# From Margins to Mainstream: Strategies for **Integrating Community-Engaged Learning Into Higher Education**

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#### Abstract

In the face of troubling public sentiment regarding the usefulness of college, this article shares a model for incorporating intentional and sustainable community-engaged learning (CEL) into the curriculum through a yearlong professional development faculty fellowship program. The authors share their experiences moving through the training, development, and implementation of their CEL courses as members of the inaugural cohort of the Tidewater Faculty Fellows program at Christopher Newport University. Drawing evidence from postfellowship critical reflection data, we (the authors) share our challenging and transformative experiences with integrating community engagement into the curriculum at a regional public liberal arts and sciences university in southeastern Virginia. Ultimately, we argue that community-engaged learning—as a curricular and extracurricular activity—is an ethical and viable strategy for demonstrating the value of the university to not only its graduates, but also the community where it is situated.

Keywords: community-engaged learning, pedagogy, community engagement, curriculum development

ccording to a July 2023 report from at CNU are encouraged to graduate with The Chronicle of Higher Education, "Service Distinction," an honor bestowed barely half of Americans believe on students who have contributed at least college has a positive effect on the 140 service hours—or, for those who percountry (Fischer, 2023). Tanking public form at least 400 service hours, to graduopinion regarding the usefulness of college ate as "Service Distinction Leaders." Both has (re)issued a sense of urgency among of these honors are highly coveted and college leaders to demonstrate their insti- pursued by Christopher Newport students; tutions' value beyond their campuses by nevertheless, CNU has struggled to intenengaging within the communities where tionally and sustainably incorporate "serthey are situated. One strategy for rebuild-vice" as more than just an extracurricular ing public trust and countering images activity on campus. Though many programs of colleges as disconnected, isolated, and on campus incorporate service requireuncaring has been to instill campuswide ments, and senior administrative leadercommunity engagement as a core feature ship proudly tout quantitative data on the of university mission statements. Indeed, number of service hours students perform at our own institution, "service" is listed in the community, CNU has struggled to inas one of the four pillars of Christopher tentionally integrate service or community Newport University (CNU), and several pro- engagement into its liberal arts and sciences grams on campus, such as the President's curriculum. Historically, service-learning Leadership Program and the Bonner Service has been undertaken sporadically by only Scholars Program, incorporate service as a few faculty members with little oversight core requirement for participation. Students and few professional development opportuEngagement sought to change that.

This article describes a yearlong professional development faculty fellowship program There is substantial evidence to show the that brought together faculty and program value of community-engaged learning in administrators from disciplines across the higher education. This growing body of university to integrate community engage- literature points to positive impacts on ment as a deeply valuable, intentional, and students' sense of self-worth, awareness essential element of the university's cur- of diversity, attitudes toward learning, riculum. First, the authors describe the con-social skills, civic development, and acatext within which this fellowship emerged, demic achievement (e.g., Al Barwani et al., before outlining the specific features of the 2013; Bernadowski et al., 2013; Billig, 2009; fellowship program. Then, using data from Carson & Domangue, 2013; Chen et al., 2012; postfellowship critical reflections, the authors share some of the key challenges and Researchers also attest to community-based transformations that emerged from this teaching and learning as a highly effective important effort. We write primarily for an pedagogical tool that encourages students audience of other educators and program to reflect on unequal systems of power and administrators who are interested in cultivating community-engaged learning as an essential feature of higher education. To that end, we conclude with reflections on the future of higher education and a call to action aimed at like-minded faculty, staff, and administrators.

### **Institutionalizing Community-Engaged Learning**

In the introduction to the Wiley International Handbook of Service-Learning for Social Justice, editors Kari M. Grain and Darren E. Lund (2018) trace what they call the "social justice turn" in service-learning. The editors critique the field's roots in charity and call for a critical approach to service-learning—one that prioritizes diverse voices, challenges unequal distributions of power and cycles of oppression, and operates in solidarity with partners to build resilient and equitable communities. This turn has Established in 1960 as a branch school for produced discrepancies in the nomencla-

nities to explore community-based teaching forms of engagement, where students, facand learning pedagogies. In the fall of 2021, ulty, and community members are situated the staff of CNU's Center for Community as colearners and coeducators engaged in the pursuit of justice-oriented learning and restorative collective action.

> Conway et al., 2009; Cooke & Kemeny, 2014). privilege, social justice, civic responsibility, and globalized notions of citizenship (e.g., Catlett & Proweller, 2016; Hartman & Kiely, 2014; Kiely, 2004; Lee & Lund, 2016; Lund et al., 2014; Lund & Carr, 2015; Mitchell, 2010; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011; Schensul & Berg, 2004; Sharpe & Dear, 2013).

> Given the well-documented benefits of community-engaged learning, many institutions are turning to community engagement to support student growth while also bolstering public sentiment about higher education. And yet for the authors, institutionalizing a campuswide commitment to community-engaged learning is more than just a way to speak back to troubling statistics concerning the usefulness of college; importantly, we also view these initiatives as a reparative force within our local community—one that reckons with the troubling history of CNU and its founding.

the College of William & Mary, Christopher ture, with some practitioners preferring Newport College (as it was formerly known) terms like justice-learning (Butin, 2007) a lacked a physical campus. Determined to pedagogy of interruption (Bruce, 2013) criti- locate a permanent campus for the school, cal service-learning (Mitchell, 2008), social Newport News city officials announced injustice sensemaking (Mitchell, 2014), global terest in obtaining approximately 60 acres service-learning (Hartman & Kiely, 2014), of land that was home to a small but thriving and antifoundational service-learning African American community known as the (Butin, 2007). We prefer the term "com- Shoe Lane neighborhood. Given that Newport munity-engaged learning" as a correc- News was deeply infected with racial segtive to "service-learning," since the latter regation and discrimination in the 1960s, often situates students and community many suspected that the city's interest members in a hierarchical relationship in the land was more about displacing this between those performing the service and African American neighborhood from the those being served. Instead, community- predominantly White section of Newport engaged learning prioritizes nonhierarchical News where Shoe Lane (and the Whitesonly James River Country Club) was situated. Shoe Lane residents fought for their homes for nearly two years; nevertheless, the city seized the land through "condemnation" and paid its owners below-market prices for their homes (Kellam & Hansen, 2023).

