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Leveraging Reflective Practice to Advance the Field and Enhance Impact: Learning From Failure and Missteps in Community-Engaged Scholarship

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Abstract

The purpose of this reflective essay is to encourage the discussion of community-engaged scholarship (CES) that does not progress as planned. Insufficient attention is given to lessons gleaned from missteps and outright failures experienced by scholars in the field, which results in a paucity of documented cases and recommendations for improvement. To address this gap in the literature, this article features vignettes from scholars in the field whose experiential wisdom may inform practice for individuals as well as institutional strategies. The authors discuss implications for practice informed by their experience in developing community-engaged scholars and the shared wisdom of the contributors whose experience and failures provide insight for emerging scholars. The essay concludes with recommendations for future research related to how we experience and learn from failure in CES.

Keywords: community engagement, community-engaged scholarship, reflective practice, faculty development, failure

Community-engaged scholarship (CES) is a process involving a variety of contributors, each of whom has their own personality, motivations, agenda, perceived benefits, and anticipated contributions. There may be a shared, common goal, but the route by which it is achieved is not always clear and agreed upon among everyone involved. Even when goals are clearly understood, mishaps, struggles, and outright failures may occur along the way. Scholars commonly describe the process as "messy," and those who spearhead CES endeavors inevitably experience failure and disappointment at some point. However, faculty and professional staff are typically trained to circumvent failure. We are taught to execute a specific process in order to ensure we achieve the outcomes identified. We have become products of and contributors to a culture of perfectionism in academia that is increasingly risk averse. Despite our training and preparation, many of us have experienced less-than-ideal results of plans that fell short when executed. In the event of failure, we tend to reframe the experience as best we can, salvaging our results without necessarily elaborating on or even acknowledging the unique difficulties experienced. For example, a basic search for "failure" in the archives from *Inside Higher Ed*, an online trade publication that produces daily opinion essays and news content, revealed 3,414 stories published in this venue in the past 15 years that used this word; however, narrowing the search to "failure" and "community engagement" led to just 12 stories in the same time span. As professionals in the field, we are aware of anecdotal accounts of failures among close colleagues, yet we struggle more broadly as a cross-disciplinary research field to document lessons learned from unsuccessful partnerships and projects.

According to Sutherland (2015), failure and rejection, "while common to the academic experience, are not spoken of or written about often enough" (p. 756). More specifically, we in the community-engagement realm tend to, at best, attenuate failure in our professional work and, at worst, ignore it. Ironically, in order to transform ourselves and affiliated organizations, especially in the complex context of higher education, we must be willing to embrace the mess and accept that failure is a possibility of community-engaged practice. There is a need for more individuals talking about their personal goals, particularly their failures, and how they reconciled failure with their expectations. "Being flexible and learning from failures will result in positive changes" (Gorski et al., 2015, p. 21). Most of us have read articles that implore us to understand that failure is part of the process—some of us even say it—but do we really believe it? And are we transparent about our own failures as a form of critical reflection meant to benefit our own work and that of others?

We are surprised and disappointed at the lack of conference sessions and articles on the sometimes challenging learning process associated with CES. Collectively, we appear to be focused primarily on our success to the detriment of our own transformative growth gleaned from failures. The goal of this reflective essay is to encourage faculty, partners, and professional staff to create space for openly and unabashedly discussing CES failures—with the intent of learning from each other so that the process may become less taboo and tumultuous. We believe that in order to transform higher education into an environment more friendly to CES, those who practice it must be willing to embrace failure, and the best way to embrace failure is to actually talk about it. Moreover, we believe in the constructive power of reflective practice in generating new pathways toward success in community engagement.

Background and Contributor Recruitment

This reflective essay, including its compilation of individual vignettes, emerged from an informal conversation among colleagues as we discussed challenges we have encountered in our CES and ways in which our experiences could inform professional development for the next generation of community-engaged scholars and practitioners. We invited colleagues who served on a planning committee for a national professional-development workshop to participate and distributed a writing prompt among those who agreed to participate. Our original intent was limited to sharing our lessons learned at a national research conference; however, we decided to document our experiences in the form of this reflective essay after receiving overwhelmingly positive feedback and encouragement to advance our line of inquiry following the conference panel presentation. Due to the organic and informal way in which the essay came to fruition, we intentionally present it as a reflective essay rather than framing it as a collaborative ethnographic study. Although our process is informed by practitioner-oriented research methods, it was not initially framed as a research study. Specifically, we leverage reflective practice, which is an adult learning and development strategy that supports learning through reflection on practice (Schön, 1983, 1987). The concept is prevalent in professional development settings and is supported by theory and research on adult and experiential learning (see Argyris & Schön, 1974; Kolb, 1984). We therefore offer our discussion and recommendations as insight gleaned from reflective practice that may inform future research on the topic.

A total of nine scholars contributed reflections, including the two lead authors who initiated the call for participation, conducted the literature review, analyzed the reflective submissions, and prepared this essay. Each of the nine colleagues contributed their own personal experiences with failure in a CES-related context to this compilation. We asked that each anecdote, or vignette, contain (1) brief background for context, (2) description of what went wrong (the failure), (3) explanation of the resolution—if there was one, and (4) any questions that stemmed from this failure, which were meant to provoke further consideration and/or discussion. We also requested that each contributor limit their respective vignette to approximately 750 words, which would permit ample space to detail the scenario based on the four prompts yet still allow us to compose an introduction, brief literature review, and a discussion of our reflections.

The nine contributors whose work collectively comprises this reflective essay have extensive credentials. Together, they have devoted more than 33 years' worth of mentorship experience to graduate students and early faculty selected into the aforementioned professional-development workshop. These contributors have worked with community partners for various initiatives across the country for an aggregate 111 years. Moreover, they have a combined 86 years of professional service in community engagement and/or community-engaged scholarship, including but not limited to journal reviewing, conference planning, serving on advisory councils, and/or providing presentations at their respective institutions. Finally, most have served on boards for nonprofit organizations in their local communities, enhancing their comprehension of the nuances in a university–community partner relationship. These contributors are faculty, emeritus faculty, professional personnel, and directors of outreach and engagement.

