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From the Editor…

Shannon O. Brooks

As we head into autumn, we welcome another issue of the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* (JHEOE). In Issue 29(3), our **Reflective Essay** section is prominently featured, presenting a series of thought-provoking articles that examine current issues in university–community engagement. These essays are anchored in the literature and frequently include calls to action for engaged scholars and practitioners. They offer much food for thought on issues ranging from institutionalizing community-engaged learning and providing tangible support for engaged scholarship, to pandemic pivots worth maintaining in our practice.

We begin this issue with a featured **Research Article**. Blostein et al. present a multiyear evaluation of a third-year undergraduate course in Community-Engaged Experiential Learning (CEEL) within International Development Studies at the University of Guelph. At this institution, CEEL blends experiential learning with community-engaged principles of reciprocity, critical reflection, and justice to align student projects with community-defined priorities and foster global citizenship. Through CEEL, students gain practical, interpersonal, and professional skills, while also contributing to stronger university–community relationships. This study provides a model for integrating community-engaged and experiential learning at other institutions and emphasizes the importance of engaging students in critical reflection as a means of understanding their roles in international development.

Our first **Reflective Essay**, by Talley et al., explores the evolving role of public engagement in higher education, highlighting major challenges for institutions and scholars. The authors remind readers that although public engagement has the potential to strengthen eroding public trust, it is often messy, political, and constrained by bureaucracy and academic reward structures. This essay calls on universities to prioritize initiatives that provide sustained faculty support rather than efforts that may appear merely performative.

The next essay continues the theme of increased institutional support for engaged scholarship. Rios and Saco argue that institutional recognition of community-engaged scholarship can serve as an effective strategy for rebuilding public trust in higher education. Using a social-ecological framework (individual, interpersonal, organizational, community, and policy levels), the authors offer strategies for supporting and rewarding engaged scholarship that are instructive for many other institutional contexts.

Similarly, Cornish and Gassman examine the disconnect between community-engaged scholarship and traditional tenure and promotion metrics. Their essay employs first-person narratives from two women academics engaged in deep community partnerships. Despite gradual progress across higher education, prevailing tenure and promotion norms continue to prioritize publication counts over public engagement. The authors contend that this emphasis can negatively affect faculty well-being and productivity, with disproportionate impacts on women and faculty of color. They call for the creation of "engagement-ready" institutions and argue that valuing community-engaged work benefits institutional equity, faculty retention, and the public relevance of higher education.

Next, Izadi et al. address the literature on the "third mission" of universities, defined as societal engagement beyond teaching and research. They argue that the definition, scope, and metrics of the third mission remain fragmented, despite growing recognition of its importance. Through a qualitative metasynthesis of 32 studies, the authors identify six approaches to the third

mission. This study offers key insights for agricultural and land-grant universities seeking to strengthen their third mission activities.

Motley et al.'s reflective essay synthesizes lessons from the International Service-Learning Network (ISLN), a community of practice between faculty from the United Kingdom and United States established during the COVID-19 pandemic to sustain and reimagine service-learning amid campus closures, political turmoil, and heightened attention to racial injustice. Members documented rapid pivots to digital environments and ongoing challenges such as student fatigue and mental health concerns. Despite these challenges, the essay distills postpandemic best practices and makes a compelling case for continuing innovative pandemic-era adaptations to make service-learning more accessible and resilient.

The final reflective essay explores parallels between critical disability studies and community-engaged learning, as both approaches prioritize lived experience, value community expertise, and connect classroom theory to social change. Santinele et al. describe lessons learned from a Canadian disability studies practicum program and its alignment with community-engaged learning goals. This essay offers meaningful connections to disability studies literature and inclusive practice that can inform community-engaged scholarship.

The **Projects with Promise** section highlights early- to midstage research studies or program evaluations that showcase promising practices and programs with potential to open new avenues for scholarship. In this issue, these articles examine approaches to institutionalizing service-learning and community-engaged learning through faculty development programs, as well as an innovative university–K–12 partnership in a rural community.

Leading off this section, Covington et al. investigate Christopher Newport University's (CNU) efforts to embed community-engaged learning (CEL) as a core part of its curriculum. CNU's CEL approach seeks to repair strained community relations while fostering justice-oriented partnerships in which students, faculty, and community members collaborate as colearners. At the center of this effort is the Tidewater Faculty Fellows program, a yearlong fellowship that trains faculty across disciplines to design and teach CEL courses. Through faculty reflections, the authors identify both challenges and transformative shifts in practice and partnership. They argue that embedding CEL into the university's core curriculum is essential for rebuilding public trust in higher education, supporting student development, and creating more equitable, sustainable community relationships.

Similarly, Strahler et al. examine Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs) at Slippery Rock University (SRU) as a method for institutionalizing service-learning pedagogy and building an engaged campus. Grounded in a six-attribute framework for implementing FLCs, their evaluation highlights how structured faculty development strengthens service-learning and supports broader institutional cultural change toward engagement.

The final project with promise article describes the first phase of a community-engaged partnership between Texas Tech University and rural West Texas K–12 schools. Lammert et al. conducted a needs assessment using an assets-based framework that engaged teachers, administrators, families, and community members. The assessment revealed both challenges (e.g., teacher shortages, limited housing, funding disparities, lack of broadband) and assets (e.g., small class sizes, community cohesion, cultural pride). By grounding the work in a rural cultural wealth framework, the project rejects deficit views of rural education. The authors argue that beginning with community strengths fosters more sustainable and equitable outreach and engagement.

The **Dissertation Overview** section of JHEOE features summaries of recent theses and dissertations on community engagement and highlights emerging voices in the field. We aim to expand this section in the coming years to better represent the scale and scope of graduate student scholarship in community engagement and welcome submissions or recommendations for recent studies. To conclude this issue, Van Schyndel examines how graduate students develop professional identities as community-engaged practitioner–scholars through the Imagining America PAGE Fellows program. Interviews with alumni revealed that although students often faced tensions and a lack of institutional support, professional associations can provide affirming communities of practice that foster graduate student well-being.

As always, we extend our gratitude to the many authors, reviewers, associate and managing editors, and the editorial team who make publishing JHEOE possible. We appreciate your investment of time and interest in the scholarship featured in this issue, and we thank you for your continued readership.

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A Promising Practice to Move from Charity to Solidarity: Community-Engaged Experiential Learning in International Development Studies

Samantha Blostein, Elizabeth Jackson, and Josephine Gaupholm

Abstract

Community-engaged experiential learning (CEEL) has emerged as a model of teaching and learning that provides postsecondary institutions with a framework for meaningfully connecting with their wider communities in ways that ensure mutual benefits. This study explores CEEL, including the challenges and value of CEEL, in the context of international development studies (IDS), using evidence from multiyear research with a 3rd-year undergraduate course offered at the University of Guelph. Using a multistakeholder approach, we examine experiences and perspectives of students, community partners, and university stakeholders to provide a comprehensive understanding of the course impacts and CEEL more broadly. Each stakeholder group identified numerous shared benefits of CEEL. This work indicates that actualizing community-engaged experiential learning that is grounded in justice and committed to critical reflection and reciprocity has the potential to dismantle knowledge hierarchies, promote solidarity, expand worldviews and project reach, and act as a catalyst for transformative change.

Keywords: global community engagement, community-engaged teaching and learning, community–university partnerships, international experiential learning

Community-engaged experiential learning (CEEL) has emerged as a model of teaching and learning that provides postsecondary institutions with a framework for meaningfully connecting with their wider community in a way that ensures accountability and mutual benefits. In this article, we will explore CEEL in the context of international development studies (IDS) and discuss the critique and value of CEEL using evidence from a multiyear evaluation of a 3rd-year undergraduate course offered at the University of Guelph.

CEEL is a branch of experiential learning (EL) that incorporates the principles of community-engaged learning (CEL), calling for universities to meaningfully integrate community engagement within the academic curriculum in a way that aligns learning outcomes with community-identified priorities (Morton et al., 2020). CEEL emphasizes collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities that is mutually beneficial, whereby the exchange and production of knowledge and resources is reciprocal and equally valued (Morton, 2013; Morton et al., 2020).

CEEL is a way to amplify the social, cultural, and human capital of universities and their larger communities, while also enhancing student learning and skill development (Levac et al., 2018; Peterson, 2009). Studies show that participation in CEEL courses and programs is positively associated with student academic performance, including improved GPA, critical thinking, and communication skills. There is also evidence that these programs enhance career success and employability of students due to the development of transferable skillsets and exposure to "real-world" work environments (Tiessen et al., 2018).

Much scholarship focuses on impacts for students; however, research indicates that community partners find the process of working with students enriching and value the relationships established with the universities (Cronley et al., 2015; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Worrall, 2007).

Although CEEL can lead to many positive outcomes, it is important to also recognize that these programs can have negative consequences. Critiques of CEEL generally focus on the power dynamics and oversimplification of campus–community partnerships, which can perpetuate or exacerbate social inequalities, marginalization, and disempowerment if not acknowledged and addressed (Dempsey, 2010; Levkoe & Stack-Cutler, 2018). There is a tendency within the literature to overlook the complexities of community identities and downplay the ethical implications of these relationships. Unequal access to resources, such as knowledge, time, and funding, can skew the priorities and decision making away from communities, undermining the very goals of establishing such a partnership in the first place (Dempsey, 2010). Such inequality is complicated further in the context of international development studies' contemporary practices, rooted in Eurocentrism and colonialism, that can reinforce the status quo and the charity-based development model under the appearance of "good" global citizenship (Tiessen & Huish, 2014).

Scholarship surrounding the advantages and disadvantages of CEEL has grown, but the research has been notably descriptive and/or focused on only a single perspective (i.e., students, faculty, or community; Beaulieu et al., 2018; Hammersley, 2013; Levac et al., 2018). To gain a holistic understanding of the impacts and implications of CEEL, we seek to explore the outcomes for all stakeholders simultaneously.

Understanding the Impact of CEEL

EL activities are considered an essential component of the international development (ID) curriculum in Canada. Employers and postgraduate programs seek candidates with practical "field" experience, while students are eager for exposure to potential career paths and professional skills development (Tiessen & Huish, 2014). From our perspective, CEEL has the potential to transform development studies by taking a global/local approach to social issues and reframing the focus of community engagement to one that is explicitly justice-oriented.

One way of integrating a justice orientation to CEEL is to commit to practicing critical community-engaged scholarship (CCES). CCES is described by Cynthia Gordon da Cruz (2017) as incorporating insights from critical race theory that can "support university and community partnerships in producing knowledge that more effectively dismantles systemic sources of racial and social injustice" (p. 363). Gordon da Cruz explained that shifting the goal of community-engaged learning toward an explicit focus on justice, as opposed to "public good," leads to more effective responses to social issues and strengthens partnerships between communities and universities. This can be a transformative approach, particularly in the field of ID, as we move away from the conceptualization of development as charity work toward an understanding that it is a process rooted in justice and solidarity.

Another approach to understanding the impact of CEEL in IDS is through a global/local perspective originally applied to community engaged teaching in global health (Rowthorn, 2015) and geography (Houston & Lang, 2018). Global/local, or *glocal*, is a means of "teaching or applying a global perspective and understanding of transnational . . . issues, determinants, and solutions to address the . . . needs of communities everywhere" (Rowthorn et al., 2016, p. 952). Glocal understandings of development help remove the othering that can occur when working in cross-cultural settings and can help foster "thick" forms of global citizenship. John Cameron (2014) argued that experiential learning in the context of IDS is often approached with a "thin" understanding of global citizenship, meaning motivations for implementing or participating in these programs center around superficial notions of "doing good" or "helping" or "making a difference." However, they do nothing to deconstruct or address the structural and economic inequities that perpetuate this need for "help." Thick global citizenship, on the other hand, attempts to shift these structural conditions through building solidarity with equity-deserving groups and confronting our complicity in reinforcing and benefiting from unjust systems.

Value of CEEL in IDS

Central to the value of CEEL is the focus on critical reflection and reciprocity (Levac et al., 2018; Tiessen & Huish, 2014). Critical reflection acts as a pedagogical scaffolding that positions learning, specifically

experiential learning, as a continuous process of action–reflection (Langdon & Agyeyomah, 2014). This approach prompts students to push past a focus on personal change and examine power relations, cultural norms, and existing institutional arrangements and policies that marginalize and oppress specific groups of people. Equally important in the practice of CEEL is the notion of reciprocity. Reciprocity is defined as the "ongoing process of exchange with the aim of establishing and maintaining equality between parties" (Maiter et al., 2008, p. 305) and underscores the nature of community-engaged projects as being more than a teaching tool—they should meet community-identified research priorities. Establishing reciprocal relationships requires explicitly confronting power disparities and maintaining a commitment to open communication.

Actualizing community-engaged experiential learning that is grounded in justice and committed to critical reflection and reciprocity has the potential to dismantle knowledge hierarchies, promote solidarity, expand worldviews and project reach, and overall act as a catalyst for change.

Course Description

To provide an opportunity for students to engage with development practitioners in a real-world context, a community-engaged experiential learning course was developed for the first time within the International Development Studies program at the University of Guelph. A global engagement specialist was hired by the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute (CESI) and the International Development Studies (IDS) program to research and design this course in line with best practices in the field. Following extensive consultations and research, the course Engaging in Development Practice (Development Practice) was created. This course explores the challenges associated with engaging with development practitioners and equips students with the necessary skills for successful engagement.

A primary component of the course is student research and analysis that answers an inquiry posed by the community partners. Before each term, the instructor worked to understand the specific priorities and contexts of the partners and turned their ideas and interests into questions that students address. Prior to starting the semester, the instructor drafts, tests, and revises research questions with the partners' feedback (Blostein, 2020).

Each student group worked with a local or international community partner on best practice scan research, which included a literature review and environmental scan explorations of existing initiatives, as well as emerging and promising practices. Students work in teams to consult with their partner as local experts/stakeholders to explore innovative ideas that help the partner organization address a challenge they are facing in their area. For specific examples of course partners and projects, see the Appendix. Each course offered during the study comprised 12 to 16 students. The course cycle and structured format was made up of four phases: team building, planning, project completion, and project sharing. The students produced four main coursework outputs:

1. Community-engaged project proposal—Student teams developed a proposal with a community engagement project plan to address a research question pertaining to a development issue identified in consultation with the community partner. The proposal focused on a project that contributed to the analysis of the development issue and potential solutions, as well as identified the intended social value of the proposed community engagement project.

2. Community-engaged learning draft and final product—Groups delivered a draft and final product for the community partner by implementing the plan outlined in their community-engaged project proposal. The community-engaged learning product develops analysis of the development issue and potential solutions. The primary audience for the final product is the community partner; there may be other secondary audiences as appropriate.

3. Community knowledge exchange conference—Project teams delivered presentations that reflect on contributions, shared knowledge, and effectively communicated learning garnered through the group's community-engaged project to peers, faculty, community partners, and other stakeholders. Presentations focused on in-depth analysis of the research question and recommendations.

4. Critical reflection essay—Individual assignment articulating theoretical and analytical connections between the community-engaged research experience and self-understanding of personal and intellectual growth, contributions as part of a working group, as well as evaluating power, privilege, and diverse roles in development.

The objective of the course is to simulate a work environment that closely mirrors that of international development specialists, policy analysts, and research consultants. As key learning outcomes of the course, students

- Identify and analyze development issues, challenges, and priorities;
- Understand and reflect critically on the perspectives of development practitioners and community stakeholders with respect to development priorities, challenges, policies, and practices; and
- Effectively communicate with said stakeholders through both written and oral forms.

Study Purpose and Research Question

Using findings from a multistakeholder evaluation, we share some of the insights gained through the integration of these multiple perspectives. We use data from a project documenting the course impacts of Development Practice, a newly developed CEEL course offered at the University of Guelph, for students, university stakeholders, and community partners. The purpose of the data collection and analysis was for ongoing assessment for this new course in addition to informing research in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

In this study we assess the degree to which students achieved the course learning outcomes, focusing on the tangible skills and professional development students believed they gained. Using reflections from students and partners, we explored the course's impact on their understanding of the development context and their perspectives of development issues. We gathered their feedback on course structure and approach that enhanced their learning.

Methods

This evaluation reflects on course activities undertaken from January 2018 to April 2019. The evaluation is based on the collection and analysis of data from stakeholder consultations using surveys and interviews. Research Ethics Board approval was gained from the University of Guelph prior to all research activities taking place.

All students enrolled in the Engaging in Development Practice course during the Winter 2018, Summer 2018, Fall 2018, and Winter 2019 semesters were invited to participate in the study. Those who agreed to participate were asked to fill out pre- and postsurveys with open- and closed-ended questions online at the beginning and end of the course. Survey questions aimed to assess students' progress toward the attainment of intended course outcomes, as well as their reflections on the process and personal and professional impacts of the course on student experiences more broadly.

The research team conducted semistructured interviews with seven community partners (six local to Guelph/Wellington and one international partner) and three university stakeholders, including the course instructor and two of the International Studies Department senior leadership team. All interviews were conducted by the principal investigator using interview guides that were developed for each stakeholder group. Interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the participant and later transcribed.

All data was deidentified prior to analysis. Only the principal investigator had access to the identified data. In all, there are 112 data sources with individual responses for this evaluation report, including 49 preprogram survey responses and 53 postprogram survey responses from students, seven community partner interviews, and three stakeholder interviews.

Student survey responses were imported into NVivo for data coding and analysis; interview transcripts were coded in Microsoft Word. Following a thorough familiarization period, a grounded approach was used to construct emergent themes that arose from the data, synthesizing the views of participants and using original quotes wherever possible to ground themes in respondents' statements.

Findings

We present the results from each of the stakeholder groups, starting first with our community partners, followed by the students, and finally the university stakeholders.

Community Partner Perspectives

Of the seven partners consulted to understand the outcomes of engagement with Development Practice from their perspective, six are local to Guelph/Wellington, and one is an international partner. Two community partners participated in a 6-week summer iteration of the course, and five participated in the standard 12-week iteration. Organization and research project descriptions are in the Appendix.

Based on their experience with the course, partners were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed with a series of questions, which was then followed up by open-ended questions for them to elaborate on their experience. Overall, the partners reported a positive experience in collaborating with the class. The elements that the partners commented on most positively were the connection to the students and university, while also appreciating the course process and quality.

All seven of the community partners felt that they gained the most from the energy and perspective brought by the students. They valued the students' fresh ideas and genuine interest in their work above any outputs, and described the students as being "highly intelligent," "engaged," and "enthusiastic."

Many community partners felt that the students they worked with genuinely want change and to create a better world. Students are guided by a sincere interest in solving the issues at hand, giving them the freedom to approach their research topic in a way that community partners often cannot because the students are not motivated or constrained by competing factors such as funding, politics, or organizational conventions. One particularly illustrative quote stated,

> It was extraordinarily refreshing to be able to talk to a group of people that were so genuinely interested in what we were doing but at the same time not having a lot of preconceived ideas about what's going on. [For example,] if I'm working with people [already in the field] they sort of have a framework in their head or a certain paradigm or set of principles, that are colouring their glasses. . . . But the students don't have that, they're totally unbiased and even though they're students and it's a school project, I still say they had a sincere interest.

As this community partner explained, seeing the way students embraced their research questions with open minds and enthusiasm helped organizations feel a renewed sense of optimism and commitment toward their work.

New Ideas, Fresh Energy, and Drive

Community partners also found the new ideas, fresh energy, and drive that the students brought to the table motivating, as working in the field can be draining and sometimes disheartening. They valued this "freshness" and desire to learn, explaining that it "rubs off, because it's reciprocal," and that "the more interest they show, the more that I wanted to give them. So that dynamic worked really well." One community partner described the experience as "very energy giving" and that it was like "getting a little turbo boost" because students were able to take on projects that the organizations didn't have the capacity to prioritize, helping to relieve some of their workloads and save them time in the future.

Although it was hard for students to expand beyond the knowledge the community partners already had, as they are experts in their field, students brought a fresh set of eyes that partners found encouraging. One illustrative quote explained,

> Seeing the report the way that it was written, highlighted another dimension of the topic. You know when you see something for a long time and then somebody says it in a totally different way, and you say, "Wow that's it, why didn't I think of that?"

Another element of the experience some community partners discussed was the value of the students bringing their own unique lived experience and expertise to the projects. One participant spoke about how working with the students and hearing about their lives and experience was "insightful" and it was that "human connection" that made the process meaningful. They shared,

> I liked it and some of the insights that they told me, specifically having to do with how sometimes immigrant children are kind of like the family's settlement workers or the family's ambassador and one of them said that and I thought that was very insightful.

Networks and Influence

Another major benefit community partners felt they gained through their participation with the course was a connection to the university, or as one partner commented, "The university is a place of learning, but it's also a place of networking and influence." The organizations we worked with viewed students as connections to potential volunteers, as well as organizational supporters when they graduate as future colleagues, policymakers, and leaders in the field. Being able to show students what they do and teach them about the contextual realities they face was an important part of the motivation behind community partners wanting to participate, and continuing to participate, in this course. One partner explained, "We need allies in the community, and we need people that have potential to go to higher places, to senior places, to address these issues that haven't been going anywhere," and by working with the class they helped to foster solidarity and "buy-in." Another partner described this as "plant[ing] a seed," noting they "wouldn't be surprised" to see the students as future volunteer applicants.

Community partners also viewed the partnerships as providing them valuable access to the university and its research, influence, and resources. Having research that is associated with the university added to the organization's credibility. For example, if a report identified a gap in programming or evidence of project success and they wanted to use that information to apply for funding, having the report associated with the university added a level of validity to the application, or, as one partner described, meant the report "has more teeth." Other participants commented that many of these small local organizations just didn't have the time or resources to dedicate to conducting "deep dives" into the research; therefore, partnering with the university gave them "an opportunity to up [their] game." One partner described these benefits by saying,

> It gave us the chance to get that much needed research done, that was very practical and helps us make wise decisions without real financial costs, there's cost of some time, but that cost of time would've been higher if we had been doing it ourselves.

Course Process and Quality

When asked about the overall process of working with the course, all the community partners strongly agreed that it fit with their research interests. They highlighted that the course was managed effectively, well organized, and had good communication from the course instructor throughout. One partner described it as the "perfect scenario" for working with a course and said it has set the "benchmark" when it comes to working in this type of model again.

The majority of the community partners strongly agreed that the quality of the final project met their expectations and that they would share the research with their networks. The participants commented on the final reports being "comprehensive" and "high quality" while also commending the students for doing a "phenomenal job." Two community partners selected *somewhat agree*, instead of *strongly agree*, to the previous questions. They explained that the research "didn't quite hit the mark" in terms of providing the tangible content they could use in practice. One of them further elaborated, saying, "Maybe the question or challenge that we brought to the class was too big or broad which led to broad recommendations that while great, did not help move the project forward too much."

Interestingly, all of the community partners strongly agreed that the overall benefits of working with Development Practice students outweighed any burdens it may have added to their work and also that they would work with the course again in the future. They said that they felt "supported" and that the course instructor was "receptive" to their needs, which allowed them the "freedom" to pursue a research question that was best for them. These responses indicate that the greatest benefits of partnering with the course lay in the overall process and relationships, rather than the end products.

Areas for Development

During the interviews, community partners were asked to provide feedback or recommendations regarding ways in which we could improve the partnership experience in the future. The main challenge identified by the community partners was that because they are the experts in these topics, it was difficult for the students to provide research that went beyond what the partners already knew. To address this issue, partners

suggested that students take on more specific research topics with concrete parameters or deliverables. Another recommendation from community partners, echoing students' suggestions, was to increase the amount of engagement time they had with the class.

Community partners offered these key takeaways:

- Take time to develop trust with partners to make sure the process is a worthwhile investment of their time.
- Ensure built-in intentional allocated class time for students to meet with partners throughout the term to ensure engagement and input into the research process and relevance of outputs.

Student Perspectives

Demographics

We had 49 student responses to the online presurvey and 53 student responses to the postsurvey. These surveys were distributed at the beginning and end of each course, offering to the same students the opportunity to gather reflections on working with community partners for community-engaged learning projects, as well as the process and impacts of the course activities on student experiences.

Of the 48 students who responded to the question, 44% were 3rd year, 44% were 4th year, and 12% were in the 5th year of their undergraduate studies.

Presurvey

The presurvey asked students to share what skills, values, and knowledge they brought to the Development Practice course. In order from most mentions to least mentions, students discussed that they entered the course with research skills, international development knowledge, interpersonal skills, written communication skills, personal skills, and ethical values. Students highlighted their oral communication skills the least. When asked how many prior courses they have had with a community engaged learning (CEL) component, 85% had never taken a CEL course. Students largely reported entering the course with strengths in theoretical knowledge and academic competencies.

The presurvey also asked an open-ended question about challenges or concerns students anticipated within the community engagement project. A common theme (n = 10) was the expression of feeling unprepared or unqualified to take on a "real" project for an actual development organization. One student stated they were "concerned that [the] project will be more challenging than anticipated" because it was their "first time working with community partners for a project that they will be using" and they were "fearful that [they] did not have enough practical experience to be able to provide useful information and present it in a way that is beneficial to our partners." Due to a lack of previous experience in the area and a general lack of practical skills in a professional domain, some students doubted their ability to provide useful research outputs.

Postsurvey

Following the completion of the course, students were asked to complete a second survey to assess the impacts of the community-engaged component on the process and outcomes of their learning. The postsurvey data measured three main domains. First, it assessed the degree to which students achieved the course learning outcomes, focusing on the tangible skills and professional development students believed they gained. Second, students reflected on the course impact on their understanding of the development context and perspectives of development issues. Third, students discussed the elements of the course structure and approach that enhanced their learning and provided feedback on the course.

Tangible Skills. Students leaving the course reported that they had gained valuable and tangible skills to enter the development field. They discussed developing skills including collecting and analyzing data, writing and presenting a professional report, soliciting and incorporating feedback, understanding and meeting community partners' needs, and developing interpersonal skills through teamwork. When asked if they would apply what they had learned outside the course, 96% of students responded with *strongly agree* or *agree*, indicating that the skills they developed throughout the course are versatile and valuable in the long term.