These are the troubling roots from which CNU springs—a gleaming liberal arts and sciences university that in fall 2021 was home to 311 Black students (7%), 311 Hispanic students (7%), 233 multiracial students (5%), 180 Asian/Pacific Islander students (4%), and 3,380 White students (76%). Meanwhile, according to the U.S. Census, the city of Newport News is approximately 41% African American, 9% Hispanic, 7% multiracial, and 46% White. Against this community backdrop, the lack of diversity at CNU is visible and perhaps even expected, given the forced displacement of African Americans from the very land upon which the university sits. Relations between the university and the community are understandably strained—and this is the context (and the impetus) for the community-engaged work facilitated by CNU's Center for Community Engagement (CCE). Thankfully, a community-engaged learning grant from the Bonner Foundation in 2021 enabled CCE staff to propel community-engaged initiatives forward.

Priorities included motivating a wider cultural shift away from "service" and toward critical community-engaged learning at the university. This effort began by instituting the Center's definition of community-engaged learning:

Community-engaged learning (CEL) is a pedagogical approach that involves students, community partners, and instructors working together to identify, analyze, and address community priorities through experiential learning. This high-impact educational practice:

- Meets student learning objectives through academic content, community engagement, and critical reflection
- Generates and applies academic knowledge in community-based contexts to address the priorities of the community as identified through mutually beneficial

- collaboration with community partners
- Helps anchor CNU in the local community by meaningfully connecting teaching, research, and service to the community's assets and challenges.

Community-engaged learning integrates meaningful community partnerships with instruction and critical reflection to enrich the student learning experience, teach civic and social responsibility, and strengthen communities. Importantly, community-engaged learning must be community-driven, must be mutually beneficial, and must involve critical reflection. (Center for Community Engagement, 20 July 2025)

Center staff are careful to describe how community-engaged learning differs from more traditional models of service-learning. Whereas service-learning simply invites students to participate in acts of service, count service hours, and reflect on their service experiences, community-engaged learning combines classroom learning with community engagement where students work alongside community partners to gain hands-on experience in building sustainable, resilient communities. This approach reorients students as members of larger communities who can and should foster relationships of solidarity and respect toward the community and our shared natural environment. With this push for communityengaged learning, the Center also hopes to shift away from an institutional hyperfocus on the number of "service hours" performed and instead encourage the campus community to assess community engagement activities through the impact and the values university representatives are enacting alongside community members.

Beyond establishing these institutional definitions, the Center's campuswide CEL strategy also included joining forces with the Center for Effective Teaching and the Center for Sustainability in Education to develop a yearlong fellowship program to train faculty in the best practices and principles of CEL. From this collaboration, the Tidewater Faculty Fellowship was born. The authors here represent the first fellowship cohort (Cobos, Donaldson, Hamm, Kelly,

Kuster, Rose, and Timmer) and its program The fellowship culminates with a public yearsee Appendix A.

#### Tidewater Faculty Fellows Program

In March 2022, the Center launched the Tidewater Faculty Fellows program and began accepting applications for the inaugural cohort. Faculty accepted into the program receive \$2,000 to participate in training to gain traction at the institutional level. To sessions, attend cohort dialogues, and teach identify the key challenges and transformaa CEL course during the fall and/or spring tions associated with this work, program semester of their fellowship year, which coordinators developed and disseminated a runs from May to May. Following a brief postfellowship reflection for inaugural cohort orientation to the program in mid-May, the members to complete (see Appendix C). fellows participate in an intensive 3-day CEL Institute in June, which includes seminars on **Overcoming the Challenges** CEL best practices, community partner networking events, field trips to local nonprofits and innovations spaces, and CEL course design workshops (see Appendix B for CEL Institute itinerary). The curriculum for this program is theoretically grounded in critical social justice pedagogy (Freire, 1970,1973; Kumashiro, 2009; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012), critical service-learning (Mitchell, 2008, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2012), and critical race feminism (hooks, 2003; Razack, 1998).

Program coordinators provide copies of Marshall Welch and Star Plaxton-Moore's (2019) The Craft of Community-Engaged Existing Partnerships Teaching and Learning as the common textbook and assign several case studies and reflection prompts from the text's openaccess digital toolkit (<a href="https://compact.org/">https://compact.org/</a> <u>craft-companion/</u>). Fellows are also provided access to a digital repository of readings, slideshows, sample course materials, and critical reflection models. Following the CEL Institute, fellows are released for the summer to build relationships and course materials with their community partners. The cohort comes back together in August for a peer-review-style workshop to provide feedback on CEL course materials and address concerns. As we move through the fellowship year, we meet monthly for cohort dialogue sessions to brainstorm ideas, consider challenges, give feedback, and ultimately support one another while implenew pedagogical approach. And although the "real world," or help students form colleagues to a community of friends.

coordinators (Covington and Buehlman). end showcase where fellows, their communi-For brief descriptions of each author's CEL ty partners, and their students highlight their course and/or contributions to the program, CEL work and discuss the benefits of CEL and the public purpose of a university. All who spoke at the inaugural showcase agreed that CEL is vital to the sustainability of higher education. Nevertheless, we recognize that CEL comes with its challenges—which can be transformative, but can also be paralyzing for those new to the field or those struggling

Upon analyzing the postfellowship critical reflections of our inaugural cohort, we identified several key themes that might help guide future attempts at embedding community-engaged learning within the curriculum. These include a lack of resources, training, and existing partnerships; timing, planning, and communication; assessing student performance; and remaining flexible. Each challenge is discussed at length below.

# Addressing Lack of Resources, Training, and

While reflecting on their motivation for joining the program, cohort members consistently expressed the lack of CEL resources, training, and partnerships as their main reasons. Two of the eight authors had attempted to teach similar courses in the past but recognized that they "didn't have good resources in place for how to interact and engage all of the stakeholders and deal with some of the contentious issues that can take place between the university and community stakeholders." Another explained that she felt she "did not have the teaching experience with CEL to help prepare my students for how to address some of these issues." Those who had not taught such a class before expressed a desire to develop connections and learn about resources to help build commenting what is—for some—an entirely munity partnerships, teach students about forced interdisciplinary collaboration can connections with the local community. One be frustrating and awkward, particularly fellow succinctly expressed, "I had two main among academics, we came to realize that goals: To improve my ability to implement we had moved from a group of like-minded a course that strongly relied on community engagement, and to have access to resources

that would both make this work appreciated those experiences in the classroom in ways and visible."

