Community Engagement and the Educational Success of Underrepresented Students

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Abstract

This article introduces a special of issue of the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* focused on a 5-year research project examining the impact of community engagement on the educational success of underrepresented students. A research team from six universities was supported with a multiyear grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) program. This research project is one of the few multi-institutional, multiyear investigations to compare the similarities and differences of outcomes across different types of community engagement practices and institutional and community settings, one of the few research projects on community engagement outcomes focused on the experiences of underrepresented students, and one of only a handful of community engagement–focused studies to use propensity score matching to address the persistent criticism in community engagement research regarding the lack of attention to group equivalence between treatment and comparison groups.

Keywords: community engagement, underrepresented students, sense of belonging, service-learning, retention and persistence

I n 2014, a group of eight program directors who lead various types of higher education community engagement activities at six universities formed a research team to better understand the strengths and limitations of various approaches to student community engagement. Specifically, the team sought to study the ways in which different approaches to community engagement programming (academically embedded service-learning, cocurricular service experiences, sustained service experiences, service-based internships, student-initiated community engagement, near-peer mentoring) impact the educational success of participating students, and in particular, underrepresented students (i.e., students of color, Pell eligible, and/or first-generation college enrollees). In all, 14 different campus-supported community engagement programs were identified to be developed, implemented, and/or evaluated for the research project. These 14 programs, situated at six universities, became the basis for a series of research investigations that were supported over 5 years by the U.S. Department of Education, under the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) program. The findings from some of these investigations are presented in this special journal issue focused on the role of community engagement in advancing the educational success of underrepresented students.

This research project is one of the few multi-institutional, multiyear investigations that compare the similarities and differences of outcomes across different types of community engagement practices *and* across different types of institutional and community settings. It is also one of the few research projects on community engagement outcomes focused on the experiences of underrepresented students, and one of only a small handful of community engagement–focused studies to use propensity score matching to address the persistent criticism in community engagement research regarding the lack of attention to group equivalence between treatment and comparison groups.

The six sites who participated in the study are all public research universities, but vary in (a) selectivity, (b) proportions of enrolled underrepresented students, (c) whether students largely live on or near campus rather than commute from home or still live in their home communities, (d) geographic region of the United States, (e) degree of urbanicity, (f) types of community engagement programs offered; and (g) levels of institutional commitment and support for student community engagement. The overarching research project sought to capitalize on this institutional diversity and build a deeper understanding of how different contexts and approaches to community engagement programming affect the outcomes of participating students. Are there commonalties in findings regarding student educational outcomes across the different approaches to community engagement programming? Are particular approaches to community engagement more effective in promoting educational outcomes for students, especially underrepresented students? Does institutional setting matter in the kinds of outcomes that manifest for community engagement participants?

The leaders and directors of community engagement programs at the six university sites—City University of New York; University of California, Santa Cruz; University of Georgia; University of Illinois–Chicago; University of Memphis; and University of Minnesota—were invited to engage the students of their programs in a series of quantitative and qualitative studies to examine how community engagement involvement during college years affects the students' academic progress, retention, degree completion, and other educational outcomes. Since underrepresented students are most at risk of not persisting in and not graduating from college, a key focus of the overall research project was to study the effects of these diverse community engagement programs on underrepresented students (Kezar & Kitchen, 2020).

The articles in this special issue present some of the key findings from students' participation in the different community engagement programs. This introductory article opens this special issue with an overview of the overall project, the project's conceptual roots and the primary research questions it sought to investigate, and a description of the different types of community engagement programs that were investigated. In this introductory article, we also describe some of the lessons learned regarding conducting a multi-institutional, multiyear research study on community engagement, and we introduce and provide context for the articles that follow.