Although their combined credentials suggest expertise in CES activities, it is important to note that each contributor has provided anecdotes of their own experience with failure, suggesting that, even with abundant knowledge and experience, there is always opportunity to learn and improve. As a qualitative exploration of our experiences and subsequent learning, our approach to this project was intended to serve as a self-directed, semistructured professional development exercise for our peer group. It also loosely follows the DEAL model as outlined by Ash and Clayton (2009) as a tactic to guide critical reflection. This essay reflects our scholarly practice and also serves as documentation of our learning and implications for practice. The culminating contribution to the scholarship on engagement is presented to support fellow scholars and practitioners and to inform future research.

Literature Review

In our review of the literature, we found scant evidence of scholarly research that discussed failure in CES endeavors from the perspective of faculty or professional personnel, and those publications that did pertain to failure presented it from a third-person perspective, where they did not experience it personally (Birbeck, 2014; Hinton et al., 2014). This gap in the literature directly reflects the assertion noted by Sutherland (2015) that most failures are kept private. An overview of past research did indicate, however, a plethora of information and discussion concerning the failure of students (Barth, 2018; Liguori et al., 2014; Suhr et al., 2014; Tucker et al., 2014). Failure among faculty and professional personnel is typically discussed in the context of prevention: best practices to follow and potential barriers to avoid. For example, Birbeck (2014) outlined five poorly planned motives that can lead to failure in health-oriented CES partnerships. Similarly, Weaver et al. (2018), in their own lessons learned from firsthand experience with failure, posited 12 best practices for community partnerships and experiential education. Flicker et al. (2007) identified 18 barriers that, if not addressed and discussed openly in advance, could result in failure, though their barriers pertain primarily to community-based research. Table 1 lists these best practices and barriers for CES practitioners to consider, and collectively they form a baseline typology for prevention of failure in community-engaged endeavors.

These three sources are not meant to encapsulate all considerations and complexities associated with community-engaged initiatives; instead, this table conveys how failure can occur in many different ways and at many different stages. Even the most experienced practitioners—faculty or professional personnel—can and do experience failure. Therefore, more discussion of failure, especially from the firsthand perspective of academics, is needed to fill this scholarly dearth and inform other and new academics (Crabtree, 2013). The exiguousness of research about failure in CES confirms that there is a need for more literature and conversations about the importance of talking about failure: “Engagement competencies primarily deal with preparing for, avoiding, and moving past failure” (Gorski et al., 2015, p. 20). We must have the professional fortitude to embrace this fear (Sousa & Clark, 2019), as it is a disservice to the field at large to inadequately address these critical experiences in learning and growth.

Community-Engaged Scholar Reflections

The following nine reflections detail the personal experiences of midcareer and senior community-engaged scholars and practitioners who currently support the development of future community-engaged scholars through national workshops, consulting, and professional development within their respective institutions. Each reflection presents a failure self-identified by the contributor and subsequent learning

Table 1. Guidance for Preventing Failure in Community-Engaged Scholarship

Birbeck's (2014) poor motives that can lead to failure	Weaver et al.'s (2018) best practices to prevent failure	Flicker et al.'s (2007) barriers to address in advance to prevent failure
• Working without partners doesn't work • The research mercenary • The project succeeds . . . but at what cost? • The medical tourist • The academic "exchange" program	• Open & authentic communication • Articulated mission • Mutual trust, respect, & commitment • Reciprocal benefit • Joint ownership • Clear expectations • Reflective action • Plan for closure or sustainability • Regular communication between partners • Regular in-person meetings • Employee project engagement • Critical reflection	• Lack of trust & respect • Inequitable distribution of power & control • Conflicts associated with different perspectives, priorities, assumptions, values, beliefs, language • Conflicts over funding • Conflicts associated with different emphases on task & process • Time-consuming process • Community representation & definition • Questions of scientific quality of the research • Proving intervention success • Inability to fully specify all aspects of the research up front • Seeking balance between research & action • Time demands • Interpreting & integrating data from multiple sources • Competing institutional demands • Risks associated with achieving tenure & promotion within academia • Expectations/demands of funding institutions • Political & social dynamics within the community • Deterrents to institutional, community, & social change

and development informed by the experience. A discussion of implications for practice and research follows. For the purposes of critical reflection, we loosely followed the DEAL model, as "originally developed in the context of service-learning" and used in professional training settings by Ash and Clayton (2009, p. 41). This approach consists of three sequential steps: (1) description of experience—for this essay, the experience equates to failure—in an objective and detailed manner; (2) examination of those experiences in light of particular goals—for this essay, our overarching goal is to analyze experienced contributors' CES failures with an eye toward exposing this taboo; and (3) articulation of learning, including future action that can lead to refined community-engagement praxis. The reflections are presented alphabetically by the contributor's last name and are not organized by their content. Readers will notice variations in writing style, vantage point, and unit of analysis, which reflects the original reflection prompt provided by the authors. Our observations and recommendations related to these variables are addressed in the following section.

The vignettes illustrate myriad challenges associated with community-engaged scholarship, including its unique complexity due to the variety of stakeholders involved in any given study or project. For example, five vignettes present challenges involving community partners (Foulis, Franz, Kowal, Kuban, and Thomas), whereas four vignettes discuss challenges within the university community with either peers (Mull and Pearl) or stakeholders in a supervisory role (Purcell and Wittman). Interestingly, only three vignettes (Foulis, Kowal, and Pearl) directly address challenges involving students. Regardless of the stakeholder type, the themes of expectations, preparation, strategies for addressing problems, and positive lessons learned from failure were consistent across each reflection. In the section following the contributor reflections, we provide a discussion informed by the aforementioned literature on failure as well as a discussion of implications for practice and future research.

Elena Foulis, PhD
Spanish Senior Lecturer
The Ohio State University

I teach a service-learning course for advanced Spanish majors ("Spanish in Ohio"). It is a required course for majors who will not be completing a study-abroad semester in a Spanish-speaking country. Over the past 9 years, I have developed sustainable relationships with a broad range of nonprofit and government organizations that serve the Latina/o community in the city. One of the major difficulties I have had is making sure that the organizations understand our class goals and objectives. There have been a couple of partnerships that have not continued because of two main reasons:

1. There is little to no engagement with the Latina/o community.
2. There is little to no exposure to the Spanish language, primarily through formal and informal conversations.