To overcome this challenge, Covington and Buehlman curated a series of readings, workshops, field trips, and community partner networking opportunities. Resources included our fellowship text, Welch and Plaxton-Moore's The Craft of Community-Engaged Teaching and Learning, as well as a series of foundation and exploratory texts Another significant challenge inherent to in the field of community engagement (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Hatcher & Bringle, 1997; Mitchell, 2008; Mitchell & Chavous, 2021; and Mitchell et al., 2012).

Fellowship workshops addressed best practices for fostering and maintaining community relationships, pedagogical strategies for designing a CEL course alongside community partners, and guidelines for fostering strong critical reflection opportunities with students. Program coordinators designed a community partner networking event during the CEL Institute to ensure that faculty members lacking established community partnerships could foster these relationships early in their fellowship journey. One cohort member mentioned: "This is the part that most relates to the Fellowship experience—there is no way that this partnership would have occurred to me without the process of the Fellowship (the workshops and especially the meet and greets with community partners)." This tailored access to partners and resources continues to expand as fellowship coordinators listen to participants, curate stronger resource inventories, and draw on the expertise of community partners. Having welcomed our third cohort of fellows, coordinators also tap into the expertise of fellowship alumni to participate in CEL faculty panels so incoming cohorts can ask questions, brainstorm ideas, and build relationships. Most important for program coordinators is our commitment to listening and adapting based on the interests, needs, and concerns of our cohort members and their community partners.

#### Addressing Timing, Planning, and Communication

In two ways, timing is a major challenge when it comes to community-engaged

that support their learning. Sometimes responding means changing the focus of a day's lesson or altering assignments, seemingly on the fly. Other times responding means removing lessons or academic content because students already learned it in the field, or it becomes less relevant to the experience than once thought.

this work is the difference between the timetable of the university and that of the so-called real world. Students rarely have large blocks of free time, and many community organizations are staffed by overworked employees or volunteers. Merging these schedules often results in little overlap, at least during regular business hours. The typical college student is engaged in the university community through participation in clubs or organizations, on-campus employment, research groups, or athletic teams. All these activities are in addition to 15 hours (or more) of coursework in a 15-week semester. Students are not busier than the typical community member, but their time is spent on a variety of different endeavors and is doled out sporadically, meaning that finding time to dedicate to community work outside the classroom can be difficult, particularly for those who request direct service with students.

To overcome this challenge, one of the cohort members, for example, recognized that "sacrificing" in-class time for on-site engagement greatly facilitated the success of his course. He explained,

I ended up using one of my scheduled class meeting times as volunteer time for my students. The fellowship helped me realize not only is this OK, but it's essential . . . shifting the delivery of course material from lecture to the community-based experiences (with the proper reflective assignments) instantly frees all of the students' schedules for that scheduled class meeting time.

learning. First, facilitating experiences that In the lack of this shared time, the rest of build and align with course content adds a the cohort had to deal with students somelevel of complexity not often present in tra-times not being able to make it to their site ditional courses. This coordination requires for various reasons. Indeed, the importance planning as well as instructional flexibility; of making sure the community partner one must be able to recognize transforma- knows the constraints of the academic tive student experiences and respond to schedule and designing the course around

learning challenges and opportunities is key the communities we serve. to overcoming this challenge—but doing so requires open and consistent communica- Assessing Student CEL Performance tion with community partners. One cohort An additional challenge is the expectamember advised,

Planning, scale, and communication become essential [in CEL courses] . . . and, again, this needs to happen before, as well as during, the actual course. Monthly meetings with my community partner in the 4–5 months before my course started, during the design phase, were essential.

Beyond the literal logistics of timing a CEL course across a 15-week semester, there is also the significant challenge that this is not a sufficient amount of time in which to learn the nature of the organization, perform meaningful work, and build deep community relationships. Community partners work year-round and benefit from longterm partnerships. This type of support is not something that university students can consistently provide. As one cohort member expressed,

I had in my mind the course I wanted to design, and I realized that even with all the resources and support, I am limited in what I can accomplish in 15 weeks with students (and faculty and community partners) who are already over-extended. My goals shifted to be more attainable. Any engagement with the community and any learning experience that involves the community members as partners can be transformative.

these constraints as well as the partner's embracing the continuity of multisemester schedule cannot be overemphasized. Making collaborations, we pave the way for lasting allowance for serendipitous and unplanned impact, both within our classrooms and in

tions versus the reality of harmonizing the relationships between three disparate entities—community partners, instructors, and students. As educators, it is important for us to recognize that students have different goals for their education than we do. They might be focused on their future career and money-earning potential while faculty are likely focused on imparting what we see as valuable insights, information, and opportunities for intellectual growth. Community partners are likely concerned with these areas too—but their primary focus is understandably situated within their organization's mission, goals, and priorities. In theory, CEL is a way in which these differing goals can align, until, of course, we factor in the grade. Our students have been largely socialized to see a grade as the sign of success in a college classroom. In our testing-heavy educational culture, students have come to equate learning with regurgitating information on a test. Unfortunately, CEL does not always lend itself to a numeric grade. How can we attach a numeric value to self-exploration, learning community responsibility, and relationship forming?

Grades can be a means of accountability for students. As opposed to a traditional classroom, where students are gathered together for a set amount of time in the same space, faculty potentially have less oversight of students in a CEL course. There must therefore be some mechanism, probably a component of the grade, that ensures students are meeting expectations. These expectations might include going to the By extending perspectives beyond the community partner's location for hands-on boundaries of a single semester, instructors work, completing a set of tasks determined can unlock the potential for deeper, more by the community partner, or adhering to meaningful partnerships with community the professional norms of the organizaorganizations. Indeed, the transformative tion. One cohort member described having power of community-engaged learning ex- multiple avenues to assess the communitytends far beyond the confines of a traditional based elements of the course. She explained, academic timeline. Embracing multise- "As a way of keeping students accountable, mester collaborations allows instructors I had them document their learning in sevto cultivate trust, nurture communication, eral ways; [these assignments] were graded. and foster sustainable relationships with These included a set number of volunteer our community partners. As we engage hours [at the organization], short reflecwith the process of community-engaged tions, and a longer summary reflection learning, it's important to remember that paper." Self-reporting, despite its potential true transformation takes time—and by for exploitation, is often employed in CEL

managing time sheets and keeping students CEL is cooperative, the voice of the comaccountable.