Underrepresented Students and Community Engagement

Higher education today faces a distinctive array of interrelated challenges. First, for some time, higher education has acknowledged the imperative to effectively educate a greater proportion of the population for a rapidly evolving, more globally connected workforce that requires a combination of advanced, specialized yet transferable skills obtained through education beyond high school, coupled with a broad range of soft skills, such as leadership, decision making, teamwork, and problem solving (e.g., Barton, 2006; Duderstadt, 2000; McGunagle & Zizka, 2020). Second, changing student demographics means that higher education institutions (HEIs) are educating more diverse student bodies, including greater proportions of underserved, underrepresented, and nontraditional students (e.g., students of color, first-generation college students, students with diverse aspirations for educational attainment, students from low-income families; Fry & Cilluffo, 2019). Third, college students increasingly are coming from metropolitan areas. The 2020 census data revealed 6.4% growth in the nation's urban population, with 80% of people in the United States now living in urban/metropolitan areas (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). In recent years, the percentage of adults with at least a bachelor's degree living in urban areas is outpacing the percentage residing in rural and nonmetropolitan communities, further widening the rural–urban education gap (Davis et al., 2022). Even as the rural workforce has become more diverse in recent years, urban areas also maintain greater racial and ethnic diversity and higher education levels, resulting in higher pay and earning potential in metro job markets (USDA, 2023). Fourth, costs of postsecondary education continue to rise, creating greater economic divides and, at many HEIs, particularly residential campuses, resulting in student cultures that are increasingly defined by affluence and privilege. Fifth, the academic standards that must be attained by students are rising, exposing differences in qualities of K-12 educational experiences and providing

advantages to students whose K–12 education is focused on preparation for postsecondary success (Price, 2021). Additionally, bachelor's degree completion of dependent students from the highest income quartile (59%) is nearly four times that of students in the lowest quartile (15%; Pell Institute & PennAHEAD, 2022), illustrating the challenges facing students from lower-income backgrounds as they navigate higher education. Clearly, higher education has yet to create and implement systemic interventions and support mechanisms that adequately address the needs of nontraditional and underserved students.

The challenges described above have increased the salience of the cultural differences that exist within and across HEIs as well as students' communities and backgrounds. For many underrepresented students and students from low-income and culturally diverse communities, their communities and experiences are not well-matched to the communities of affluence and privilege that dominate many HEIs (Chang et al., 2020; Lee & Harris, 2020; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Manning, 2000). Like most students, underrepresented students arrive at college with a strong desire to learn skills that will fulfill their hopes and dreams for their future and the future of their communities. They also bring with them good understanding of the challenges their communities confront, and they aspire to use higher education as a means to better their lives and the conditions of their communities. Yet all too often, they find that the college experience immerses them in an unfamiliar culture and a new environment that is or may appear isolated from the societal and cultural issues about which they care most (Karp, 1986; Langhout et al., 2009; Lee & Harris, 2020; Walpole, 2003). As Banks (2007), Lee and Harris (2020), and others have suggested, this culture clash and cultural divide lessens the capacity of students from underserved communities to develop a sense of belonging and engagement that is critical to persistence and success. It also inadvertently may stifle their interest in exploring new topics and areas of study, steering them to those few disciplines and major fields with which they are already familiar (Banks, 2007; Lee & Harris, 2020).

Findings from studies point to the heightened cultural, social, financial, and academic challenges students from underrepresented backgrounds face that often inhibit their capacity to engage with higher education, to develop a sense of belonging as a postsecondary student, and to persist in completing their degrees (Chang et al., 2020; Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020). Although many of the challenges are influenced by forces external to higher education, we believe that colleges and universities should be proactive in addressing and mitigating these challenges by creating meaningful and intentional connections with local and broader communities. We believe not only that HEIs can be more effective in helping all students bridge the cultural campus–community divide by building and engaging more deeply in partnerships with a broad array of communities, but also that such bridging is especially important for students from historically underrepresented backgrounds. We also believe that HEIs need to be seen as places that address issues important to all students so that every student can envision their dreams and aspirations of making the world better and can see higher education as a place to fulfill those dreams.