Personal Skills. Students identified a range of personal skills that were developed or strengthened by the course. In both the pre- and postsurveys, students discussed feelings of inadequacy and having to deal with imposter syndrome when they first

started the course. As the course progressed and they were required to reach out to development experts and regularly interact with group members and community partners, students expressed that their confidence grew. One student shared that "Being propelled to do more than I believed I could resulted in me gaining confidence and insight on all the abilities that harbour within me." Their increased confidence helped build resilience and belief in themselves to realize their "opinions and insights matter," and their "thoughts will be validated" when they enter the workforce. An area students particularly lacked confidence in was oral communication and public speaking, with participants commenting that prior to the course they "hated public speaking and presentations." However, in the postsurvey questionnaire, 90% of students responded with *strongly agree* or *agree* to leaving the course with increased confidence in their ability to present research findings orally, with the other 10% selecting *somewhat agree*.

Confidence also contributed to the ability to both receive and provide constructive feedback. One student said they usually would not ask their group members to change things because they "wouldn't want to offend anyone," but their approach shifted as they realized that their feedback "helped the report." Receiving feedback was also discussed as an area of growth for many students as they sometimes struggled with how feedback made them feel; however, they recognized its importance and worked to disentangle their personal worth from their work.

Interpersonal Skills. Students also developed many translatable interpersonal skills, including relationship development, effective communication, and understanding and meeting the needs of others. This course offered many students their "first opportunity to work in a large group setting," and required them to work closely with their peers on data collection and analysis, report writing, editing and feedback, and the final presentation.

Students also discussed interpersonal growth in their ability to connect with others and work as a team. Students shared that they learned how to "productively allocate roles" and delegate and share tasks effectively. Some students also shared that they gained "participation skills" as they developed confidence about their intelligence, "speaking out in a small group setting," and their "ability to effectively collaborate" with team members. A few students discussed how they "gained perspective" and learned from their peers. As one student shared, "The biggest skill I picked up was learning about how to be in a group with seven other people that you don't necessarily see eye-to-eye with."

Multiple students discussed the advantages of building new relationships, including communication skills and knowledge exchange. For instance, one respondent shared, "I think the relationship-building was hugely beneficial for me. Working with a group . . . taught me so much about communication and knowledge mobilization that I will continue to apply in the future." Team discussions, "bouncing ideas off one another," and "constant check-ins" pushed students out of their "comfort zone" and gave them a glimpse into what teamwork might look like in the workforce. Their teamwork experience taught them how to gain trust, be patient with others, show and receive respect and support, and "make sacrifices" to "be there for the group." Participants also discussed that learning how to effectively communicate with various stakeholders and the community partner was the most valuable aspect of the course.

Although students reflected positively on relationship building and teamwork, students also struggled with these areas the most. Group work challenges, such as finding suitable times to meet outside class and managing group dynamics among different working styles and personalities, were mentioned frequently. Even though most development work is highly collaborative, one student stated that "in the program, people often aren't challenged to work in group projects." However, by working through these challenges students were able to learn strategies to help them communicate and reach compromises that they can take with them into the future.

Professional Skills. When asked if they had developed the ability to identify priorities for development practitioners and community stakeholders, 96% of students indicated they *agree* or *strongly agree*, suggesting that students gained many relevant professional skills, including how to work for others to meet their needs, accept and incorporate feedback from project partners, and practice professional communication, as well as identify and assess solutions.

Students commented that connecting with the community partner "was an extremely important part of the project" because it helped ensure they "were keeping in line with stakeholder and development practitioner perspectives and priorities." These consultations provided students with an opportunity to engage in professional discussions to establish a shared understanding of the expectations and goals of the project. When asked if they learned to reflect critically on perspectives of development practitioners, 96% of students indicated that they *agree* or *strongly agree*.

Another professional competency that students discussed was developing their written communication skills. These skills encompassed several areas, such as accessible report writing, writing for different audiences, and knowledge mobilization. In the postsurvey, 96% of the student responses indicated that they *agree* or *strongly agree* that they can communicate effectively with development practitioners and stakeholders through written and oral forms. In the open-ended responses, one student shared that they learned how to create "a written document that is accessible to a wide variety of audiences rather than being riddled with academic jargon." Another participant wrote that they were already applying these concepts beyond the course, stating, "I have been testing my knowledge mobilization skills in papers I have been writing, and [I] even explained [knowledge mobilization] to a peer when editing their work."

Avenue to Development Work and Networking. Another benefit of the course identified by the students was that these structured interactions with community partners proved to be incredibly useful for students' understanding of the challenges and complexities of development work. Several respondents pointed out the importance of having practical and applied experiences with community partners. As one student commented,

> I think most people, including myself, have not had much experience in development work. This class gives us a great opportunity to get a taste of what a real project would look like with actual organizations and how everything works.

Further, 89% of students indicated that they *agree* or *strongly agree* that they have made valuable connections with individuals from the community that they likely would not have made outside this course. Multiple students discussed how this course reaffirmed their desire to pursue employment in the development sector after graduation and that the course exposed them to different types of development work that they had not previously known about or considered. One student shared, "I want to work in the community development sector someday, and without this course, I wouldn't have known all the options that are available to me after I graduate."

The Engaging in Development Practice course provided an important opportunity for experiential learning, enabling students to discover relevant job opportunities. As one student put it, "I now feel more affirmed in my skillset and knowledge. As I venture into the international development sector post-grad, I remind myself that I have the capacity to [succeed]."

In addition to enabling students to envision a future career path, this course also provided an opportunity to network and connect with professionals and organizations within their field. Although students are often told about the importance of networking, there is little to no instruction or opportunity to practice throughout their undergraduate degree. This course, however, provided a safe and supportive space for students to practice this skill, which students can incorporate to obtain volunteer and employment positions in the future.

Evolved Worldview. CEEL has great potential within IDS to promote solidarity and to expand worldviews and project reach. One of the central themes that emerged from student feedback was the impact of the course on their worldviews and perceptions of development issues. Participants shared many profound insights into how their understanding of development and their role within development changed over the semester. Students acknowledged that there is no "correct answer" to development issues, that struggles for funding, lack of time and resources, and the difficulties of addressing multifaceted challenges are not going to be solved easily. Yet, despite these realizations, students were not discouraged; in fact, they expressed feeling empowered. As one student shared, "The small things you do actually matter."

Working with partners also helped students

understand the systemic barriers faced by communities and development practitioners working toward long-term progress. As one student said,

> Our group kept coming back to the idea that there needs to be policy change to really address the development issues, . . . which is not necessarily in the capacity of our partner as a service organization rather than an advocacy organization.

Policy change was not within the partner's capacity; nonetheless, these students now understand that development issues are inherently policy issues. Although these challenges were difficult to navigate, they allowed students to gain firsthand experience into possible workplace realities, including difficulty connecting with and meeting the needs of colleagues and external partners.

Working with a variety of partners, both local and international, students discussed how the course shifted their lens to see that "there are problems that need help at home too," such as youth homelessness and immigrant health inequity, which bridged "the gap between the local and the global." Several students commented that this local focus challenged their belief that they had to focus on a global scale to "make a difference." As one student said, "I now understand that local and international development are both important, and one does not outweigh the other."

Throughout the semester, students also challenged their "biases and assumptions about deficits in the communities" to instead employ an asset-based community-engaged approach. Several participants recognized that "communities already have the knowledge, but [they] need a way to allow it to come to fruition," which is where community-engaged researchers' expertise becomes valuable. Another student reflected on the fact that "community members are experts in their own experiences," which prompted them to begin to unpack their privilege within academia and critique academic tendencies to monopolize space and shut others out.

Related to this critique, multiple students also commented that this course helped them practice humility and fight for justice alongside equity-deserving communities rather than view these communities as charity cases in need of saving. One student expressed how understanding the vulnerability context discussed in class helped them examine the systemic elements beyond their control that hold people back. They shared, "People's situation is often a product more so of their environment rather than their personal choices or attributes—poverty is often a systemic problem and thus requires a systemic solution." This recognition of the root causes and external forces of the long-term cycle of social and economic exclusion demonstrates the student dissecting and examining the structural and economic conditions that perpetuate inequity. This process leads to a shift in their thinking toward addressing systemic issues through solidarity for societal transformation.

A particularly profound insight (it inspired the title of this article) that reveals the transformative impact a course like Development Practice can have came from a student, who said,

> I learned that development work is justice not charity. Developmental work should be implemented in order to provide long-term and sustainable change that should not only be for a period of time but is continuous and effectively makes a change for the better.

Areas for Development

In the final section of the survey, students were asked to provide their comments and recommendations for how to improve the course for future cohorts. Although the feedback from the students was overwhelmingly positive, they did provide several critical observations and suggestions.

As we discussed previously, students highly valued interacting with the community partners and expressed their desire for more frequent meetings throughout the semester and more opportunities to solicit their feedback during the report-writing stage. Time spent with the community partners was crucial for relationship-building, networking, and understanding experiences in real-world development jobs, so the professor incorporated this consideration into future iterations of the course. Feedback noted how the instructor helped students schedule regular meetings with the partner every few weeks and made time for students to discuss the report and presentation with the partner immediately following the conference.

Another recommendation was to keep the class size small. Students emphasized that this course required a lot of one-on-one interaction and support, which students didn't "think . . . would be possible in a large class." Students also highlighted that the small class size enabled them to feel comfortable with their peers and helped facilitate effective working relationships that might be lost if the size of the class increased.

Students offered these key takeaways:

- With regular interactions among group members and community partners, students expressed that their confidence grew.
- Exposure to the field through community partners helps students feel connected and belonging to a future in development.
- Ongoing instructor supports are critical to foster course success for students.

University Stakeholders' Perspectives

We conducted interviews with three university stakeholders to explore the intended and unintended outcomes of this course and identify recommendations to ensure the further success of this model going forward. Overall, the course was noted to meet the following outcomes:

1. Establishes the model of CEL in ID-disciplinary context
2. High level of course impact on students in providing career readiness through field connections and opportunities. Valuable addition to the International Development Studies program, addressing students' desire for more practical experience in the degree program
3. Links program and department to the noncampus community and external stakeholders

Demonstration of Concept

Prior to running Development Practice, a global engagement specialist was hired specifically to research and design a community-engaged experiential course rooted in global community-engaged learning best practices. Extensive consultations and research were carried out to inform the format and structure of the course, and its success has provided university faculty and administration a tangible model that is a valuable addition to the international development curriculum. Through the implementation of this course, university stakeholders were able to see many benefits of experiential learning, with one of them noting that

> You take away just a very different set of insights when you are part of a team and you're having to work on a specific problem as opposed to reading what so and so wrote about the politics of agricultural policy. . . .

Seeing the positive feedback from both students and community partners has also given the university stakeholders more "confidence" in continuing the course and inspired them to explore ways they might expand or create more experiential learning opportunities within IDS. One of the participants explained,

> I think now there's a demonstration effect, . . . once you see how it can work well and look at some of the foundations of what might need to be in place to make it successful. Then it's not so hard to think about the possibility of doing something like this at the Master's level.

The course was created to address a gap in student experiential learning; however, the university and International Development Studies program wanted to ensure that it was academically rigorous and involved the application of analytical skills and core development concepts. Connecting with the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute was seen as a critical component of not only designing a high-impact course but also maintaining its success and understanding its impacts, because they brought expertise in community-based learning and pedagogy that was described as not found "typically in the traditional social sciences." One university stakeholder stated,

> I think the links with the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute are critical. We have people who are experts in this area, and so that will be all the better for us, so that's fabulous. It also allows that link to scholarship.

Having such a strong connection to the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute

and bringing in their expertise also contributed to proving the validity of this model within the ID context because, as one stakeholder explained,

> I think with community engaged models of education, there's a tendency or a danger of people thinking that it's easy, or it's just like course plus community, whereas Liz and Sam [engagement unit director and course instructor] carried out extensive consultation and review of existing programs. Sam is deeply familiar with best practices, both in ID and in CES, and I think that's another reason that this course is working as well as it is.

Addresses Curriculum Gap

A key motivation for designing and implementing the Engaging in Development Practice course was to address a gap in the IDS curriculum at the University of Guelph in creating transitional career opportunities for students. University stakeholders had become aware of students' desire for more opportunities to apply their disciplinary knowledge in applied and practical settings. Development Practice was therefore intended to allow students to gain the relevant field experience and understanding of the complexity of the community development context to better prepare them for the transition into the workforce. As one university stakeholder stated, "For international development, it was a real gap for many years. The closest we had to this was something on case studies and development, which would vary. . . . So, it's really filling a need." The addition of such a high-impact course was felt by all stakeholders as really responding to students' requests for more practical experience in the degree program. The positive response to the course has been highly encouraging for the department and has reinforced the knowledge that through this course they are really addressing a need. One participant reflected, "I've heard that a lot from students that they were just waiting for this. There's a lot of similar feedback where people are saying, 'I've waited my whole university career to be able to take a course like this.'"

Links to Wider Community

Another main outcome that university stakeholders wished to achieve through this course is connections to a broader base of external partners and potential supporters. One university stakeholder noted that the course is intended to foster "linkages with the outside community, this is something that we always wanted to enhance." The individuals interviewed for this evaluation felt that the course helped to facilitate strong partnerships with a range of organizations, both locally and internationally, and also enabled students and community partners to connect, which helps establish professional networks for future employment or volunteer opportunities.

The success of these partnerships has made university stakeholders realize the strength of community engagement, leading them to imagine ways to further their connections with these organizations and beyond. One participant was particularly impressed by the commitment and involvement of the community partners, noting,

> The community partnerships appear to me to be really good. I mean the fact that people in the [international] country office were in [the final presentations] live today was notable to me and it seems that they've been, despite the logistical challenges, both willing and able to interact and [want to] again in the fall, [they] seem to be really excited about the partnership and about seeing it continue on into the future. It strikes me that that was a really successful experience.

Areas for Development

The university stakeholders were asked to discuss any elements of the course that they felt might need further development or any challenges they noted at the institutional level. Although all participants felt the course met all its intended outcomes and were excited to see where the course goes, they did mention a few challenges.

First, compared to traditional courses, Development Practice is much more resource-intensive due to the extensive instructor involvement needed to ensure the quality of the course and partnerships, as well as continued program redesign, development, and assessment. In addition to the instructor's work of delivering and developing the content of the course, many hours of work went into the identification and confirmation of potential partners, listening to their research priorities, and developing viable research projects for the

class to undertake before the class had even begun. This course benefited from a high level of institutional support, including a staff role that supported the course development and partnership building, informed by the recognition that "it's a somewhat slow, intentional process." One stakeholder summarized, "Moving forward, you know, we will need more resource[s] to recruit the partners, we may need more research costs, or honoraria, but we need to make sure that we have the budget to do that." Not only is the funding important, but also the commitment to maintaining the partnerships beyond the 12-week course to, as one stakeholder put it,

> really think about what it means to partner in this way and if we're really talking about true and deep mutually beneficial trusting relationships. Recognizing that there are resources and things that need to be put in place in order for that to continue.

This is where the connection with the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute is critical, because having "an institute on campus that has the capacity to have long and sustainable and mutually beneficial relationships with partners" allowed the instructor to be much more "nimble" and "responsive" to the needs of the community and partners.

Institutional stakeholders offered this key takeaway:

- Invest in specialized personnel with cross-department collaboration for effective resource and expertise sharing.

Discussion

As we identified previously, this type of comprehensive analysis has been scarce within the scholarship of teaching and learning literature, which can result in a fairly unidimensional understanding of the outcomes and impacts of CEEL (Hammersley, 2013). Our results report broad similarities between each group, suggesting that the course was indeed mutually beneficial and reciprocal. Although we did not see any points of disagreement, each stakeholder group provided unique insights into the strengths and limitations of the course that would not have been observed otherwise.

Stronger Networks, Expanded Reach

From our analysis, one of the main themes that emerged for all stakeholder groups was the benefit of this course in facilitating the establishment of strong networks, resulting in the expansion of the reach and impact of each group. Students spoke about the importance of connecting with professionals and organizations within their field, as for many this course represented the first time they had the opportunity to do so. This course provided a supportive and collaborative environment for students to develop essential employability skills, while also allowing them to envision a future for themselves within the development sector.

University stakeholders and community partners saw their connection to students, as well as to one another, as a vital strength of this program model. Community partners viewed students as potential future supporters, volunteers, and colleagues; therefore, this course offered an opportunity for them to influence the next generation of development workers. Notably, past students have already gone on to volunteer with the organizations they worked with during the course. For the university stakeholders, Development Practice allowed them to meet a need for applied experience identified by past and current students. The connection between the university and community partners was also of critical importance to both, enhancing the sharing of resources and knowledge, and expanding professional networks.

Disciplinary Knowledge

Reflections from all three stakeholder groups indicate that students achieved the desired course learning outcomes. Although students reported they entered the course with considerable theoretical knowledge, the practical application of that knowledge was seen as extremely valuable in solidifying their understanding of it. The ability to not only recognize and describe concepts and theories, but to apply and adapt them as well is critically important in the field of ID because development practitioners must be able to both understand and address the complex issues facing the world. Development Practice provided students with the opportunity to further develop their disciplinary expertise through the analytical application of core development concepts.

Course Impact

Our findings parallel similar studies looking at the advantages of CEEL and experiential learning more broadly, demonstrating the effect these types of models have on student learning and skill development (Peterson, 2009; Tiessen et al., 2018). This study demonstrates that CEEL impacts go beyond learning and skill development, also contributing to the shaping of student worldviews and perceptions of development issues. Throughout the analysis it was clear that students were making global to local connections, challenging their preconceived assumptions surrounding development issues, and gaining a deeper understanding and appreciation for what asset-based, justice-led approaches to development work look like in practice. In doing so, students were developing thick understandings of global citizenship as they began to confront their own positionality within structures of oppression.

From the community partner perspective, the primary impact of the course was not necessarily the tangible end product, but the overall process of engaging with the class. These findings support the growing body of literature that expands the benefits of CEL for community partners beyond that of simply increasing organizational capacity (Cronley et al., 2015). Rather, the main benefits of the course were strongly linked to the enthusiastic energy of the students, as well as the opportunity it provided to contribute to the development of student worldviews and by extension the chance to influence the next generation of development leaders. This finding has implications for university stakeholders, as it underscores the importance of recognizing community partners as coeducators and necessitates ongoing relationship building and collaboration. Additionally, an important impact of the course from the university stakeholder perspective was that students were meeting the learning outcomes and participating in academically rigorous research projects.

Course Structure and Pedagogy

Through structured and purposeful course activities, students shared that they were able to comprehend the complexity and difficulties of addressing multifaceted issues more fully. Despite these realizations, students did not feel discouraged; instead, they felt inspired and more confident that they can help tackle these challenges. Based on the postsurvey, 90% of students indicated that they *agree* or *strongly agree* that they feel more confident in their ability to apply the principles of development practice because of their involvement in the course. We found that this was not only due to exposure to development professionals working in the field as well as their organizations, but also the result of ongoing critical reflection and instructor support. The intentional design and facilitation of the course enabled this deep learning through elements such as structured mentorship, incorporating the voices of diverse knowledge holders, and step-by-step project planning and leadership.

Community partners also felt that the course was well managed and organized, which many attributed to the course instructor's strong communication skills and receptiveness to partner needs and feedback. They reported that the students produced high-quality, comprehensive final reports and that the overall experience was energy-giving. From the university stakeholder perspective, the extensive consultation and research instituted to inform the format and structure of the course were borne out by its success, which provided tangible proof that this model is a valuable and attainable addition to the IDS curriculum in terms of achieving learning objectives. They recognized that this course, despite being much more resource intensive than other classes, filled a gap in the program curriculum and that its success stems from the high level of instructor involvement and the quality of community partnerships.

Future Research Directions

Critical reflection is seen as one of the primary components of CEEL, facilitating the examination of personal positionality and, crucially, connection to structural factors and norms that contribute to inequity (Langdon & Agyeyomah, 2014). Our results demonstrate that students actively engaged in these reflective practices, leading to a shift in their conceptualization of "development" and their role within it. By incorporating discussions around concepts such as critical theory, global/local perspectives, and asset-based approaches, students were able to begin building those connections, realizing that development wasn't some static end goal waiting to be achieved by communities in far-off places; rather, it is an ongoing process happening every-

where. The insights shared by the students highlight the transformative nature of CEEL within IDS, showcasing its potential for building solidarity with equity-deserving groups and confronting the oppressive power structures that reinforce inequities. Further research is encouraged to explore how the results transfer across educational settings and classroom environments.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore CEEL in the context of IDS and discuss the challenges and impacts of CEEL using evidence from a multiyear evaluation of a 3rd-year undergraduate course offered at the University of Guelph and assess the degree to which students achieved the course learning outcomes, focusing on the skills students gained. Students and partners reflected on the impact of the course on their understanding of the context and perspectives of development issues. This reflection also provided insights on the course structure and approach that enhanced their learning. Analysis of the data showcases the numerous benefits of CEEL on student learning outcomes, as well as on the expansion of relationships and networks for students, university stakeholders, and partners alike. These findings support and improve our current understanding of the impact of CEEL by providing a comprehensive assessment of the specific benefits and drawbacks experienced by the main stakeholders involved in the course. As we highlight in the title of this article, a key strength of this model of CEEL in IDS is that it can help foster thick forms of global citizenship by challenging the structural conditions underlying development issues and leading to a shift in perspective from charity to solidarity, in both policy and practice. This work indicates that actualizing community-engaged experiential learning that is grounded in justice and committed to critical reflection and reciprocity has the potential to dismantle knowledge hierarchies, promote solidarity, expand worldviews and project reach, and overall act as a catalyst for deep and mutual impact.

About the Authors

Samantha Blostein *is the global engagement specialist, a cross-appointed position between the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute, Guelph Institute of Development Studies, and the College of Social and Applied Human Sciences Dean's Office at the University of Guelph. She has extensive experience in advocacy, research, facilitation, and capacity building, delivering lectures and training on intersectional gender justice, antioppression, decolonization, antiracism, and bystander intervention. Samantha holds a master's in gender and development and a Program Evaluation Certificate.*

Elizabeth Jackson *is director of the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute at the University of Guelph. Her primary areas of expertise are critical community-engaged methods, community–university collaboration for social impact, and antioppressive practice in communities, classrooms, and research teams. She also works on arts-based research and knowledge mobilization, and does volunteer work in the arts and mental/community health sector. Jackson holds a PhD in English and cultural studies from McMaster University.*

Josephine Gaupholm *has an MSc in international health from the University of Leeds and is a PhD candidate at the University of Guelph in epidemiology and international development. Her research interests include global health, food security, nutrition, and health promotion.*

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Appendix

Organization description	Research question
Organization providing services and programs to alleviate poverty in a medium-sized Ontario city through community building, social supports, and immediate relief.	What are best practices for social enterprises that offer woodworking training and employment opportunities to marginalized people (including people coping with addictions, as well as people with cognitive disabilities) in an integrated work environment?
Settlement agency assisting newcomer families to integrate and thrive in southwestern rural Ontario county.	What are best practices for providing English as a Second Language training to newcomers in rural Canadian communities?
Community health center in a medium-sized Ontario city providing accessible health care and social services to individuals with barriers associated with the social determinants of health.	What are best practices for how Community Health Centers and other service providers offer support and deliver services to uninsured/undocumented clients?
A collaborative initiative in medium-sized Ontario city focused on addressing the root causes of poverty through system and policy change.	What are best practices for YIMBY (Yes In My Backyard) campaigns focused on supporting developments that meet the needs of low-income community members?
A network working directly with neighborhoods across medium-sized Ontario city to provide resources, trainings, and support to community-led initiatives.	What are examples of best practices, challenges, and success factors for community-level asset mapping?
Agency providing support and resources for community members to foster self-sufficiency in rural Southwestern Ontario county.	What are the best practices for evaluating a rural youth homelessness awareness campaign?
Canadian-based international development agency focused on sending volunteers overseas, working directly with program offices in rural and urban Ethiopia.	What are best practices, challenges, risks, and success factors for introducing women-owned homestead production initiatives as infant and family nutrition interventions? What are the key practices, challenges, risks, and success factors in training women and engaging them in livelihoods strategies to bring homestead-produced food to market for income generation?

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

Brooke Covington, Chelsey Hamm, Jessica Stewart Kelly, Vanessa Buehlman, Andria D. Timmer, April Cobos, William Donaldson, George Kuster, and Andrew M. Rose

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

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

nities to explore community-based teaching and learning pedagogies. In the fall of 2021, the staff of CNU's Center for Community Engagement sought to change that.

This article describes a yearlong professional development faculty fellowship program that brought together faculty and program administrators from disciplines across the university to integrate community engagement as a deeply valuable, intentional, and essential element of the university's curriculum. First, the authors describe the context within which this fellowship emerged, before outlining the specific features of the fellowship program. Then, using data from postfellowship critical reflections, the authors share some of the key challenges and transformations that emerged from this important effort. We write primarily for an audience of other educators and program 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 produced discrepancies in the nomenclature, with some practitioners preferring terms like justice-learning (Butin, 2007) a pedagogy of interruption (Bruce, 2013) critical service-learning (Mitchell, 2008), social justice sensemaking (Mitchell, 2014), global service-learning (Hartman & Kiely, 2014), and antifoundational service-learning (Butin, 2007). We prefer the term "community-engaged learning" as a corrective to "service-learning," since the latter often situates students and community members in a hierarchical relationship between those performing the service and those being served. Instead, community-engaged learning prioritizes nonhierarchical forms of engagement, where students, faculty, and community members are situated as colearners and coeducators engaged in the pursuit of justice-oriented learning and restorative collective action.

There is substantial evidence to show the value of community-engaged learning in higher education. This growing body of literature points to positive impacts on students' sense of self-worth, awareness of diversity, attitudes toward learning, social skills, civic development, and academic achievement (e.g., Al Barwani et al., 2013; Bernadowski et al., 2013; Billig, 2009; Carson & Domangue, 2013; Chen et al., 2012; Conway et al., 2009; Cooke & Kemeny, 2014). Researchers also attest to community-based teaching and learning as a highly effective pedagogical tool that encourages students to reflect on unequal systems of power and 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.