As CEL attempts to move away from the mindset of simply accruing service hours, community points or participation certainly should not comprise the entirety of a student's grade. Reflection and content-based assignments provide two means of evaluating student performance. Cohort training sessions emphasized the value of critical reflection within a CEL course. If we believe reflection is a meaningful and essential part of the experience, then it should appear as part of assessment. There are numerous methodologies to help students organize their thoughts. For example, during the CEL Institute, cohort members explore the ABCs rubric of reflection, which asks students to touch on affect, behavior, and cognition in responses (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Raskoff, 1994), as well as the DEAL model of reflecthe experience, evaluate those experiences in light of specific learning goals, and articulate their learning, including their goals for future action in their reflections (Ash & Clayton, 2009). Grading reflective assignments can feel subjective (to both faculty and students), but many cohort members incorporate rubrics to help structure the grading and encourage students to revise reflections based on feedback. Weekly reflections may be incorporated as formative assessments, and reflection portfolios might be considered for a summative assessment assignment.

reading exercises, research papers, presentations, or final reports, are more conven- member to think of alternatives midsemes-Through content-based work, students develop the language to talk about their exaccounting of their experience to a deeper ing unprepared or unsettled. discussion of how they see larger societal forces in play.

Community partners may also want to be to be salvaged. The students and the proinvolved in the development of content- gram coordinator agreed that the students based assignments and their assessment. who play louder instruments (e.g., trumpet, We had a variety of experiences—some saxophone) would play outside—at a discommunity partners were enthusiastic tance—for the goats. The goats did not seem

courses. Faculty should be cognizant of the ments, providing feedback, and assessing community partner's role and time; the the quality of student work, whereas others community partner's focus should not be on wanted to leave the grading to faculty. Since munity partner is vital, as is the community partner's ability to gauge the true value of the students' contributions—but the level at which community partners contribute to such activities should be openly negotiated throughout the collaboration, while protecting and respecting the agency and capacity of the partner.

#### Remaining Flexible With Rethinking Course Content, Managing Expectations, and Maintaining Openness to "Failing Upward"

Another significant lesson learned while teaching our CEL courses was that this approach demands flexibility. We could attempt to plan for different contingencies and possibilities, but in the end, not everything worked as anticipated. Navigating this challenge, however, was actually a learning opportunity in disguise: Our plans did not tion, which invites students to describe always work out as we meant them to, but the unforeseen provided opportunities to implement strategies discussed in our fellowship training and cohort dialogues.

There is also the reality that unexpected incidents might arise that cannot be written into, and accounted for, in the syllabus even if content is shifted or room is made for possible changes and difficulties arising. For instance, in one CEL course, students played music at the local SPCA to help socialize animals at the shelter. Neither the cohort member nor the community partner anticipated that the animals would have adverse reactions to the volume of the music within Content-based assignments, such as guided confined shelter spaces. This situation upset the students and required the faculty tional assignments, but they can help stu- ter. Response to these challenges requires dents contextualize the community-based a level of flexibility that is not common in work. Content-based assignments work the traditional methods of teaching at the in tandem with reflection assignments. university level. Students may expect faculty to present a fully prepared 15-week course syllabus and schedule; shifting gears midperiences and can move from a superficial project may leave faculty and students feel-

Fortunately, open communication with the community partner allowed the situation about collaborating on creating assign- scared of the music, and were in fact rather mesters.

This example of "failing upward" shows that when something doesn't go to plan, it is easy to jump to negative conclusions. Perceiving a conflict to arise between the service goals of our students and those of our community partners may appear to be a worst-case scenario. According to this faculty fellow,

What many of us learned was that the key to resolving any conflict of this nature is communication. Often a situation that initially seems serious can be resolved with compromise by both students and the community partners. If a mistake is made, we can attempt to rebuild the relationship as best we can by apologizing and working together to find a mutually beneficial solution.

In CEL courses, faculty often feel the responsibility both to teach students the practical nature of related assignment objectives and to ensure that students learn to become both civically engaged and aware of the social justice components of these projects. Such a reflection speaks to the significance of A carefully designed syllabus is necessary to achieve both goals. One cohort faculty member stated:

The first challenge I encountered was the question of how to balance content and community engagement. I recognized that if students were committing to several hours of service and/or research work outside of the class, they could not be expected to do the same amount of reading and writing outside of the class that I had previously assigned. Moreover, I knew that a significant amount of the time in class had to be dedicated to thoughtful discussion and reflection. Therefore, I needed to condense and eliminate much of the content to prioritize community engagement.

For many faculty members new to CEL, or for whom social justice education exists outside their wheelhouse, there may be hesitation to include these topics. The reality that

curious, and the indoor animals were still faculty might not feel prepared to effectively able to hear the music through the shelter teach these topics may lead to some perbuilding's walls. The community partner ceived "teaching failures" or uncomfortable continues to support the partnership and moments in the classroom. In the experieven offered to partner again in future se- ences of our cohort, having the opportunity to workshop, collaborate on sharing sources, and discuss these kinds of assignments and concerns before and during the semester was especially beneficial. In the words of one cohort member,

> I had previously taught a similar course in which students were working with a data set that included all crimes and their locations for a ten-year period in Newport News. As a mathematician, I felt ill prepared to help students process and contextualize the data. Students were surprised to learn what types of crimes were happening just beyond our campus "bubble." We had several discussions about the data itself as well as how to use that data in a transparent and ethical way, but ultimately, I did not feel equipped to lead students in this conversation. The experience of working with cohort members in other disciplines helped me to anticipate student concerns and respond appropriately.