Along these lines, students often hesitate to report when this is occurring because they might like the organization, or they feel guilty about no longer working with them once they have made a commitment.

One specific example is a student who was tasked with creating a type of dictionary of terms in English and Spanish. Initially, the student and I believed that his involvement in this project would connect him with the Latina/o community and that he would get to interact regularly with the people and the language. This did not happen. The student enjoyed working on the project, but he knew it was a very large task. When he eventually explained this to me, it was too late to look for a different organization or try to modify his work there. I knew this was not a good partner for our class.

In an effort to lessen the student's burden and help him complete the work, I recruited two other students who could help with the translating project and requested that the organization allow students to promote their service and explain their mission to the community. Students really enjoyed completing the project and getting to finally reach out to the Latina/o community, the intended audience for the project and for our class goal. I still believe that, especially in comparison to other class peers, the student who initially started working with this organization did at least two times as much work as the others in the class. This is something that I try to prevent because students should be completing a similar amount of work. I decided that before I allow students to work with an organization, I have to share our goals—in person or via email—to make sure they understand what students need to accomplish and for me to understand how the organization works with the Latina/o community; that is, is it direct or indirect contact? Essentially, if the organization does not provide an organic or semistructured way to engage with the language or the community, we do not form a partnership. This has always been a hard decision to make because many of the organizations do wonderful work, but student learning is at the center of the class.

Nancy Franz, PhD
Professor Emeritus, School of Education
Iowa State University

I had 6 years under my belt as a county-based university Extension faculty when I started working in a new county. I was thrilled to be bringing research-based youth development research and curriculum to rural communities and especially to a Native American reservation. One of my college roommates was a Native American, and I was drawn to the earth-based culture. Each year, I was charged with starting 4-H clubs around the county—a 100-year-old successful research-based youth development model. 4-H clubs are local affiliations of the largest youth development organization in the United States and are facilitated by the publicly funded, university-based Cooperative Extension network. Administrators on campus were especially interested in expanding 4-H to underserved audiences. So, every fall I went to the reservation to meet with the youth leader to urge her to start a 4-H club. Every year she politely turned me down. The fifth year she not only turned me down; she kindly suggested I spend more time on the reservation getting to know the youth and their families to more fully understand their youth development needs.

I was stunned! How could I as a university youth development expert not know what was best for all the youth in my county! This advice went against my training on using research to inform my work and the expert model as Extension's main educational delivery model. I was impatient with the Native people. How could they not see the great opportunity I was giving them and take action? So, in response I decided to research my relationship with the tribe. I interviewed a 4-H leader who worked on the reservation and was a member of the tribe. I also talked with Extension coworkers and others who worked with Native Americans. What I discovered made me take a hard look at myself and made me fundamentally change the way I engaged with others and their communities.

I was seen by the Native Americans as that little White girl who thinks one size fits all! It was also hard for them to trust me because they believed I represented the government—not a big stretch since my office was located in the county courthouse. Most importantly, their experience with universities was that students and faculty would come into their community to conduct research and projects and maybe bring some resources and then leave without much benefit added or even sometimes make conditions worse than before they arrived. So, what was I as a White girl with all this baggage to do? I took the advice of the youth leader and became more involved with the tribe. I joined the food-buying club and helped fill orders at the health department on the reservation. I attended pow wows and camped at the tribal campground. I attended professional development about native culture and relations. I helped a coworker with her program on the reservation and got to know the native leaders. I also started integrating the tribe and tribal land into my countywide youth development programs.

Slowly, requests came to me from the reservation and the school that native students attended for youth development programs. I was finally learning the lessons of leading with the needs of my community partner in my engagement work instead of leading with my needs. I also learned over and over again the value of being patient for the readiness of my tribal partners for me and my resources. When I started learning these lessons, I found it was easy, rather than frustrating, to work in equal partnership with this community. This awareness resulted in hiring them as experts for programs on and near the reservation. With each program we led together, I learned to let go a bit more of my expert stance and to be more open to community engagement as a complex and individualized partnership. I discovered that if we first learned who we are together, then it is easy to stay focused on common goals even if we get to them in different ways!

Many questions have arisen for me from my failure to start a 4-H club on the reservation. Why do we as scholars think we know what is best for a community that is not our own? How do we best build trusting and enduring relationships with people not like ourselves? How do we discover the history and noise behind the work we want to do to discover important perceptions, norms, and values that impact the work? How do we mesh the needs of our community partners, the needs of the university, and personal needs, especially when they seem to differ greatly? For me, I have found listening, hearing, watching, discussing, knowing, and setting common goals before taking action—even though this takes time—is critical for successful community-university engagement. It really is not about me—it is about the communities I work with!

Monica M. Kowal, PhD
Lecturer III and Associate Dean of Community Engaged Research
University of New Mexico

The Office of Community Engaged Learning & Research (CELR) at the University of New Mexico (UNM) fosters quality experiential learning opportunities for students, supports faculty with their community-based teaching and scholarship, and facilitates mutually beneficial campus-community partnerships. In the fall of 2015, CELR was approached by one of our campus partners in Student Support Services who had been working with a local nonprofit agency whose mission was to develop mentors and tutors to work with third-grade students within the public school system.

As CELR had already developed a two-semester course sequence on leadership training, it was agreed that we would use those classes as for-credit options for students who wanted to join the corps of mentors. The agreement was that the nonprofit agency would be responsible for recruiting students from UNM, as well as our local community college and a private 4-year liberal arts college located 50 miles north. The agency would also pay for and conduct background checks needed for mentors to work within the public schools. CELR would develop the curriculum for the courses based on the agency's training framework (which lacked detail and specific student learning outcomes), and our office would fund and train instructors to teach the two three-credit courses. Students who wanted to become tutors would have to take the courses in order to be certified to work with students in the three pilot public schools. Although we did develop a memorandum of understanding with the nonprofit agency outlining what each of our respective responsibilities and commitments were, nothing prepared my office and staff for the unforeseen issues that began to arise as soon as the classes began. The courses were listed as enrollment with instructor permission only, which means that the instructor of record would have to approve each person who wanted to enroll in the class. This was done in order to ensure that all students enrolled had gone through the agency's recruitment and background check processes. Prior to the class beginning, there were only eight students enrolled. This was far below our minimum enrollment for a class to "make" for the semester, but as we were just getting this program off the ground, we made a special exception.