Established in 1960 as a branch school for the College of William & Mary, Christopher Newport College (as it was formerly known) lacked a physical campus. Determined to locate a permanent campus for the school, Newport News city officials announced interest in obtaining approximately 60 acres of land that was home to a small but thriving African American community known as the Shoe Lane neighborhood. Given that Newport News was deeply infected with racial segregation and discrimination in the 1960s, many suspected that the city's interest in the land was more about displacing this African American neighborhood from the predominantly White section of Newport News where Shoe Lane (and the Whites-

only 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 community-engaged 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 coordinators (Covington and Buehlman). For brief descriptions of each author's CEL course and/or contributions to the program, see 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 sessions, attend cohort dialogues, and teach a CEL course during the fall and/or spring semester of their fellowship year, which runs from May to May. Following a brief orientation to the program in mid-May, the fellows participate in an intensive 3-day CEL Institute in June, which includes seminars on 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 Teaching and Learning* as the common textbook and assign several case studies and reflection prompts from the text's open-access digital toolkit (https://compact.org/craft-companion/). 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 implementing what is—for some—an entirely new pedagogical approach. And although forced interdisciplinary collaboration can be frustrating and awkward, particularly among academics, we came to realize that we had moved from a group of like-minded colleagues to a community of friends.

The fellowship culminates with a public year-end showcase where fellows, their community partners, and their students highlight their 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 to gain traction at the institutional level. To identify the key challenges and transformations associated with this work, program coordinators developed and disseminated a postfellowship reflection for inaugural cohort members to complete (see Appendix C).

Overcoming the Challenges

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 Existing Partnerships

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 community partnerships, teach students about the "real world," or help students form connections with the local community. One fellow succinctly expressed, "I had two main goals: To improve my ability to implement a course that strongly relied on community engagement, and to have access to resources

that would both make this work appreciated 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 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 learning. First, facilitating experiences that build and align with course content adds a level of complexity not often present in traditional courses. This coordination requires planning as well as instructional flexibility; one must be able to recognize transformative student experiences and respond to those experiences in the classroom in ways 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.

Another significant challenge inherent to 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.

In the lack of this shared time, the rest of the cohort had to deal with students sometimes not being able to make it to their site for various reasons. Indeed, the importance of making sure the community partner knows the constraints of the academic schedule and designing the course around

these constraints as well as the partner's schedule cannot be overemphasized. Making allowance for serendipitous and unplanned learning challenges and opportunities is key to overcoming this challenge—but doing so requires open and consistent communication with community partners. One cohort member 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 long-term 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.

By extending perspectives beyond the boundaries of a single semester, instructors can unlock the potential for deeper, more meaningful partnerships with community organizations. Indeed, the transformative power of community-engaged learning extends far beyond the confines of a traditional academic timeline. Embracing multisemester collaborations allows instructors to cultivate trust, nurture communication, and foster sustainable relationships with our community partners. As we engage with the process of community-engaged learning, it's important to remember that true transformation takes time—and by embracing the continuity of multisemester collaborations, we pave the way for lasting impact, both within our classrooms and in the communities we serve.

Assessing Student CEL Performance

An additional challenge is the expectations 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 community partner's location for hands-on work, completing a set of tasks determined by the community partner, or adhering to the professional norms of the organization. One cohort member described having multiple avenues to assess the community-based elements of the course. She explained, "As a way of keeping students accountable, I had them document their learning in several ways; [these assignments] were graded. These included a set number of volunteer hours [at the organization], short reflections, and a longer summary reflection paper." Self-reporting, despite its potential for exploitation, is often employed in CEL

courses. Faculty should be cognizant of the community partner's role and time; the community partner's focus should not be on managing time sheets and keeping students accountable.

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 reflection, which invites students to describe the 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.

Content-based assignments, such as guided reading exercises, research papers, presentations, or final reports, are more conventional assignments, but they can help students contextualize the community-based work. Content-based assignments work in tandem with reflection assignments. Through content-based work, students develop the language to talk about their experiences and can move from a superficial accounting of their experience to a deeper discussion of how they see larger societal forces in play.

Community partners may also want to be involved in the development of content-based assignments and their assessment. We had a variety of experiences—some community partners were enthusiastic about collaborating on creating assignments, providing feedback, and assessing the quality of student work, whereas others wanted to leave the grading to faculty. Since CEL is cooperative, the voice of the community 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 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 confined shelter spaces. This situation upset the students and required the faculty member to think of alternatives midsemester. Response to these challenges requires a level of flexibility that is not common in the traditional methods of teaching at the university level. Students may expect faculty to present a fully prepared 15-week course syllabus and schedule; shifting gears mid-project may leave faculty and students feeling unprepared or unsettled.

Fortunately, open communication with the community partner allowed the situation to be salvaged. The students and the program coordinator agreed that the students who play louder instruments (e.g., trumpet, saxophone) would play outside—at a distance—for the goats. The goats did not seem scared of the music, and were in fact rather

curious, and the indoor animals were still able to hear the music through the shelter building's walls. The community partner continues to support the partnership and even offered to partner again in future semesters.

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. 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 faculty might not feel prepared to effectively teach these topics may lead to some perceived "teaching failures" or uncomfortable moments in the classroom. In the experiences 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.

Such a reflection speaks to the significance of 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)

Undoubtedly, it is challenging to help students focus on the practical, rhetorical, and social justice implications of their projects, to create a connectedness between the local community and the university, and to provide students with real-world experiences that also keep them engaged. 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 community members will be. Community-engaged learning can be time-consuming and requires a 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.

Overcoming the challenges inherent in community-engaged teaching and learning requires a multifaceted approach grounded in flexibility, community, and communication. By addressing issues such as the lack of resources, training, and existing partnerships, fellowship coordinators can lay the groundwork to effectively respond to these challenges and overcome barriers related to timing and the complexities of integrating real-world experiences into the curriculum. Moreover, by embracing the principles of critical reflection and remaining open to "failing upward," we can create environments where our students (and we) are empowered to explore, learn, and grow alongside community partners. As each of us continues to refine our approaches to community-engaged learning, it's essential to recognize that these challenges are not insurmountable obstacles but rather transformative opportunities for growth, innovation, and meaningful collaboration.

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 community-engaged 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, it's evident that these relationships are the cornerstone of effective community-engaged 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 relationships with the community partners, and many cohort members continue to build upon the relationships developed during the fellowship. Some of us are developing new classes, working with the same partners on multisemester projects. Others are working on publications with their partners. The ability to build long-term community partnerships beyond an individual academic semester was seen as a transformative experience for some fellows in their approach to community-based teaching and learning. One cohort member explains,

> 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 needs and dynamics of our communities, 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 community-engaged 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 community-engaged 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 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 gained during one semester can serve as building blocks for future iterations of the course speaks to the iterative nature of community-engaged learning. Rather than 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 community-engaged 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 instructor and students in the class. One 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 recognize the community partner as not just a collaborator but a coeducator in the learning process, where their knowledge and lived experiences 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 learning process. As noted by Welch and Plaxton-Moore (2019),

> [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 community-engaged 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 of like-minded faculty colleagues is in all aspects of teaching and learning, but especially in community-based contexts. As Welch and Plaxton-Moore (2019) pointed out,

> 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.

A more practical element that emerged from this community of practice was the coconstructed knowledge cultivated from 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.

As we continue to develop new classes and projects in collaboration with our community partners, we are not only enriching the educational experience for our students but also contributing to the long-term sustainability and resilience of the communities we serve. Through ongoing dialogue, critical reflection, and intentional coaction, we are forging enduring connections that transcend the boundaries of academia, creating a legacy of positive change that extends far 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 experiential learning opportunities with students. Much of university education is still rooted in a teacher–student model despite the growing recognition that a triadic relationship that includes the local community is mutually beneficial to all. The steadily increasing number of institutions and academic endeavors created to support CEL is a testament to its value and usefulness. However, it remains separate from or tangential to, rather than integrated in, the university 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, it can no longer exist on the margins of our curriculum. Situating community-engaged learning as a cornerstone—or a pillar—of the university and its curriculum requires concrete actions that institutions must implement if they take seriously the benefits of CEL to student learning and development and fostering wider social change. Brandt's research underscored the importance of providing adequate resources, infrastructure, 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).

Institutional support is essential in bolstering faculty resilience and commitment to CEL endeavors. Recognizing and rewarding faculty contributions to community engagement not only validates faculty efforts but also signals the institution's genuine commitment to fostering meaningful partnerships with communities. By offering funding, resources, and ongoing support, universities can empower faculty to navigate the complexities of community partnerships 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 community-engaged 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

Brooke Covington *is an assistant professor of English and academic director of the Center for Community Engagement at Christopher Newport University. She earned a PhD in rhetoric and writing from Virginia Tech, and her research interests include rhetorics of public memory, antioppressive forms of community engagement, and narrative medicine. Her work has appeared in Community Literacy Journal, Journal of Medical Humanities, Western Journal of Communication, and Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy.*

Chelsey Hamm *is an assistant professor of music and the director of the Music Theory & Aural Skills areas at Christopher Newport University. Her research interests include posttonal analysis, text/musical relationships, timbre in popular music, and the works of Charles Ives. Chelsey's recent publications include Open Music Theory (Vol. 2), and her other recent essays can be found in Indiana Theory Review and The Routledge Companion to Music Theory Pedagogy.*

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.*

Vanessa Buehlman *is the director of the Center for Community Engagement at Christopher Newport University. She earned her MBA from University of Maryland University College. Buehlman has presented and published on the unique role center-based models play in supporting student self-directed learning, and on the impact of community engagement on student development.*

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.

***William Donaldson** is an associate professor of management at Christopher Newport University. Dr. Donaldson is the director of the CNU Luter Business Institute and director of the Biotechnology and Management Program. His research interest areas include enterprise management systems; corporate universities and their impact on performance; family business issues, dynamics, and transitions; entrepreneurship and innovation; systems thinking; and corporate governance and board performance.*

***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?

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Building Faculty Capacity: Initial Impact of a Service-Learning Faculty Learning Community Model

Douglas Strahler, Steven Verba, Christine Walsh, and Jeffrey Rathlef

Abstract

Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs) offer a collaborative and structured environment for professional development, enabling educators to build their capacity to incorporate service-learning into their teaching practices. This study examines the initial impact of a FLC for institutional awareness and implementation of service-learning at Slippery Rock University. The FLCs allowed scholars to gain theoretical and hands-on experience in service-learning pedagogy. This article outlines a FLC model based on a conceptual framework of six course attributes to promote structure, clarity, and inquiry. Through intentional structural revisions, the FLCs evolved to more effectively provide a space where faculty could integrate service-learning into their courses. Participants increased both their self-reported awareness of the six attributes and confidence in their ability to implement the attributes in their teaching practices. Further research is needed as the FLC model is adjusted; however, the results indicate a positive impact on faculty development and support institutional change.

Keywords: service-learning, faculty development, faculty learning community, community engagement

With the goal of building an engaged campus, Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania (SRU) used the institutional self-study process to leverage institutional commitment and transform the use of service-learning pedagogy. Furco (2010) stated that "an 'engaged campus' is characterised by the *authenticity* and *genuineness* with which community engagement is integrated into the research, teaching and service mission of higher education institutions" (p. 387). SRU is committed to advancing community-based learning and service-learning practices through a variety of efforts and with support from the university's Office for Community-Engaged Learning (OCEL). The OCEL aimed to strengthen the service-learning practices at the university by developing a conceptual framework to structure the content of a faculty learning community (FLC).

Prioritizing the development of FLCs represents advancing community-based learning and service-learning practices on our campus. The purpose of faculty development for service-learning is to foster curricular reform while also assisting faculty with scholarship, leadership among colleagues, and advocacy for service-learning (Bringle et al., 1997). Cox (2001) detailed how FLCs were change agents for transforming institutions into learning organizations. Additional changes included communication across disciplines, increased faculty interest in teaching and learning, inquiries into the scholarship of teaching, and growth in civic responsibility. When designing faculty development opportunities, Hatcher and Bringle (1995) argued for "a more deliberate, organized, and centralized approach to faculty development that would yield more tangible results more quickly" (p. 113). Notably, a curriculum about the tenets of

service-learning should be complemented by opportunities to reflect on their practice (Bringle et al., 1997). Furthermore, institutional support is necessary to enhance faculty curricular work.

In this article, we describe one approach to creating faculty development to support the high-impact practice (HIP) of service-learning by designing and implementing FLCs. One of the overarching goals was to build capacity among faculty members to effectively implement new teaching strategies, such as service-learning pedagogies, to contribute to the institutionalization of service-learning. Weaver and Kellogg (2017) described institutionalizing community engagement/service-learning as "establishing the goals and values of community engagement as norms within the well-established organizational culture of a university campus" (p. 119). Thus, faculty development was an essential component in the process and development of an assessment plan. The inquiry aims to examine faculty's perceptions of their awareness of the six attributes for service-learning and their confidence in implementing each of them to foster institutional change on our campus.

Moreover, an assessment plan to evaluate the effectiveness of the service-learning FLC became important to ensuring the quality of the experience from both process and outcomes perspectives. Hansen and Williams (2005) suggested that "learning community assessment strategies must necessarily be comprehensive, multi-faceted, and inclusive of multiple frameworks in an effort to systematically assess complex outcomes" (p. 70). Conducting an initial evaluation of faculty members' perceptions of the FLC can help identify key areas for enhancing faculty capacity to inform targeted strategies in building awareness and confidence with implementing service-learning pedagogies.

Profile of Slippery Rock University

As a member of a 10-university state system, SRU is a teaching-oriented public higher education institution in Western Pennsylvania, approximately 50 miles north of Pittsburgh. The regional university has a total enrollment of approximately 8,800 students, with about 7,400 undergraduates and 1,400 graduates. During the period of this inquiry, Slippery Rock was comprised of four colleges: Business; Education; Health, Engineering, and Science; and Liberal Arts. Graduate programs are offered in education, business, and health sciences, including a master's in physician assistant and doctorates in physical and occupational therapy.

Service-Learning at SRU

"The fundamental educational mission of Slippery Rock University (SRU) is to transform the intellectual, social, physical, and leadership capacities of students in order to prepare them for life and career success" (Slippery Rock University, 2022a). Holland (1997) found that the presence of service-learning in the university mission, along with setting clear goals and additional support structures, increased university support of service-learning on campus. As part of the mission, the university demonstrates a strong commitment to advancing community-based learning and service-learning practices through various efforts and support from the OCEL. In addition, the university earned the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification in 2020 and aims to earn CCEC reclassification in 2026.

Multiple campus initiatives and institutional changes preceded the establishment of the service-learning FLCs. Collectively, the events contributed to the goal of institutionalizing an engaged campus at SRU to align with the tenets of service-learning institutionalization as described by Furco and Holland (2004):

> Like most educational initiatives, service-learning achieves institutionalization when it becomes an ongoing, expected, valued, and legitimate part of the institution's intellectual core and organizational culture. However, in comparison to other educational initiatives, service-learning presents some unique features that challenge traditional conceptions of what "institutionalization" means. Specifically, service-learning's multifaceted structure, multi-disciplinary philosophical framework, and broad organizational impacts require institutional leaders to think differently about why and how to institutionalize this educational initiative. (p. 24)

Furthermore, Bringle and Hatcher (2000) described how efforts for institutionalization need to be multifaceted, related to the mission, and supported by presidential leadership, allocations in the budget, and a centralized office to coordinate campuswide

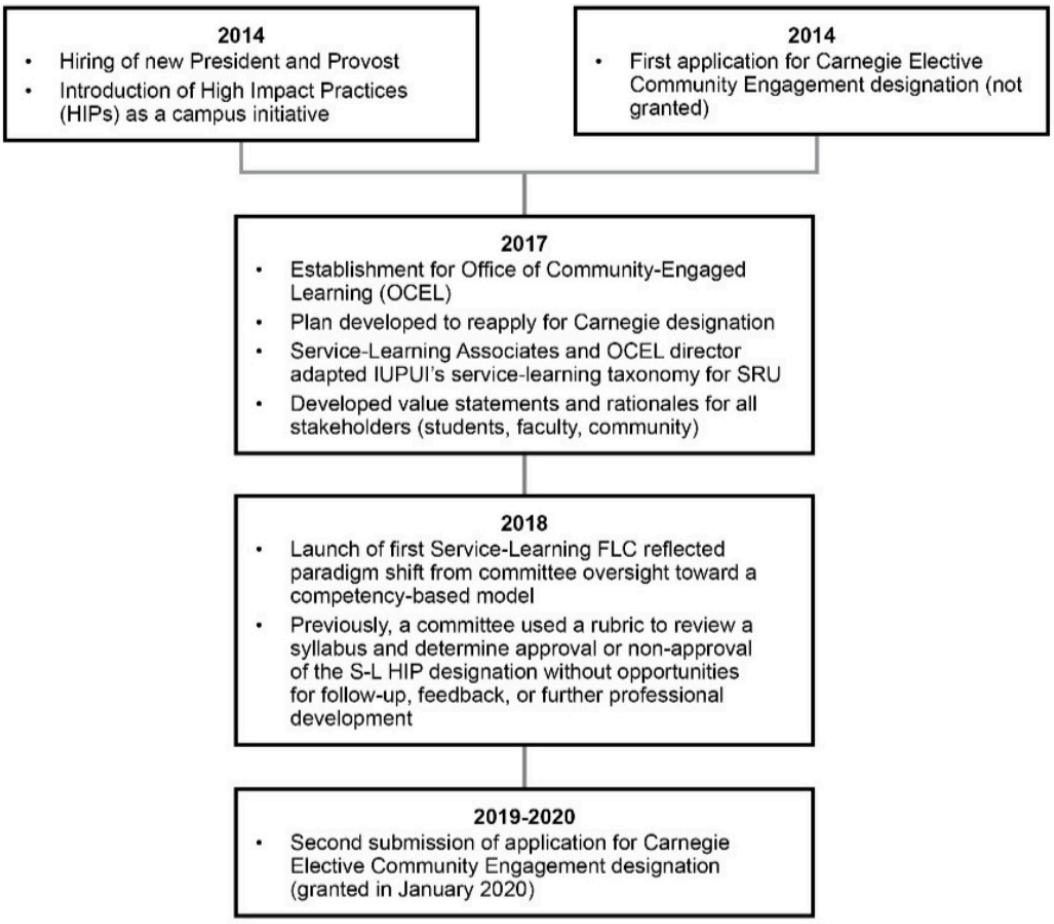
service-learning opportunities. Each of these factors represents deliberate and supportive actions implemented at SRU. Previously, service-learning was undertheorized and operationalized without integrity on our campus. Additionally, service-learning pedagogy was self-reported, resulting in an inflation in course tracking. Over time, structured initiatives and changes were established to institutionalize the service-learning practices at SRU (see Figure 1).

Faculty Development to Contribute to Institutionalizing Service-Learning

Bringle and Hatcher (1996) identified four key constituents essential for successfully implementing service-learning in higher education: the institution, faculty, students, and community (p. 224). Faculty members make a critical difference in service-learning, from course design to mentoring students in their experiences. Faculty development and support are essential for sustaining service-learning initiatives. Universities can provide faculty development opportunities that create a shared understanding of service-learning while establishing and maintaining its academic integrity (Hatcher & Bringle, 1995). Bringle and Hatcher (1996) also explained that faculty will develop confidence in their use of service-learning pedagogies and increase the presence of service-learning in the fabric of the university.

Although faculty development can take varying forms, Hatcher and Bringle (1995) argued for an intentional approach and presented four reasons for structured offerings. First, a shared vocabulary, including a definition of service-learning, is necessary for faculty to understand the pedagogy of service-learning. Second, academic integrity

Figure 1. Timeline of Initiatives and Changes in Community-Based Learning and Service-Learning Practices



is fostered and quality control is offered for curriculum revision. Third, faculty experience increased support and confidence as they learn from colleagues, gain information about resources on campus, and establish relationships with faculty in other disciplines. Fourth, institutionalization ensues when faculty are motivated to engage in the learning to implement service-learning. Moreover, Bringle et al. (1997) explained that faculty development extends beyond working with faculty to weave service-learning into their courses. It also involves the active and engaged roles as scholars, leaders, role models, and service-learning advocates.

Various models of faculty development exist to integrate teaching, scholarship, and service. Gravett and Broscheid (2018) suggested that the selection of a model should align with the achievement of specific outcomes. One category of "extended and immersive programs" (p. 159) includes FLCs. With the strengths of being high impact and participatory, FLCs offer opportunities for a sense of belonging, building relationships, and program development. Shortcomings include their time-intensive nature, the need for planning, logistical complexity, and possible costs.

At SRU, the structure of the FLCs reflects a model developed in the 1990s by Milton Cox and colleagues at Miami University (Cox, 2004). In this model, participants represent cross-disciplinary faculty and staff in groups of six to 15 members. Cox described the FLC as an opportunity to "engage in an active, collaborative, yearlong program with a curriculum about enhancing teaching and learning and with frequent seminars and activities that provide learning, development, the scholarship of teaching, and community building" (p. 8). Cox's model associates multiple teaching and learning goals with the FLCs, including

> building a university-wide community through teaching and learning, nourishing the scholarship of teaching and its application to student learning, broadening the evaluation of teaching and the assessment of learning, increasing faculty collaboration across disciplines, and creating awareness of the complexity of teaching and learning. (p. 10)

FLCs can be cohort-based or topic-based. Cohort-based FLCs focus on the needs of a particular group of faculty members, tailoring topics and content to their needs and interests. Topic-based cohorts focus on a specific university-wide initiative related to teaching and learning. Faculty members often propose topics to the FLC program director, who then distributes the information across campus.

Faculty Learning Communities at Slippery Rock University

Slippery Rock University (2022b) defines a topic-based FLC as "small, cross-disciplinary groups of both faculty and staff who work collaboratively to develop 21st-century approaches to teaching and learning in higher education and engage in the scholarship of teaching." The university charges the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) to provide professional development to support faculty and staff as they build on their teaching and research, in which FLCs are one of many opportunities developed by the CTL. FLCs provide broad overview training for faculty members across campus to become acquainted with the essential components of HIPs and provide a collaborative environment to guide faculty to develop competence in a particular area of teaching and learning (Cox, 2003). The term "high-impact practice" (HIP), introduced by George D. Kuh (2008), refers to active learning processes that promote strengthening teaching practices and approaches to deep learning through student engagement. One or two individuals recognized as experts in the area facilitate FLCs, meeting at least five times during a single semester. At the completion of the FLC, faculty will be able to incorporate what they learned into their courses; furthermore, by demonstrating professional competency in a particular HIP, they will be designated HIP practitioners. Faculty are awarded a professional development stipend through the successful completion of a particular HIP FLC. The university also assigns the HIP designation to one or more of the faculty member's courses.

Service-Learning Faculty Learning Community Development and Structure

Service-learning is one of the 11 HIPs established by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). SRU launched the Service-Learning Faculty Learning Community (SL-FLC) in fall 2018

to support faculty members in advancing their service-learning practices through professional development. The goal for faculty was to develop competencies in the essential components of service-learning and engage in the scholarship of engagement. SRU models its approach to service-learning after the AAC&U's "high-impact educational practices" (Kuh, 2008) and the Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) Center for Service and Learning (Hahn et al., 2016). Service-learning at SRU is based on six attributes (Table 1) adapted from Hatcher et al. (2016): reciprocal partnerships, diversity of interactions and dialogue, community activities, civic competencies, critical reflection, and assessment.

The purpose of the SRU conceptual framework is to inform practice in three ways:

1. The value ("We believe . . .") statements give meaning and purpose to concepts that the SRU community cares about.
2. The attributes characterize the practice and allow for a structure that promotes exploration and discovery.
3. The criteria that are applied define the expectations in a quality service-learning course that possesses integrity and rigor.

SRU faculty and staff adapted the conceptual framework from IUPUI and added the value statements and criteria. The order of the attributes was also changed from the original taxonomy to create an artifact that reflects institutional values and practices.

The conceptual framework served as the basis for designing the SL-FLC through the introduction, discussion, and reflection on each of the six attributes. The SL-FLC included six 90-minute sessions during the

Table 1. How Values Inform Service-Learning Practice at Slippery Rock University

We believe . . .	Attribute	Our practice
that campus and community, working as equitable partners and coeducators, can create transformative change.	Reciprocal partnerships	Reciprocal partnerships and processes shape the community activities and course design.
engaging across difference promotes an awareness of the interdependence between self and society, which serves to humanize others and build vibrant communities.	Diversity of interactions and dialogue	Diversity of interactions and dialogue with others across difference occurs regularly in the course.
engaging in activities that reflect the concerns and priorities of the community deepens both civic and academic learning and enhances community well-being.	Community activities	Community activities enhance academic content, course design, and assignments.
the public purpose of higher education is to promote the development of engaged citizens who will uphold democratic values and serve the public good.	Civic competencies	Civic competencies (i.e., knowledge, skills, dispositions, behaviors) are well integrated into student learning.
critical reflection bridges service and learning in order to enhance and reinforce both, enabling meaning to be derived from the experience, and hastening the creation of capable citizens.	Critical reflection	Critical reflection is well integrated into student learning.
assessment shows evidence of impact among multiple stakeholders for the purpose of continuous quality improvement, including teaching, learning, partnership, and community impact.	Assessment	Assessment is used for continuous course improvement.

Note. Adapted from *Research on Student Civic Outcomes in Service Learning: Conceptual Frameworks and Methods* (IUPUI Series on Service-Learning Research) by J. A. Hatcher, R. G. Bringle, and T. W. Hahn, 2016, Stylus Publishing.

semester, with each session dedicated to discussing one of the six attributes. Every SL-FLC had four to 12 faculty participants. The SL-FLC initially met face-to-face; however, with the advent of COVID-19, it moved to a virtual format. The FLC utilized the university learning management system (Desire2Learn) to provide a space for collaboration and supporting materials for each attribute.

The FLC was cofacilitated by the director for community engagement and a service-learning HIP-designated faculty member. A faculty member cofacilitated the sessions, offering participants a faculty perspective and examples of their own service-learning practices. The director for community engagement selects faculty members to ensure that each faculty participant is well-versed in service-learning and capable of serving as a mentor. The collaboration provided faculty voice, experience, and expertise with administrative direction, oversight, and stewardship. The two voices leveraged their assets in a way that mutually reinforced one another. The administrative consistency anchored the FLCs within OCEL, allowing for tracking, assessment, and the further evolution of the model. Faculty enhanced this arrangement with their rich examples, artifacts, and experiences from applied practice in their specific discipline. The complementary nature of the cofacilitators' voices was not a common practice but one that SRU intentionally chose to implement. The cofacilitators were responsible for leading each FLC session, establishing responsibilities based on each other's strengths, developing the materials for each session, and meeting outside FLC meeting times to reflect on the FLC process.

