice, and a powerful if simple way that CEPs can support cultural change on their campus and in their communities. Ultimately, the data lab method can help CEPs to be mindful of assessment as not only a discrete skill or knowledge base important to administering community engagement programs or to institutionalizing community engagement, but as a larger disposition, one that embraces ongoing learning and collective reflection, in the service of strategizing toward institutional and social change.

As we have experimented with and refined the data lab method, we have been inspired by the work of Imagining America's Assessing the Practices of Public Scholarship (APPS) research team, which recently urged the field to look carefully "at the role SLCE [service learning and community engagement] values play in SLCE assessment practices" *(Bandy et al., 2016, p. 96)*. Like Bandy et al., we have found that it is most effective to engage assessment from within a democratic engagement orientation, as this framework emphasizes cocreation and shared inquiry among all partners in community engagement. Building from Saltmarsh, Hartley, and Clayton's *(2009)* seminal piece on democratic civic engagement, Bandy et al. *(2018)* call for our field to better instantiate the values of democratic engagement in our assessment work, taking into account, specifically, the ways a democratic engagement orientation "draws on the knowledge, expertise, experience, and perspectives of everyone involved in any particular partnership—community members, students, faculty, staff—and insists that all have a voice" *(p. 18)*. We still have room to grow as we experiment with ways to use the data lab method with a full range of stakeholders and across all phases of assessment. Yet our own experiences consistently using and learning from data labs with colleagues on and off campus

have led us to believe that it is a promising method for enacting the premise of democratic engagement. In this way, the data lab is one example of a tool that can help CEPs approach assessment as what APPS calls a "democratic practice," one that helps us to "nudge the world toward such ultimate outcomes as democracy, equity, and justice" *(Bandy et al., 2018, p. 63)*.

In this article we will situate the data lab as a proactive response to neoliberal pressures in higher education and as a method that amplifies collaboration, continuous improvement, and play—achieved through the use of metaphors. The data lab has also contributed to cultural change at our institution, as it has helped us to more deeply and intentionally embed democratic practices into our assessment work. We will then describe and analyze the impact of the data lab method, outlining how we have used it and what it has yielded for our center. Finally, we will examine challenges and opportunities posed by the data lab method and consider next steps for how the method might be shared, assessed, and improved in collaboration with other stakeholders and CEPs across the country.

Assessing Community Engagement Under Neoliberal Pressures

Much has been written about the ways that neoliberalism, as an ideology that "reduces the purpose of public institutions to their role within the market" *(Orphan & O'Meara, 2016, p. 215)*, affects and is reflected in higher education, casting students as consumers and faculty as purveyors of a marketable good or "academic entrepreneurs" *(Orphan, 2018, p. 63; see also Brown, 2003, and Giroux, 2002)*. But neoliberalism places a particular weight on CEPs, especially when it comes to assessment. On one hand, as Orphan and O'Meara *(2016)* and Saltmarsh and Hartley *(2016)* have described, the community engagement movement is in itself part of a response to and a defense against the effects of neoliberalism, in that it pushes back against the assertion of private and market-based gains over public goods *(Orphan & O'Meara, 2016, p. 218)*. On the other hand, community-engaged initiatives, which are often isolated within the institution (at the level of a center or program, or seen as the purview of a handful of departments), can and most often do take shape as "surface-level boutique operations" that "co-exist with neoliberal ideologies and effort without much conflict" *(Orphan & O'Meara, 2016, p. 219)*. For CEPs operating in resistance to, but at the margins of, the neoliberal university, assessment is a necessary and often urgent activity designed to satisfy the institution's demands

for information that will justify and maintain the existence of community engagement.