However, there were 21 students in the class on the first day of school. I double-checked our registration system and still saw that only eight were officially enrolled. I assumed that perhaps students had not yet enrolled, so I opted to wait the full week to let the registrants get settled. In the second week, however, the situation had not changed. Twenty-one students were showing up to the class, but only eight were officially registered. I asked the instructor to collect information from the students who were not registered so that I could figure out the discrepancy. As it turns out, the recruitment officer for the nonprofit agency had been telling potential mentors that they did not have to register for the class—that they could just go and sit in and get the certification. Needless to say, this was an unexpected and misguided statement by the partner. In no way would my university allow nonregistered students to be taking classes without registering and paying tuition. When I approached the partner agency about this, the director was genuinely surprised. From his point of view, he did not charge for training his mentors, so why should they be required to pay tuition?

The issue of the unregistered students was dealt with, but suffice to say, the damage had been done. It was clear from this point forward that the needs and operating ethos of the nonprofit did not align with the needs and operating ethos of the university. Although we could have certainly worked through these issues, as time progressed the director of the nonprofit started to make requests that we simply could not meet.

After several other miscommunications and overstepping of agreed responsibilities and commitments, we eventually ended our relationship with the agency and dissolved our MOU.

In retrospect, the needs of the partner agency were not immediately transparent—not because they were being secretive or dishonest, but because the evolution of the agency was not yet fully realized. Also, as a new and growing nonprofit agency, they misunderstood the structural limitations and policies that guided our practice as an institution. A more fully fleshed-out MOU was certainly needed, and more planning and preparation was needed prior to the students' enrolling in the class. This would have certainly ironed out the issues that arose and would have also more clearly laid out the restrictions and barriers that each partner faced. That said, we acknowledge that sometimes the favorability and the timeliness of the opportunity does not always serve the best interest of either party in the relationship.

Adam J. Kuban, PhD
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Ball State University

Facing Addiction in East Central Indiana is a project under its national, nonprofit umbrella (The Facing Project) that aims to tell the stories of those who struggle (in)directly with addiction and to create ongoing dialogue about the topic: how individuals cope, how medical personnel address and treat it, how family and friends support those who struggle, and why it is important to share one's personal story with the community.

This iteration represents collaboration among The Facing Project's cofounders, a community task force, an integrated care facility, an addiction treatment program, undergraduate students at Ball State University, and residents throughout Central Indiana. To date, The Facing Project has spread to over 75 communities nationwide, resulting in more than 20,000 books centered on hyperlocal issues such as autism, depression, and poverty. Student writers knew their interviewee (or storyteller) by the end of September 2016, reading related literature about the topic before that time. Interviews occurred through the end of September and into October, with a draft of the written stories submitted in early November. Our community partners, cofounders of The Facing Project, and I offered content edits for the students. Their revised stories were submitted in mid-January 2017 to allow for ample time to create the book, publish it, and make abundant copies by the first of two community debuts on March 30. The second community event occurred on April 12, meaning this community-engaged project spanned an entire academic year.

Some students, typically those with public relations and advertising majors, contributed to the publicity and planning for Facing Addiction in East Central Indiana. They were responsible for the creation of press releases, event flyers and programs, and event promotion via buttons, stickers, and business cards. The 47-page book—*Facing Addiction in East Central Indiana*—debuted at the Public Works Building in Anderson, Indiana, on March 30, 2017, via a live monologue and multimedia event; the second event occurred at Cornerstone Center for the Arts in Muncie, Indiana, on April 12, 2017. For both, we arranged for expert panelists to discuss and interact with those in attendance. Panelists included county sheriffs and prosecutors, legislative district council members, and community partner contacts. The purpose of the book was to inform and educate readers about the struggles and difficulties associated with addiction, a disease that afflicts many. The primary purpose of the community events was to share these local stories, promoting further awareness about this often-misunderstood topic.

Coordination presents a major challenge to a project like this: keeping track of writers' interview progress, encouraging storytellers to reply promptly, planning photo shoots, working with the student designers—and this is just for the resultant book! Even more coordination is required to track progress for all multimedia deliverables as well as the eventual community event. Securing commitments from our aforementioned panelists also presented challenges. Two of our community partners contributed financially—but in different amounts—toward the publication expenses associated with book copies. When we began the project in fall 2016, I was under the impression that we had the same objective: to inform and educate. And I truly believe that all partners maintained that overarching goal through the duration of the project; however, once money became involved, I had to mediate a "size issue" between the two partners who had monetary investment in the final look of the book.

In short, the partner who, on behalf of their organization, had contributed more dollars toward the copies and distribution of the resultant book wanted a larger company logo on the inside front cover of the book. The other partner who had financially contributed, albeit in a smaller amount, objected to this. I found myself in the middle, particularly because I had not clearly outlined what each partner would get as a result of their monetary contribution. In other words, we had no written agreement, or contract, to resolve this problem.

Fortunately, I was able to reiterate the broader goal of the project and convince them to look beyond the "size issue" that created the conflict. In the end, we settled on an oral agreement where the partner who contributed more had a company graphic that occupied 2/3 of the inside cover of the book, and the other partner who contributed less had an image in the remaining 1/3 of the available space. All community partners, including those who were not able to financially contribute, were listed at the back of the book.

As a faculty member, I am not explicitly trained in project management, so I had not focused on the contractual details that could have circumvented this problem/failure. How do we best prepare future faculty, especially those entrenched in engaged, project-based settings, to draft such contracts? And do we allocate ample time and discussion toward conflict-resolution skills?

Casey D. Mull, PhD
Assistant Director of Extension
Purdue University

Armed with an undergraduate degree from a top 20 university, I was knowledgeable (overly so), well equipped, and excited in my first job. I was working as an engagement practitioner within the Cooperative Extension Service, the adult education organization that transfers the innovations of the land-grant universities to clientele through not-for-credit classes, workshops, and technical assistance (Mull et al., 2018). The Cooperative Extension System and the U.S. Department of Defense initiated a partnership in the late 1980s (Cox & Long, 1986; Elrod, 2010). The global war on terror was ramping up and I had been hired to be one of the first individuals dedicated solely to supporting military audiences through youth development programming. The role served 12 military installations statewide as well as the county extension faculty members working with military-connected audiences through their own programming.