what Tania Mitchell (2008) dubbed "critical service-learning." Researchers have shown that traditional service-learning grounded in charitable models runs the risk of being miseducative and inadvertently reinforcing stereotypes (Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004; Duffy et al., 2014; Hatcher & Bringle, 1997; Sheckley et al., 1993). Unlike the "traditional approach [to service-learning] that emphasizes service without attention to systems of inequality" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 50), "critical service-learning programs encourage students to see themselves as agents of social change, and use the experience of service to address and respond to injustice in communities" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 51). Mitchell explained that such an approach

requires rethinking the types of service activities in which students are engaged, as well as organizing projects and assignments that challenge students to investigate and understand the root causes of social problems and the courses of action necessary to challenge and change

the structures that perpetuate those problems. (p. 53)

cal, and social justice implications of their community-engaged learning, it's essenexperiences that also keep them engaged. innovation, and meaningful collaboration. But, as Mitchell (2008) suggested, "without the exercise of care and consciousness, drawing attention to root causes of social problems, and involving students in actions and initiatives addressing root causes, service-learning may have no impact beyond students' good feelings" (p. 51). Although several members of the cohort reported feeling ill-equipped to guide these conversations, many practiced transparency and embraced being colearners with the students about the root causes of injustices in the local community. Thus they demonstrated to students that justice-oriented collective action demands continual learning, active listening, and critical reflection, even among the faculty "experts."

Similarly, from the professors' point of view, we must also learn to manage expectations of what the classroom experience can and should look like and what the immediate response of both the students and the commua restructuring of the classroom. Content in a CEL class comes largely from experience and partnership, not necessarily from lecture and reading. Assessment comes in the form of reflection, not testing. Thus, the way we, as educators, approach our learning objectives. day-to-day teaching, and assessment must take these new expectations into account. We all learned that we had to restructure our thinking to work outside the boundaries of the classroom.

principles of critical reflection and remain - One cohort member explains,

ing open to "failing upward," we can create environments where our students (and we) are empowered to explore, learn, and grow Undoubtedly, it is challenging to help alongside community partners. As each of students focus on the practical, rhetori- us continues to refine our approaches to projects, to create a connectedness between tial to recognize that these challenges are the local community and the university, not insurmountable obstacles but rather and to provide students with real-world transformative opportunities for growth,

#### **Embracing the Transformations**

Analysis of the postfellowship critical reflections of our inaugural cohort shed light on several transformative shifts in our pedagogical approach. These insights will inform future endeavors in integrating communityengaged learning (CEL) into the curriculum. Our expanded approach comprises four key facets: recognizing the power of mutually beneficial, lasting community partnerships; embracing community experts as coeducators; acknowledging the importance of critical reflection to learning; and fostering a supportive community of practice among CEL colleagues.

#### Recognizing the Power of Mutually Beneficial, **Lasting Community Partnerships**

The power of mutually beneficial, lasting community partnerships cannot be overstated. Based on our cohort's reflections, nity members will be. Community-engaged it's evident that these relationships are learning can be time-consuming and requires the cornerstone of effective communityengaged learning. Despite the challenges listed above, the relationship-building with community partners was consistently identified as one of the most rewarding parts of our experience. According to one group member, "Through the fellowship, and especially working with my partner organization, I began to see a much larger synergy between the students' experience and the community partner's benefits." And this synergy extended beyond the course. Many of our students maintained relation-Overcoming the challenges inherent in ships with the community partners, and community-engaged teaching and learning many cohort members continue to build requires a multifaceted approach grounded upon the relationships developed during in flexibility, community, and communi- the fellowship. Some of us are developing cation. By addressing issues such as the new classes, working with the same partlack of resources, training, and existing ners on multisemester projects. Others are partnerships, fellowship coordinators can working on publications with their partners. lay the groundwork to effectively respond. The ability to build long-term community to these challenges and overcome barriers partnerships beyond an individual academic related to timing and the complexities of semester was seen as a transformative exintegrating real-world experiences into the perience for some fellows in their approach curriculum. Moreover, by embracing the to community-based teaching and learning.

When it comes to capitalizing on the potential of building stronger university-community ties via community engaged learning, I want to return to the idea of building longer term relationships with partners. Though successful courses and relationships can come in a lot of different scenarios, the most exciting part of my experience has been realizing how much more can be accomplished when the partnership is seen as a multi-semester and multi-year effort. Building trust and communication, as well as reacting to and learning from what unfolds during one given course, becomes easier when the professor and partner are both able to take a longer view (rather than a weekly/monthly perspective only, a multi-year view when appropriate adds depth and stakes to the project).

By embracing the concept of multisemester collaborations, we unlock new possibilities for deepening our engagement with community partners. Building trust and communication over time lays the foundation for impactful collaboration, allowing us to navigate challenges and seize opportunities with greater agility and resilience. Moreover, the continuity of these partnerships enables us to respond more effectively to the evolving fostering a sense of ownership and investment among all stakeholders involved. For example, one cohort member describes how a multisemester commitment led him on a journey that transcended the boundaries of his individual CEL course:

Once the community partner displayed willingness to go all-in, my goals shifted to trying to not only improve a particular course, but trying to make this course a model for an entire teaching program. The community partner wanted to try to scale up the impact on their end, and that gave me a vision for how this course could serve as a model for teacher education programs. Having a venue to display this work was originally for my own selfish desires, but it shifted to "hey look at what you are missing out on by not having something like this; look at what we have to gain."

This reflection encapsulates the transformative potential inherent in communityengaged learning initiatives, illustrating how collaboration between faculty members and community partners can activate systemic change within educational frameworks and the broader community. The cohort member's initial motivations, rooted in personal aspirations for course improvement, underwent a profound shift toward a broader vision of impact and innovation. This pivotal moment occurred when the community partner and the faculty member demonstrated a commitment to wholeheartedly embracing the collaborative endeavor, signaling a shared dedication to maximizing the initiative's reach and effectiveness. This multisemester commitment prompted a strategic reorientation toward not merely enhancing a single CEL course but envisioning a model capable of reshaping entire educational programs.