Much has been written about the value of participation in community-based learning and broader community engagement for advancing students' educational, personal, social, and career outcomes (e.g., Alexander et al., 2020; Bringle et al., 2010; Celio et al., 2011; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Schulzetenberg et al., 2020; Song et al., 2018; Soria et al., 2019). This literature also points to how, through such practices, HEIs can offer learning opportunities that allow students to bridge the campus–community cultural divide (Barnes et al., 2009; Kerrigan et al., 2015; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). However, we are concerned that higher education community engagement efforts are not adequately serving the most challenged communities and the students who come from them. Therefore, our multi-institutional project sought to enhance the educational experience and attainment of students from challenged communities by strengthening campus–community engagement efforts through the application of a systems approach to community engagement program implementation and impact analysis. Specifically, our partnership research project examined relationships among the *institutional, programmatic, and partnership dimensions* of campus–community engagement to assess the best practices (and poor practices) for an array of existing community engagement programs on our campuses that

currently involve students from low-income and underrepresented populations in community engagement activities in a variety of communities. These activities are designed to enhance participating students' sense of belonging, engagement (affinity) with the institution of higher education, continued enrollment (retention), and academic persistence. Although studies and evaluations of these efforts have demonstrated success in producing positive student outcomes, the success has not been universal across programs. In addition, there has not been adequate focus on the particular ways that different community engagement experiences impact students from underrepresented communities. Consequently, we worked to determine which programmatic conditions and components are the best predictors of securing positive outcomes for student participants.

Research Questions

Guided by a logic model that describes the relationships between and across the three dimensions (institutional, programmatic, and partnership), we worked to identify and implement universal and contextual factors that influence the success of community-based learning efforts, implicitly testing a multidimensional model designed to guide institutions of higher education in securing high-quality, high-impact community engagement efforts, with a focus on underrepresented and low-income students from challenged and underserved communities. For the purposes of this study, we used the federal definition of underrepresented students, which encompasses students who are first-generation postsecondary students, students of color, and/or low income (as measured by Pell eligibility, per guidelines provided by the U.S. Department of Education). The term "community engagement" refers to a wide range of experiences and programmatic approaches in which students actively engage in educational activities that involve some type of service to, in, and/or with a community. Across the various investigations of this research project, we examined the outcomes of students engaged in six types of community engagement approaches: credit-bearing academic service-learning courses; cocurricular service-learning; community-based internship; extended community engagement experiences; student-initiated community engagement; and near-peer mentoring. We measured students' educational success through standardized quantitative metrics, including grade point average, credits earned, persistence in postsecondary education, and degree completion. As is discussed in the student-authored article in Part 3 of this special issue (Do et al., 2023), these measures of educational success do not necessarily align with what students consider indicators of "educational success." We also conducted a series of qualitative investigations to provide further information on the programmatic factors and students' perspectives that may have influenced the observed outcomes.

The investigations of our multiyear research project were guided by the following overarching research questions:

- Is there a relationship between the involvement of underrepresented students in community engagement experiences and their educational success?

- Are there differences between the educational success of underrepresented students who conduct community engagement and comparable underrepresented students who do not participate in community engagement?

- Are there differences among the different types of community engagement experiences (service-learning, community-based internship, etc.) in their relationship to the educational success of underrepresented students? Are particular approaches to community engagement more effective in advancing the educational success of underrepresented students?

These questions framed the set of 14 investigations that were situated across the six university sites. As is reflected in the articles of this special issue, the particular sets of investigations at each of the six sites were further guided by more specific research questions tailored to the specific community engagement program type(s) and student populations studied.

Guiding Theories and Conceptual Frameworks

Across our studies, we considered the following set of theories and conceptual frameworks that offer insights into the

complex experiences of higher education students.

Family Income and College Success

Higher education scholars have highlighted the "hidden" status of low-income students and the particular challenges that low-income students face (e.g., Soria & Stebleton, 2013). When compared to students from higher income families, students from lower income families have been found to have a lower sense of belonging and adjustment and tend to do less well in their postsecondary studies (e.g., Lehmann, 2007; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Soria et al., 2019). In addition, lower income students are more likely to be negatively impacted by interpersonal, institutional, and macro-level classism on their campus, which is associated with lower levels of sense of belonging and, in turn, more intentions of dropping out of college (Langhout et al., 2009; Wilson, 2016). Regarding postsecondary students in the United States, more research is needed to understand more fully the effective strategies for improving underrepresented students' sense of belonging. In the U.K., findings from several research studies suggest that the creation of a university infrastructure that brings together first-generation college students and does not isolate them from their cultural communities can improve students' sense of belonging (Borrego, 2008; Soto, 2008). To this end, we hypothesized that university-sponsored community engagement experiences in which lower income students have opportunities to engage with and give back to the communities they are from will enhance their sense of belonging and, in turn, increase their likelihood to stay enrolled.