Being new and the first in my position, I met with all the major stakeholders, including individuals at each military installation who might gain from the workshops Cooperative Extension could offer. Within the first 6 months, I convinced my supervisor to open a training opportunity to these military civilian staff members, a training typically internal for Cooperative Extension employees. This opportunity would extend our programming to allow the community partner to expand our outreach through the community partner's network.

Grant funding supported the registration fees for these community partners to attend. I had worked with university staff as well as military community staff to share costs, being transparent and maintaining open lines of communication. The organizational systems to register and communicate with these external clienteles were adapted. I navigated the hierarchical military travel approval system with success. These professional development offerings differed greatly from the on-installation training offered by the military itself.

Six staff members from two installations were set for the 3-day training for all new county faculty members at a residential university facility. They would arrive at the same time, learning side-by-side with their university counterparts and partners. I would complete a concurrent session the final day of the three-day training to focus on specific content related to the university–community partnership. On the morning of all of the attendees' arrival, I had a frantic phone call from my coworkers coordinating registration—the military staff members were upset and demanded to speak with me.

I had arranged for the community members to have the nicest accommodations at the university facility. The six military partners would be housed in hotel-style rooms, each with two beds. This was different from the other facilities, where university staff members would be in cabins with eight bunk beds and shared bathrooms. I assumed that offering the nice accommodations to the military partners as guests would be much appreciated by the military community partners. Within Cooperative Extension, it is not uncommon to share a room, particularly at this university facility. Unfortunately, sharing a room with coworkers was against all military norms and culture, in direct conflict with Cooperative Extension/university culture. Unless the military partners all had individual hotel-style rooms, they could not participate in the three-day training and would return to their worksite.

The situation did come to a partial resolution. I quickly secured additional hotel rooms off-site for each of the military community partners. This additional cost led to some university frustration but saved the damaged relationship. The military partners explained that their organizational policies prevent their staff members from sharing rooms. I had to smooth over the matter with my own university colleagues who thought the military staff members were ungrateful—they had been offered the best accommodations and found them unsatisfactory.

Weerts and Sandmann (2008, 2010) and others (Adams, 2014; Mull, 2016) highlight the importance of boundary spanners to help navigate some of these differences. Boundary spanners "act as knowledge and power brokers between university and external partners" (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008, p. 86). On the university–community dyad, the university did not understand the organizational policy and the military did not understand the organizational norm. I incorrectly believed that I understood the organizational culture. I only had a cursory understanding of the military needs based on my initial conversations. When I did not fully understand the military travel policies, it resulted in failure. I had risked the success of the partnership—as the military staff members were prepared to return to their installations and not participate in the training. In retrospect, I had been too eager to force the military partners' needs into the university opportunity. A boundary spanner would have brought all perspectives to the table and perhaps would have cocreated a new professional development program rather than forcing the military partner into a university opportunity that was not developed around their needs and expectations.

Drew Pearl, PhD
Director of Community Engagement Research and Publications
University of Alabama

At a previous institution, my responsibilities included working with faculty members who expressed an interest in adding service-learning to their teaching. Among the strategies to accomplish this was a year-long professional development cohort that included monthly topical workshops and individual coaching sessions. Participation in this particular program required an application that included a teaching philosophy and specific statement of interest in utilizing service-learning in the classroom. The faculty member in question was approved by the selection committee to participate in the program based on an apparently genuine desire to have students learn their academic material through participation in a service-learning activity that addressed an identified community need in an accounting course. The proposed activity was to partner with Volunteer Income Tax sites to prepare tax returns for individuals who would not be able to hire a professional tax preparer.

It did not take long for issues to begin to emerge. The faculty member (FM) was the only member of the cohort not to respond to emails to schedule times for the group to meet and would rarely attend meetings. When we were finally able to connect for an individual coaching session, another issue emerged. Despite expressing an interest in working through Volunteer Income Tax sites in the application for the program, FM instead wanted students to provide tax services to wealthy individuals because that would be more interesting for the students. I tried to work with the faculty member and help them understand how service-learning should address an identified community need and help students develop an "enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility" (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995, p. 112), explaining that by working with clients of a Volunteer Income Tax site, students would be able to demonstrate their learning by helping individuals learn about the process. Volunteer Income Tax site work would have the added benefit of exposing the students to the broader context of how difficulties in navigating the tax code can directly impact people in their own community. My suggestions were often dismissed because I "didn't understand how things worked."

The situation did not really resolve; it essentially fizzled out. I spent a great deal of time emailing and otherwise reaching out to FM to try and reschedule coaching sessions and make-up meetings and provide resources that I thought would be helpful. Responses from FM were infrequent at best, and eventually stopped completely. Because FM did not fulfill the requirements of the program, they did not receive a completion certificate for inclusion in their promotion and tenure dossier.

A major takeaway from this experience is a reminder not to fall victim to the sunk cost fallacy, which is the psychological concept that suggests people tend to continue an endeavor once an investment of money, effort, or time has been made (Arkes & Blumer, 1985). I know that it is important to remember that service-learning is not going to be an appropriate pedagogical approach for every faculty member, but because FM had initially expressed a genuine interest in learning more and connecting students to identified community needs, I thought it was my responsibility to make every effort to connect and "win over" FM, even when, in retrospect, the signals were fairly clear that there was a mismatch between FM's goals and the purpose of the cohort program.

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My research as a community-engaged scholar explores scholarship on engagement, including faculty and organization development to support the institutionalization of community engagement, and typically involves faculty and community partners with both the institution and community serving as partners. In this action-oriented, applied research, I function as content expert, facilitator, and researcher, with the roles often blurred. Acknowledging the blurring of these roles and my intention to transition between these roles is critical to successful execution of learning and change intervention and my research. My first study of this type also revealed the importance of negotiating and clearly outlining expectations regarding the roles and my transition out of the unit or organization. This experience also highlighted the importance of effective communication techniques and strong interpersonal skills in this work.