This notion of scalability emerges as a central theme in postfellowship reflections, underscoring the potential for communityengaged learning initiatives to transcend individual classrooms and ripple outward, influencing justice-oriented change on a systemic level. Moreover, the shift from self-interest to advocacy highlights the potential for community-engaged learning to foster a sense of collective responsibility and social consciousness—for all involved. What initially began as an individual classroom's needs and dynamics of our communities, endeavor evolved into a rallying cry for institutional change, inviting stakeholders to recognize the untapped potential of collaborative educational models and the profound benefits they offer to both academia and society at large. In essence, this reflection challenges us to reimagine the role of academia as a force for social innovation and equity in our communities and urges us to embrace collaborative partnerships as essential to the work we do with our students. What's more, this broad multisemester outlook addresses one of the most significant challenges inherent in this work: time. As one cohort member explains:

> When the professor and community partner understand that what they learn and gain from one semester, can be built upon in future semesters, the process begins to take on its own timeline. This timeline is not quite that of the course or academic year and also not quite that of the community partner's

usual timeline, but instead becomes a blend of the two that hopefully works for both the students and the partner organization.

The notion that learning and insights being confined to the rigid parameters of a single academic term, the process evolves organically over time, drawing upon past experiences to inform future CEL courses. Central to this concept is the recognition that community-engaged learning often assumes a timeline of its own—one that transcends the boundaries of traditional academic calendars and community partner schedules. Moreover, this perspective underscores the benefit of sustained, long-term partnerships in community-engaged learning. By embracing a collaborative timeline that extends beyond the confines of individual semesters, stakeholders can cultivate deeper relationships, refine strategies based on cumulative insights, and achieve more meaningful and sustainable outcomes. In essence, this reflection invites us to reimagine communityengaged learning as a fluid and adaptive process that unfolds over time.

#### **Embracing Community Experts as** Coeducators

Another transformative experience was highlighted in reflections related to the relationship built with community partners. Many mentioned how powerful it can be to approach the community partner as a coeducator/colearner working alongside the learning process. As noted by Welch and instructor and students in the class. One Plaxton-Moore (2019), cohort member explains,

I did not realize how helpful, and how actually enjoyable it would be, to allow the community partner to fully (if they choose to) engage with the course planning. This built into the process an emphasis on their goals, and also importantly added to their investment in the course and our students' experience. Having had a say in the course construction, they could see both what they hoped to gain but also became—before the course even began—partners with me in structuring the student experience (and were thus better positioned to understand the student

perspective and implicitly more engaged with student success).

As the dynamics between instructors. students, and community partners shift throughout a CEL course, it is vital to recgained during one semester can serve as ognize the community partner as not just a building blocks for future iterations of the collaborator but a coeducator in the learning course speaks to the iterative nature of process, where their knowledge and lived excommunity-engaged learning. Rather than periences are situated at the forefront of the educational process. When the boundaries between instructor, student, and community partner blur, a shared sense of ownership and purpose can emerge from the CEL course.

> Previous sections mentioned the challenge of instructors feeling unprepared to tackle complex social justice issues that often bubble to the surface in CEL courses. It's true that traditional educational frameworks may fall short in comprehensively addressing social justice at the local level. Situating community partners as coeducators, however, can fill critical gaps in understanding, thus providing students with a more holistic perspective on pressing local concerns that transcends the confines of the classroom. Moreover, this nonhierarchical approach fosters a deeper level of engagement and investment from community partners, who, by actively shaping the learning environment, often become staunch advocates for student learning and growth.

#### Acknowledging the Importance of Critical Reflection to Learning

Although instructors new to CEL tend to focus on community-based activities and projects, it's crucial to recognize the equal importance of critical reflection in the

[Reflection] creates opportunities for students to synthesize their community experiences and academic content into new understanding in multiple ways. This process allows students to make connections from what they are doing through the engaged work to what they are learning in class. (p. 121)

Like Welch and Plaxton-Moore, we understand "reflection as the intentional consideration of an experience in light of particular learning objectives" (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997, p. 153). While reflecting on their CEL courses after the fellowship experience ended, several cohort members mentioned

the importance of critical reflection, especially in community-based teaching and learning. For example, one cohort member explained,

I have always believed that reflection is an important part of the mathematical process, but going through the fellowship, I realized that reflection could and should include more than just content and group dynamics questions. Reflection was a way for students to consider how their work was connected to the community and the ways (positive and negative) their results could affect real people.

This cohort member's observation attests that

reflection is not an "add on" or conducted on a whim as a "fill-in" activity or even as a summative "wrap-up" report. Instead, reflection is intentionally incorporated before, during, and after service in ways that integrate course content with what is experienced outside of the classroom in the community. (Welch & Plaxton-Moore, 2019, p. 122)

Just as critical reflection is essential to student learning, it is equally valuable for faculty and community partners as well. Engaging in reflective practices enhances instructors' pedagogical effectiveness and promotes continuous improvement in CEL initiatives. One effective method for faculty members to cultivate reflective habits is by maintaining a CEL teaching journal, where they can document their experiences, insights, challenges, and successes. Timed entries each week ensure regular reflection, enabling instructors to track their progress, identify areas for growth, and refine their approaches to communityengaged teaching.

#### Fostering a Supportive Community of Practice Among CEL Colleagues

Perhaps one of the biggest transformations that came out of this experience was the realization of how important a community aspects of teaching and learning, but esout,

Within higher education we are typically ensconced in a siloed setting and an autonomous culture in which opportunities for continued collaborative professional development with a colleague or group of colleagues are rare. In fact, we traditionally approach teaching and learning as a private, almost secretive, activity. (p. 189)

Though our diverse cohort included tenure-track and non-tenure-track junior and senior faculty from Business, English, Mathematics, Modern Languages, Music, and Sociology, we were all-in from the start. And because of that high level of trust, we became not only a community of colleagues committed to community-engaged learning but a group of friends, discussing the wins and whoopsies in our classrooms from a place of support and encouragement, rather than judgment. This collaborative, supportive, interdisciplinary approach challenged our assumptions about cross-disciplinary collaboration in higher education and empowered us to disrupt the "go at it alone" mentality that is so pervasive and exhaustingly toxic in the academy. Instead, we were able to go at it together and focus on the process of community-engaged learning. For example, one fellow admitted,

What I didn't expect to find was a sense of community from the other educators and CEL administrators. Having others to bounce ideas off of or to gauge what was going well or not so well in my own projects was very beneficial. I found that I loved hearing about the others' experiences in their classrooms, which helped me think through what I could or would do differently in the next round of CEL.