Sense of Belonging

Belonging has been identified as a human motivation considered universal, with implications beyond immediate functioning, affecting behavior in many situations, and with a variety of emotional consequences (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Strayhorn, 2019). It is viewed as necessary for effective functioning regardless of cultural or environmental background. The need for belonging first surfaced in Maslow's (1943) theory of motivation as one of five fundamental motivations: physiological, safety, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Maslow argued that without a sense of belonging, individuals will not strive for confidence, achievement, and competency, and that a lack of belonging creates the foundation for maladjustment, including anxiety and depression. When belonging is satisfied, individuals are more resilient.

Through the years, perspectives on how to enhance students' sense of belonging have shifted. During the 1990s, Baumeister and Leary (1995) argued that humans are motivated to form and sustain a minimum number of enduring, positive, and meaningful relationships. They suggested that belonging can be fulfilled by any relationships perceived to be stable and likely to continue into the future. In turn, a lack of sense of belonging is most frequently manifested as social exclusion and rejection. The connection between sense of belonging and negative affect is empirically supported, with a robust number of studies finding connections between a lack of belonging and loneliness (Mellor et al., 2008; Stevens et al., 2006), as well as between social exclusion and anxiety (Baumeister & Tice, 1990), lower self-esteem (Zadro et al., 2004), poorer memory (Gardner et al., 2000), and physical pain (Williams et al., 2000).

Bennett and Okinaka (1990) found that institutional belonging (commitment to one's college) is a stronger predictor of retention than academic performance. More recent studies have found that constructivist and experiential pedagogies that actively engage students in service-learning and research activities with their peers can foster the development of meaningful and lasting bonds, fulfilling students' need for belonging (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Greenberg, 1997; Scales et al., 2006; Soria et al., 2019). In light of this research, we hypothesized that providing underrepresented students opportunities to engage in constructivist learning experiences in the communities they are from can help them partner and form bonds with peers and others who are partners in their community-engaged work.

Culture of Affluence and College Culture Shock

Elite and selective HEIs, in particular, are increasingly manifesting a culture of affluence (Cushman, 2007; Torres, 2009). HEIs, especially the most selective institutions, have a history of catering to students who possess high levels of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Pascarella et al., 2004). In addition to the stress of moving

away from home and building a sense of belonging within a new environment, even the highest achieving underrepresented students can find themselves feeling isolated and are most at risk of falling behind academically as they struggle to learn and adapt to an unfamiliar campus culture (Blosser, 2020; Torres, 2009). Study findings have revealed that underrepresented students disproportionately lack high levels of valued cultural capital, such as proper use of particular language discourse, graduation from elite high schools, expensive and upscale clothing, and various social capital indicators (membership in student organizations, professional network connections used for personal and profession advancement, etc.; Pascarella et al., 2004). First-generation students, for example, have been found more likely to have a job and work more hours than non–first-generation students, making it harder for them to find time and opportunities to create a sense of belonging within the more affluent culture of their higher education institution (e.g., Billson & Terry, 1982; Pascarella et al., 2004; Perna et al., 2007; Pratt et al., 2019). Pulliam and Gonzalez (2021) suggested that high-achieving ethnic and racial minority students are often burdened by an imposter syndrome that can impact their sense of academic self-efficacy, engagement, and overall mental health, which in turn can detract from their willingness to persist in college. In this research, we hypothesized that providing underrepresented students opportunities to engage with the communities they are from can help them feel less isolated and can enhance their capacity to build networks with peers and others.