This is a job CEPs must take seriously, as is suggested by the competency model's articulation of the "ability to report data to strengthen institutional support" as a primary skill *(Dostilio et al., 2016, p. 48)*. However, it is also work that can easily in itself consume all assessment activity, energy, and enthusiasm. Consider, for example, the insistent requests CEPs receive for the enumeration of community service hours or dollars. Such indicators speak to the quantity of engagement but not, in themselves, to its quality. If ideally we measure what we value, in practice and in the absence of unlimited time and resources, we too often value what we are expected to measure. As Muller *(2018)* observes, "what can be measured is not always worth measuring; what gets measured may have no relationship to what we really want to know" *(p. 3)*. One obvious danger of this assessment trap is that in primarily reacting to institutional demands (which are often themselves brought on by external pressures on institutions), we miss the critical insights into our programs that might come from following "what we really want to know." This is a peril even when we are measuring things we value a great deal, as we were reminded recently at a CEP gathering convened by a state council of higher education. The council had just introduced a new policy on assessing the quality of civic engagement as a core competency. During a question and answer period, the director of a center at one of the state's public universities asked a clarifying question: "Is the focus of this policy solely on student learning or are we also interested in community impact?" The council representative's answer was immediate: "Your focus should be on students and your campus. I would be concerned if your narrative focused on community impact versus what your students are getting."

The council representative's response was unsurprising; an exclusive focus on student learning is easily justified in our institutions as "mission critical." Yet the scenario points to the dilemma faced by CEPs charged with assessing community engagement. The CEP's role is, in part and as the CEP model affirms, to lead change in higher education. Central to this role is an orientation around democratic engagement, which, as Saltmarsh et al. *(2009)* assert, hinges on an understanding of knowledge construction itself as collaborative across community and university stakeholders *(p. 9)*. The CEP competency model names this as the "ability to encourage a democratic engagement orientation," which it elaborates as knowledge of "participatory processes, co-creation of knowledge,

co-planning, inclusivity, etc." *(Dostilio et al., 2016, p. 46)*. When it comes to assessment, however, trying to enact this orientation results in tension because the reflexes of our institutions send us down narrow pathways that reinforce divided thinking (like students versus community) and lead us away from, not toward, the collaborative impulses and imperatives at the heart of our field.

The current emphasis on assessment in higher education in the United States, economic historian Jerry Muller *(2018)* argues, is one outcome of a "seemingly irresistible pressure to measure performance, to publicize it, and to reward it" *(p. 4)*, an obsession that is fueled, specifically, by the requests of accrediting bodies for "ever more elaborate measures of performance" *(p. 75)*. We have not found a way to function as CEPs outside this paradigm; indeed, at this point there may be no outside. However, embracing a creative and inclusive method for assessment, which we call a data lab, has illuminated for us the possibilities for aligning our assessment practices with a democratic engagement orientation and has opened up rather than constrained our thinking about the impact of our community-engaged work.

Metaphor: A Figure of Thought

During a data lab, stakeholders in a program, class, or shared experience gather to look carefully at artifacts (data) that emerge from their collaborations. The only requirements for participating in a lab are curiosity, openness to exploring and interpreting data in new ways, and a willingness to reflect collectively to gain new understandings. The artifacts we have examined in labs to date (field journals, reflection papers, blog posts, survey results, syllabi, community organization newsletters and participant surveys, mission statements, learning goals, etc.) originated in classes our center supports, programs we administer, and community partner relationships we help to steward.

The data lab method, however, employs a key component not often found in data analysis: "metaphorical concepts" *(Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5)*. CEPs create the data lab following certain steps that center questions and metaphors:

1. Find a collaborator to help you create the data lab. This will be more fun with an open-minded and curious partner who shares your love of learning.

2. Identify the question you want to explore, and then locate the data you have that might speak to that question. Or,

identify the data you want to process (charts, graphs, student assignments, syllabi, partner reports, etc.) and articulate a linking question you will ask across this data.

3. Consider what kind of thinking you are interested in doing about this data, and generate a metaphor that will be useful to structure that thinking. Try out several: You'll know you've hit on a good one when the metaphor begins to suggest ways of thinking about the data you've identified for analysis.

4. Decide how to group the data, and divide it into three to five different data stations. For each data station, come up with an exercise that will invite participants to explore the data using the metaphor.

5. Write detailed instructions for each station and make worksheets that the participants can use to perform the activity described in the instructions.

6. Set up the stations around the room. Provide several sets of instructions that will stay at the station and enough worksheets for all participants, as well as any other supplies necessary to complete the activity (pencils, rulers, etc.) and any props that will make the metaphor come to life.

7. Gather all participants, give them an overview of the purpose and focus of the data lab, and explain the metaphor you will be using. Advise them of any specific instructions, such as how many stations they should visit in the allotted time.

8. Allow participants to circulate and choose their own sequence of stations. Not every participant will complete every station, and that is OK.