One fellow summed this relationship up by acknowledging, "Community work needs a community." Indeed, the fellowship model enabled us to cultivate a sense of community where we drew inspiration from each other, from our community partners, and from our students.

of like-minded faculty colleagues is in all A more practical element that emerged from this community of practice was the pecially in community-based contexts. As coconstructed knowledge cultivated from Welch and Plaxton-Moore (2019) pointed the sharing of our diverse experiences. One cohort member reflected,

It would have taken me years to experiment with all of those different kinds of projects that my other fellows were working on, but instead I got some insider knowledge about what aspects of their projects went well or didn't go so well, so I have more insight into what I should be considering for future endeavors.

beyond the confines of our classrooms.

#### The Future

All members of the inaugural TFF cohort joined the program because of their desire to build meaningful partnerships with members of the community and foster Institutional support is essential in bolstermunity is mutually beneficial to all. The commitment to fostering meaningful part-CEL is a testament to its value and usefuluniversity curriculum, which creates a challenge for those who wish to implement the principles of community-engaged learning in their teaching and a barrier to creating lasting institutional change.

As institutions grapple with the challenge of mainstreaming CEL, there are clear steps that can be taken to institutionalize and elevate its status. As Brandt (2023) pointed out,

Institutions of higher education are uniquely positioned to leverage their distinct mix of institutional resources (funding, technology, social capital), faculty expertise and mentorship, community engagement staff's knowledge and connections, and student capacity (time, energy, passion) to forge deep,

reciprocal institutional-community partnerships. (pp. 179–180)

Despite this access to institutional resources and the benefits highlighted in the literature, CEL often remains on the periphery of institutional priorities, relegated to cocurricular or extracurricular activities rather than integrated into the core curriculum. Indeed, if "service" is to be a pillar at the institution, As we continue to develop new classes and it can no longer exist on the margins of our projects in collaboration with our commu- curriculum. Situating community-engaged nity partners, we are not only enriching the learning as a cornerstone—or a pillar—of educational experience for our students but the university and its curriculum requires also contributing to the long-term sustain- concrete actions that institutions must imability and resilience of the communities we plement if they take seriously the benefits serve. Through ongoing dialogue, critical of CEL to student learning and development reflection, and intentional coaction, we are and fostering wider social change. Brandt's forging enduring connections that tran-research underscored the importance of scend the boundaries of academia, creating providing adequate resources, infrastruca legacy of positive change that extends far ture, and support for community engagement initiatives. Such efforts must include investing in community engagement staff, recognizing their accomplishments, and leveraging institutional resources to forge deep, reciprocal partnerships with communities (p. 189).

experiential learning opportunities with ing faculty resilience and commitment to students. Much of university education is CEL endeavors. Recognizing and rewarding still rooted in a teacher-student model de- faculty contributions to community enspite the growing recognition that a triadic gagement not only validates faculty efforts relationship that includes the local com- but also signals the institution's genuine steadily increasing number of institutions nerships with communities. By offering and academic endeavors created to support funding, resources, and ongoing support, universities can empower faculty to navigate ness. However, it remains separate from or the complexities of community partnerships tangential to, rather than integrated in, the and create meaningful learning experiences with students.

> Finally, addressing the structural barriers within universities, such as rigid evaluation procedures, is crucial in fostering a culture that values collaborative and communityengaged teaching and research. The structure of the university and its evaluation procedures are often antithetical to the inherently messy, time-consuming, and collaborative nature of community-engaged teaching and research. Programs like the Tidewater Faculty Fellows provide a crucial avenue to form a community of practice—a group of informed colleagues dedicated to challenging institutional power dynamics and advocating for the integration of community-engaged teaching and research. The fellowship also provided an avenue for cohort members to make this work legible in

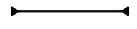
current evaluation procedures through receiving the fellowship, presenting at conferences, and even coauthoring a journal article manuscript.

One final reflection sums up our recommendations nicely:

The time and effort it takes to build an ongoing relationship with a community org[anization] is made possible through [the] support of individual professors [and] through the support of the fellowship: funding, expertise of leads, community building, and ongoing pedagogical, technical, and emotional support.

The more that is then also supported at the institutional level, the better.

As we look ahead, it's clear that the future of community-engaged learning requires institutions to create a supportive environment that prioritizes collaboration, flexibility, and reciprocity. By situating community-engaged learning as a cornerstone of the university curriculum and implementing concrete programs and actions to support such integration, institutions can better fulfill their commitment to student learning, community engagement, and social change.



#### About the Authors

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Jessica Stewart Kelly is an associate professor of mathematics and assistant director in the Center for Effective Teaching at Christopher Newport University. Although her primary research areas are special functions and differential equations, her interests extend into the mathematics classroom to include alternative grading, specifically standards-based testing, and ways to incorporate real-world experiences in the classroom. She received her PhD in mathematics from Baylor University.

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Andria D. Timmer is associate professor of anthropology in the Department of Sociology, Social Work, and Anthropology at Christopher Newport University. A cultural anthropologist, Dr. Timmer's research investigates social change through civic and nongovernmental organizations (or NGOs). Her most recent publication, Gender, Power, and Non-Governance: Is Female to Male as NGO Is to State? attends to the ways in which gender and governance constitute flexible, relational, and contingent systems of power. Her current work takes an ethnographic look at the civic response to the 2015 "refugee crisis" in Hungary.

**April Cobos** is a lecturer at Christopher Newport University in the English department, where she teaches classes in professional writing and rhetoric, grant writing and civic engagement, community engagement, and language and discourse. She is the author of The Women of Explosive Ordnance Disposal: Cyborg, Techno-Bodies, Situated Knowledge, and Vibrant Materiality in Military Cultures (Lexington Books, 2024). Her other recent research publications explore balancing the labor and responsibilities as graduate students and early career faculty, and working with varied student populations in online classroom settings.

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George Kuster is a dedicated educator and leader committed to driving positive change in STEM education, with over 15 years of experience in education and research. As an associate professor of mathematics at Christopher Newport University, his research focuses on the teaching and learning of mathematics, and supporting STEM educators. Passionate about collaboration and community engagement, George aims to bridge the gap between academia and practice, fostering collaborative partnerships in education.

Andrew M. Rose is an assistant professor of English at Christopher Newport University in Virginia. His academic interests include environmental literature, critical posthuman studies, and ecopolitical theory, and he teaches courses in early American literature, the environmental humanities, and science writing. His monograph, Material Insurgency: Towards a Distributed Environmental Politics, was published by SUNY Press in 2021.