Outcomes

Six outcomes framed the FLC. Through the participation in the service-learning faculty learning community, participants will

- Complete an ongoing reflective self-assessment of their current service-learning practice throughout the FLC.
- Develop/revise course materials consistent with six (6) course attributes for service-learning.
- Learn new knowledge and skills from the examples of faculty peers to invigorate their engaged practice.
- Designate a course as HIP-S (service-learning).
- Learn how to operationalize course attributes through the RockServe (powered by GivePulse) online community engagement platform.
- Earn $300 in professional development and gain eligibility to apply for additional course enhancement funds through the OCEL community-engaged service-learning practitioner grant program.

The outcomes functioned to support faculty as they sought to develop a service-learning course or further develop their current service-learning courses. Participants also had access to additional resources, such as the community engagement platform RockServe (powered by GivePulse) and professional development funding.

Recruitment

Initially, the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) utilized an application process to select members for each FLC to ensure a small cohort model and advertised the FLCs to the university community through email. In addition, the CTL established a webpage providing details on each FLC and details about the FLC model at the university. In recent years, OCEL worked in collaboration with CTL to advertise the SL-FLC. The OCEL designed flyers and distributed them to faculty through email and to campus mailboxes. The director for community engagement also extended individual email invitations to faculty who demonstrated an interest in service-learning. The FLC was intentionally designed to be open for faculty members at any level to join a cohort, not just tenured faculty members.

Initial Service-Learning Faculty Learning Community

The 90-minute sessions followed the same basic agenda when the FLC was first offered in fall 2018. Each commenced with the presentation of key components to define each attribute and examples of how the attribute can look in practice. After sharing the content, an interactive portion offered the time and space to brainstorm ways to integrate the attribute into each faculty member's course. Often, a think-pair-share model was used to promote dialogue among the participants. The facilitators asked participants to talk with different colleagues each week.

The deliberate request ensured that participants heard from various voices across multiple disciplines during the six sessions. The interactive session also provided the opportunity to collaborate on approaches for their specific discipline and establish a sense of community among their peers. At the end of each session, faculty members were provided time to share their ideas with their peers and receive feedback.

The FLC opened membership to all faculty members, and each participant was asked to design a course in their discipline where they could apply the concepts from the FLC. Participants needed to meet two requirements to complete the FLC and earn the HIP-S designation for their course. First, each participant was expected to attend all six sessions but needed to attend at least five of the six sessions. Second, each participant was required to submit a revised syllabus to demonstrate the integration of the service-learning attributes. Although the development of additional course materials was not required, it was highly encouraged throughout the FLC and provided participants the opportunity to receive feedback on their materials from the cofacilitators.

At the completion of the FLC, the cofacilitators evaluated each faculty member's syllabus and course documents for evidence of the service-learning attributes. If a faculty member needed further support to integrate the attributes in their documents, a cofacilitator met with them to discuss revisions. When the director for community engagement and cofacilitators deemed the courses acceptable for HIP-S designation, they made the recommendation to the University Curriculum Committee. The FLC enabled faculty to designate multiple courses by submitting revised syllabi that reflected the six attributes. This way, the designation was affiliated with the faculty member who teaches each course.

Faculty members who successfully completed and met the requirements of the FLC were provided a professional stipend of $300, which was supported through the university budget. According to Dostilio and Welch (2019), a variety of factors motivate faculty to become involved in community-engaged learning. One of those factors includes being prepared to provide logistical support for teaching and research (p. 163). The funding was provided to not only support the faculty but also reflect the OCEL's philosophy of investing limited resources in those faculty that invest in their own professional development through the FLC. Another form of financial support provided by the OCEL came in the form of HIP-designated course enhancement minigrant opportunities. The minigrants were intended to support access (mobilization), quality (consumable materials and supplies), and/or reciprocity (honoraria for community partners).

Evolution of the Faculty Learning Community

Over time, the SL-FLC evolved to sustain pedagogical change. Revisions were also needed during the shift to virtual learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A key goal was to encourage discovery and a deeper understanding of the six attributes among the participants. A series of five advancements was implemented over a period of 3 years (see Table 2).

Table 2. Five Faculty Learning Community Advancements

Semester/Year	Advancement	Rationale
Fall 2019	Powerful questions	Powerful questions present many benefits to deepening the discussion.
Spring 2020	Flipped approach and virtual synchronous sessions	Asynchronous: hosted facilitator-created videos for main principles for each attribute; synchronous sessions became the place to work through problems, advance concepts, and engage in collaborative learning.
Spring 2021	Syllabus worksheet	Developed to assist participants with the development of their course by providing guidelines for each of the attributes.
Spring 2021	Community engagement platform (RockServe)	Short RockServe (GivePulse) tutorials were provided to align platform features to attributes.
Spring 2021	Support through OCEL	Graduate assistant and mini grants for additional support.

Powerful Questions (Fall 2019)

The first advancement with the FLC was the introduction of two to three powerful questions for each attribute. Powerful questions "stimulate reflective thinking, challenge assumptions, are thought-provoking, generate energy and a vector to explore, channel inquiry and promises insight, are broad and enduring, touch deeper meaning, and evoke more questions" (Vogt et al., 1994, p. 2). The introduction of the powerful questions promotes the goal of discovery and exploration by stimulating curiosity in the participants, which was a goal of the FLC facilitators. In the participants' responses, the facilitators discover what is important to the participants and give each one a voice in the process. The learning management system presented the powerful questions for each attribute within the weekly module, in advance of each session. The intent was to allow participants to reflect on each question before attending the weekly session.

Flipped Approach and Virtual Synchronous Sessions (Spring 2020)

In spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced a shift from face-to-face to a virtual environment, resulting in two significant FLC changes. First, the FLC sessions became synchronous sessions using video conferencing software. Second, the learning management system created additional readings and resources to cater to an online learning environment. The shift to an online environment led to the introduction of a flipped classroom approach to create a more active learning environment. The learning management system hosted facilitator-created videos where instruction that previously occurred during the in-person session was now viewed asynchronously in advance of the session. The change resulted in more efficient use of the synchronous meeting time by allowing for an interactive session with application and engagement surrounding each attribute.

The virtual synchronous sessions became the place to work through problems, advance concepts, and engage in collaborative learning (Tucker, 2012). The conversations revolved around clarifying questions related to the attribute and expanding on the concepts by addressing two to three powerful questions related to the attribute. This was followed by an interactive brainstorming session to allow participants to ponder the attributes in their practice.

Syllabus Worksheet (Spring 2021)

In spring 2021, the team created a syllabus worksheet to assist participants in developing their courses by providing guidelines for each of the attributes. The worksheet allowed the attribute information to be constructed and integrated into the course more strategically. Additionally, the worksheet provided a straightforward guide for participants to meet the updated FLC and university HIP designation syllabus requirements. The synchronous interactive sessions allowed participants to complete the section related to the attribute being discussed for that session and document any areas of development needed for their course. Cofacilitators invited participants to submit their updated worksheets before the session so they could receive feedback on their progress. The content for this worksheet could be later integrated into their course syllabus since some faculty courses would change due to new teaching assignments or the course they were developing being offered only once an academic year. The worksheet allowed participants to successfully fulfill the FLC requirements and receive approval from the University Curriculum Committee (UCC) in a timely manner.

Community Engagement Platform (Spring 2021)

Another revision of the FLC was the introduction of the community engagement platform GivePulse, which was rebranded as RockServe at the university. GivePulse is a "volunteer management and service-learning platform that enables anyone to find, list, and track civic engagement in their community" (GivePulse, 2022). RockServe is the university's digital community engagement platform where volunteers can find service opportunities from campus and off-campus organizations in one specific location online. It also serves as a portal for community members and organizations interested in partnering with SRU for short-term service projects, service-learning courses, or ongoing service programs to further the organization's mission and community-based efforts. As part of the FLC, facilitators added participants to the RockServe platform and provided short tutorials during the synchronous sessions. They demonstrated how specific features could assist participants in finding partners for their course and manage service-learning aspects of the course.

RockServe was utilized throughout the FLC to foster growth as an engaged campus. First, through the FLC, faculty were introduced to the platform in a way that would not be overly burdensome. RockServe also served as the platform where facilitators distributed surveys to participants and managed attendance using the "Impacts" feature. The Impacts feature is a way to measure and access potential forms of community engagement: It asks users to submit their impacts for a particular event and enables event administrators to verify individuals' impacts.

The FLC utilized Impacts for five purposes. First, facilitators used it to track FLC participant attendance, allowing participants to experience the function in the same way their students would if they used it through a course or project/partnership (such as automation). Second, RockServe taught participants how to operationalize course attributes into practice—for example, reciprocity in action through surveys and feedback mechanisms. Third, when a faculty member earns their HIP-S designation, all HIP-S courses and rosters are automatically uploaded into RockServe each semester. Faculty could utilize their RockServe course portals for service and partnership coordination and tracking if chosen. Fourth, RockServe houses all OCEL minigrants and reporting requirements and supports tracking, organization, and assessment. Finally, RockServe provides data to access service-learning efforts at the course level or across the university. The implementation and use of RockServe allowed the university to build an important infrastructure that did not exist previously toward the engaged campus. Connecting the FLC and HIP-S courses to RockServe was a very intentional and strategic initiative to make community engagement and service-learning deeper and more pervasive at SRU.

In the case of the FLC, each session equated to 1.5 impacts, and participants were asked to submit their impacts at the conclusion of each session. Then the facilitators tracked and verified their attendance.

Support Through OCEL (Spring 2021)

The last area of advancement focused on the additional support outside the FLC. First, a graduate assistant in the OCEL designed and developed RockServe training sessions—both group and individual. Second, the OCEL addressed financial support for the HIP-designated faculty members by offering minigrant opportunities designed to serve two purposes. First, the grants allowed faculty to enhance student outcomes and community benefit; second, they enabled faculty to promote professional competency development among HIP-designated faculty practitioners through the applied practice of community-engaged learning. More specifically, the grants supported the utilization, experimentation, and application of best practices in core competency areas. The funding also scaffolded and bridged a faculty practitioner's stages of development from fundamentals to quality-building to advanced integration as a community-engaged scholar.

Collectively, the five advancements in the FLC contributed to a more supportive and robust structure for faculty development around service-learning. Although other university-wide initiatives existed, the FLC remained the key to advancing service-learning among faculty. As part of the comprehensive plan that was developed to evaluate and assess the effectiveness of service-learning institutionalization at SRU, one of the main assessment strategies of the FLC was to conduct a pre- and postsurvey. This study examined existing programmatic assessment data to understand the outcomes and impact of the FLCs as a form of faculty development, as well as to guide the advancement of the FLC and the institutionalization of service-learning.

Measuring the Impact of SRU's Service-Learning Faculty Learning Community Model

An initial evaluation was conducted by the authors to examine faculty's perceptions of their gains from participating in a faculty learning community (FLC) in terms of awareness of and potential to implement service-learning. Three of the authors are HIP-S-designated service-learning faculty members, and the fourth is the director for community engagement, lending credibility to the study's focus on service-learning pedagogy and faculty development. This article outlines an FLC model based on a conceptual framework of six course attributes to promote structure, clarity, and inquiry. The attributes are considered by community engagement experts to be key components that both characterize and distinguish service-learning as a high-impact practice. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Slippery Rock University.

Recruitment

The FLC recruited faculty primarily through a campuswide email. Faculty who regularly engaged in service-learning and were interested in implementing it into their classes were encouraged to participate. Faculty represented each of the four Colleges, including Business; Health, Engineering, and Science; Liberal Arts; and Education, as illustrated in Figure 2.

The College of Health, Engineering, and Science had the largest number of participating faculty members; however, the greatest representation from a single academic program was six faculty members from Early Childhood Education (see Figure 3).

Pre- and Post-participation Survey

Participants completed a survey before and after the FLC sessions to gauge their knowledge of and confidence in implementing service-learning components. Questions focused on the six main attributes of service-learning adapted from Hatcher et al. (2016): reciprocal partnerships, community activities, civic competencies, diversity of

Figure 2. Faculty Participation by Academic College

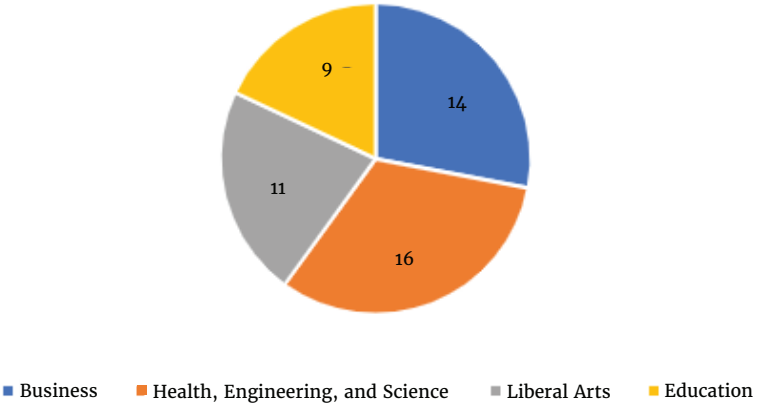
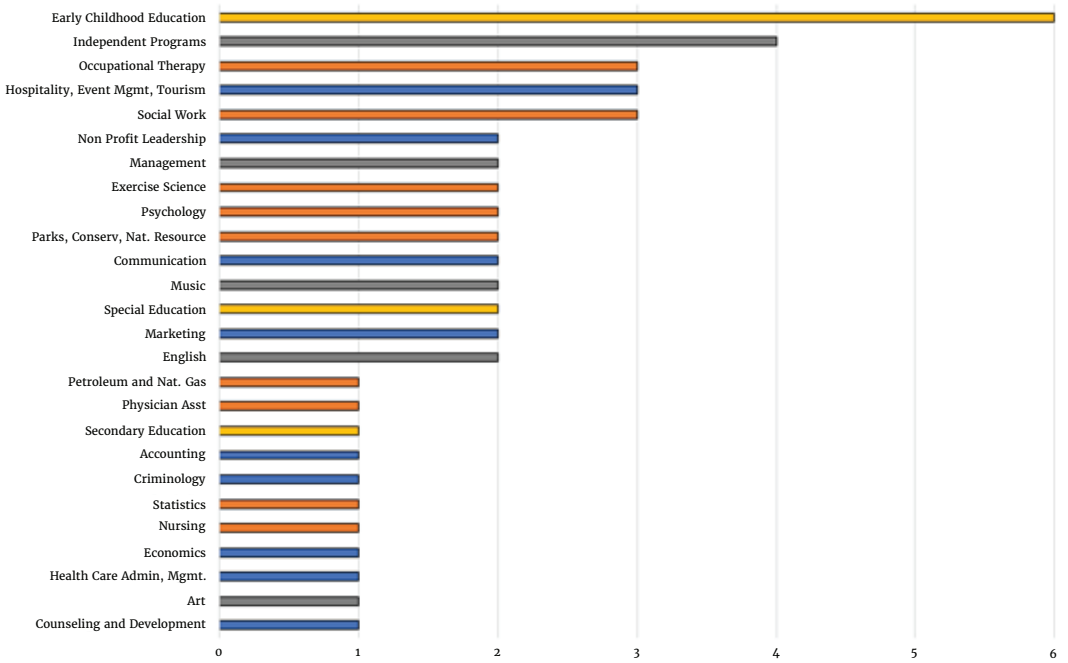


Figure 3. Faculty Participation by Academic Program



interactions and dialogue, critical reflection, and assessment. The team collected data using a seven-point Likert scale. They also asked participants to provide their reasons for participation and list two or three key takeaways they hoped to gain by the end of the FLC. In addition to the Likert-scale questions in the postsurvey, the team asked participants to rate the quality of each session based on content, relevance, and structure and to provide two or three items they learned from their participation in the FLC. Finally, each faculty member was encouraged to submit their course syllabi to the OCEL to apply for HIP designation through UCC for their relevant classes.

Findings

As part of our analysis, we employed both descriptive statistics to evaluate the distribution of sample values and *t*-test analyses to assess statistical significance (see Table 3 for the analysis of awareness and Table 4 for the analysis of confidence in implementation).

A paired two-sample *t*-test was conducted to assess the mean differences in the awareness of the six attributes. Administering pre- and posttests to evaluate awareness is appropriate because it enables a direct comparison of participants' knowledge, perceptions, or understanding before and after completing the FLC. By comparing the average performance before and after the intervention, the *t*-test provides insights into the program's effectiveness or teaching strategy. This statistical analysis allowed us to examine the paired data points and determine statistical significance, which we present in Table 3. The six attributes showed statistically significant increases post-assessment, with participants indicating the largest change in reciprocal partnerships, with a *t*-statistic of -6.29 ($p < 0.001$). It should be noted that statistical significance does not imply the difference is practically meaningful or large—it simply shows the results are unlikely to be due to random variation. It is also important to note that self-reporting of awareness has limitations because it relies on individuals' perceptions, which can bias their responses through overestimation, underestimation, or social desirability. Additionally, self-reports may not accurately reflect actual knowledge or behavior, making them less reliable for objective evaluation.

A paired two-sample *t*-test was conducted by the authors to assess the mean differences in confidence in ability to implement the six attributes. The results are presented in Table 4. The six attributes showed statistically significant increases in the post-assessment with participants.

Preparticipation Survey Results

As shown in Table 5, results from the preparticipation survey suggest faculty participants were more aware of the service-learning attributes than they were confident in implementing each of the attributes into their classes.

Post-participation Survey Results

Following the conclusion of the FLC, participants completed the same questionnaire regarding their awareness of and confidence in their ability to implement each of the six service-learning attributes in their classes. The expectation with the design and approach of the FLC was for participants to feel more aware of and confident in their ability to implement the attributes discussed in the FLC by the end of the program. Participants perceived their awareness of and confidence in ability to implement each attribute to be greater at the end of the FLC than at the start, which aligns with the goals of the FLC, as it is designed to enhance participants' understanding of and ability to apply the attributes over time. It highlights a perceived improvement, though it may or may not reflect actual skill development or measurable outcomes. Participants reported a larger increase in areas related to implementation compared to awareness, as shown in Table 6.

Faculty perceived the FLC to be beneficial, with each question eliciting a response of at least six on the 7-point Likert scale (Table 7).

Some participants did not finish or complete the process of submitting their final materials for HIP-S designation (see Table 8). Through individual follow-ups with participants, some indicated that their departments made curricular changes and reassigned their teaching workloads so they would not be teaching the course they worked on during the FLC. One faculty member left the university after completing the FLC, and others could not submit their syllabi before the deadline to get a HIP-S designation on the master class schedule.

Table 3. Descriptive and *t*-Test Analysis of Awareness of the Six Attributes (*n* = 23)

	Pretest		Posttest		Pre/post mean diff.	*t*-stat	*p* (2-tail)
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*			
Reciprocal partnerships	3.74	1.66	5.91	1.08	2.17	–6.70	$p < 0.001$
Diversity of interactions & dialogue	4.04	1.33	5.83	0.98	1.78	–5.79	$p < 0.001$
Community activities	3.96	1.49	5.83	1.03	1.83	–5.31	$p < 0.001$
Civic competencies	3.96	1.22	5.61	0.94	1.65	–5.79	$p < 0.001$
Critical reflection	4.74	1.42	5.96	1.07	1.22	–3.48	$p < 0.01$
Assessment	4.48	1.38	5.57	0.95	1.08	–3.01	$p < 0.01$

Table 4. Descriptive and *t*-Test Analysis of Confidence in Ability to Implement the Six Attributes (*n* = 23)

	Pretest		Posttest		Pre/post mean diff.	*t*-stat	*p* (2-tail)
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*			
Reciprocal partnerships	3.04	2.01	5.74	1.10	0.91	–6.29	$p < 0.001$
Diversity of interactions & dialogue	3.78	1.51	5.61	0.89	1.83	–5.25	$p < 0.001$
Community activities	3.74	1.81	5.91	1.04	2.17	–5.87	$p < 0.001$
Civic competencies	3.65	1.61	5.61	0.72	1.96	–5.55	$p < 0.001$
Critical reflection	5.00	1.45	6.17	0.58	1.17	–4.44	$p < 0.001$
Assessment	4.74	1.39	5.83	0.72	1.09	–3.27	$p < 0.01$

Table 5. Preparticipation Survey Results for Awareness of and Confidence in Ability to Implement Each of the Service-Learning Attributes

Attribute	Presurvey awareness	Presurvey implementation
Reciprocal partnerships	3.7 ± 1.6	3.1 ± 1.9
Diversity of interactions	4.1 ± 1.5	3.7 ± 1.6
Community activities	4.0 ± 1.5	3.8 ± 1.8
Civic competencies	3.8 ± 1.3	3.6 ± 1.7
Critical reflection	4.6 ± 1.5	4.9 ± 1.5
Assessment	4.5 ± 1.3	4.5 ± 1.5

Table 6. Post-participation Survey Results for Awareness of and Confidence in Ability to Implement Each of the Service-Learning Attributes

Attribute	Postsurvey Awareness	Pre–Post Change	Postsurvey Implementation	Pre–Post Change
Reciprocal partnerships	5.7 ± 1.2	+2.2 ± 1.5	5.5 ± 1.2	+2.7 ± 2.0
Diversity of interactions	5.6 ± 1.1	+1.8 ± 1.4	5.5 ± 1.0	+1.8 ± 1.6
Community activities	5.7 ± 1.0	+1.9 ± 1.6	5.8 ± 1.2	+2.2 ± 1.7
Civic competencies	5.4 ± 1.2	+1.7 ± 1.3	5.4 ± 1.1	+2.0 ± 1.7
Critical reflection	5.9 ± 1.1	+1.2 ± 1.6	6.0 ± 1.0	+1.2 ± 1.2
Assessment	5.4 ± 1.1	+1.1 ± 1.7	5.6 ± 1.0	+1.1 ± 1.6

Table 7. Postparticipation Survey Responses: Quality of Faculty Learning Committee

Question	Likert value (*M* ± *SD*)
Each week consisted of an appropriate balance of content, reflection, or discussion	6.4 ± 0.8
Materials on each attribute provided in advance were useful to me	6.5 ± 0.5
The D2L shell was useful to me as a way to organize my own materials	6.2 ± 0.8
Materials provided by my colleagues in the D2L shell were useful to me	6.0 ± 1.1
Spending time working on the FLC before each meeting was useful to my development	6.4 ± 0.9
The service-learning taxonomy was a helpful structure for understanding the potential of service-learning	6.7 ± 0.6
The developmental stages within the taxonomy were helpful for setting professional development goals	6.6 ± 0.6

Table 8. Faculty Learning Committee Breakdown by Semester With High-Impact Practice Designation

Semester/Year	Number of participants	Number of faculty receiving HIP-S designation
Fall 2021	4	4
Spring 2021	12	12
Fall 2020	--	No FLC due to COVID-19
Spring 2020	7	6
Fall 2019	7	7
Spring 2019	11	6
Fall 2018	--	No FLC due to administrative reasons
Spring 2018	9	9

Implications of the Early-Stage Assessment

The early-stage measurement findings highlight the FLC's effectiveness in fostering significant growth in faculty self-perception of awareness of the six identified attributes and confidence in their ability to implement service-learning across these attributes. This outcome indicates that the FLC's structured approach successfully provides faculty with both the theoretical foundation and practical tools necessary to integrate service-learning into their courses. The findings emphasize that participants gained a better understanding of the model and six attributes of service-learning and developed the confidence to apply the principles for each attribute effectively in their teaching practices.

Self-reported perceptions provide valuable insights into participants' experiences and self-assessments by offering a firsthand account of how they perceive changes in their awareness and confidence. We must acknowledge that the findings are based on self-reported perceptions, which can be influenced by biases such as social desirability (Nederhof, 1985) or overestimation of one's abilities (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). Although these perceptions provide valuable insights into faculty experiences, they may not fully reflect actual changes in teaching practices. Additionally, participants may have a positive bias toward the FLC or faculty facilitators, which could influence their responses in a way that highlights improvements.

The results also highlight the deeper potential of FLCs as an established structured mechanism replicable for faculty development. Furthermore, the results suggest the value of using a conceptual framework to guide a learning community. Such a set of frameworks proved to add clarity, focus, and initial measurability in this case. By enhancing the capacity of faculty members toward designing and delivering service-learning courses, FLCs contribute to the institutional goal of fostering community-engaged learning. This success should readily be interpreted as reflecting the potential for developing FLC models to support other innovations in pedagogies, and thus proving that the models have the capacity for professional growth and educational enhancement.

The results point to six reasons that have potential for continuing growth as the FLCs evolve further in the future and implications for institutional change.

1. The representation of service-learning faculty in various colleges and disciplines indicates a level of institutionalization across the campus. However, efforts can continue for outreach to programs that are underrepresented. As our university revises professional development pathways in each of the colleges, the structure of the SL-FLC could be customized for specific colleges.

2. Although the six attributes defined the conceptual framework and guided the planning and implementation of weekly sessions, the further development of community-engaged competencies for SRU holds much promise. This idea came from Campus Compact as faculty and staff reflected on how the service-learning concepts could be expressed as competencies and perhaps illustrate tangible examples for faculty.

3. Furthermore, involvement in opportunities with Campus Compact holds potential for faculty and staff as conference attendees and presenters who share their service-learning courses and projects. Faculty have also pursued professional development to earn professional credentials through Campus Compact.

4. The FLC experience was a catalyst for scholarship among faculty, students, and staff. Faculty members have presented at regional conferences and have been encouraged to submit to national and international conferences, as well as publish their work.

5. As a result of participating in the FLCs, faculty assumed new roles as community-engaged learning associates and FLC facilitators. In recent semesters, there was an increase in minigrant proposals through the OCEL at SRU. With additional grants awarded to faculty, more robust projects can be implemented with mutual benefit for participants and community partners.

6. As SRU prepares for the Carnegie Community Engagement reclassification application, the self-study process holds potential for further exploration and development and provides a model for collecting assessment data to inform next steps.

This study examined the initial impact of the FLC on faculty's perception of their awareness of the attributes of service-learning and of their confidence in their ability to implement service-learning, and there are opportunities for further investigation to explore its long-term effects and broader applicability. Quantitative measures, such as pre- and posttest data, provided evidence of changes in faculty awareness of and confidence in ability to implement service-learning principles. Tracking the retention of service-learning elements in course syllabi or assignments over time can further measure the lasting influence of the FLC on teaching practices. The metrics provide a clear, numerical basis for evaluating progress and identifying areas for improvement.