9. Gather in a circle or around a table and conduct a group discussion. Ask questions about what participants learned, as well as what they wish they had learned. For example: What did you notice? What surprised you? What did you learn about *X*? Having seen what you've seen, what else do you wish you knew?

10. Take good notes of the discussion to document learning and to fuel future inquiries and next steps.

11. Collect all of the worksheets for future analysis by the assessment team.

The selection and development of a metaphorical concept is at the heart of the data lab methodology; it is what makes the experience playful. For each data lab, the planners choose a metaphorical concept to build the lab around (metaphors we have used to date include an amusement park, coffee brewing, alpine sports, archaeology, house design, and magic). The Greek origin of the word *metaphor* ("to carry" [*phor*] "across" [*meta*]) points to the effort and transformation inherent in linking one thing to another through language, and the concept dates back to Aristotle. More recent thinkers have considered that a metaphor is not just a "figure of speech" but rather a "figure of thought" *(Hickey, 1999, p. 3)*. As Lakoff and Johnson *(1980)* argue, metaphors are not just fodder for poets: "We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action" *(p. 3)*. They explain: "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" *(p. 5)*. In this vein, data lab planners choose a metaphor by asking: What kind of thinking will help us make meaning of this data? How could setting the data in this specific and different context be fruitful? Planners don't know what the outcome of extending the metaphor will be. Each station's activities invite the participants to continue extending and applying the metaphor, exercising their own interpretive skills and imagination. For any given lab, we might begin our planning by considering what data we want to review as a group. This data can be a mix of direct and indirect measures, and of qualitative and quantitative products. Or we might begin with a focused question, like "What are students learning about their own identity because of community-based learning?" Once we are clear on the focus of shared inquiry, the guiding metaphor we select for the lab is an invitation to map our data with a concept that has no obvious relationship, in an effort to generate new insights.

Participants cycle through each station, working alone or in groups to grapple with data in creative and unfamiliar ways as they apply and extend the metaphorical concept. We allow enough time for participants to move through most of the data stations (we have found that an hour of focused quiet time is usually about right for a lab with four to five stations). We then conclude each data lab by asking questions along the following two themes:

1. What are we learning about [focus of the data lab] from this data?
2. What else do we wish we knew?

The first line of questioning unifies our inquiry and prevents us from getting stuck in a critique of any specific program or initiative that produced that data lab's artifacts. The second line of questioning reveals important gaps in our data collection processes, and, most important, points us toward future directions for inquiry. This focus on "what's missing" has been particularly useful in helping us leverage the data lab process toward change on multiple levels, as we will describe below.

Although it is always tempting to allow data lab participants to encounter the artifacts under consideration in comfortable and familiar ways, we hold fast to applying metaphors. Metaphors help unsettle our own cognitive maps, whether we are aware of those maps or not. When a group of professors looks at a student's blog post, for example, their initial stance is as graders, judges of the work, comparing the writing they see with a mental map of the ideal version along a spectrum of poor to excellent. CEPs also carry a spectrum in their minds for moving a student from "not civically engaged" to "fully civically engaged." Applying metaphors to our data disrupts our cognitive maps by creating a shared challenge of translation and analysis. Grappling with the extension of a metaphor is hard work and can be uncomfortable. We do it because it helps to move us from binary ways of thinking ("good" or "bad") and into deeper knowledge of the objects and ideas at hand as we notice, wonder, describe, and discuss what we see.

For many participants, metaphor play is also fun, engaging imaginations that are not often invited into work settings, and leading in surprising directions. For example, in a recent lab conducted with faculty, we applied the metaphor of archaeology to student work produced in community-based learning classes. When planning the lab, we imagined lab participants as archaeologists, using archaeological tools to analyze student reflections. Data stations around the room contained objects like small shovels, and we built one station around a chart called a "stratigraphic," which archaeologists use to track the depth at which artifacts are discovered. At this station we examined a "core sample" of student blog posts created over the course of a semester. The station included the following instructions:

> Using the stratigraphic worksheet provided, consider each layer (post) of the core sample (blog) separately. What does learning look like in this layer? Write out a few important phrases you see. What kind of learning

is it? Can you represent it visually? e.g.: At this level the learning looks like a bowl because. . . .