Experiential and Community-Engaged Learning

Tinto (1993) has argued that college students who are more academically and socially engaged in college and communities are more likely to persist in college. His position has been supported by research showing that engagement and experiences are key to persistence (e.g., Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2003). Interventions that increase students' personal engagement in learning should help increase persistence of students at greatest risk of dropping out of school. Several studies have found that participation in community engagement experiences, especially when integrated with academic coursework, can enhance students' social responsibility (Eyler & Giles, 1999), deepen understanding of diversity and cultural competence (Simons & Cleary, 2006), increase students' citizenship and civic skills (Celio et al., 2011), and strengthen their sense of community and belonging (Astin & Sax, 1998). For instance, Bringle et al. (2010) found that when comparing service-learning participants' ($n = 534$) and non-service-learning participants' ($n = 271$) intentions to reenroll at and graduate from their institution, enrollment in a service-learning course was positively related to students' intentions to continue at the same campus between the first and second year of their studies.

Findings from several studies described below suggest that certain programmatic characteristics (meaningful learning activities, opportunities for reflection, etc.) of community-based learning experiences can strengthen students' academic engagement, sense of belonging, and persistence. Among the various forms of student–community engagement experiences (community-based research, volunteering, internships, community service, etc.), the pedagogy of service-learning appears to be supported by the most robust and the strongest empirical evidence (e.g., Marcus et al., 1993). This pedagogy focuses on engaging students in applying academic knowledge from classroom experiences to address authentic societal issues in ways that meet a community need. Celio et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 62 studies of service-learning involving 11,837 students that found statistically significant differences across five outcome areas between students participating in service-learning and students in comparison groups. In all five outcome areas—attitudes toward school and learning, academic performance, attitudes toward self, civic engagement, and social skills—service-learning students had significantly larger gains, with mean effect sizes ranging from 0.27 to 0.43. These researchers also found that linking community experiences to the curriculum, student involvement and voice in the development of the experiences, community involvement in the development of the program, and reflection were associated with the most positive outcomes. Other meta-analyses of experimental and quasi-experimental studies of service-learning have found similar differences between students who participate in service-learning and control and comparison groups (Novak et al., 2007; Warren, 2012; Yorio & Ye, 2012).

Research on service-learning has also demonstrated that service-learning is related to increased multicultural competence (Einfeld & Collins, 2008) and decreased ethnocentrism (Borden, 2007). Einfeld and Collins (2008) examined the relationship between students' participation in a service-learning program and students' sense of social justice, multicultural competence, and civic engagement. Among positive outcomes, students developed multicultural skills such as empathy, patience, attachment, reciprocity, trust, and respect. Borden (2007) administered an ethnocentrism scale at the beginning and end of a class in which students engaged in service-learning. Students reported a significant decrease in ethnocentrism from the beginning to the end of the semester, and analyses of students' written reflections indicated that service-learning played a significant role in the reduction of ethnocentrism. These results support the use of service-learning to increase students' intercultural competence. Building on these various research findings, we hypothesized that pedagogies such as service-learning, undergraduate research opportunities, volunteering, and other community-based learning experiences may increase underrepresented students' engagement and investment in learning (Celio et al., 2011; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Gallini & Moely, 2003; Greenberg, 1997; Scales et al., 2006; Yorio & Ye, 2012) as well as their college commitment (Astin et al., 2000; Song et al., 2018; Strom & Savage, 2014), which have been found to be associated with student college persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Overall, the focus and approach to our study draws from a range of research literatures which suggest that increasing the engagement of underrepresented and underserved low-income students in challenged communities provides an opportunity to connect their college experiences to their lives, thus promoting greater academic engagement and sense of belonging, which in turn promotes student persistence and retention.

Logic Model

Drawing from these theories and conceptual framework, we developed a logic model to describe how we hypothesize the relationships among the inputs, activities, impacts, and outcomes of community engagement programming (see Figure 1).

On our six campuses, we worked with our campuses' community engagement programs, developed partnerships with programs that allowed them to be fully evaluated, and, in some cases, built new student community engagement programs. Our logic model hypothesized that, if implemented effectively, our programs should demonstrate that underrepresented students who participate in community engagement are more likely to have higher levels of higher education persistence, completion, and academic performance than comparable students who are not engaged in community engagement. In addition, by focusing on the inclusion of effective best practices drawn from the community engagement literature, our research also sought to build a better understanding of the relationship (if any) between programmatic approaches to community engagement (i.e., sustained community engagement experiences, academic service-learning, service-based internships, cocurricular community engagement) and particular student outcomes. In the end, for various reasons, we were not