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#### Appendix A. Community-Engaged Learning (CEL) Course Descriptions

**April Cobos** taught an upper level writing intensive professional writing course, a required or highly recommended elective for a variety of majors. The students worked on capacity-building projects in collaboration with the community partner to help assess and grow several areas of program development to include researching to assess the effectiveness of the current program services offered to the local population, analysis of the current marketing practices to gauge the effectiveness on various audiences and future users, and assessment of the current sponsorship and donor model of engagement to determine if best practices are being used that benefit the organization.

Willy Donaldson taught a hands-on course in which teams of senior students in the Biotechnology and Management Program, in concert with business majors, conducted a semester-long business consulting project with for-profit and not-for-profit partners. Teams consult with partners on a wide range of topics, including opportunity identification and verification, market attractiveness, technology commercialization, product/service development, and deployment. Students gain theoretical and practical knowledge as well as real-world exposure to the dynamic forces affecting the partners and humanity in general. Students have an opportunity to develop and refine critical thinking, as well as written and oral communication skills in their final consultation reports to the partners.

Chelsey Hamm taught an upper level elective seminar in music, the Falk Seminar, which is designed to facilitate the scholarly preparation, writing, and annotation of research findings through the accurate and disciplined use of conventional style sheets. Students worked on their own with several different community partners, including the Peninsula Regional Animal Shelter, Soundscapes, the Hampton Roads Philharmonic, and the Virginia Community Music Festival. Different students were able to tailor their work with their community partners to best match their interests. For example, students who were interested in performance gravitated toward the animal shelter, which allowed students to perform minirecitals for the animals and visiting public. Students more interested in teaching worked more with Soundscapes, helping local music educators work with at-risk students in the preparation of orchestral musical literature.

Jessica Stewart Kelly taught a course titled BIG (Business, Industry and Government) Experiences in Mathematics. Students were divided into four groups, each of which partnered with either the Newport News Fire Department or Newport News Waterworks Department. In all cases, community partners presented students with data sets and a series of related open-ended questions. Throughout the semester, students used mathematics to analyze the data and make progress toward answering the questions posed by their community partners. For example, one group worked to identify patterns of daily and weekly water usage based on type of meter (residential, multifamily residential, commercial, etc.). Another group aimed to create risk scores for commercial locations that quantified the likelihood of a fire and resulting community impacts.

**George Kuster** taught a course in the Honors College titled Early Field Experience in Education. Through a collaborative partnership with local schools, this course introduces students to the challenges facing educators and students at the system, district, school, and individual levels. The main purpose of the course is to problematize learning as a means for empowering future educators by providing them with tools to intentionally problem solve the learning process. Students enrolled in the course work with instructional support staff, teachers, and principals while teaching math reasoning to elementary students during a 12-week field experience.

Andrew Rose taught an upper level English elective titled Writing About the Environment. The course is designed to help students develop the skills necessary to confront, engage, analyze, and, ultimately, write and speak about complex environmental issues in a variety of university and professional contexts. The student population consisted of English, environmental studies, and communications majors, among a few others, and the community partner was the Newport News Fire Marshall's Office. Students worked in groups of three to four in order to research, write, and present a policy brief that engaged with a core environmental justice issue facing the historically underserved community of Southeast Newport News (including air quality, water quality, pollution from nearby heavy industry, and the urban heat island effect).

Andria Timmer taught an upper level anthropology elective called Migration, Displacement, and Refugees. The community partner for this course was the Catholic Commonwealth Charities (CCC), the local refugee resettlement organization. Prior to the class, we met to discuss the needs and expectations of the community partner. The CCC does not have enough staff or resources to meet the needs of resettled refugees. Therefore, their biggest need was help with discrete activities such as filing, cleaning, and running errands. Some students were able to work directly with clients, but others were not. Students who were not able to go to the CCC conducted community-based research projects that answered questions of importance to the refugee resettlement workers on topics such as transportation needs and housing safety concerns. At the completion of the course, students had a greater understanding not only of the refugee community, but also of the nature of and challenges to humanitarian work.

## Appendix B. Community-Engaged Learning (CEL) Institute Program

#### DAY ONE

10:00am-10:30am	Welcome Coffee & Guided Meditation
10:30am-11:30am	Introductions & Community-Building Exercise
11:30am-12:30pm	Developing Sustainable Community Partnerships
	Case Study Discussion & Reflection
12:30pm-1:30pm	LUNCH BREAK
	Boxed lunches provided by Center for Community Engagement
1:30pm-2:30pm	Nuts & Bolts of Establishing Community Partnerships
	Brainstorming Session & Group Discussion
2:30pm-3:30pm	Review Sample CEL Course Materials & Discuss
	Preparation Form for Speed Dating with Community Partners
3:30pm-4:30pm	Networking Event: Speed Dating with Community Partners
4:30pm-5:30pm	All invited to optional happy hour

#### DAY TWO

2:00pm-3:00pm	Tour Brooks Crossing Innovation Lab & Workforce Development Center
3:15pm-3:45pm	Hampton Roads Urban Agriculture Community Garden Tour
4:00pm-6:00pm	Environmental Justice Driving Tour of Newport News
6:00pm	Cohort Dinner hosted by Center for Community Engagement

#### DAY THREE

9:30am-10:00am	Welcome Coffee & Guided Meditation
10:00am-11:00am	Ethical CEL: Critical Perspectives & Inclusive Voices
	Case Study Discussion & Reflection
11:00am-12:00pm	Reflection & Assessment in CEL Courses
12:00pm-1:30pm	WORKING LUNCH: CEL Faculty Panel Discussion
	Boxed lunches provided by Center for Community Engagement
1:30pm-3:00pm	Course Mapping & Feedback Sessions
3:00pm-3:30pm	Institute Wrap-Up & Cohort Assessment

### **Appendix C. Postfellowship Reflection Prompts**

- 1. What were your initial reasons and/or goals for participating in the Tidewater Faculty Fellows program?
- 2. How did those reasons and/or goals shift over the course of the fellowship experience? What caused those shifts in your thinking?
- 3. What emerged from the fellowship experience that was unexpected for you?
- 4. What surprised you from this experience?
- 5. What significant lessons or takeaways did you gather from the fellowship experience?