Qualitative methods, such as participant interviews and classroom observations, can complement these quantitative measures by offering deeper insights into faculty members' experiences, challenges, and successes after they've integrated service-learning into their courses. Interviews can reveal perspectives on how the FLC influenced their teaching philosophies and interactions with students and community partners, and classroom observations can provide real-world examples of service-learning practices in action. Analyzing these qualitative data will help uncover contextual factors that may not be apparent through quantitative analysis alone. The quality of how the six attributes were integrated into classes could also be assessed to identify areas where faculty can enhance their approach. The authors also acknowledge this initial study did not evaluate the impact on students or community and was restricted to faculty's perceptions in being prepared to integrate service-learning into their courses.

Conclusion

This study aimed to assess and evaluate the outcomes and impact of a service-learning FLC as a model for institutional change. The findings point to the benefits of providing support to faculty through the FLC model and a deeper and more pervasive presence of service-learning in the curriculum at SRU. Faculty appreciated the experience and gained a better understanding of service-learning and the six-attribute model utilized at SRU. Participants also noted the FLC provided a deeper understanding of the complexity of service-learning; how to incorporate service-learning into an academic setting; and the importance of community partnership, streamlining projects to meet student learning outcomes better, and engaging in collaboration with other faculty members from across disciplines. Beyond SRU, institutions interested in designing and implementing a faculty development program might consider how our FLC model that centers on the six attributes can guide their planning.

With the recent development of a set of competencies (Table 1) for each of the six attributes, additional research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of the competencies and the extent to which faculty are addressing the competencies. Early assessment points to an initial impact of a FLC for institutional awareness and implementation of service-learning at SRU, and many valuable insights are evident; however, the model will continue to be assessed and developed to meet the growing needs for professional development of faculty and continuing to establish an infrastructure that makes program assessment more accessible.

Author Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Douglas Strahler, Slippery Rock University, 213E Eisenberg Classroom Building, 1 Morrow Way, Slippery Rock, PA 16057. Email: douglas.strahler@sru.edu

Declaration of Interest

We do not have any conflicts of interest to disclose.

About the Authors

Douglas Strahler *(https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3968-7071) is an associate professor of strategic communication and media at Slippery Rock University (SRU) and teaches courses in digital media. He serves as a community-engaged learning faculty associate at SRU and previously served as the university's Service-Learning Faculty Fellow from 2019 to 2020 and a service-learning faculty learning community facilitator for two semesters. He is also actively involved with Campus Compact and IARSLCE. Douglas earned his MS in new media from Syracuse University and EdD in instructional technology and leadership from Duquesne University. His research interest focuses on community-engaged learning and service-learning, as well as social media, user experience design, and instructional technology.*

Steven Verba *is an associate professor of exercise science at Slippery Rock University, with a focus on preparing students for various preprofessional health graduate programs and careers. He previously served as a service-learning faculty learning community (FLC) facilitator at SRU and helped to develop various minigrants to support community-engaged learning projects on campus. Steven earned his MS in health, physical activity, and chronic disease and PhD in exercise physiology from the University of Pittsburgh. His research interests include the scholarship of teaching and learning, the development of student–faculty research projects, and health promotion in rural areas.*

Christine Walsh *(https://orcid.org/0009-0000-5917-5807) is a professor of curriculum, instruction, and educational leadership at Slippery Rock University and the Graduate Reading Program coordinator. She served as a cofacilitator for a service-learning faculty learning community at SRU and a team leader for the Engaged Department initiative. With an interest in university–school partnerships, Christine collaborates with teachers and administrators to develop field experiences that include service-learning. She earned a PhD in curriculum and instruction with a focus in literacy from Kent State University. Christine has interests in preservice teachers' beliefs about culturally relevant sustaining pedagogy, professional development for literacy educators, and family literacy events.*

Jeffrey Rathlef *is the director of community-engaged learning at Slippery Rock University. Jeffrey's prior experiences include serving as a rural community development volunteer in Ecuador with the U.S. Peace Corps, assistant director for Latin American and Caribbean Studies at World Learning's division of study abroad (SIT), and the director for community-based service and learning at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota. He earned a BS in horticulture, a BA in history from Kansas State University, and an MA in international affairs (Latin American studies) and MA in cultural studies in education from Ohio University.*

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CARE-ing for Rural West Texas: Conducting a Needs Assessment to Support a Community-Engaged K-12 Education–University Partnership

Catherine Lammert, Mihwa Park, Jesse Perez Mendez, Shawn Mason, and Kallie Covington

Abstract

The success of outreach hinges on whether programs are authentically rooted in the needs and strengths of a particular community. Here, we describe the process of conducting a needs assessment intended to provide this foundational information. This needs assessment, conducted by boundary spanners from a large public university, focuses on the needs of rural K-12 educational settings in West Texas. The article describes how the needs assessment shifted as we reflected on our initial attempts. It also highlights how the use of an assets-based framework enabled the team, as boundary spanners, to highlight community resources that can be leveraged for the design of future outreach and engagement efforts.

Keywords: rural education, K-12 education, teacher shortage, needs assessment, engagement

This report describes community-engaged scholarship uniting the K-12 education systems of rural West Texas with Texas Tech University with the goal of better serving Texas children. As we—an interdisciplinary team of university-based scholars and practitioners—have begun this work, we have become boundary spanners (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010) committed to assets-based views of rural communities (Crumb et al., 2023) and unwavering in the stance that engagement is a two-way approach to partnership rather than a one-way delivery of services (Stanton, 2007). Here, we focus on Phase 1 of this partnership in which we are conducting a needs assessment. Needs assessments are regularly used in fields such as medicine when it is necessary to assess the status quo within an organization (e.g., Sata et al., 2022). In education, needs assessments are used to understand the challenges that exist, as well as the forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that can address those challenges (Bryk et al., 2015; Pade-Khene, 2012). Although needs assessments are common, this report differs from many needs assessments in that it describes how the project's goals were sustained but the specific processes were altered as we conducted the initial stages of the needs assessment, reflected on varying degrees of success, and experienced a change of leadership at the level of the dean's office. Our long-term goal is to use the needs assessment findings to leverage university resources for outreach programs to support rural West Texas K-12 schools. Thus, this Project with Promise provides a model for those embarking on outreach and engagement efforts, especially within the reality of ever-changing university leadership.

Review of Literature

The difficulty of attracting and retaining qualified teachers and administrators to rural schools is well documented (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Leech et al., 2022; Reading et al., 2019; Showalter et al., 2017; Wargo et al., 2021) and persistent (Foght, 1912; Gray, 1916). In 1910, Henry Dewey described rural schools' challenges as a

> lack of carefully trained and experienced teachers, short terms of school, poorly constructed schoolhouses, insufficient equipment, annual or semi-annual change of teachers, enrollment too small for

> best results . . . teachers not in touch with life of community, and community not vitally interested in the schools. (Dewey, 1910, p. 542)

Many of these challenges remain today. Typically, university-based teacher education programs do not provide content specific to the needs of rural students, so it is common for teachers to lack knowledge of rural communities and rural pedagogy (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Leech et al., 2022; Wargo et al., 2021). Rural schools, like schools across the United States, increasingly serve emergent bilingual students (Lee & Hawkins, 2015; Lichter, 2012) and students of color (Marrow, 2011; Means et al., 2016), but rural teachers are underprepared to meet their needs.

Some of the issues noted by Dewey (1910) have taken on new forms in contemporary schools. For example, "insufficient equipment" now includes a lack of access to broadband internet with streaming speeds necessary for video content (Karnopp, 2022). The lack of material resources is compounded by the fact that rural schools cannot benefit from economies of scale in the same ways that large urban school districts do (Thomas et al., 2011; Urban Institute, 2021). For example, if a speech therapist is required for a single student, a district must provide one (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). Such a requirement burdens rural school budgets, which are already funded at rates disproportionately lower than suburban and urban districts (Leech et al., 2022; Reading et al., 2019; Strange et al., 2012).

Although some challenges of K–12 rural education remain unchanged, we dispute that in rural education settings, the "community [is] not vitally interested in the schools" (Dewey, 1910, p. 542). Agger et al. (2018) have demonstrated the importance of rural families in their children's educational attainment. Rather than familial disengagement, the underlying issue is that community engagement is often constructed as one-way (Isserman, 2005; Stanton, 2007), rendering the commitment to education that rural families hold less visible to university-based stakeholders. To highlight the voices of those who live and work in rural communities, and to act as boundary spanners (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010), we have begun by conducting a needs assessment alongside these deeply invested stakeholders to create a two-way flow of support.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that underpins the needs assessment is one that extends critical models of cultural and social capital (e.g., Bourdieu, 1986; Yosso, 2005). The rural cultural wealth model, which is rooted in Yosso's groundbreaking work on community cultural wealth, includes four components: (a) rural resourcefulness, including the capacity to overcome sociocontextual adversity; (b) rural ingenuity, including the inventiveness to respond creatively to need; (c) rural familialism, including lineages of intergenerational care; and (d) rural community unity, which refers to the composite assets of rural community. Crumb et al. (2023) noted that they "do not suggest that grit, bootstraps, or a positive attitude remedy ensconced inequities. . . . We do, however, suggest that rural people have agency which rural education scholars and practitioners should amplify" (p. 128). We see Crumb et al.'s emphasis on assets over deficits combined with their emphasis on remediating inequity as providing a foundation to our community-engaged approach.

The Needs Assessment

Prior to beginning the needs assessment, we secured Institutional Review Board permission and defined the goals of this project.

Goal 1: Determine the community assets and strengths on which K–12 students, their families, their teachers, and their administrators already draw in rural West Texas schools.

Goal 2: Determine what additional supports and resources (i.e., programs, partnerships) the university collaboration can provide to improve academic and economic outcomes in rural West Texas schools.

In addition to defining the goals of the needs assessment, it is important to define what constitutes success. Our criterion for success is that our results must indicate some assets and needs that have not previously been identified through our review of the existing literature, which highlights general trends and thus points to generic solutions. This criterion is important, since it would also suggest that the needs assessment's findings enable us to plan outreach and engagement efforts that would align with the university's strategic priorities, especially a goal to "increase and strengthen collaborative, mutually beneficial community partnerships that stimulate creativity, innovation, and

social and economic development" (Texas Tech University, 2024, p. 12). Our aim is to use this needs assessment to identify a set of clearly outlined programming priorities specific to the needs of rural West Texas.

Defining the Location

One methodological consideration when conducting a needs assessment is defining the target context. Our partnership focuses on rural West Texas. To operationalize the region of West Texas as a location for research purposes, we chose to engage with the communities on and west of I-35, a north–south highway that divides the state. Although "West Texas" may seem like an ambiguous designation, it has a distinct cultural memory informed by the unique geopolitical history of Texas (Flores, 2002) and the agricultural and geological wealth of the western Staked Plains (Spearing, 1991) that shapes the local relationship between rurality, schooling, and culture (Panos & Seelig, 2019).

Defining Rurality

Defining the study's boundaries also required us to define rurality itself (Isserman, 2005; Koricich, 2022). Various scholars (e.g., Manly et al., 2018; Thomas et al., 2011) have challenged the trend of defining rural by what is lacking, such as distance from a city center, rather than what is present, such as a sense of community. Here, we use a pragmatic definition of any district that only has one high school, and where school leadership consider themselves rural.

Our Boundary-Spanning Team

The contributions of each team member are essential to connecting university-based scholars with community members. First, our team includes the dean of the College of Education, who acts as an internal engagement advocate (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010) by holding space for the project, thus reflecting the value of community engagement back on the College. Midway through this needs assessment, we experienced a change of deans. However, including a leader at the dean's level in the project remains essential to its success. Following Weerts and Sandmann's (2010) typology of boundary spanners, university faculty serve this project as technical experts: One of us holds expertise in designing instrumentation; another holds knowledge of teacher preparation and taught in rural K-12 schools. Our team also includes a (semi-)retired rural K-12 administrator who acts as a community-based problem solver, and a development director who takes the role of an engagement champion by defining pathways for individuals interested in providing meaningful support to rural schools. Three team members have deep familial ties to the West Texas area; two team members do not. Figure 1 depicts the original needs assessment team.

Figure 1. The Original Rural West Texas K-12 Needs Assessment Team

Note. From left, Dr. Catherine Lammert, Dr. Mihwa Park, Mr. Shawn Mason, Dr. Kallie Covington, and Dr. Jesse Perez Mendez.

Identification of Participants

Brown and Lambert (2013, 2015) suggested that a typology of individuals from five distinct categories should be considered in needs assessments: (a) key individuals, who are those most closely related to the topic at hand; (b) affected communities, who are secondarily impacted by the decisions key individuals make; (c) specialist advisors, who include community leaders who wield influence; (d) influential organizations such as community organizations, clubs, and boards; and (e) holistic thinkers, including anyone who might offer an insightful perspective. We used this model to determine who to invite to participate in the needs assessment. Table 1 shows our participants organized by Brown and Lambert's (2013) typology.

Data Sources

Next, we developed a focus group interview protocol based on the rural cultural wealth framework (Crumb et al., 2023). It includes an assets-based question for all attendees: What aspects of your rural community do you take the most pride in? Then, participants join one of three groups: teachers, administrators, and staff who work in K-12; family members/caregivers of students; or community members with broader interests (e.g., Chamber of Commerce members). The aim is to maximize the potential for dialogue to emerge "as a confluence of varied perspectives on similar experiences" and to "[surface] visible connections between and among constitutive social, cultural, and political structures and forces" (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013, p. 40). Accordingly, the questions increase in criticality but maintain an assets-based stance.

Initial Recruitment of Participants

To begin, we held thirteen listening sessions in fall 2023. Each session was held at a regional Education Service Center in a hybrid format, permitting participants to attend via Zoom or face-to-face as they preferred. To support shared understanding between all participants, the focus groups were led by a faculty member who is an experienced rural K-12 teacher and the (semi-)retired community-based problem solver (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). Our college's communications team advertised these sessions using traditional and social media.

Early Challenges and Successes

In our initial focus groups, we met with 37 participants from various rural school districts who have fallen mostly into the key individuals (Brown & Lambert, 2013) category, including principals and superintendents. They have ranged from those with 5 or fewer years of experience (n = 5) to those with 30+ years of experience (n = 3). Most reported that they live in the rural communities where they work, although some (n = 8) reported that they commute.

In reflecting on this first step, and in comparing our outcomes to our success criteria, we realized that by holding focus groups at the Education Service Centers during

Table 1. Rural West Texas K-12 Needs Assessment Participants

Invitee knowledge category (from Brown & Lambert, 2013)	Participant groups in the current study
Key individuals	K-12 teachers, administrators, and support staff; Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) boards, school boards
Affected communities	Families, caregivers, and parents
Specialist advisors	Civil service (firefighter, police, librarians); City Council Members; Chamber of Commerce; local co-op boards (e.g., electric, internet, phone)
Influential organizations	Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions Club, Shriners, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), Salvation Army, Native American organizations, Latinx organizations (e.g., Chicanos Por La Causa)
Holistic thinkers	Clergy

business hours, we made a structural decision that prioritized the voices of key individuals (Brown & Lambert, 2013). Although these individuals' views matter greatly—they are called "key" for a reason—we also recognize that the perspectives of superintendents and principals do not necessarily reflect all community members. Furthermore, in spring 2024 we experienced a change of leadership at the level of the dean that added a new perspective to the project. As a result, two additional 50-minute focus group sessions were conducted with teachers (n = 36), most of whom were also parents of children in rural schools, in the summer of 2024. To facilitate turnout, we held these sessions as part of a College Connect Conference, an opportunity to earn ongoing education credit that teachers were already attending.

Initial Findings

Goal 1: Understanding Rural Schools' Challenges and Strengths

Our initial descriptive coding of the transcripts from these focus groups (Saldaña, 2016) suggests a variety of challenges faced by rural communities, including uncompetitive salaries and lack of suitable and affordable housing. As one participant explained, "It's [a teacher's] market," suggesting competition is fierce. However, results also suggest that rural communities are learning to leverage the assets they have by making sure job candidates know what rural life has to offer, including smaller class sizes, shorter commutes, and a sense of belonging. A superintendent described the imperative that "we have to sell *culture*." In selling rural culture, leaders are advocating for the resources and personnel they require.

Goal 2: Identifying Possibilities for Collaboration and Programming

In our study, the most common request made by rural school leaders was for improvements to rural residencies and student teaching placements. Whether they described paid residencies, in which those learning to become teachers of record serve as support staff in schools, or unpaid student teaching placements where teacher candidates spend time learning with a mentor teacher, rural school leaders had seemingly endless ideas for ways our university could better partner with them. Since this goal is only partly met at this time, we envision supporting rural teacher residencies and other initiatives in Phase 2 of the project.

Limitations and Potential Next Steps

As we consider those whose perspectives we have captured and those we have not, we recognize the need for a survey that would permit access to an even broader range of invitee knowledge (Brown & Lambert, 2013). We developed the Community Assets for Rural Education (CARE) survey following an asset-based approach, aiming to learn insights from rural communities (Emery et al., 2006). To this end, items were created to address four rural cultural wealth components (Crumb et al., 2023). The survey also includes demographic information questions to ensure respondents will represent the economic, cultural, and racial diversity of rural communities in West Texas, and can be available in Spanish. However, a current unresolved challenge is how best to distribute the survey to ensure a strong response rate. This survey is intended to reach individuals such as recent graduates of rural high schools, their parents/families, and additional community groups. To this end, we have strategized to administer the survey online through collaborations with local school districts and educational service center offices.

Conclusion

Rural K-12 schools have suffered from the negative views held by those in suburban and urban settings more often than they have from a lack of parental engagement from within (Agger et al., 2018; Manly et al., 2018). By beginning with a needs assessment rather than with programming based on preconceived ideas about rural K-12 schools, we use this work to begin to remedy this long-standing problem of public perception. Although needs assessments are sometimes conducted without theoretical frameworks (Pade-Khene, 2012; Sata et al., 2022), we argue that grounding our examination of rural school *needs* inside a stance toward rural school *strengths* provided us with a guidepost to follow as we interacted with community members. We have thus provided a tentative model for how outreach and engagement partnerships can be constructed in the preliminary stages to ensure success.

About the Authors

***Catherine Lammert, PhD**, is an assistant professor in the Department of Teacher Education at Texas Tech University. She is a former kindergarten teacher, reading specialist, and middle school English teacher. Her research focuses on literacy teacher education, teachers' knowledge of children's literature, and education to promote ecological justice. She earned her PhD at the University of Texas at Austin.*

Contact information: Catherine.Lammert@ttu.edu

***Mihwa Park, PhD**, is an associate professor of STEM education in the College of Education at Texas Tech University. Dr. Park taught science for over 10 years in South Korea before earning her PhD in science education from the University at Buffalo. Dr. Park has authored/coauthored over 20 scholarly manuscripts published in peer-reviewed journals. In addition, her scholarly contributions encompass two book chapters. She has served as editorial board member for three journals, including the Journal of Research in Science Teaching, the most prominent journal in science education.*

Contact information: Mihwa.Park@ttu.edu

***Jesse Perez Mendez, JD, PhD**, is provost and executive vice president of Kansas State University. Previously, he was dean of the College of Education at Texas Tech University. Throughout his academic career, he has worked and administered budgetary operations within both urban and rural universities, a land-grant institution, a community college, a Hispanic-Serving Institution, and a flight center. Mendez's research explores the dynamics of postsecondary access and policy issues in higher education.*

Contact information: jpmendez@k-state.edu

***Shawn Mason** serves as the program manager for the West Texas Rural Education Partnership. He is a retired Texas public school educator who served as a teacher, coach, principal, central office administrator, and superintendent during his 32-year career in rural schools in Texas. During his time as a superintendent, he developed the first partnership with Texas Tech University to place student teachers in his rural school district.*

Contact information: shamason@ttu.edu

***Kallie Covington, PhD**, is the associate director of development for the College of Education at Texas Tech University. She is a major gift officer for the College of Education and Burkhart Center for Autism Education & Research. She is responsible for managing external and philanthropic relationships for the College, and connecting those to the College in a way that is meaningful for them.*

Contact information: Kallie.Covington@ttu.edu

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Navigating Changing Maps for Public Engagement in Higher Education Contexts

Jared L. Talley, Krista E. Paulsen, Jen Schneider, and Vanessa Crossgrove Fry

Abstract

Public engagement is becoming a critical element of U.S. universities' missions. Defining public engagement has become increasingly complex, however, and navigating the significant and diverse literature on public engagement can be daunting. This essay addresses this challenge as well as two others that make public engagement difficult for those feeling called (or pressured) to perform such work. We draw on our own public engagement experience and research to (1) conceptually scope out the terrain of public engagement literature and approaches, (2) articulate how the emerging problems of rapid intensification and hyperpolarization in American political culture make public engagement work ever more challenging for both faculty and students, and (3) call attention to the ways universities are often not bureaucratically or structurally aligned to meaningfully support and advance public engagement work. We conclude with some recommendations for how faculty, staff, and administrators might navigate these concerns.

Keywords: stakeholder engagement, public participation, public engagement, community engagement, higher education outreach

Higher education has experienced a sea change in its relationship to "public engagement" over the last several decades. Colleges and universities have bristled at accusations that they are ivory towers, insulated from life outside ivied walls and rarefied, esoteric intellectualism. They have been accused variously of promoting overly precious navel gazing, not providing enough access and support to underserved communities (or, at the other end of the spectrum, preying on them), not doing enough to prepare students to be successful in the "real world," not providing enough "return on investment" (ROI), and of being overly expensive, left-wing indoctrination echo chambers. Critics of higher education have written extensively about what ails higher education in the United States today, resulting in an ever-expanding corpus of work taking aim at how colleges and universities are failing students and their families (e.g., Craig, 2015; McMillan Cottom, 2018; Selingo, 2013; Treadgold, 2018).

At the same time, higher ed is a favorite target for political actors making good on the nation's turn toward populism. As has been the case cyclically throughout recent history, higher education frequently stands in for elitism and groupthink. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*, arguably the two most prominent industry publications in higher education, have been sounding repeated alarms regarding how colleges and universities are major battlegrounds in contemporary culture wars. These struggles over American higher education are clearly proxy wars for partisan battles over American values, belonging, and political power.

Higher ed institutions have responded to these accusations and attacks in a number of ways, ranging from developing extensive experiential learning and internship-rich curriculum options for students (e.g., Aoun, 2018) to investing in private–public partnerships intended to meet specific workforce development needs (e.g., Selingo,

2013). One of the primary responses, however, has been to shore up relationships between colleges, universities, and the public, often through coursework, projects, and initiatives intended to (1) provide meaningful, real-world learning experiences for students and (2) provide tangible value to various publics (for more on this topic, see Staley, 2019). These projects—which we group under the broad heading of "public engagement" efforts—allow higher ed institutions to point to how they solve problems and promote partnerships, and often build on preexisting research, teaching, and service missions. Public engagement efforts have become one of the primary ways universities avoid critiques of insularity (Fischer, 2023) and message the value of higher education to external audiences. There is also a growing body of work devoted to providing advice for becoming an engaged scholar and instructor, and understanding the challenges therein (e.g., Calice et al., 2022; Hoffman, 2021; Mirvis et al., 2021).

This intense focus on public engagement activities resonates with the four of us—between us, we have decades of experience working on such activities. We have professional training and practical experience with how to engage various publics, audiences, groups, or communities around varied social, environmental, political, and economic problems, and have worked as researchers, organizers, facilitators, and analysts on these issues. We have seen a significant increase in the number of faculty, staff, and students wanting to work with publics, and in universities calling on faculty and staff to do more of this kind of work. Collectively, we're aware of hundreds of diverse resources regarding the ethical and pragmatic dimensions of engaging publics. We've written formally about the challenges of doing this work (e.g., Fry et al., 2019; Lucena et al., 2013; Talley et al., 2016) and have supported hundreds of students' public engagement and participation.

In short, we believe there is much to be gained from working closely with and for communities and community organizations. However, we're also keenly aware of the many robust and compelling critiques of performing public engagement work without careful planning, self-reflection, ethics, care, and attention to power dynamics. There is a potential to do more harm than good when we engage various publics, and such engagement is frequently messy, time-consuming, and fraught. This essay aims to add to critical perspectives of public engagement work by mapping out three areas of concern that we grapple with as scholar-practitioners and that we believe are worthy of more attention: (1) domain complexity, (2) rapid intensification and hyperpolarization, and (3) institutional logics.

First, we address the challenges that faculty, staff, and students first entering into engagement practice and scholarship face. They must grapple with a wide variety of terminologies, values, and goals that make up the public engagement ecosystem. This *domain complexity* is increasingly challenging to navigate and teach. Second, we address the phenomena of *rapid intensification and hyperpolarization* of issues. By "rapid intensification" we mean that issues emerge on the public agenda relatively quickly; debate is brisk, with limited opportunities for reflection or revision. By "hyperpolarization" we are referring to the likelihood that engagement efforts at local scales might be increasingly impacted or shaped by broader political identifications and thus may unexpectedly and confusingly lead to conflict. Politics and conflict are nothing new to public engagement, but these phenomena can make it riskier, less tolerant of error, and more time- and energy-consuming than some might expect. Third, we discuss issues of *institutional logics* or the business and academic cultures of universities; these are the expectations, norms, and policies that organize the institution and its associated activities. There is an increasing gap between what universities and colleges say they want from or for public engagement, and the resources and support they actually provide to faculty, staff, and students. The problem is particularly acute for those institutions that lack elite reputations, state support, or large endowments.

Public engagement is as much a practiced art as an academic interest. Therefore, our analysis of these three challenges is buttressed by evidence from our own practices where we see these challenges emerging in situ. These examples from our own work in public engagement are included both to illustrate how we see these challenges taking shape in practice and as suggestions for future research: We hope future work will test our claims empirically and analytically to gauge whether these findings represent larger trends happening beyond our particular

contexts. We suspect they are and that they may only intensify in the coming years as the United States continues to grapple with social, environmental, political, and economic upheaval. We conclude with recommendations for institutions seeking to better support those engaged in, or seeking to engage in, public engagement activities. Given increasing institutional emphases on experiential learning, workforce development, and public engagement, there is more need to support navigating the challenges of doing this work without getting so bogged down in trying to do it so perfectly that we end up not doing the work at all.