The discussion that followed the lab was remarkably free of the complaints that commonly dominate faculty discussions of student writing on our campus. Instead, faculty focused on the quality of the reflective thinking, noticed the progression of insights, wondered about how the reflection prompts had been worded, and considered how they might change their own reflection assignments. The playfulness of the activities in the lab invited faculty to come out of their disciplinary silos and focus on the common ground of community-based learning. In doing so, participants found new, generative ways of thinking about the learning happening in their courses. Feedback after the data lab revealed the impact the activity had on the faculty's mind-set when several faculty commented that they were surprised at how much they enjoyed and learned from the session, claiming it even made them like assessment.

Play and Making Meaning

In our center, the data lab has become an eagerly anticipated ritual. We conduct one to two data labs each year with our staff, and other data labs as relevant with faculty and community partners. We have found that data labs help us to deepen our understanding of our work across our center, and in turn to develop and refine our programs using evidence. Although program evaluation and improvement are benefits of the lab, its fundamental goal is to build a culture of inquiry among our colleagues and collaborators, in part by opening dialogue about foundational concepts relevant to our work and engaging our team in an inclusive, generative, recurring, and playful assessment conversation. One of our team's favorite data labs used J. K. Rowling's magical world of Hogwarts as its metaphorical backdrop. The focus of this lab was on deepening our understanding of the ways students learn about social issues through civic engagement. We entered the lab with a brief lesson in the history of magic (a review of participation numbers for our center for the previous year), and then circulated among stations like the "Pensieve." *Harry Potter* readers might remember the great wizard Dumbledore saying:

> I use the Pensieve. One simply siphons the excess thoughts from one's mind, pours them into the basin, and examines them at one's leisure. It becomes easier to

> spot patterns and links, you understand, when they are in this form. *(Rowling, 2000, p. 597)*

At this station, participants glimpsed the past via a sampling of essays from a community-based learning biochemistry class and were asked to "draw the moment that you see in the Pensieve (in the student essay), in which the student identifies the connection to biochemistry."

This exercise was useful in two ways. First, the metaphor of the Pensieve forced participants to slow down as they processed the data through an uncommon lens, imagining and drawing a student's "aha moment"—the moment in time at his or her service site wherein the student made a connection between their service and a biochemistry question (see Figure 1 for an example of a visual representation produced in the data lab). Second, the accumulation of these images (which we examined in gallery form at the end of the lab) allowed our colleagues, together, to connect and synthesize our examination of singular artifacts in a way that transformed our larger understanding. Creativity matters, we have found, because it freshens people's relationships with fundamental assessment questions, such as "What are our students learning?" The playfulness that characterizes a data lab moves CEP staff away from sensitivity about the success or shortcomings of their own programs and toward shared inquiry about the implications and consequences of our work.

The data lab process, while fun, can be unsettling within the normative framework of assessment culture in higher education. A new staff member once confided after a lab, "It was great and I learned a lot. But I don't understand—what is the answer?" The culture in which assessment means checking for right answers is entrenched, and it has robbed many of us of opportunities to learn about and from our own work. When we treat assessment as being primarily about finding out whether or not students learned what we wanted them to learn, we do not do justice to our students' meaning-making experiences, or to our own. When we delegate the work of assessment solely to experts on campus, we short-change the possibility of shared inquiry and collective meaning-making. By emphasizing the data lab as a cornerstone of our assessment cycle, we are not rejecting conventional assessment measures, like rubrics and surveys, which we also do employ. Rather, we are inserting those measures into an assessment ecosystem grounded in our own recurring and reflective practice. This ecosystem would be familiar to most CEPs. We complete annual evaluation plans

Figure 1. A center for civic engagement staff member's representation of the moment a student integrated community experience with classroom learning. "Pestered by the disconnect between regurgitating healthy tips to program participants on losing weight, but truly having a limited understanding of what processes occur, I discovered my bio-chemical connection to obesity."

and reports as required by our Office of Institutional Effectiveness, collect information from participants in our programs, and conduct periodic, institution-wide audits of community engagement in sync with accreditation cycles and other national benchmarking opportunities (like the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement). But instead of focusing our energies primarily on collecting and submitting data for those reports, we leverage this work in combination with data labs to learn as much as we can about our impact. We find our team energized by the regular reflection and learning we do in our labs, together and with our constituents. We think that our mission is furthered more by this emphasis on collective reflective process than by focusing on completing assessment products.