My first failure that significantly informed my practice and approach to action research involved miscommunication between a campus community-engagement leader and me regarding facilitation roles for a faculty development series. As an early career researcher, I naively and eagerly attempted to function in multiple roles simultaneously and unintentionally excluded the community-engagement leader whose engagement would have improved the series of organization development interventions. Specifically, I failed to step back as content expert and emphasize the role and expertise of the campus community-engagement leader who would continue supporting the faculty participants long after I completed the study. Unbeknownst to me, the issue came to a head, and I was called into a meeting with the community-engagement leader and the senior vice-president who had approved my research with the institution. I was blindsided, hurt, confused, and, if I am honest, angry with my institutional partner in how the issue was addressed.

Admittedly, though calm and receptive during the meeting, later in private I was defensive and thought of dozens of different, more acceptable (for me and my ego) ways for the issue to have been addressed. Nonetheless, there remained a legitimate issue with my facilitation approach, and I agreed to more clearly integrate the campus community-engagement leader as a cofacilitator and to defer to them as the internal resource. The study continued and was quite fruitful for the participants, the institution, and my learning and development as a scholar; however, there was an unnamed undercurrent of tension between the community-engagement leader and me that I simply avoided for the remainder of our work together.

With years between this experience and my current practice and a professional and interpersonal maturity that seemingly only comes with the passage of time, I have a greater understanding of the issue and ways in which I could have engaged more constructively with my research partner. Insufficient empathy, lack of understanding, oversensitivity, and my fear of engaging constructively with what I now know is a common, minor conflict led to hurt and resentment that I carried for too long. Thankfully, I now recognize the influence of our full personhood on community-engaged work, the benefits of negotiating expectations and roles clearly, checking in frequently, and equipping ourselves with conflict negotiation techniques. As we think about best practices and professional development for this work, I wonder how we might better equip students, professional staff, and faculty to engage more effectively interpersonally with university and community partners. Such communication and facilitation skills are fundamental to the success and sustainability of university-community partnerships and can benefit us professionally and personally.

Chippewa M. Thomas, PhD
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My experience involved a graduate faculty team at a research-intensive university with no background or experience in community-engaged scholarship that had conceptualized a publicly engaged research project. The project was initially devised to collect data through a local community-based organization committed to improving the health and mental comorbidity outcomes of members of an ethnically diverse community. This data would be analyzed and used to propose action steps that met the identified critical health needs of affected families and individuals living in the community. The faculty team initially approached the community-based organization without much knowledge of the local community demographics or sociopolitical and historical concerns.

The faculty team expressed interest in forming a partnership with the community-based organization by way of a memorandum of understanding (or articulation agreement) that included that they were interested in producing manuscripts for publication from the project and leveraging the data to procure grant funding to support their efforts. The faculty team intended to utilize a community-based participatory approach, which they had little to no experience with, and working in partnership with the community was also new to them. In recent years, faculty who taught at the university had visited and conducted research in the community. University placements for student field experience, internships, co-ops, and course-embedded service-learning activities were also happening in the local community.

Pockets of diminished community trust in the university already existed in the local community. Although there was a long-standing history of members of the university community engaging community members by way of the local schools, businesses, agencies, and affinity groups, members of the community were skeptical when approached by the members of the university. The faculty team was unaware of the skepticism they were likely to encounter with the community-based organization and of how the (us and them) distrust could potentially impact the work that they were proposing to accomplish. In the first several meetings, an exchange of information did not occur. The faculty team presented as the experts, communicated the project objectives, yet did not ask questions nor demonstrate an openness to learning about what the community was interested in getting out of the partnership. The faculty team did not convey a desire for a cocreation of knowledge and a bidirectional approach, nor did they communicate a desire for reciprocity.

This experience served as a reminder that faculty teams should receive some education and training in community partnership development and engagement practices. Since such training exists at the university and in other spaces, the faculty team could access this information to gain greater understanding and insight into best practices for their intended engagement. The work of partnership formation can be long and require ongoing, consistent communication, negotiation, and planning. Additionally, the faculty team's precontact and initial contact plan should include what they have learned from and about the community. Information gathered from listening sessions can be later used to inform next steps in the process of relationship formation and project planning.

Amanda Wittman, PhD
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Cornell University

My example of failure concerns an error I made as a newly appointed administrator when giving a talk about our campus programs at a conference. In essence, I misconstrued the expectations my vice president had for me, while simultaneously misconstruing the expectations the conference organizers had for my invited talk. I made the wrong choice when presenting, a choice that cost me a great deal of trust with my supervisors, even as it yielded positive feedback from the conference organizer. Here is what happened.

I was 2 months on the job in a well-publicized, new, campuswide unit for community engagement. I was asked to speak at a statewide conference about a topic of past research, and I was excited to both represent my new university and stay connected to work I had previously enjoyed. My supervisors agreed that I should speak and that my talking points would be on the topic of assessing community engagement, an area I had previously presented on and was comfortable speaking about. I confirmed with the conference organizer and drove to the conference, feeling confident and prepared about my topic.

I was unprepared for how much attention my role was given. In this context, I was not recognized for my own work; instead, I was a clear and visible representative of my university and the initiative that we were embarking upon. I was moved on the agenda to a keynote slot at the end of the day and asked by the organizer to reflect on and wrap up the conversation that had occurred, while also sticking to my main theme of assessment. "Of course," I said, feeling like I could hit on many of the main themes that I had heard throughout the day. I presented, with brief notes and with a roving mike, by connecting the importance of assessment as a way to address many of the challenges that we had chewed on together at the conference. I spoke for my 20 minutes, answered a few questions, and was done. The conference organizer came over and told me I did a great job, and that it was a good end to the day.

I left the conference and got on a flight to the International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement (IARSCLE), where I connected with colleagues from my office. It was there that I found out that the vice-provost and the faculty director of the program had been watching my talk remotely, and they were unhappy. Very unhappy. I had not stuck to the talking points we agreed on. They thought I had not represented the initiative and our university in a good way. I had not honored the work that my colleagues had put into our initiative, and my speaking was out-of-control, and I was off-message. I was to have a formal reprimand lodged in my file. I had failed to represent the important work my university was doing to support community engagement in a way that leaders felt was authentic and correct. It was a blow to my confidence and undermined the trust that I was beginning to build with my new colleagues. To resolve this situation, I ate humble pie. I apologized. I accepted that it would be 2 years before I was trusted to be asked to be in that kind of situation, and I have never been asked to represent us at that particular conference again. I also reflected on the ways that my position and title are as important to communicating community engagement as my research and programming skills.