Challenge 1: Domain Complexity

One of the challenges that brought us together to work on this essay was that, although we all work on some form of public engagement, we come from different disciplines that define public engagement differently, draw from different bodies of literature, and endorse different types of practices. Sociology defines and practices public engagement differently from urban studies, from public policy and administration, from communication, from philosophy, and so on. Practitioners who work with various communities may have altogether different goals and definitions. Therefore, when we come together to work on a project or to coteach an interdisciplinary course, we see that we all bring different bodies of work, different conversations, and even different value commitments to the table.

These diverse public engagement terms, values, and practices reflect what we have come to think of as domain complexity. By "domain complexity," we indicate the breadth, disciplinary span, methodological diversity, varying value assumptions, and disparate nature of the various disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and practical public engagement literatures that exist today. In his extensive review of engagement literatures, Kevin Burchell (2015) made this argument, recognizing that "the literature is diverse in terms of disciplinary populations and the frames of public engagement that it employs. . . . The implication of this is that the literature presents a somewhat unclear and confused picture" (p. 3). This confused picture prevents explicit and critical discourse around engagement that synthesizes lessons across diverse disciplines and practices, leading to "many academics seeing research engagement as an institutional and administrative set of activities, rather than rooted in academic theory and practice" (Fransman, 2018, p. 187). Furthermore, the engagement literature extends well beyond academic research to a gray literature developed by practitioners and professionals—roughly half of the literature reviewed by Burchell. As community engagement is necessarily a practiced art, the lessons learned from those in the trenches offer significant guidance. But this work also creates additional complexity to navigate.

This section seeks to provide a brief review of the literature as a way to demonstrate community engagement is not universally defined and therefore creates challenges for interdisciplinary work and community-engaged scholarship. We build on the work of Burchell (2015), Fransman (2018), and others by highlighting three ways in which domain complexity manifests in public engagement literatures: variation across *terms*, *values*, and *goals*. This complexity, which is increasing as more academics turn toward public engagement efforts, is heightened by cross-disciplinary efforts and what sociologist Kristin Luker (2009) called the rise of info-glut. We live in a time of unprecedented access to information often devoid of thoughtful categorization, evaluation, or synthesis. The realities of managing too much information, especially when it is organized by different terms and disciplines and across domains, can make it particularly daunting for someone who is new to public engagement literatures and practices to even know where to begin. It is unlikely that scholars and practitioners will resolve this complexity (such a task is likely inadvisable if not impossible), but naming the complexity and developing some strategies for navigating the diverse terms, values, and goals at play are important steps.

First, the terms of art for public engagement work vary, often shaped by the disciplinary conventions from which they emerged. In both the academic and popular literature, engagement processes are described variously as "stakeholder engagement," "public participation," "collaborative governance," or "engaged research," and with such varied terms as "'partnership' . . . . 'alliance' . . . 'collaboration' . . . 'coordination' . . . 'cooperation' . . . 'network' . . . 'joint working' and 'multiparty working,'" to name a few (Huxham et al., 2000, p. 339; cf. Fransman, 2018). We understand this list as a subset of the broader public and community engagement

practices conducted in the contexts of universities (Beere et al., 2011). Many of those practices, including community service, outreach, community-based research, and student-centered engagement practices such as service-learning, are beyond the emphasis of this essay, except as noted. In our experience, "stakeholder engagement" is commonly used as a colloquial catch-all for most such activities, though it is often used interchangeably with the other terms listed above.

For many academics writing about and practicing these various forms of public engagement, however, these terms are not necessarily interchangeable. They denote different value systems and approaches to conceptualizing the relationship between "they who engage" and "those being engaged." Take "stakeholder engagement," for instance: The concept was first introduced as a counterbalance to shareholder engagement in the business literature (Freeman, 2010) and although many in engineering and natural sciences prefer this term, others from the humanities and social sciences often reject it because of its roots in settler-colonialist historical practices and capitalist structures of ownership (Banerjee, 2003; Reed & Rudman, 2023). In fact, "engagement" as a term can be critically scrutinized; it implies that those doing the "engaging" (academics) have agency while those being "engaged" (publics) are in a passive role. For that reason, academics from fields such as communication, health sciences, and science and technology studies often prefer terms such as "public participation," "participatory action research," "partnerships," or "collaboration." We chose the term "public engagement" for this essay simply because it seemed to cast a wide enough net that it might capture a variety of the concepts and approaches listed here, while recognizing that this term will be adequate for some and too broad and ill-defined for others. In short, there is no one term everyone agrees on, and scholars have pointed out that the terminology used in various bodies of literature is often unclear (Deverka et al., 2012; Huxham et al., 2000; Stewart, 2009).

This diversity of terms can make finding and managing the "right" literature challenging. Both the academic and practitioner literatures vary widely across types of engagement. Searches for "stakeholder participation" (Luyet et al., 2012; Reed, 2008), "stakeholder engagement" (Leonidou et al., 2020; Talley et al., 2016), and "stakeholder collaboration" (Orr, 2013; Savage et al., 2010) all return works that, on the surface, seem to be concerned with similar questions, approaches, and critiques. However, replacing "stakeholder" with "community" returns yet another set of (seemingly) similar or overlapping literatures (cf. Ahmed & Palermo, 2010; Burns & Heywood, 2004; Heath & Frey, 2004). Replacing "community" with "public" or "citizen" returns even more results. Furthermore, many results vacillate between terms as if they were equivalent. Indeed, differing terms can often—though not always—point to the values and goals that different disciplines and practitioners bring to working with publics. Different terms may be intended to highlight particular relationships between those engaging and those being engaged, goals for engagement, and/or "best practices" for setting and achieving those goals.

In terms of goals, there are not universal standards for public engagement goal-setting, nor is there agreement about what constitutes effective engagement (e.g., Rowe & Frewer, 2000). Does effective engagement avoid conflict? Does it end with public support for a predetermined decision, or empower the public to define problems and develop solutions (Arnstein, 1969)? Is it deemed successful on normative criteria, objective-meeting criteria, or process criteria? A successful engagement can be directed toward achieving any of these goals, or none—for instance, sometimes engagement is about relationship-building, rather than seeking any sort of instrumental outcome. Quite often there is no stated goal at all—academics often embark on public engagement activities without ever defining an objective. On the other hand, practitioners in the public sector often have very specific goals they need to achieve, such as following public notification or meeting requirements, or getting feedback on proposed projects.

The diversity of engagement literatures can be a strength if one knows enough to navigate it. However, it can also be an obstacle if a familiar engagement is used across ill-fitting contexts, a situation captured by the adage "when all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail." As an example, one of us works across public land management in the American West, helping

to organize and facilitate collaborative efforts in environmental management, as "collaboration" is increasingly recommended in federal management strategies. The literature on collaboration as an engagement method focuses attention on relationship- and trust-building, long-term (often informal) processes, and coming to consensus (Innes & Booher, 2004; Van Riper, 2013), yet federal land management agencies cannot abdicate authority for land management decisions and struggle with relationship-building, as employee turnover is high and there is a tension between agency capture and building community trust (Kretser et al., 2018; Puntenney, 2022). In these cases, the engagement method (collaboration) is often ill-fitted to the institutional and political context (federal decision-making). The specific policy demands of "collaboration" guide interested parties to a literature that is ill-equipped for the context, whereas literature on engagement practices that center formal processes, broad public input, and consultation may be more appropriate. But how does someone unfamiliar with the domain navigate this?

In sum, domain complexity presents a real challenge to those first entering public engagement, teaching students public engagement theory or practices, or trying to understand how to support and reward public engagement work in university settings. We call attention to the intertwined complexity of the terms, values, and goals of the public engagement literature as a means of highlighting not just the challenges inherent to doing the work itself but the challenges of even preparing to do the work. As the domain develops and different forms of public engagement are utilized and reported across diverse contexts, we expect this complexity to increase and become even more difficult to navigate. The final section of this essay offers recommendations to help guide those interested in public engagement navigate this difficult terrain. First, however, we describe two more significant challenges facing public engagement practitioners today.

Challenge 2: Rapid Intensification and Hyperpolarization

Public engagement activities are almost never apolitical—engaging with publics means engaging with people embedded in social, economic, and political contexts. Some public engagement activities are deeply embedded in histories of struggle and protest; those working in environmental justice contexts come to mind, to give but one example among many (e.g., Jalbert & Kinchy, 2016; Ottinger, 2010). In other engagement activities, power relations are ill-considered or unbalanced. For example, there has been much work critically analyzing engagement projects that involve students and faculty "engaging" communities locally and abroad, perhaps with excellent intentions, but without developing meaningful partnerships, accountability mechanisms, or plans for long-term sustainability (e.g., Illich, 1968/1990; Lautensach & Lautensach, 2013). These are long-standing and relevant critiques worthy of our continued attention. Furthermore, there is an extensive literature documenting how those in power use public engagement pathways to organize quickly around their interests, such as corporate interest groups and lobbyists who routinely advocate for or against projects, rules, and legislation that might impact their business (Baumgartner et al., 2021; Golden, 1998) or to whitewash or greenwash corporate aims (e.g., Bsumek et al., 2014; Kovic et al., 2017). Thus, although expanded access to information and social networks facilitates community building and advocacy, it also risks elevating the perspectives and needs of the few, potentially producing a tyranny of the minority (Bishin, 2009). Such dynamics have long been in play.

By contrast, in this section, we are primarily talking about two more recent phenomena that are especially salient in the contemporary American context. The first is rapid intensification, which we largely attribute to the speed and intensity with which interest groups and publics can mobilize around particular issues and messages in ways that shortchange more deliberative engagement strategies. At its best, this allows publics to rapidly respond to developments that may not serve them. At its worst, rapid intensification can give rise to conspiratorial thinking and reactionary responses that are particularly shaped by political affiliation and worldview (Douglas et al., 2019; van Prooijen & Acker, 2015). The second is hyperpolarization. The two dimensions of hyperpolarization of interest to us, and which may shape engagement efforts at universities, are (1) political identifications, which seem to be increasingly salient for issues that formerly had not been particularly politicized; and (2) national political identifications and messaging,

which increasingly overlay what used to be nonpartisan, local politics. These processes are impacting multiple forms of public debate and discourse; here, we provide special attention to the challenges they pose to public engagement practices, drawing from examples in our own practice.

Rapid Intensification

"Rapid intensification" refers to the accelerated pace at which issues capture public attention and ignite debate, often leaving little room for reflection or adjustment. In this environment, the most alarming narratives frequently overshadow more measured perspectives, with misinformation and sensationalism amplifying the urgency of discussions. Social media and electronic communication technologies have revolutionized the spread of information, enabling publics to not only become aware of an issue but also adopt entrenched positions within hours or days. The speed of intensification creates significant challenges for public discourse, where practitioners must navigate preformed opinions and limited opportunities for meaningful dialogue. Moreover, individuals and organizations may face reputational risks for taking controversial stances—or for choosing not to engage at all.

Communication around issues and conflicts within communities once turned at a slower pace, set by daily news cycles, publication of letters to the editor, and the convening of public meetings. These means of disseminating facts and opinions not only moderated the pace at which information was shared, they involved gatekeepers who could assess the validity of information, enforce (sometimes exclusionary) norms of civility, and seek out diversity of perspectives (Iyengar, 1994; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2004). Social media has mediated some of this gatekeeping through expedited information sharing and the circumvention of gatekeepers, but information and mis- or disinformation are shared instantaneously and may metastasize while depth and context are flattened. Moreover, platform algorithms may promote especially alarmist or polarizing posts, as these successfully compete in overlapping attention and affective economies (Boler & Davis, 2020). As a result, conflicts can quickly become heated and trust can erode.

Helping publics to work through conflicts is a central aim of academics' public engagement work. Doing so successfully depends in part on the opportunity to enter conflicts at productive moments—for instance, when data and analysis from experts might be heard and evaluated, when stakeholders' positions are responsive to new information, and when members of the public can engage in basic norms of civil discourse (i.e., convening together, speaking and listening in an ordered fashion, etc.). Once conflicts have intensified, conventional engagement practices may not be effective and academic expertise may be unhelpful or unwelcome. Students may face particular challenges wading into such conflicts. Although they may be especially motivated to become involved in high-intensity issues, their developing maturity, judgment, and professionalism may not yet prepare them for these settings.

Rapid intensification of conflicts makes conventional forms of public engagement difficult or impossible for nearly any social issue. A recent proposal to relocate a local shelter and service center for people experiencing homelessness illustrates this phenomenon. A locally respected nonprofit operated a small shelter on the edge of the city's downtown for several years and sought a larger facility to serve the region's growing population of individuals and families experiencing homelessness. They identified a site further from the city center that appeared to have much to recommend it—for instance, the building's former use by another service-oriented nonprofit, and its location along a public transit corridor. But as is the case with many types of socially necessary but locally unwanted land uses, some area residents quickly mobilized against the effort. These residents felt that the shelter would compound challenges within their already disadvantaged neighborhood, or pointed to public safety concerns, often highlighting the recent murder of a local child by a man experiencing homelessness. Opposition mobilized seemingly overnight.

Among the strategies used to fight the shelter's move was an oppositional Facebook group dedicated to sharing information regarding public comment opportunities, details of the shelter relocation proposal, and arguably alarmist concerns regarding persons experiencing homelessness and implications of the shelter proposal. As is common in online forums, comments included some exchanges more personal and hostile than those typical of in-person public fora (though in-person spaces are becoming

similarly hostile—see Baker & Ivory, 2021; Smith, 2021), such as characterizing those with opposing views as ill-informed or unreasonable, or insulting and degrading those living with homelessness. Hostility regarding the shelter moved from online to "in real life" when a mural on the proposed shelter building's windows proclaiming "You Are Welcome" was defaced. In response, a local neighborhood association condemned this act, as did the oppositional Facebook group, though the latter continued to post alarmist content.

Development and use of these social media channels was not the only means by which locals organized in opposition to the proposed shelter. However, the norms of social media exchange allowed emotionally loaded and spurious claims to become central to debate over the issue. As a result, the conflict quickly became so charged that several of us stepped back from possible engagement opportunities. For instance, two of us considered and then rejected having students examine the shelter siting through an experiential learning course. Students, we worried, might not have the skills necessary to respond to the conflict's strong rhetoric and emotions, or to balance potentially competing roles as scholars, advocates, members of the community, and/or representatives of the university. Another of us was engaged by the city to facilitate a group charged with making a shelter-siting decision, but it became clear as the group's work proceeded that many members didn't feel safe or comfortable making a recommendation, given the intense neighborhood opposition. It is not likely that any process or facilitation could have intervened to overcome the intensification of the issue in the time provided by applicable policies and procedures. At the time of this writing, the shelter has been approved by the city and construction has begun, but relationships among neighbors, city employees and residents, and the unhoused have been deeply strained, and lawsuits continue to work their way through the courts.

Hyperpolarization

Hyperpolarization adds a significant challenge to public engagement by aligning local conflicts with broader ideological divides and national political narratives. This dynamic not only increases the likelihood of conflicts intensifying along partisan lines but also erodes trust in institutions and expertise. Heightened skepticism toward authority is often accompanied by growing hostility toward opposing political viewpoints, a phenomenon political scientists term "negative polarization" (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016). These trends complicate engagement efforts, as participants may approach discussions with entrenched distrust or preconceptions shaped by political identity. For practitioners, navigating these dynamics requires finding ways to foster dialogue and trust amid deepening ideological divides.

"Polarization" broadly refers to the phenomenon of a social, policy, economic, or cultural issue becoming a source of or attached to partisan identity and conflict; two sides may come to seem as if they are at opposite "poles" in terms of beliefs, ideologies, policy preferences, geographical sorting, and so on (Heltzel & Laurin, 2021). Although most issues in our society have political aspects, by "polarization" we mean the process whereby an issue that was previously not contested becomes so in a way that is notably partisan. A good example of this process is the polarization around the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. It took many of us by surprise that a public health disaster could so quickly become partisan. We would hope instead for a rational, consistent, apolitical response focused on limiting infections and deaths and reopening schools and businesses as quickly and safely as possible. However, the COVID response was politicized early on by political actors and since then responses to the crisis (whether to have lockdowns, to wear a mask, or to get vaccinated) can be correlated with partisan identification (Lyons & May, 2021). As a result, it is likely more people have died than might have otherwise, that illness and death may have disproportionately affected Republicans as opposed to Democrats (Fowler et al., 2021), and possibly that the pandemic stretched on longer than it might have otherwise.

Polarization might appear most relevant to state and national politics, rather than local public engagement practices. Indeed, historically, partisan identities have been most salient at the federal and state levels. Municipal and school board elections, for example, have generally been considered nonpartisan. However, recent years have seen a rise in partisan identification manifesting at the local and hyperlocal (neighborhood-scale) levels. Local officials, even including those who were elected to nonpartisan positions, are painted with a partisan brush.

We can think of this phenomenon as a "flattening" of American politics, such that even local politics now have become associated with national political interests. Recent efforts to "take over" school boards and health districts offer useful examples of this flattening (Mazzei, 2021; Schneider, 2021).

Public participation projects that would have been challenging under past circumstances now feel particularly fraught because we are dealing with heightened levels of public mistrust of institutions and democratic processes and with the rise of what political scientists call "negative partisanship"—political identification not just with one's political party but explicitly against the opposing party (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016; Iyengar et al., 2019). So, if an American identifies as a Republican, they are likely to do so now not because they identify with traditionally conservative ideals but instead because they despise the Democrats (and vice versa). However, this hyperpolarization does not necessarily apply only to political party identification; we are seeing an "us vs. them" mentality manifest across multiple contexts, exacerbated by mis- and disinformation that spreads especially quickly in social media environments and, more recently, by the isolation and conflicts created by the COVID pandemic.

It is a challenging time for a public engagement practitioner entering into a field where there is not only conflict but increasing polarization. Many of the "best practices" developed in public engagement literatures can seem ill-equipped to address the challenges of hyper- or negative polarization. One can spend a lot of time and effort building systems, processes, and relationships that can seemingly be undone overnight when state or national players intervene to upset the applecart, sometimes in bad faith, or when social media narratives oversimplify or spread misinformation that poisons the well. As the old saying goes, it takes a very long time to build trust and just a minute to destroy it. This adage feels especially true now.

A vignette from our own experience that involves another urban land use case in our area illustrates this challenge. Neighbors in a wealthy neighborhood who did not want a church to develop affordable housing on a nearby vacant block stated concern about impoverished people moving in. They claimed that affordable housing would lead to a decline in property values, overtaxed social services and schools, increased trash problems and drug use, and decreased maintenance of the space. Neighbors accused church leadership of making sweetheart deals with real estate developers and launched a series of lawsuits to impede development. Neighbors didn't trust the church or the city to protect their interests, or to engage in productive dialogue. The church, for its part, argued that it has a missional calling to provide housing and, at the end of the day, believes its private property rights dictate what it can do with the block. During a stakeholder characterization study, a participant told one of us that he was a "good liberal" who gave to housing charities, but that he didn't have to put up with his property values taking a hit. A church leader indicated that he would listen to the neighbors but at the end of the day the church could do what it wanted.

Nonetheless, the church and neighbors were set to embark on a facilitated restorative justice process when the pandemic hit. Seemingly in the blink of an eye, the stress and distance brought on by the pandemic caused a major rift between neighbors and their neighborhood association, which resulted in more than a year's worth of intense conflict over association elections and decision-making. A local newspaper called the conflict a "neighborhood divorce"—an apt characterization. But we see in that "divorce" a mirror image of the kinds of political splitting-up that Americans are experiencing writ large in the early 2020s.

Challenge 3: Institutional Logics

Institutional logics are the underlying norms, expectations, and policies that govern how universities are organized and operate. These logics encompass not only formal structures and procedures but also the ways in which universities, as organizations, are expected to act and interact with external stakeholders (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). In the context of public engagement, institutional logics often reflect a blend of academic and business cultures, shaping priorities, resource allocation, and the nature of partnerships. These intersecting logics can create tensions, such as balancing financial imperatives with community needs or aligning scholarly rigor with practical impact. As universities face evolving external pressures, such as funding challenges and societal demands, their institutional logics play a pivotal role in determining how ef-

fectively they engage with the public.

Universities' engagement efforts are fraught with contradiction. On one hand, universities are crucial centers of expertise. Not only are their faculties and staff subject matter experts, but many academics' scholarly contributions include community-engaged and community-based research, program and policy evaluation, and public outreach (Hoffman, 2021; Moore, 2014). However, the structures, logics, and reward systems of universities do not always encourage, and sometimes implicitly or explicitly discourage, engagement work (Fischer, 2023; Hoffman, 2021). This disconnect may persist even as universities of all types have come to emphasize public and community engagement as a way of indicating their value to taxpayers and other stakeholders and as a metric for assessing university performance (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). When successful, partnerships with publics stand to benefit scholars, universities, and their communities (Franz, 2005; McNall et al., 2009). But these efforts can also go awry, particularly when institutions' engagement efforts are primarily self-serving, performative, or short-lived (for the institution's benefit) rather than centering communities' needs and goals (Moore, 2014). In the worst cases, universities' engagement projects may be interpreted as unequal, unhelpful, or even exploitative (Glover & Silka, 2013; Karasik, 2020).

How do we reconcile universities' desires to respond to community needs and grand challenges with the banal realities we face as academics working within complex organizations? We address three practical concerns here: (1) the challenges of adapting engagement work to the academic calendar, (2) engagement's place within faculty assignment and reward structures, and (3) obstacles imposed by bureaucratic processes.

When it comes to engaging in community issues, timing is of utmost importance. University and community timescales are often out of sync—moving either too quickly or too slowly or, in the case of universities, fragmenting time into units such as semesters that do not reflect the rhythms of public issues. How can academics be responsive to immediate community needs or nurture long-term relationships and trust when our workload is thus divided (Baum, 2000)? And how can we sustain community relationships as academic responsibilities change, new courses are taught, student cohorts pass through, and so on? When including students in engagement work, how might we quickly and adequately train them in the practice and ethics of engagement and provide opportunities to apply this training through meaningful relationships and projects—all in one semester? In addition, university research doesn't often chase policy developments and certainly not on the short timescales in which issues arise within communities. As an example, the timeline for university researchers to access competitive external funding for academic research is generally 6 months or more. Even with the intention to be responsive to community needs, can most universities effectively respond?

Assignments and reward structures also present challenges. Academics themselves have many workload demands and expectations for achieving promotion and/or tenure (Hoffman, 2021). The demands are generally broken into teaching, research, and service, with each assigned varying weights across different departments, universities, and positions. The question of how public engagement "counts" is a challenging one for many institutions. Not only does this work straddle operational definitions of research, teaching, and service, it does not always result in publications or other easily recognized products. In addition, engaged research may not always be publishable in highly ranked journals, posing a challenge to conventional evaluation and tenure metrics. Those best positioned to evaluate the merits of engaged scholarship are often outside the positions and networks typically called upon to evaluate candidates. Even as universities increase their commitments to community engagement, promotion and tenure practices are slow to reflect this commitment, and institutional cultures may be even slower to change (Ellison & Eatman, 2008). Some faculty may not view engaged scholarship as "real" scholarship, and even when policies acknowledge community-engaged work, untenured faculty may wonder how it will count. Is it a helpful addition to an already robust record of conventional research, can it stand alone as scholarship, or is it an extra burden not worth pursuing?

Furthermore, university business and legal processes can hinder those inside the institution when it comes to outside engagement. The activities required to answer requests for proposals, negotiate contracts, develop data-sharing agreements, and earn Institutional Review Board approval can

all but halt the progress of some engaged scholarship. These activities can generate delays, and community members may not understand or value the rationales behind them. In addition, communication channels at the university are anything but clear. As a result, a community partnership built by a researcher may be impacted when others at the university directly engage the partner rather than working through the established relationship. Another set of challenges arises with research dissemination—who has control over it, how and when findings should be released, and by which party (Archer-Kuhn & Grant, 2014). In most cases, if the research is sponsored, the contract will outline the ownership of intellectual property created through the research. Dissemination itself can be used to both inspire new partnerships and advance community engagement scholarship.

A course cotaught by two of us illustrates challenges presented by institutional logics. The course was designed to facilitate student research as a resource to address housing crises in our region. First, as with any student-centered engagement work, substantial time and effort was required to cultivate students' knowledge in the field. We spent our first semester reading key sources on housing affordability and access, followed by another semester getting to know key community partners. Although we did not conduct research during this "getting up to speed" time, by the end of the first year, students identified the central needs of community partners. For instance, planners and local governments needed tools to effectively communicate with residents about proposed affordable housing projects. In our second year, we began working with a local "client" agency, assessing affordable housing needs and identifying housing strategies that might work in our region's policy and political context. Were the course not multisemester, and students not allowed to repeat it for credit, this work would not have been possible.

Along the way, we missed an opportunity to serve a community partner. This organization serves members of our region at risk of homelessness by preventing eviction, rapidly rehousing households, and serving as a coordinated point of entry for the area's homelessness services. They requested some data analysis to evaluate whether these services were being provided equitably to diverse households. The project fit well with the aims of our class, but barriers emerged as we tried to transfer the relevant data to the university for analysis.

The organization had recently implemented a new data-sharing policy, necessitating a data use agreement (DUA) between the outside agency managing the data and the university. The intent of a DUA is to specify how data will be shared, stored, disclosed, and used, among other things, and these agreements can be helpful in making explicit the understandings that guide collaborative projects. DUAs are often required when academic researchers utilize others' data and are required when using HIPAA-protected data (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office for Civil Rights, 2013). They're also a source of frustration for faculty who view the DUA process as generating "excessive and unnecessary delay[s] in getting research started" (Mello et al., 2020, p. 150). It is not uncommon for a request for a DUA to enter a university's office of general counsel or similar entity and seem to disappear. In studying DUA delays, Mello et al. found they are rooted in the complexity of the agreements as well as "procedural inefficiencies, incomplete information, data suppliers' lack of incentives and familiarity with academic practices, and faculty unresponsiveness" (p. 150). In our case, the DUA approval took 3 months, which were spent nudging the multiple relevant offices about the request and helping direct it to the right desk and signatory.

Our goal here is not to complain about the slow wheels of university bureaucracy, but to illustrate how the pace and execution of these processes may confound engagement opportunities. As we waited for permission to get the project under way, spring semester ended, students interested in summer research opportunities looked elsewhere, and fall term began—by which time we had committed to an opportunity with a different partner. The delay was not unlike those experienced with other institutional processes such as IRB approval or contracting procedures that, although important for conducting ethical research, complying with state and institutional funding policies, and protecting the institution's interests more broadly, may be out of sync with the condensed calendars of semesters and with the desire of community partners to obtain assistance sooner rather than later.