Changing Culture

The data lab has become our primary method for feeding and sustaining a generative assessment culture because it centers the

real questions we—and not others—have about our work and its impact. Although our formal evaluation reports don't include the drawings and other items that data lab participants produce, the process of continually inquiring through this method has directly affected our evaluation tools. For example, in a recent lab, we examined end-of-year surveys in which students reflected on the skills they were learning through civic engagement. Our analysis led us to ask, among other questions, "How are students utilizing their skills to build the capacity of our nonprofit partners?" We have now modified a capacity-building survey, completed by students at the end of the year, in order to capture more nuanced answers to that question. Data labs have also led to numerous specific program refinements. For example, while examining field journals in the archaeology data lab, participants noticed how one instructor's responses to early journal entries, which praised certain kinds of observations and discouraged others, clearly led the students to make better observations later. Because of the dialogue around this, center staff subsequently began to use this journal entry commentary as an example to help other faculty to learn the value of formative feedback on reflection.

Overall, the data lab has affected our approach to assessment by

- shifting our culture from "my students" to "our students," helping us break out of program silos and ask bigger questions;
- helping us develop new and richer data streams;
- allowing us to claim assessment as an area of shared learning we undertake together, rather than a burden imposed from outside or as the responsibility of one person on our civic engagement staff; and
- opening up new, generative relationships with our institutional research colleagues, who have been excited by our staff's enthusiasm for ongoing assessment.

These changes have been positive. What we find most important, however, is that data labs spur more questions to fuel future data labs. This circularity is not a failure of the process, but a sign of its ongoing and iterative nature. Like inquiry itself, the success of a data lab lies in the extent to which it sparks more of what drives it in the first place—curiosity, an interest in learning, a commitment to ongoing learning from learning. What we find most significant as CEPs invested in long-term institutional and cultural change

are the ways the process has led us not to answers but to more and better questions. Consider, for example, the contrast between the questions we landed on in our inaugural data lab, held in May 2011, and the questions sparked by a data lab only 3 years later (see Table 1). At our first data lab, we examined as a staff the fruits of our assessment efforts at the time. This included student volunteer

Table 1. What Else Do We Wish We Knew?

Data Lab #1 (May 2011)	Data Lab #11 (June 2014)
How can we track students across programs and across years?	What motivates the large percentage of first generation and minority participants to participate in our programs?
What are students' own learning goals?	What are the demographics of students awarded Federal Work Study?
Are there connections between programs and partners (tracking relationships with partners)?	What are men doing? How can we understand the gender imbalance in our programs?
What are faculty's experience and reflections?	How can we understand the under-representation of the business school in our programs?
What are students' majors in our center's orbit?	
What is the connection between the experience and the class and how students make that connection?	What is the connection between how people were advised and what happened for them? Can we track students advised/relationship to program participation?
What are the community-identified needs we are working on with partners?	What is the breakdown of students in our orbit by school and year?

and site supervisor surveys, community-based learning class evaluations, and information about participation in our events (range of topics, numbers of participants). Our first data lab question was simple and broad: What are we learning about our work? As we examined and discussed the artifacts, and especially as we considered what we did *not* know from this evidence but *wished* we could glimpse, our staff encountered the unsatisfying gap between the kind of information our assessment was providing and the questions we actually considered important. The evidence assembled suggested that we were most concerned about customer service. But this did not adequately reflect our real concerns about student and faculty learning, partner needs, and the accessibility and inclu-

siveness of our programs. Confronting this gap together quickly set us on a path to grow our data sources so that we might be able to ask and answer more nuanced questions. The list of questions we generated 3 years later (included in the table) reflects this shift.

In response to the discomforts surfaced in our first data lab, we developed more sophisticated ways of tracking students' participation in our center's programming, which allowed us to disaggregate student participation by demographic characteristics. We also began a years-long focus on student learning, which involved using the data lab method to iteratively develop student learning outcomes grounded in our own reflection on the evidence about what students were (and were not) learning. We now use data labs to, in part, explore what we are learning from our measurements of our student learning outcomes, which involves looking more closely at student artifacts (like reflection papers and written protocols). After several years of focusing intently on questions of student learning, we have recently begun shifting and expanding our data lab focal points to include questions about community partnerships, and we have begun including community partners in our labs.