Almost 5 years later, I can recognize the positives that came out of crashing and burning in my first big presentation at this job. I learned that institutionalizing community engagement—as with all aspects of community-engaged work—must be done through relationships. My failure slowed down relationship trustworthiness, although I appreciate my colleagues, even the VP, who acknowledged that although the failure had happened, we could move on from it. It helped us create practices to ensure that the unit was on the same page, and it allowed us all to have a conversation about expectations. I grew as a person, though I work hard not to be in that kind of situation again.

Reflection Summary

These nine reflections illustrate the value of reflective practice in CES, particularly as it helps us create meaning from failures and projects that unexpectedly go sideways. Notably, we each had multiple experiences to choose from and selected a lesson that resonated deeply and significantly impacted our practice as community-engaged scholars. As we endeavor to refine our individual practice, advance the research field, and cultivate organizational knowledge for CES within our institutions and the profession at large, individual reflections such as these provide valuable contributions to our knowledge base. Individual and organizational learning relies heavily, though not exclusively, on experience (Di Stefano et al., 2016); moreover, it is the process of critical reflection that enables us to generate meaning from our experience (Dewey, 1963). Therefore, holding space, or providing the opportunity and encouragement to share vulnerable reflections in a safe environment (Bell, 2009), is essential to facilitating and promoting learning from failure in CES. We propose that these reflections and our subsequent discussion help to solidify a foundation from which future reflective practice and dialogue may be encouraged.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

As previously stated, the impetus for this essay was to share lessons learned through individual reflective practice and to encourage our colleagues to share examples of failure in addition to our successes. Through our roles as research mentors for graduate students and early career colleagues, we each recognized how receptive our mentees were to lessons learned when projects did not go as planned. Although we were curious to learn the extent to which such experiences had informed our community-engaged practice and scholarship, we also recognize an opportunity for us to model reflective practice, particularly in the vulnerable scenarios in which we were not successful. Ultimately, our goal is to support sustainable, impactful community engagement in higher education. This goal is multifaceted and requires change across multiple levels within our institutions. We need organization norms and performance-related policies that accommodate and value learning from failure; institutional infrastructure and policies to address commonly experienced impediments to successful partnerships; and learning and development opportunities for students, faculty, staff, and community partners. Moreover, the prevalence of similar anecdotal stories suggests inadequate accountability within our practice. That is, we appear to be missing an opportunity to learn from mistakes, document both the failure and improved practice, and disseminate this information such that we advance our individual practice and the field more broadly.

Although our understanding of best practices has expanded since each of our contributors entered the field, there is little indication of what amounts to quality control at the individual researcher level. Institutional review boards theoretically provide oversight and guidance regarding best practices for engagement with community partners in their roles as coresearchers and participants in community-engaged scholarship. Likewise, peer journal and conference-proposal reviewers assist in maintaining standards for documenting detailed research protocols for studies involving community partners. Most midsize and larger institutions also have a centralized unit to support community-engaged scholarship through professional development options for faculty. Still, the examples provided in the contributor vignettes illustrate how the sum of these efforts remains inadequate. Individually and collectively, we have a responsibility to control for risks and potential in our research and, despite our best intentions and existing support structures, we can and do fall short—potentially at significant consequence to the parties involved.

We believe there are three central implications for practices to be gleaned from the lessons learned by our contributors. First, the need for adequate preparation and ongoing professional development cannot be overstated. Although graduate students remain a target population for these learning interventions, researchers also stand in need of ongoing professional development, including support for involving undergraduate students in CES and service-learning. There is also a need for tailored curriculum for community partners, whose valuable insight should inform these efforts at the local level. Essential to these training and development efforts is consistent monitoring and reporting that includes indicators for quality control. Second, the content for the recommended professional development needs to be carefully reviewed. As our understanding of best practices is further informed by research and awareness of shifting societal contexts, we must ensure that our learning interventions related to CES are responsive to the dynamic needs of our local communities and stakeholder groups. Third, our hope is for this reflective essay to inspire others to reflect on their own professional experiences and conceptualize failure as an empowering, educative experience that has the potential to enhance their practice and help others engaged in CES. In the following sections, we discuss these implications for practice in more depth. Table 2 provides an overview of the guidance we propose for addressing failure in community-engaged scholarship.

Preparation and Professional Development

Consistently, adequate planning and preparation are noted as necessary elements of successful community-engaged projects. This step is necessary for all parties, includ-

Table 2. Guidance for Addressing Failure in Community-Engaged Scholarship	
Preparation and professional development	Integrated graduate student education
	Ongoing research development for faculty
	Community partners as coteachers and colearners
Review and revision of best practices	Commitment to continuous improvement
	Engagement of stakeholders in policy and process review
Reconceptualizing failure	Cultivate awareness and address stigma
	Embrace constructive conflict
	Identify dissemination opportunities

ing faculty, staff, students, and community partners. The web of interactions among students, colleagues, administrators, and community partners presents myriad opportunities for misunderstanding and mishaps. Every community-engaged activity follows a timeline of engagement in which likely failure junctures could be identified as well as the actors involved during each phase. Engaging all stakeholders in clearly identifying possible hurdles and preparing is necessary, but it does not guarantee the complete elimination of unforeseen challenges. However, the deliberate process of anticipation, acknowledging what could go sideways, provides alternative strategies and clarifies expectations for the overall project. Establishing expectations for all involved parties coupled with routine, preplanned check-ins helps to clarify the various stages of the project. Such project-management strategies and techniques are fundamental to community-engaged scholarship yet are rarely included in disciplinary-based curriculum. Therefore, universities and research associations have an opportunity to expand their professional-development offerings for faculty.

Likewise, ongoing professional development provides continuous support for CES researchers as they engage with community partners. We were not surprised to find interpersonal and communication challenges in each of the vignettes. Inevitably, conflict eventually emerges in our professional lives, and campus–community partnerships are no exception. Because partnerships involve boundary spanning and increase the likelihood of encountering cultural and organizational differences, conflict is more likely to emerge. While recognizing conflict is likely, it is equally important to note that conflict is healthy and can be productive and even beneficial when engaged constructively (Runde & Flanagan, 2013). However, there is no guarantee a community-engaged scholar has adequate preparation and experience in conflict management. When misunderstandings, missteps, and mishaps occur, having access to on-demand support can help to deescalate conflict and provide constructive strategies for moving forward. For example, scheduled check-ins or required reporting could aid in addressing problems in a timely fashion and prevent further complication.