Implications and Recommendations

The concerns we emphasize here—domain

complexity, rapid intensification and hyperpolarization, and institutional logics—overlap and intersect in important ways. For instance, complex and sensitive environments can change on a dime, as we saw with the neighborhood's conflict with the church. But such conflicts can also take many years to understand properly and to intervene in successfully. Such investments do not always align with academic calendars—the "timing" issue that routinely confounds university engagement efforts. Furthermore, many faculty perceive themselves to be apolitical, nonpartisan, or committed to objectivity. The thought that one could get caught in a social or political quagmire that does not yield satisfying results or could harm one's career certainly functions as a deterrent, especially if one is considering involving students, who could be dragged into ugly and even threatening environments if things deteriorate. Moreover, as public universities become a popular target of legislatures' political agendas, engaging with particularly hot issues may also bring about unwanted attention and fiscal repercussions.

However, with public trust in higher education waning (Fischer, 2022), there has never been a more important moment for academics to find ways to engage with publics. Students, staff, and faculty can make a positive impact through community partnerships, which may help rebuild lost trust. Across the country, institutions are creating or strengthening their outreach and engagement divisions. Organizations like the Engaged Scholarship Consortium, the Consortium of University Public Service Organizations, and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities provide frameworks, training, and camaraderie for community partnership development and engaged research. What we offer below is general guidance and principles to consider when engaging in community partnerships in relation to the issues identified above: domain complexity, rapid intensification and hyperpolarization, and institutional logics.

Domain Complexity Recommendations

Public engagement is complex, and always has been. The literature consists of a variety of confused terms, each with its own best practices and implicit assumptions. This complexity cannot be solved, but it can be recognized. Recognizing this complexity can help manage expectations around community engagement. For example, if an engagement effort is being conceptualized as a collaboration but is more like a stakeholder engagement, then the practices and values recommended in the collaboration literature will not fit well with the reality of the effort. This incongruity may seem trivial, but setting expectations can help guide conversations with administrators and public partners, and set realistic goals for deliverables and resource commitments.

At the very least, institutions should strive to support conversations on campus about goals and definitions. Ideally, such conversations will also involve community partners. They can also consider the Carnegie Foundation's Elective Classification for Community Engagement, which provides structural suggestions for a community-engaged institution. In addition, institutions should provide research and training support to faculty and staff who are interested in doing public engagement work, and who may need support getting started. Institutions could support attendance at workshops and conferences, or the development of on-campus workshops, faculty learning communities, and learning circles. Finally, offices of community engagement—which are often focused on reporting on or catalyzing community engagement efforts—should also consider investing in institutional capacity to support faculty, staff, and students seeking to navigate these complex intellectual and practical challenges.

Rapid Intensification and Hyperpolarization Recommendations

Universities are increasingly at the center of many of the nation's culture wars; from an institutional perspective, public engagement work can be both a remedy for decreasing public trust in higher education, and a source of public conflict. University administrations are quick to celebrate successful public engagement activities in marketing and communication campaigns; they have been less intentional in providing support when conflicts or controversies arise.

This is a hard problem to navigate, but there are steps that can be taken. Faculty, staff, and student training for publicly engaged scholars can provide guidance for managing conflicts that quickly escalate or intensify. Universities should develop crisis response plans that communicate the kinds of support faculty and staff can expect and should seek out should things go awry. Finally, institutions can provide some training on how to engage with the media in order to prevent

or moderate any negative feedback loops. Mentoring and coaching, especially through learning communities and offices of community engagement, can help those new to engagement be aware of potential negative outcomes and have resources available when a situation arises. Good practices can be shared and successes celebrated. Such support can temper feelings of isolation or anxiety that occur in the face of engagement challenges. Faculty and staff should carefully consider whether, when, and how students or courses might retreat when course projects get into heated situations. Finally, national associations and organizations can work toward creating a set of recommendations or best practices for dealing with a strong threat of polarization and ossification.

Institutional Logics Recommendations

Universities have a clear interest in encouraging faculty, staff, and students to engage their communities. Further, institutions' stated support for these activities should be accompanied by investments in appropriately aligned reward and support structures. Examples include revising promotion and tenure policies to reward engaged scholarship and creating engaged faculty, staff, and administrative positions dedicated to this work. Research suggests that often this kind of work functions like emotional labor or an add-on to existing work, and can frequently fall disproportionately on women and people of color, who in turn may not be adequately rewarded for these efforts (Fischer, 2023). To address this problem, there must be good alignment between statements of support for engaged research and actual reward and administrative structures.

We would also encourage institutions to consider, at a high level, ways to reduce red tape and other kinds of bureaucratic friction that make the conduct of public engagement work so frustrating. Administrative transaction costs are a particularly challenging problem, especially at state institutions. Institutions should determine if community-engaged scholarship has values beyond monetary ones provided by partners with the capital to sponsor research activities or pay student interns and act accordingly. Overly conservative or constraining data agreements, risk management constraints, catering contracts, and software approvals are just some of the general administrative processes that become hurdles and sometimes barriers to this kind of work. Individual researchers can express agency by being upfront with community partners about these processes, and sometimes having the partner agency lead is a useful workaround, as is creating master agreements between community partners and institutions. Regardless of the solution(s), institutions must take on these issues at an organizational level.

Conclusion

We thus find ourselves in the paradoxical role of bringing to bear our own expertise on a field where expertise is itself a significant challenge. Many scholars are diligently working to shift academic cultures to be more amenable to and responsible for engagement activities (Boyer, 2015; Fry et al., 2019; Hoffman, 2021). This work is necessary and can help to structure academic–community relationships in ways more amenable to normatively, epistemically, and sociopolitically responsible engagement. However, in view of these emerging challenges, academics need to be reflexive about engagement and its implications. When is the issue moving faster than institutional constraints allow? Are we merely consulting or truly engaging? Are we aiming for participatory action research? Are we acting as a concerned public and not as an institutional representative? Where is the money coming from, who has the power, and how are money and power constructing the conditions of the engagement? What engagement frameworks—and assumptions that underlie them—are best suited for the context? And, critically, when are universities promoting public engagement as a depoliticization strategy aimed at performing engagement for social license rather than enacting it for democratic legitimacy?

And when do we not engage? As much promise as engagement offers, in light of the significant challenges we've discussed, nonengagement may at times be the more responsible and/or pragmatic choice. When are the conditions such that academic engagement is not effective? When are the relationships, communication norms, and sociopolitical landscapes already spoiled—when are they too hot to touch without risking further entrenchment and intractability? When is a client, partner, or participant just not going to work out? Acknowledging the cases that didn't happen—and, when appropriate, reporting out the lessons learned from them—is important. Yet, akin to the reticence to publish failed experiments, institutional

barriers exist. How do interrupted cases relate to a scholar's position within their institution in terms of tenure and social capital? How are practitioners recognized not only for excellence in the cases where engagement works, but also for the self-awareness and courage to walk away?

It is at this juncture that public engagement scholars, practitioners, students, and all those interested find themselves. Public engagement is complex, and always has been. The literature consists of a variety of confused terms, each with its own best practices and implicit assumptions. Power dynamics in social relationships shape the processes and outcomes of engagement, holding both promise for underserved publics and peril for increasingly polarized social issues. Rapidly evolving social systems replete with technological intensification and ever more complex social realities challenge the efficacy of democratic decision-making. And the increasing polarization of social issues erodes the trust, respect, and communication that are needed to simply work together to solve complex issues.

In sum, the obstacles, conflicts, and emerging concerns we've outlined cannot be overcome merely through a renegotiation of individual expertise or a shift in individual attitude. The structural constraints to engagement and, more broadly, democratic institutions are significant. Negotiating the obstacles presented here requires concerted effort to illuminate the ways that explicit policies and implicit norms structure and constrain the possibilities for engagement. Organizations have an important role to play: Universities that desire to advance engagement must do so in ways that respect publics and contexts and provide faculty, staff, and students the resources and structures they need to succeed at these efforts. The comportment of faculty, staff, and students is important, but so too is dedicated structural analysis and change. The value to be gained from collaborating with publics is worth the effort such changes will require.

About the Authors

Jared L. Talley *is affiliate professor of environmental studies in the School of Public Service at Boise State University and Idaho State policy advisor for the Nature Conservancy in Boise, Idaho. His research studies the role of science in collaborative efforts, the role of place in environmental identity, and the role of the imagination in mediating both. He received his PhD in philosophy from Michigan State University.*

Krista E. Paulsen *is professor of urban studies and community development in the School of Public Service at Boise State University. Her research examines the relationship between place and culture in the contexts of cities and neighborhoods. She received her PhD in sociology from the University of California at Santa Barbara.*

Jen Schneider *is interim dean of the College of Innovation and Design and professor of public policy and administration at Boise State University. Her research focus is the public communication of science and technology controversies. She received her PhD in cultural studies from Claremont Graduate University.*

Vanessa Crossgrove Fry *is associate research professor at the Idaho Policy Institute in the School of Public Service at Boise State University. Her research focuses on the use of community-engaged research to inform public decision-making. She received her PhD in public policy and administration from Boise State University.*

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Creating Institutional Supports for Epistemic Equity: A Social Ecological Approach to Engaged Scholarship

Michael Rios and Larissa Saco

Abstract

A social ecological framework is proposed that identifies institutional supports to increase public scholarship. The framework offers an analytical structure for conceptualizing how motivations interact at multiple levels of influence, as well as utility to increase epistemic equity and encourage behavior change through institutional supports that reward and recognize multilevel motivations. The authors draw on prior work that analyzed data from 49 interviews detailing practice stories to understand motivations for public scholars and found that faculty report motivations at individual, interpersonal, organizational, community, and policy levels.

Keywords: epistemic equity, engaged scholarship, faculty motivation, social ecology, promotion and tenure

A 2023 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* cited a Gallup Poll that found only a third of Americans have confidence in higher education, arguing that more community-focused scholarship could build back public trust (Fischer, 2023). In the article, blame is squarely placed on outdated institutional structures and disciplinary norms that do not value or recognize engaged scholarship in promotion and tenure. Several illustrative examples of recognizing engaged scholarship are offered as a response, including supportive university-wide policies and narrative CVs highlighting the impact of community-engaged research. Fischer's article is in line with calls by federal agencies and philanthropic organizations for broader impacts and community engagement as part of grant requirements. These are promising developments. However, the landscape of faculty recognition and rewards, including broader impact grantmaking (Hoppe et al., 2019), is uneven at best, and there is no consensus about the most effective institutional strategies to elevate engaged scholarship.

One avenue is to integrate engaged scholarship with university efforts to improve equity in higher education as faculty from historically underrepresented groups are disproportionately involved and invested in embedding their scholarly activity in communities around them, sometimes to the detriment of their own career advancement and success (Bell & Lewis, 2023; Kohl-Arenas et al., 2022). These findings are in line with research showing disproportionate service burdens (both internal and external service) on this group of scholars (Lunsford & Omae, 2011). Thus, when considered as a whole, the institutional support structures and rewards for public scholarship become a faculty equity and retention issue. An additional factor is the context of historically marginalized scholars who partner with communities underserved by the university (Abes et al., 2002; Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Doberneck et al., 2011; Wheatle & BrckaLorenz, 2015). A multiyear research initiative undertaken by Imagining America (Kohl-Arenas et al., 2022) summarized the challenges that university public scholars face:

> Through over one hundred individual interviews, twenty multimedia case studies, a national graduate scholar survey, an online study group, and public conversations, we learned how public scholars have historically and consistently conducted research that matters—responding to urgent challenges

> in the world, including on the pressing ecological, social, racial, and economic justice issues of our time. Yet, we also found that most academic institutions are still not designed to support this important work. By favoring narrow disciplinary boundaries and norms as well as individualized methods over collective commitments and reciprocal partnerships, most institutions marginalize public scholarship through outdated reward systems and bureaucratic obstacles. (p. 1)

In response, this reflective essay identifies supports that holistically recognize engaged scholarship with attention to epistemic equity. For the purposes of this essay, the "enaction" of epistemic equity is defined as "examining and responding to the impact higher education systems have on privileging whose knowledge is valued, what research is legitimized, and who gets to participate in the creation and spread of knowledge" (Saltmarsh, 2020, p. 153). Epistemic equity draws attention to strategies that address intellectual and disciplinary bias such that underrepresented groups' perspectives are fully recognized. Institutional supports that center epistemic equity provide university administrators a lens to consider what types of programs, policies, and initiatives should be prioritized, while signaling to individual faculty they are being recognized and rewarded for their engaged scholarship. It is important to identify the supports needed and their corresponding levels to address the multiple barriers that exist, which are context dependent and vary from institution to institution.

Previously, the authors analyzed interview data from 49 engaged scholars at a public land-grant university on the U.S. west coast that showed different levels of faculty motivations exist for pursuing engaged scholarship: individual, interpersonal, organizational, community, and policy scales (Rios & Saco, 2023). In the following, further utilization of a social ecological framework is proposed to identify institutional supports that scaffold multilevel motivations of engaged scholars, while also creating an institutional environment to encourage behavior change among faculty peers, academic personnel review committees, department chairs, and administrators alike within the promotion and tenure system. Accomplishing both aims is critical. In his afterword discussing epistemic equity, Saltmarsh (2020) shared guidance on how to evaluate activist scholarship, while also calling readers to "move beyond" it by considering the relationships between epistemology and scholar identity and their structural implications:

> What would it mean for your committee (department, college, and University) to move beyond trying to make sense of, and fully and fairly evaluate the merits of, activist scholarship per se? What would happen, instead, if you approached this review through a lens of equity, foregrounding how questions of epistemology are connected to the identity of the scholar. A lens of epistemic equity could shape efforts to resist systemic forms of oppression and cultivate more equitable faculty reward policy that addresses prejudicial exclusion of scholars from participation in the spread of knowledge through credibility discounting and epistemic marginalization. (p. 153)

The following essay echoes this message, calling for systemic acceptance of diverse and marginalized forms of scholarship that often deviate from disciplinary norms. Arguably, an individual faculty's sense of epistemic inclusion and desire to practice engaged scholarship will increase when institutional supports exist at different levels that parallel faculty motivations, bolstered by an institutional culture called upon to respond to society's greatest challenges.

In the following essay, we review the application of ecological models within the engaged scholarship literature, including a focus on evaluation of programs and projects, societal impact, and institutional supports. This is followed by an overview of social ecology and the application of a social ecological framework to engaged scholar motivations that exist at the individual, interpersonal, organization, community, and public policy levels. This social ecological approach is then applied to institutional supports using illustrative examples that center on promotion and tenure, a key concern in the field. The case is made that promotion and tenure issues, including their expressions at different levels of influence, draw attention to the need for greater epistemic equity at multiple levels of influence. Finally, the conclusion includes a call for

more relational approaches to understanding faculty motivations across institutions of higher education, considering varying contexts and how individuals are situated in geometries of power spanning social ecological scales.

Literature Review

The present essay builds on the extant literature of ecological models used in engaged scholarship by drawing attention to multilevel motivations of individual scholars as the basis for designing and implementing institutional supports that fully recognize engaged scholarship. Multiple works cite Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which describes an individual's environment according to the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. His work highlights the importance of understanding human development within a broader context, emphasizing that individual development is shaped and influenced by the larger social, political, and cultural environments in which individuals live.

Within the engaged scholarship literature, the adaptation of ecological systems theory primarily focuses on the development and evaluation of partnerships and projects. (See also Elrod et al. [2023], who apply an ecosystem approach to systematic change leadership.) As examples, Bowland et al. (2015) used Bronfenbrenner's theory to assess individual and community levels of health and quality of life in a low-income housing community. Leonard (2011) drew on Bronfenbrenner to better understand the effect of a school–community partnership on student graduation, attendance, and dropout rates. Also focusing on schools, Shields et al. (2013) showed how an ecological systems orientation enhanced their service-learning undergraduate course, supported a systemic approach to health promotion in schools and communities, and facilitated strategic, mutual, and sustained partnerships. These studies highlight the benefits and implications of an ecological approach for university–community collaborations.

Some scholars have developed and evaluated individual projects that combine Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory with one or more complementary theories, encouraging readers to test the hybrid models in their own projects. For example, the "double rainbow model" is a long-standing approach for identifying all potential partners that can contribute to or could be affected by an engaged project (McLean & Behringer, 2008; Behringer & McLean, 2022). Integrated with the concept of units of identity and solution (Steuart, 1993), it posits that every individual possesses numerous social units of identity, which include self-concept, demographics, family affiliations, social networks, memberships, community ties, and broader societal affiliations. These units of identity can transform into units of solution when they foster relationships and collaborations to develop effective programs. The double rainbow model visualizes these concepts as concentric rings that mirror-image project partners and their social units of identity, aiming to serve as a nonhierarchical, cross-level planning tool for identifying various stakeholders in partnerships. This model has been used to complement additional frameworks, specifically GiveGet visualized by a table showing what each partner will contribute to and receive from a partnership and the four Rs of community engagement (relevance, reciprocity, research, and resilience), which aim to enhance approaches to engaged work (McLean & Behringer, 2008; Pruitt et al., 2019).

Reeb et al. (2017) presented a similar framework, the psycho-ecological systems model (PESM)—an integrative conceptual model rooted in general systems theory (GST). The PESM represents an integration of three conceptual developments: the ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the biopsychosocial model (Kiesler, 2000), and the principle of reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1978). The PESM was developed to inform and guide the development, implementation, and evaluation of transdisciplinary and multilevel community-engaged scholarship (e.g., a participatory community action research project undertaken by faculty that involves graduate and/or undergraduate students as service-learning research assistants). Reeb et al. argued that integrative conceptual models may increase the likelihood that community-based research projects will, among other benefits, develop and implement efficacious, sustainable, transdisciplinary, and multilevel projects, and assess constructs at multiple levels using a blend of quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Other scholars discuss ecological systems theory to draw attention to interventions that have a broad societal impact. In an introduction to a themed issue on

participatory research and capacity building for community health and development, Francisco (2013) argued that, although most of the literature is still dominated by researcher-run, targeted interventions with limited reach (i.e., affecting change among much less than 100 persons), the featured community interventions in the themed issue affect the broader social ecology. He explained that a growing literature on community-engaged scholarship is calling for collaborations between university researchers, state-level policymakers, and community-based groups to effect widespread changes in the social and physical environment. McNall et al. (2015) echoed these sentiments, arguing that failure to address complex dynamic systems of problems that interact and reinforce each other over time is in part due to the predominance of a university-driven, isolated-impact approach to social problem solving. These authors suggested an alternative approach called systemic engagement, which involves universities as partners in systemic approaches to community change using six guiding principles: systems thinking, collaborative inquiry, support for ongoing learning, emergent design, multiple strands of inquiry and action, and transdisciplinarity.

Although focused on the discipline of psychology, Ozer et al. (2021) drew attention to the utility of ecological approaches to institutional supports. They argued that the ecological theories of Bronfenbrenner (1977) and Kelly (1966) illuminate principles that can guide choices or anticipate consequences, and that community-engaged scholarship highlights infrastructural supports that are typically not present at R1 universities. Ozer et al. (2021) argued, "Support is needed at multiple ecological levels, from the department to the institution" (p. 1296) and posited that an ecological view of their cases underscores the multiple levels of intervention required for sustained institutional change to support and reward community-partnered scholarship. Their ecological approach is adapted in their recent scan of initiatives aimed at changing promotion and tenure systems to acknowledge the societal impact of research (Ozer et al., 2023). Mirroring this perspective, the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) recently published the modernizing scholarship for the public good action framework, which draws from ecological approaches that provide strategies for public research universities to aid scholars pursuing public engagement and research, emphasizing the importance of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice in these endeavors (Aurbach et al., 2023).

The aforementioned contributions draw attention to the utility of ecological approaches in advancing engaged scholarship. However, little attention has focused on the application of ecological approaches to the lived experiences and motivations of faculty with respect to recognition and epistemic equity. The lack of institutional support structures and rewards for engaged scholarship is a faculty equity issue. Individuals from historically underrepresented groups are disproportionately invested in scholarship that benefits their communities, but traditional academic structures and norms impose risks for engaged scholars' career advancement and success (Bell & Lewis, 2023; Kohl-Arenas et al., 2022). This epistemic exclusion is widely recognized in the community engagement literature, as demonstrated through many studies' calls for the promotion and tenure system to institutionalize, instead of marginalize, engaged scholarship (Colbeck & Weaver, 2008; DeFelippo & Giles, 2015; Franz et al., 2012; Jovanovic et al., 2017; Nicotera et al., 2011; Wade & Demb, 2009). Here, the literature on motivations of engaged scholars offers insights into the integration of community-engaged scholarship in promotion and tenure policies at various institutions (Dickens et al., 2023; Falahee & Kerry, 2021; Janke, Jenkins, et al., 2023; Janke, Quan, et al., 2023; Moffett & Rice, 2022; Sdvizhkov et al., 2022). Scholars have noted interventions that would complement changes to the tenure and promotion system, including financial and funding commitments to support related activities (Dickens et al., 2023; Falahee & Kerry, 2021), climate improvement workshops, leadership opportunities with high impact and the ability to effect institutional change, service equity (Settles et al., 2025), and professional development (Doberneck, 2022). Several of these contributions emphasize the importance of defining engaged scholarship in tenure and promotion policies more clearly. For example, one study found that there is significant variability in how engaged scholarship is defined and described across different levels of governance (e.g., university, unit, department), suggesting that institutions may not have a standardized or consistent understanding of engaged scholarship (Janke, Jenkins, et al., 2023). These authors warn

that this inconsistency can lead to confusion and challenges in evaluating and rewarding engaged scholarship.

Applying a Social Ecological Framework to Engaged Scholarship

These recent literature findings highlight the challenges and opportunities in recognizing and promoting engaged scholarship and emphasize the need for clarity, support, and systemic changes to better reward engaged scholarship and integrate this field of endeavor into institutional policies and practices. However, committing financial resources, creating faculty development opportunities, or defining different levels of governance more clearly, although important, do not account for the breadth of interdependencies and relationships that motivate individuals and their behavior. To further ecological approaches to engaged scholarship, we propose a social ecological framework that makes explicit relationships at multiple levels based on a range of faculty motivations, as it conceptualizes individuals as embedded and active in interdependent social contexts that span relationships, institutions, communities, and public policies (McLeroy et al., 1988; Sallis et al., 2008). This framework is in line with O'Meara et al. (2011) asserting that "origins of faculty engagement" are shaped by "the social, economic, or cultural context" (p. 89). They argued that these contexts better explain "origins" such as "generational influences, involvement in identity politics, or power struggles for social justice" (p. 89).

Sallis et al. (2008) identified four main principles of a social ecological approach. First, the approach upholds the premise that individuals are embedded in interpersonal, organizational, community, and public policy contexts. Second, these levels of influence interact with each other as interconnected contexts. Third, social ecological approaches should be tailored to a specific type of behavior to effectively develop interventions that address the behavior, such as the behavior of pursuing engaged scholarship. Fourth, Sallis and his colleagues posited that multilevel interventions show the most promise for influencing behavior.

Engaged scholarship aligns with social ecological approaches and has been incorporated into several practitioner-based fields, such as health promotion, landscape architecture, and urban planning, for the purpose of identifying effective interventions at various levels of influence to effect behavioral change (Alcalay & Bell, 2000; Golden & Earp, 2012; Thering & Chanse, 2011). From a social ecological perspective, engaged scholarship holds space for cocreation and challenges the boundaries and expectations of traditional academic disciplines (Colbeck & Weaver, 2008; Stokols, 1998). Social ecological approaches also value community-engaged knowledge production and dissemination outside the academy to achieve and improve the sustainability and resilience of outcomes (Boyer, 1996; Stokols, 1996; Stokols et al., 2013). This type of approach includes an emphasis on transdisciplinarity and translational knowledge, drawing from transcultural perspectives and employing team-based and collaborative approaches (Stokols, 2018, pp. 319–349). Mirroring the engaged scholarship literature, social ecological approaches are sensitive to the understanding that individuals have reciprocal connections and interactions with their institutional and environmental surroundings (O'Meara, 2013; Sallis et al., 2008). Given these parallels, a social ecological approach holds promise to further understand engaged scholars' motivations, with an eye toward effecting behavior change while advancing epistemic equity. Its application to faculty engagement reveals that motivations exist at multiple levels (Table 1) and where institutional supports should be considered.

In applying a social ecological approach to health promotion, McLeroy et al. (1988) defined five levels of social ecological influence: *individual* (i.e., "intrapersonal"), interpersonal, organizational (i.e., "institutional"), community, and public policy. Individual, or intrapersonal, considerations are defined as "characteristics of the individual such as knowledge, attitudes, behavior, self-concept, skills, etc." (p. 355). They criticized behavior change models in health promotion that overly focus on the individual and promote a victim-blaming ideology, which assumes individual failure is the primary cause of illness. Although these interventions may incorporate elements such as interpersonal influence, they primarily aim to alter individual behavior (e.g., resistance) and not the social environment (e.g., social norms and rewards). McLeroy et al. argued that interventions focusing solely on individual behavior changes are insufficient and should be considered secondary to interventions that prioritize changes to surrounding environments. However, they

Table 1. Faculty Engaged Scholarship Motivations by Level: A Social Ecological Framework

Motivational levels	Citations
Individual	
Personal experiences and identities; professional experiences and identities; epistemology.	Biccard & Mohapi, 2022; Colbeck & Weaver, 2008; DeFelippo & Giles, 2015; Franz et al., 2012; Malm et al., 2013; O'Meara, 2008; O'Meara & Niehaus, 2009; Wade & Demb, 2009; Ward, 2010.
Interpersonal	
Family relationships; colleague relationships; student relationships; community partner relationships.	Bowen & Kiser, 2009; Colbeck & Weaver, 2008; DeFelippo & Giles, 2015; Franz et al., 2012; Hou & Wilder, 2015; Jovanovic et al., 2017; O'Meara, 2008; O'Meara & Niehaus, 2009; O'Meara, 2013; Wade & Demb, 2009; Ward, 2010.
Organizational	
Institutional type and mission; institutional recognition and reward; institutional resources, policies, and practices; leadership, campuses, and departments.	Bao et al., 2023; Colbeck & Weaver, 2008; Darby & Newman, 2014; Forbes et al., 2008; Franz et al., 2012; Hou, 2010; Hou & Wilder, 2015; Jovanovic et al., 2017; Lewing & York, 2017; Malm et al., 2013; Nicotera et al., 2011; O'Meara, 2003, 2008, 2013; O'Meara & Niehaus, 2009; Wade & Demb, 2009.
Community	
Community interests; community and university connections; student learning and development; professional communities.	Abes et al., 2002; Baez, 2000; Banerjee & Hausafus, 2007; Blakey et al., 2015; Colbeck & Weaver, 2008; Darby & Newman, 2014; DeFelippo & Giles, 2015; Franz et al., 2012; Hou, 2010; Hou & Wilder, 2015; O'Meara, 2003, 2008, 2013; O'Meara & Niehaus, 2009; Osborne & Wilton, 2017; Richard et al., 2022; Wade & Demb, 2009; Ward, 2010.
Public policy	
Policy-relevant social issues; law and policy change.	DeFelippo & Giles, 2015; O'Meara, 2008; O'Meara & Niehaus, 2009; Osborne & Wilton, 2017; Peters et al., 2008.

did not forgo focusing on individual behavior altogether, positing that environmental support of individuals can reciprocally empower individual behaviors that change the social environment further. In the context of engaged scholarship, environmental support of individual scholars' personal and professional identities, lived experiences, and epistemologies can further empower both their pursuit of engaged scholarship and efforts to support engaged scholarship institutionally. For other individuals at the institution, such as academic personnel review committee members, department chairs, and administrators, environmental supports could scaffold their skills, shape their attitudes and knowledge, and ultimately affect their behavior and decision-making toward strengthening institutional supports for engaged scholarship.