Figure 1. Process Model for Community Engagement and Student Success
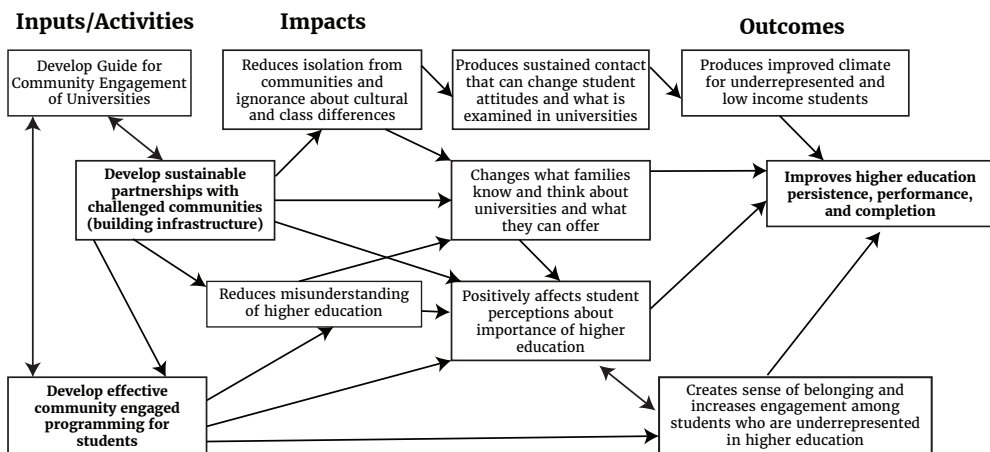
very successful in assessing the relationship of programming with students' sense of belonging and academic engagement as we had hoped. However, research investigations did produce useful findings regarding the relationship between underrepresented students' participation in particular types of community engagement programs and their academic persistence, performance, and completion.

Project Design

At the six participating universities, we examined the extent to which community-based learning experiences at our institutions were fulfilling their promise in advancing the educational success of underrepresented students. We found prior evidence of success for some of the programs and their participating students, but such results have not been universal. The approach we applied was largely to focus on and enhance existing community engagement programming, intending to leave sustainable programming in place while incorporating more systematic inquiries designed to increase understanding of both the outcomes that the programs produce for underrepresented students and the factors (institutional, programmatic, and partnership) that contribute to those outcomes. All six participating universities are public research universities; however, they are situated in very different regions of the United States and are diverse in context, ranging from largely residential campuses that draw students from across the country, to campuses that largely draw commuter students from the local (urban) communities. In addition to representing differing types of research institutions with differing approaches to community engagement programming, the eight research project leads from the six universities represent a range of disciplines, including psychology, political science, education, urban planning and public policy, as well as representatives from higher education administration. The range of disciplines ensured that the approaches would not be limited by disciplinary orientations. In addition, this disciplinary diversity allowed us to vary our methods across sites as appropriate to the focus of each institution, but always with a perspective of valuing mixed methods, especially for the cross-institutional insights that were collectively produced. As is demonstrated in the articles in this special issue, this approach was instrumental in providing evidence of community engagement program effectiveness that cuts across types of programmatic approaches and contexts, while also providing insights regarding programmatic aspects that were found to be more site and program specific.

Throughout the 5 years of the project, we collected data and evaluated successes of our programs on multiple cohorts of students at our respective campuses, combining archival and new data to provide a broad picture of effectiveness. The process unfolded uniquely at each campus due to each institution's various histories, differential administrative support for community engagement, variance in mission priorities, differing student populations, and the diverse programmatic and pedagogical approaches applied to community engagement. Given these differences, we did not attempt a priori to identify specific designs to use. Rather, each campus's research lead(s) developed their own approach consistent with their institution's history and goals, keeping in line with the principles, theories, and prior research described above. Although it meant that we did not perform a multisite exact replication, the work could be viewed as six conceptual replications of the principles underlying the project, uniquely tailored to each institution. As well as focusing on interinstitutional differences in settings and student populations, the multiyear nature of the research project allowed us to examine intrainstitutional designs over time, either through lagged implementation, experimental/quasi-experimental designs, or through propensity score matching (see, e.g., Maruyama et al., 2023, this issue), such that our institutions could implement innovative practices with some of our students, with other students available for comparison. In addition, during annual meetings of project leads held at the different campuses involved in the research project, we were able to share effective practices and research approaches and forge beneficial relationships to strengthen our collective community engagement and service-learning programs. Finally, in assessing student outcomes, throughout the project we envisioned treating institutions as single cases for multiyear single subject designs (using archival data to provide multiple baselines). Over the course of the research project, we completed 14 investigations, some of which are presented and described in this special issue.