Democratic engagement, as articulated by Saltmarsh et al. *(2009)*, "locates the university within an ecosystem of knowledge production" in which there is a "multi-directional flow of knowledge and expertise" *(p. 10)*. The outcomes generated through this exchange are a result of the "co-creation of knowledge," not the dissemination of the university's expertise *(Saltmarsh et al., 2009, p. 11)*. The data lab is one method by which assessment can facilitate that cocreation. It is a space, specifically, in which people can engage in authentic discussion, seeking meaning together. Such exchange is reminiscent of what Palmer *(2011)* has noted in Alexis de Tocqueville's observations of American civic life in the 1830s. Tocqueville named among the requirements for democracy what he called "habits of the heart," which Palmer *(2011)* summarizes as "deeply ingrained patterns of receiving, interpreting and responding to experiences that involve our intellect, emotions, self-images, and concepts of meaning and purpose" *(p. 24)*.

In a data lab, we exercise these "habits" by encouraging participants from different positions inside and outside higher education to bring their curiosity and full selves to the project of exploring the shared meaning that emerges when we examine and discuss data from our distinct and subjective points of view. We know from the outset that the meaning we make together will be contingent on who is in the room and what we come in knowing and having

experienced. We have also learned that it is useful to have people present who are familiar with the evidence we are considering, as they can act as checks on the impulse to too-easily generalize or come to abstract conclusions. The artifacts we consider will have different meaning to the faculty member who taught the course from which they emerged, colleagues who teach community-based learning classes in other disciplines, the community organization staff member who was on site with students, center staff close to and far away from the specific program in the spotlight, or students involved and students not directly involved. But the insights and questions we raise *together*—or rather, the togetherness of the inquiry—is what matters.

Because of its "togetherness," the data lab is also potentially disruptive of what Simpson *(2014)* has aptly called the "relentless attachment to privatization and the destruction of an ethical and relational framework" that is at the heart of neoliberal ideology *(p. 192)*. As a method, the data lab is inherently relational, necessarily social, and playful. It challenges the vertical and external flow of our data in favor of a peer-to-peer data network, a conversation aimed not at demonstrating (*Was it good?*) or diagnosing (*To what extent did they get it?*) but rather at grappling with the realities and complexities that come up when we spend time with the material artifacts that reflect the lived experiences of community-engaged practice. We propose the data lab as a method that resists the relentlessness of neoliberalism not to aggrandize the data lab method, but to emphasize the significance of the kind of culture change that is possible when we exercise the habits of democracy within our assessment practices. Such habits contribute to a guiding "civic ethos" as described by the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (*2012)* as "the infusion of democratic values into the customs and habits of everyday practices, structures and interactions" on our campuses *(p. 15)*. The data lab, as well as other assessment practices that enact a democratic engagement orientation, helps to cultivate a "defining character of the institution and those in it that emphasizes open-mindedness, civility, [and] the worth of each person" *(National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012, p. 15)*.

Without the recurring structure and cycle of the data lab, the assessment we conduct at our own center would fit neatly into the neoliberal framework. We track, collect, analyze, and submit our reports up the data chain. These reports can then be useful fodder for private ends (awards and recognitions, promotional stories for the institution, annual reports, etc.). The data lab inter-

rupts the instrumental nature of this data cycle by providing an opportunity for participants not only to discover something new in an afternoon, but, more important, to engage in a conversation that significantly redirects the methods, means, and meanings of our assessment, our community engagement, and our institutions themselves.

The Way Forward

Looking ahead, the logical trajectory of the data lab for us is toward increased inclusion, both in terms of how we conduct our own data labs and how we share and track the value of the method for other CEPs. One next step for us is to continue expanding the spectrum of stakeholders we regularly include in the lab. For example, though we know colleagues at other schools who have done so, we have not yet invited students into our data labs. Our aim in doing so in future labs is to use the experience to collaboratively learn about the impacts of the community engagement experiences while also fostering student participants' "civic growth and development," a key CEP competency *(Dostilio et al., 2016, p. 48)*. As we extend the labs in this way, we must address some complications:

- Monitoring our own expectations around our stated student learning outcomes. How will the presence of students affect the way our staff and colleagues interact with and respond to the data?
- Building reflection and learning into the process beyond the data lab itself. How do we structure time before and after the lab with student participants to ensure intentional scaffolding of their learning and development?