Review and Revision of Best Practices

As research mentors and planning-committee members of a CES workshop targeted to doctoral students and early career faculty, the contributors and authors of this reflective essay have observed a marked shift in the knowledge and competencies of our annual cohorts of workshop participants. It is clear to us that as a field of inquiry, community engagement and CES has solidified its position, and its influence has spread. Indicators of this growth appear as more nuanced understanding and articulation of CES concepts, current best practices, and the thoughtful critique provided by novice researchers who are nonetheless steeped in values and conventions of collaboration and partnership for the greater good. As a result of these observations and subsequent discussion, we as a planning committee have refined our workshop content to build upon the substantive foundational levels of knowledge, understanding, and capacity of our participants. Because these workshop participants represent a broad swath of disciplinary backgrounds and institutional types and sizes, their knowledge of CES indicates an expanded understanding and integration of best practices.

The degree of expertise exhibited by these researchers who would otherwise be characterized as novice, combined with our own experiences in failed CES, suggests a need to review and potentially revise curriculum to reflect our deepening knowledge base that informs CES. This recommendation also acknowledges significant contributions to the literature in recent years. For example, Post et al. (2016) compiled a compelling edited volume of emerging, next-generation scholars whose work is both public-facing and community engaged. Likewise, Dostilio's (2017) edited volume defines a comprehensive competency model for the entire professional field of community engagement professionals who support the work of CES and whose competencies mirror those required for nonadministrative roles involved in CES, such as faculty and graduate students. Moreover, Sandmann and Jones's (2019) edited volume features the revised and expanded 20th anniversary issue of the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, for which a Delphi study was conducted in order to feature the most significant articles in the history of the journal. In sum, the field has expanded, and our understanding has more depth and nuance than ever before; however, there is no guarantee that these updates are equally present in curricula across institutions, as updates and revisions require resources and institutional commitments that are not consistent or guaranteed throughout higher education.

Reconceptualizing Failure

As evidenced in the vignettes, moving on beyond failure in CES takes time. In some instances, years passed before the researcher came to terms with the challenge and fully appreciated the lessons learned. Balancing our subjective reactions with an objective assessment of our failure provides a healthy space to explore our role and contributions. Such critical reflection requires us to examine our assumptions (Knowles et al., 2015). Objectivity allows us to critically reflect on failure and ascribing responsibility, or its origination, and the related thought process. Naming responsible parties and actions does not equate to ascribing blame, which is not helpful. Conversely, identifying the origination of the failure and the responsible actors allows us to refine future projects and informs possible learning interventions to prevent similar failures in the future.

We noted a reluctance to ascribe even partial responsibility for failures to students and community partners. This hesitancy to not accept responsibility in totality reflects an awareness of the power dynamics of scholar–student and scholar–partner interactions yet is nonetheless problematic in preventing future failures. We educators are likely to accept blame ourselves, which may be warranted, yet it is also possible to have issues originating with students and/or partners, too. Balancing our subjectivity with an objective assessment of our failure provides a healthy space to explore our roles and contributions. Embracing the mind-set of failure equating to learning and program improvement will encourage more thorough and accurate critiques of our work. It is equally beneficial to maintain an optimistic outlook on one's work. Even in the midst of challenge, remembering the beneficial impact of our efforts can help us work through difficulties and sustain our practice, particularly when navigating institutional infrastructure and culture that may inadequately support community-engaged research.

Recommendations for Future Research

This area of inquiry provides a wealth of opportunity for future research, and we believe two specific interconnected threads of potential research warrant further consideration. First, there is a need to further explore how researchers navigate challenges in community-engaged research. In documenting these lessons learned, we can further refine best practices and develop interventions to address inadequate professional development for community-engaged scholars. Such research would have implications for faculty development and support as well as the expanding literature on the needs of graduate students and next-generation scholars (see Overton et al., 2017). For example, targeted workshop series including topics such as effective communication strategies, team building and collaboration, intercultural competence, and engaging in conflict constructively could help develop capacity for graduate students considering community-engaged research. Likewise, such offerings are equally beneficial to faculty members who may be interested in community-engaged scholarship.

Second, case studies on how researchers and their institutions respond to failures could provide noteworthy contributions to scholarship on the institutionalization of community engagement, including recommendations for policy and infrastructure that result from these experiences. Examples provided in the vignettes illustrate the potential consequences of inadequate institutional support and oversight. Not only is it helpful to know which organization and leadership models have proven successful, it is equally beneficial to understand which models are not effective and why. We are hesitant to advocate for increased institutional bureaucracy for community-engaged scholars to navigate, yet we recognize the value of university-facilitated efforts to maintain integrity and quality while monitoring community-engaged activity. Research on best practices for shared responsibility between faculty and community-engagement units and their leaders could help determine which pitfalls to avoid, how to do so, and related rationales.

Conclusion

Professional failure, although uncomfortable and troubling in the moment, yields tremendous opportunity for growth and development, particularly for CES researchers. Failure is an ever-present possibility, so the question becomes how do we prepare for, navigate, and respond to it? Moreover, how do we benefit long term from such experiences through an enhanced awareness and understanding of our work? We must also consider how we encourage one another to share and learn from our failures in order to improve our collective practice and advance the field of community engagement. Our willingness to engage in critical reflective practice, individually and collectively, requires courage and has the potential to amplify the positive impacts we desire for our communities.

Even as those of us participating in community-engaged research can support one another in this work in real time, we also have a responsibility to document our learning for future scholars. Likewise, we must consider how we integrate curriculum and training designed to equip future community-engaged scholars and practitioners to navigate failure and leverage their experience as a learning opportunity to improve practice. We encourage readers to explore the ways in which their institutions promote reflective practice through ongoing professional development. For example, one author's university provides faculty and staff learning communities specific to community engagement. Our hope is that engaging in critical reflective practice will build capacity among ourselves and provide a more supportive network for those interested in community-engaged scholarship.

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