Outcomes

For the quantitative analyses, the dependent measures we included across the campus investigations were campus climate, student sense of belonging, student academic engagement and persistence (reenrollment), academic performance, and completion. To ensure access to information on institutional enrollment, performance, and graduation, which allowed us to track retention, level of success, and completion without missing data, each of the participating institutions supported the time of a person from the institutional research (IR) office to assist with the deidentification of student data used in our studies. It is important to note that although the student outcome data we needed (demographics of student cohorts, persistence data, graduation data, etc.) were available at all our participating institutions, the method of accessing those data and the researchers' access to the data varied.

Signature Programs

Each of the six participating universities has a robust and intentional campus–community engagement agenda that is supported by the institution's leadership (e.g., president, provost, senior academic leader). Each campus promotes embedding student community engagement and other campus–community partnership work more fully into the academic fabric of the institution. Each participating institution is committed to offering robust community engagement opportunities that meet the needs of its diverse student population, as is evidenced by the inclusion of community engagement priorities and goals in institutional strategic plans; the allocation of significant resources toward the advancement of a robust, campuswide community engagement agenda; the presence of senior administration positions dedicated to securing the institution's status as a community–engaged university; involvement of analysts from the campus's institutional research office measuring the success of the institution's community engagement agenda; inclusion of community-based learning and other community engagement opportunities in student recruitment materials; the inclusion and valuing of community-engaged scholarship in the institutional faculty promotion and tenure documents; and a formalized commitment to participatory approaches to community engagement, which honors and embraces the knowledge, expertise, and experience of community partners. Each campus has the goal of further institutionalizing community engagement programming. This research project provided an opportunity to contribute to the community engagement and broader higher education literature by studying the experiences of a diverse group of engaged institutions that are using community engagement to address needs of their underrepresented students.

From among the many community-based learning programs operating at each institution, our research team members identified a set of signature community-based learning and engagement initiatives operating at their sites. Each researcher identified the program(s) or initiative(s) on their respective campus that best represented an exemplary and/or unique approach to involving students from underserved and underrepresented communities in high-quality community engagement experiences. Each approach also had to have a positive and strong reputation for demonstrated success at its respective institution.

The following six signature community engagement approaches were the focus of the various research investigations conducted for this project:

- *academic (credit-bearing) service-learning courses* (University of Minnesota; University of Illinois–Chicago; University of California, Santa Cruz; University of Georgia)

- *cocurricular service-learning* (University of Minnesota; University of Illinois–Chicago)

- *community-based internship* (University of Minnesota; University of Illinois–Chicago)

- *extended community engagement experiences* (University of Minnesota; University of Illinois–Chicago)

- *student-initiated community engagement* (University of Memphis; University of Georgia)

- *near-peer mentoring* (City University of New York, Graduate Center)

Some of these programs were part of several different investigations over the 5 years of the research project.

In this issue, we present the findings from

one investigation conducted at each of the six participating universities and include a set of other articles that examine other key issues regarding the study of community engagement experiences of underrepresented students. The goal of this special issue is to provide readers with a sense of the breadth of the investigations and approaches that were part of the overall research project, as well as to offer suggestions for advancing and improving research focused on examining the impacts of community engagement on underrepresented students.