Recognizing, as Farmer-Hanson *(2017)* states, that "community partner voice in the assessment process is key to ensure that both parties' needs are being met" *(p. 90)*, we also seek to further the data labs we conduct with community partners and to more systematically include community partners in labs, including those labs that don't specifically focus on the partnership. To date, we have conducted one data lab that specifically paired faculty members with their community partners, examining a variety of artifacts, from mission statements to student reflections, that relate to their specific partnership. We observed a high level of engagement among faculty and partners in these discussions, and we noted some surprise at how much they didn't know "the basics" about one

another's goals, projects, and institutions. This lab highlighted the value of creating space for faculty and partners to think together in a different way from the regular, transactional communications. They each shared the lens of their own sector and perspective, which helped the development of shared language and goals for their partnership.

Improving relationships and shared outcomes by using this method seems ideal, yet we have failed to systematically replicate the pairing of faculty and community partners in a data lab. Working across sectors is challenging for many reasons, not the least of which is that community partners feel pressured to shape their assessment efforts in a way that speaks to funders. Faculty are accustomed to looking at data with the tools of their own disciplines, different from one another and from those of community partners. Working across these lines requires skilled facilitation by CEPs, and time. Even when we have experienced the benefits of the data lab, which puts people in a creative and playful mind-set and invites shared discovery, it has been difficult to prioritize this activity in the face of what can feel like participants' more pressing obligations. Building joint community partner and faculty data labs into our annual cycle of partnership support and development is a key next step for us.

In this vein, we are also scrutinizing our past overreliance on our own center staff as the primary participants in data labs. It is all too easy to build data labs into our existing team time and to cut contextual corners as our group is now well versed in the method. By including more students, partners, and faculty in future data labs, we will deepen our continuous learning and improve the method itself. These efforts will also help us test how the model might work in varied contexts, for example, when a CEP may employ the data lab as a way to engage in creative assessment and to deepen connections and learning among community engagement allies on and off campus who do not share a primary work team.

Over the past few years, we have shared the data lab method with Association of American Colleges and Universities leadership and with CEPs from other campuses—public and private, large and small—via the Bonner Foundation network, the Imagining America consortium, and other conferences in the field. As a result, other CEPs have begun to use the data lab method as a way to involve myriad stakeholders in meaningful and substantive reflection on their shared community-engaged practice. For example, the Ursinus Center for Advocacy, Responsibility and Engagement at Ursinus College uses one to two data labs per year as a way

to evaluate its Bonner program, finding it a useful method for allowing unexpected outcomes to emerge. At Ursinus, data labs have included faculty, Bonner program and other college staff, institutional research professionals, nonprofit administrators, and student participants *(K. Turek, personal communication, December 12, 2018)*. The team at the Swearer Center for Public Service at Brown University has also adopted the data lab as part of their ongoing learning, inquiry, and continuous improvement. Most recently, the Swearer Center has worked to engage their team in ongoing artifact identification and collection, stewarded by their assessment staff, and to carve out relevant next steps for each of the center's units/programs. Their focus is on ensuring that the knowledge produced through the data lab feeds back into action planning and improved data collection *(G. Manok, personal communication, December 18, 2018)*. As the data lab method is used by other CEPs, an important next step for us will be, when possible, to understand the implications, challenges, and successes of the tool. What works? What doesn't? Why? How can the data lab be employed across the stages of assessment, and not only as a tool for data analysis? How might we learn and improve the data lab method from cross-institutional analysis?

The ongoing experimentation with the data lab method suggests that assessment in community engagement may best be used by CEPs as a process not only to evaluate and understand community engagement programs but also to lead change in higher education in ways consistent with democratic engagement. The data lab is not the end-all assessment solution; it is one effective method to open up a space of shared inquiry, to engage participants across differences, and to stimulate ongoing and change-oriented dialogue. We propose the data lab as a way for CEPs to practice and enact democratically engaged assessment and to intervene in normative assessment culture as part of our work to change higher education. When we approach assessment as collective reflection and ongoing learning, we act in a way that honors both the complexity of knowledge and the nature of democracy by prioritizing cocreation and the right of all to think, to probe, and to generate new meanings, together.

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