Overview of the Special Issue

This special issue is divided into three parts. The first part presents findings from investigations that examined the impacts of various community engagement programs on the educational success of underrepresented students. Profiled in this part are research studies from the University of Minnesota, City University of New York–Graduate Center (CUNY), University of Illinois–Chicago, and the University of California, Santa Cruz. The University of Minnesota study focuses on the practice of academic (credit-bearing) service-learning and explores whether enrollment in service-learning courses is related to 4-year retention and graduation outcomes for students who are either low-income or first-generation postsecondary attendees, and those students who are both low-income and first-generation (Hufnagle et al., 2023). The University of California, Santa Cruz article also examines the effects of the pedagogy of service-learning, this time exploring different typologies of service-learning practice and their outcomes for participating students enrolled at a Hispanic-Serving Institution (Langhout et al., 2023). In contrast, the CUNY article examines the effects of a near-peer community engagement program—a program in which CUNY students mentor students in local high schools and two-year colleges through college application, enrollment, and retention milestones—on CUNY students who serve as near-peer mentors, the majority of whom are from underrepresented backgrounds (McCallen et al., 2023). The last article in this first part, from the University of Illinois–Chicago, presents the findings of a multifaceted study that compared the impacts of four different types of community engagement experiences—co-curricular service-learning, community-based internship, academic (credit-bearing) service-learning, and extended community engagement—on students' grade point averages, credits earned, persistence, and degree completion (Duarte et al., 2023).

Whereas the articles in Part 1 of the special issue focus on the approaches and impacts of community engagement as they pertain to advancing the educational success of underrepresented students, the three articles in Part 2 focus on providing insights into the use of programmatic features, challenges, lingering questions, and effective practices for advancing community engagement programming in ways that further institutional support for underrepresented students. Specifically, these articles foreground the importance of valuing the voice and active participation of underrepresented students in the development of programs designed to enhance their success. The first article presents a case study of the University of Memphis's Tigers First program, a Student-Initiated Retention Project in which underrepresented students at the institution engaged in collective action to create a student advocacy organization focused on promoting policies, programs, and support for students from underserved communities (Davenport et al., 2023). The article highlights the importance of maintaining attentiveness to cultural capital and the imperative of actively involving underrepresented students in the development of institutional policies and programs that affect them. The second article, from the University of Georgia, focuses on a Student-Initiated Retention Project called Georgia Daze, a community engagement initiative that focuses on growing and retaining Black students at the university (Quarles et al., 2023). The authors of the article describe how the student members of Georgia Daze participate in high school outreach, field programming, and on-campus engagement to achieve the project's goals. Along with offering a set of lessons learned, the article includes details regarding how the Georgia Daze project is structured, the ways the university supports this student-led organization, and its impact on yield and retention. The third article is authored by underrepresented students themselves, who argue that the dominant literature and higher education leaders' definitions of educational success for underrepresented students do not necessarily reflect how the students themselves define such success (Do et al., 2023). The article presents important insights into the importance

of student voice and perspective on community engagement in the development of underrepresented educational experiences.

The four articles contained in Part 3 of this special issue explore new horizons in the research and practice of community engagement programming. Maruyama et al. (2023) explore how the use of propensity score matching (PSM) can improve the quality of research on community engagement by providing a means to assess group equivalence when comparing results of treatment and comparison groups in nonrandomized studies. Building on this approach and studies employing PSM in Part 1 (See Duarte et al., 2023; Hufnagle et al., 2023; McCallen et al., 2023), Soria et al. (2023) provide an example of how PSM can be used to facilitate comparison among samples from multiple institutions. Engaging a sample of more than 27,000 students from 70 HEIs, the authors use PSM to match students who participated in community service with students from similar backgrounds who did not engage in service, in order to examine whether the effects of community service on postsecondary students' social change behaviors and social generativity are conditional upon students' demographic characteristics. Along with presenting the findings of their study, the authors describe the advantages and offer cautions in using propensity score matching. The final two articles in this part focus on the results of a multiyear effort to establish a standardized, quantitative measure for assessing the quality of service–learning courses (Matthews et al., 2023). The resulting instrument (Service–Learning Quality Assessment Tool, or SLQAT) is a quantitative diagnostic composed of 28 "essential elements" known to promote positive student outcomes in postsecondary service-learning. The authors describe how to apply the tool to courses and offer suggestions for using the tool for research and for course development purposes. The final article of the special issue is a presentation of the complete SLQAT instrument (Furco et al., 2023).

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Acknowledgments

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