Interpersonal elements entail "interpersonal relationships with—family members, friends, neighbors, contacts at work, and acquaintances" (McLeroy et al., 1988, p. 356). These social relationships comprise "interpersonal processes and primary groups—formal and informal social network and social support systems, including the family, work group, and friendship networks" (p. 355). In the context of engaged scholarship, social relationships can include networks of community members and partners with which a scholar demonstrates a high level of commitment. As in their critiques of individual-focused interventions, McLeroy et al. (1988) discussed the limitations of interventions that focus on changing individual behavior through social influences instead of changing the broader social context individuals are part of. They

pointed out that these interventions often overlook the network structure and function of social relationships, treating peer influence as merely the sum of individual interactions rather than understanding the significance of social groups. They suggested it is crucial to design interventions that target and transform the social networks and norms that underpin behaviors. Instead of aiming for individual behavioral change alone, they argue that these interventions should prioritize altering the social norms and influences within interpersonal networks.

Organizational aspects refer to "institutional factors—social institutions with organizational characteristics, and formal (and informal) rules and regulations for operation" (McLeroy et al., 1988, p. 355). McLeroy et al. described several features of organizations that may affect behavior. These features include incentives, management support, changes to regulations, and restructuring work, among other characteristics, that support behavioral changes (p. 360). A focus on organizational behavior change and academic culture is a dominant perspective within the faculty engagement literature, which draws attention to how institutional agendas, practices, policies, politics, and leaders affect faculty engagement (O'Meara et al., 2011). However, although institutional incentives are important, they can be transactional in nature, which is a motivation for some engaged scholars, but not for those who seek transformational structure and culture change.

Community, a term that has various connotations, is another level of social ecological influence. Beyond community as the setting for engaging localized places and populations, communities can also include individuals associated with a disciplinary or campus community. Importantly, faculty identify their work with diverse types of communities: communities of place (a common geographic location), communities of practice (common areas of work or profession), communities of identity (common populations such as age, gender, income, and race/ethnicity), and/or communities of interest (common pursuit, passion, or activity). Similarly, McLeroy et al. (1988) provided varying definitions of communities, in their case analyzing and informing health promotion programs. For them, community is referred to as a mediating structure between face-to-face groups where individuals belong (e.g., friendship networks, neighborhoods), relationships between community groups within a defined area (e.g., local schools, health providers), and a juridically bounded area in which populations are coterminous with a political entity (p. 363).

Public policy refers to "local, state, and national laws and policies" (McLeroy et al., 1988, p. 355). McLeroy et al. described the three policy roles of development, advocacy, and analysis. These roles include the importance of public education and awareness on policy issues; encouraging citizens to participate in the political process via lobbying, voting, coalition building, and policy monitoring; and offering policy options to elected officials, the public, and affected populations, as well as public participation in policymaking processes (p. 366). They argued that there are important connections between public policies and communities. They noted that public policy can shape the social environment of individuals; however, they also called for policy work to reciprocally empower individuals to influence public policy. Mediating structures in a community come into play here to serve as connections between individuals and the larger social environment, acting as access points and sources of influence to the policymaking process. McLeroy et al. suggested that policy development, advocacy, and analysis can be employed to support existing community mediating structures, with the aim of further developing local capacity for changing public policy to benefit communities. Research associated with the public policy level includes different ways that engaged scholars give expression to societally impactful change and political engagement motivations. A focus on community engagement as a vehicle to influence and/or generate policy can serve as a motivational factor, as does the involvement of engaged scholars in policy-specific research.

The Case of Promotion and Tenure: Some Illustrative Examples

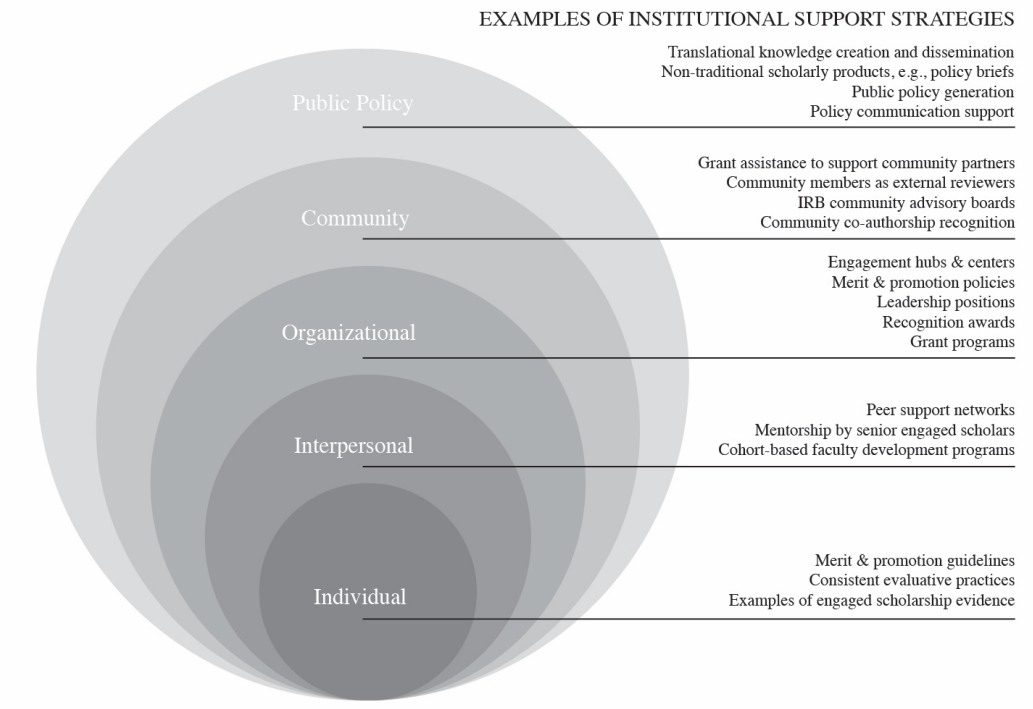
Social ecological approaches hold not only analytical import for offering more specificity in identifying engaged faculty motivations, but also applied value for informing interventions in practice. As discussed in the above overview of social ecological approaches, Sallis et al. (2008) argued that interventions at multiple levels work better to shape behavior, in contrast to interventions targeting one social ecological

level of influence. Drawing from previous work on engaged scholar motivations at UC Davis (Rios & Saco, 2023), and to illustrate where institutional interventions can create supports to recognize and expand engaged scholarship in response to multilevel motivations, this section applies a social ecological approach to identify scaffolded opportunities for rewarding and recognizing scholarship in universities, including promotion and tenure systems. The aim is to create an ecosystem that is epistemically inclusive, while at the same time encouraging behavior change—among individual faculty, academic personnel review committees, department chairs, and administrators alike—leading to increased numbers of engaged scholars and density of networks with the aim of shifting institutional culture (see Figure 1).

Institutional supports at multiple levels can create a climate where engaged scholars feel valued, while signaling to department chairs and peer colleagues that individuals should be recognized for contributions that demonstrate impact beyond disciplinary norms. Importantly, the choice of which support and at what level will vary by institution based on size, emphasis, and resources available. For example, resource investments at a research-intensive university may target increasing the prospects for extramural funding through engaged scholarship, whereas at a small liberal arts college, increasing community-engaged learning opportunities for students may be a higher priority. However, this is not to suggest institutional support strategies should focus on one level of faculty motivation over others, as priorities and resources originate from, and vary by, different units and levels of governance (e.g., department, college or school, campuswide).

Examples of institutional strategies to support individuals can include providing merit and promotion guidelines for engaged scholarship or illustrations of engaged scholarship evidence. For some faculty, this form of support provides greater clarity in definition and metrics that articulate the impact of their work in dossier statements. At UC Davis, the application of this strategy included the creation of a new "Statement of Contributions to Public and Global Impact" (UC Davis Office of Public Scholarship and Engagement, n.d.): Individuals can elect to summarize the impact of their research, teaching, and/or service in a single

Figure 1. Multilevel Institutional Support Strategies for Engaged Scholarship



document, which provides evidence in engaged scholarship toward receiving a favorable merit or promotion resulting in a salary increase.

At the interpersonal level, supportive relationships within departments, disciplines, and peer networks would help ensure that engaged scholars' professional colleagues are aware of the value of their work; evaluate them effectively; and cultivate supportive spaces for professional development, interpersonal collaboration, and a sense of inclusion and belonging. The establishment of formal and informal cohort-based and peer support networks can help individuals find other engaged scholars to learn from one another. Sharing interdisciplinary methods of community engagement, novel approaches to service-learning, or guidance on navigating the system of faculty personnel reviews are some of the outcomes of networks. The Engaged Faculty Fellowship Program at Cornell University is one example of a yearlong experience where faculty develop community-engaged expertise, programs, projects, and networks (Cornell University, n.d.). The yearlong experiences are structured around a cohort of fellows that create a tight-knit group through monthly meetings to discuss readings and workshop individual projects.

Although more common, organizational-level supports are also vital. As organizations, universities can center engaged scholarship and engagement initiatives as the core of their institutional missions and identities. Explicit merit and promotion policies signal to faculty that their work is supported by their institution, while also providing guidance to department chairs, faculty personnel committees, and others that review faculty dossiers. At Purdue University, changes to promotion and tenure policies in concert with supportive guidelines to recognize engagement led to increases in the overall number of engaged faculty as well as tenure promotion success rates. Results included a fourfold increase from 17 to 72 individuals promoted and/or tenured fully or partially based on engagement (Abel & Williams, 2019). Similarly, UC Berkeley made changes to their manual of academic personnel to provide language for assessing community-engaged research as part of merit and promotion actions (Berkeley BMAP, 2021; Berkeley i4Y, n.d.). Beyond tenure and promotion systems, resources that support faculty involvement in engagement centers, recognition awards, and grant programs are other examples of organizational-level strategies, as are faculty recruitment and retention efforts that make explicit mention of faculty public scholarship to ensure a more diverse professoriate.

Communities are the focus of much engaged scholarship work, but often where institutions provide little recognition or direct financial support. The promotion and tenure system does not equally account for the engagement and longer timeframes required to develop meaningful community-engaged partnerships in the context of engaged scholarship, nor does it explicitly value knowledge created with, or within, communities. Recognition of this labor varies at best. Community members as external reviewers, IRB community advisory boards, and community coauthorship recognition are several key strategies that recognize the value of community perspectives and the important role these partners play as co-producers of knowledge. Community partner compensation is also an area of unmet need where financial assistance can have a direct impact, enhance institutional reputation, build trust, and strengthen relationships between engaged scholars and their community partners. It is also an important step toward advancing a university's equity goals, as are efforts by an increasing number of land-grant institutions to engage tribal communities in meaningful ways. Some examples of these efforts include South Dakota State University's Wokini Initiative, which includes enhancing research and outreach partnerships with tribes and tribal colleges (South Dakota State University, n.d.), as well as the TRUTH Project, which places value on place-based, tribally led research and is a collaboration between a number of recognized Tribal Governments of Minnesota, the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council, and the Office of American Indian and Tribal Nations Relations at the University of Minnesota (University of Minnesota Institute for Advanced Study, n.d.).

Lastly, institutional support strategies that mirror engaged scholar motivations to produce research responding to societal challenges and/or having public policy impacts can go a long way toward enlarging the community of engaged scholars, especially in the science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine (STEMM) fields. Developing and rewarding faculty capacity to communicate effectively to policymakers,

write policy briefs, and educate the public on policies that affect communities and sectors would better align with engaged scholarship's translational and dissemination practices for broader impact. External grants from government agencies such as the National Science Foundation and philanthropic foundation programs such as the William T. Grant Foundation's Institutional Challenge Grant and The Pew Charitable Trusts' Evidence Project are increasingly looking to fund work that produces broader social impacts (National Science Foundation, n.d.; Pew Charitable Trusts, n.d.; William T. Grant Foundation, n.d.). The University of California's Climate Action Research Initiative, which is providing $80 million in funding to link public policies with research performed in partnership with local communities, is an example of states seeking authentic community engagement as part of grant requirements (University of California Research and Innovation, 2023). Importantly, a focus on broader impacts is a timely response to growing public criticism of institutions of higher education, as evidenced by a 2023 Gallup Poll that found confidence in U.S. higher education fell from 57% to 36% between 2015 and 2023 (Brenan, 2023). An increasing number of universities have organized initiatives to foster transdisciplinary research and extramural funding collaborations across the STEMM, health and social sciences, and arts and humanities fields to address societal challenges and "wicked problems" such as climate change, global health crises, and racial injustice. The University of Michigan's Bold Challenges initiative is one example supporting public impact research through programs and events that build equitable teams and partner with community partners (Office of the Vice President for Research, n.d.), as are similar initiatives at Indiana University, Ohio State University, and UCLA (Indiana University Bloomington, n.d.; Ohio State University, n.d.; UCLA, n.d.).

Conclusion

Echoing calls to reform current promotion and tenure systems, the present essay argues that epistemic equity and faculty sense of belonging will increase when institutional supports scaffold the motivations of engaged scholars. A social ecological framework was introduced based on previous research (Rios & Saco, 2023) and a literature review of ecological approaches, drawing attention to the utility of these approaches to engaged scholarship promotion and assessment. Engaged scholarship aligns with a social ecological approach, given an emphasis on community-engaged knowledge, reciprocity, transdisciplinarity, and cocreation. Importantly, this multilevel approach has been used in practitioner-based fields to identify effective interventions to effect behavioral change and provides a blueprint for institutional supports in ways that recognize engaged scholarship and increase epistemic equity.

A social ecological framework considers relational approaches to understanding and analyzing not only faculty motivations for pursuing engaged scholarship, but also institutional supports that match motivations. The case of promotion and tenure was used to illustrate examples of multilevel institutional support strategies that target interventions at the individual, interpersonal, organizational, community, and public policy levels. Importantly, the hope is that this approach to rewards and recognition will encourage university leadership to foster a culture and climate of epistemic equity and inclusion by changing institutional policies, programs, and practices. University leaders are well-positioned to see the big picture of engaged scholarship and have the power to shape institutional environments in ways that encourage certain behaviors over others.

Future studies can apply this framework to different types of higher education institutions to assess its suitability and fit, highlighting the unique contexts and pathways in which engaged scholarship is pursued. Future research may also explore the relationship between motivational levels and various engaged scholarship frames, such as community, public, civic, or society. Researchers may also employ comparative study designs to analyze more than one institution vis-à-vis a social ecological framework. Lastly, less common in social ecological approaches is an examination of equity and inclusion. In particular, the "scholarship of engaged scholarship" would benefit greatly from relational and multiscalar studies that critically examine how individuals are situated in geometries of power regarding their own social identities, relationships to others, the institutional cultures in which they find themselves, the communities they engage, and the public policies that impact communities.

Author Note

Correspondence concerning this essay should be addressed to Michael Rios, Department of Human Ecology, University of California, Davis, One Shields Avenue, Davis CA, 95616. Email: mxrios@ucdavis.edu

About the Authors

Michael Rios *is professor of human ecology and former vice provost of public scholarship at the University of California, Davis. His research interests focus on community engagement, university–community partnerships, and collective impact in higher education. He received his PhD in political geography from The Pennsylvania State University and his master of architecture and master of city and regional planning from the University of California, Berkeley.*

Larissa Saco *is a graduate student researcher at the University of California, Davis. Her research interests broadly focus on politics–expertise dynamics between communities, universities, policymakers, and markets. She received her master's degree and is pursuing a PhD in sociology from the University of California, Davis.*

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Wellness and Worth: A Reflection on Community Engagement and the Academic Career Path

Disa Cornish and Julianne Gassman

Abstract

There is a disconnect in higher education between higher education professional practices and valuing the community impact of engaged scholars. In this reflective essay, the authors highlight personal experiences with the process of working toward and earning promotion and tenure in academic settings. Those personal experiences are then contextualized through an examination of the literature regarding evaluation processes, engagement-ready institutions, the history of campus engagement, and the role of community-engaged scholarship in the civic purpose of institutions of higher education. There are clear systemic contradictions that create misalignments between institutional aspirations and individual metrics for success. Faculty serving as boundary spanners advance institutional missions and create transformative student learning opportunities, while sometimes sacrificing personal and professional well-being.

Keywords: community-engaged scholarship, tenure and promotion, faculty well-being, boundary spanners

The purpose of this reflective essay is to address the shifting dynamics of higher education, centering the responsibility of the academy and individual academics in both educating about and participating in community engagement (which often centers the reckoning of historical injustices in our society). Through personal reflections and connections to extant literature, the authors seek to highlight the disconnect between higher education professional practices and valuing the community impact of engaged scholars. The authors are female academics with extensive experience both working in communities and working within traditional career paths and academic tenure and promotion paradigms. The inclusion of personal experiences and reflections highlights wellness, well-being, and career sustainability, alongside evidence for innovations in professional development in the tenure and promotion process.

Personal Reflections

Author A

I began my professional academic career as an assistant professor in fall 2013. Six years later, in fall 2018, I went up for tenure and promotion to associate professor. During the intervening 6 years, I was approached with words of wisdom from colleagues many times. My department head told me that to achieve tenure and promotion I would need "about six" publications in peer-reviewed journals, plus making sure to do "some presentations" and serving on "a couple of committees" (that was the extent of her guidance). I was advised to not spend time writing grants or working in the community because that would take away from time that could be spent publishing. And many colleagues, some smiling and some not, reminded me of the old academic adage: "Remember, it's publish or perish."

And yet. As a faculty member focused on community health promotion, engagement in the community is a key component of my field. The value system of my field demands a service-oriented approach and advocates for deep partnerships between academic and community organizations. I teach my students to spend time building relationships in the community and to take time creating collaborative coalitions for improved health and well-being. I teach them that it takes time and trust to move the needle on community health. But in order to keep my job and keep teaching students about how to be engaged community health professionals, I needed to hurry up and publish "about six" articles and give "some presentations."

There was a deep disconnect between the metrics for success in community-engaged public health that I was teaching and the metrics for success against which I was being evaluated. And, although my department's standards for promotion and tenure were vague, it was clear that original and empirical research published in peer-reviewed journals was the expectation. There was no discussion about alternate scholarship models and certainly no inclusion of community engagement as a legitimate academic pursuit on its own.

Over time, things have changed to some degree. Although I still feel a structural disconnect between the traditional metrics of evaluating scholarship and the newer ways of considering community-engaged scholarship, I must give my institution credit for some forward momentum. In the past 5 years, my institution has created an Office of Community Engagement that is tasked with helping faculty to embed engagement into the curriculum and promoting community-engaged scholarship. Our institutional faculty handbook specifically mentions the connection between community engagement (service) and the scholarship of application, with latitude given to departments regarding how peer review is defined. This is progress. Junior faculty at my institution today have more structure and guidance regarding community engagement in the tenure process than I did. As I move toward seeking promotion to full professor, there is much more clarity and documentation to scaffold my efforts than there was for faculty 10 years ago. I have the relative privilege today of feeling that my work can speak for itself within the parameters that I, along with my colleagues, was able to help develop.

Author B

I am currently a full professor and also followed the traditional schedule for tenure and promotion. This included 7 years as an assistant professor, 7 years as an associate professor, and promotion to full professor in February 2020. Prior to being hired as an assistant professor, I was a full-time instructor in the same academic department while completing my PhD and was subsequently hired as faculty. My area of expertise was in nonprofit management and leadership, and accordingly I was hired into a position that also included directing a nonprofit certificate program. The 7 years of assistant professorship was a constant pull between being engaged in the community, which is essential and important in being a credible nonprofit leader, while also being expected to publish. In my third year it was advised that I quit, or pause, all community engagement, step down from any nonprofit board of directors I sat on, and halt all service commitments to focus on publishing. Reflection on this advice, especially within a nonprofit management academic focus, has led me to find this guidance contradictory to the advancement of the discipline, benefit to students, and support for the community. In addition, as a young faculty member in age and years in the academy, and often feeling powerless, I listened to the advice and informed my community partners of my shift in focus for the next few years. I didn't see any other option. It is unlikely a young faculty member is going to understand how to advocate that their community-engaged work, their "service" in communities that may be informing programs, services, and systems in community-based organizations, be considered scholarship. Instead one does what one is told.

Tenure and Promotion

In considering the path to tenure and promotion (and the accompanying mentality sometimes referred to as "publish or perish"), faculty have a limited amount of time to prove their worth to their academic institution. But the metrics for that proof are sometimes difficult to quantify outside the traditional indicators like number of publications. In fact, it is well-documented that higher education places a greater value on research and scholarship than on teaching, and that it values both of those over service. This emphasis is operationalized such that community engagement is linked

most closely to service, and scholarship is linked with research outputs that prioritize eminence and productivity (Janke et al., 2023). The timeline for research and publication leaves little room for the relatively slow process of relationship- and trust-building that is required for healthy community engagement.

The conflict between individual faculty engagement and institutional norms has been summarized with great clarity by Jessani et al. (2020) in their study of academic incentives for faculty engagement in schools of public health. "Deliberations on incentives leads to a larger debate on how to shift the culture of academia beyond incentives for individuals who are *engagement-inclined* to institutions that are *engagement-ready*, without imposing on or penalizing faculty who are *choice-disengaged*" (p. 9). One key issue highlighted by Jessani et al. is the conundrum of how to develop metrics that accurately capture engagement work by faculty. They noted that engagement activities often "transcend mere transactions to being more relational and perhaps even transformational; hence unquantifiable" (p. 9).

Engagement-Ready Institutions

Although literature exists that outlines characteristics and competencies for faculty and researchers who want to pursue community engagement, very little is known about what characteristics would make an academic institution "engagement-ready." For example, Shea et al. (2017) described 40 competencies organized into nine domains that are critical for researchers to assess whether they are ready to take part in community-engaged dissemination and implementation. However, the literature offers no corresponding competencies for academic institutions to assess readiness to tangibly support faculty and researchers working in community engagement efforts.

Institutionalizing community engagement in institutions of higher education was organized as a nationwide effort with the development of the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement in 2006, currently being facilitated by the American Council on Education. Shortly after the inception of this classification, Sandmann et al. (2009) wrote about leading engaged institutions and the importance of rewarding community-engaged scholarship, while also noting the need for new approaches to assess service-learning, described as "the most important curricular vehicle of community engagement" (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009, p. iii). Weerts and Sandmann (2008) noted that the work of community-engaged faculty should not be lumped into and aligned with teaching or service roles, but is better included as part of the faculty's scholarship and research. Fifteen years after Ernest Boyer's *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (1990) was published, Calleson et al. (2005) outlined the gap between "recommendations made by national commissions and national governing bodies, and the reality of how promotion and tenure actually works [in health professions schools]" (para. 3). To do what is best for the profession, to be engaged and impacting outcomes in a community, is risky in the academy. Faculty opting to be both engaged in the community and in the academy are likely paying a personal price. And are we getting any better?

In a study of departmental policy documents, Janke et al. (2023) examined promotion and tenure standards to assess the language used to describe community-engaged scholarship and how those terms were integrated into faculty assessment. Although the authors assessed policies across departments at a single university, they found significant variation and inconsistency in how community-engaged scholarship was defined and how it was integrated. The authors noted that although ambiguity in how community-engaged scholarship was defined may have allowed faster expansion of the policies, it ultimately hindered growth and any transformations in faculty assessment. "When in doubt as to its legitimacy as scholarship, faculty tend to be more likely to dismiss community-engaged scholarship as service, which is typically the least regarded faculty role" (Janke et al., 2023, p. 39). Indeed, when institutions push the burden of defining the scholarship of engagement onto departments, it is the boundary-spanning junior faculty that bear the brunt of proving the worth of that work.

This is not a challenge limited to just a few institutions. In a study of evaluation of community-engaged scholarship that included five R1 institutions that were classified as engaged campuses by the Carnegie Foundation, Wendling (2023) found that although the classification requires institutions to show clear ways to recognize engaged faculty, there was still a lack of appropriate metrics. Faculty respondents

at those five institutions reported challenges regarding how to label and present their community-engaged scholarship in ways that adhered to traditional metrics of research (publications and grant dollars, for example). In addition, there was the added challenge of having to argue for the legitimacy and rigor of their community-engaged scholarship when colleagues called it into question due to a lack of understanding. Another study (Cooper, 2014) documented the perceptions of faculty who embraced service-learning for 10 years, and when noting the impact on tenure and promotion, two themes emerged: the importance of service-learning being accepted as a valued pedagogy within their discipline and department, and recognition that for service-learning to be effective, a commitment of time for relationship-building, complexity, and problem-solving was important. According to Cooper, some faculty indicated service-learning had a positive impact on their tenure decisions; however, this was not universal, nor without its challenges, and "other forms of scholarship were stressed" (p. 420).

Historical Context and Disconnects

Let's pause a moment on the discussion of today's landscape and shift to how the historical context of community engagement at academic institutions has led us to the disconnects that affect our well-being. There is a broader context to consider in the ways colleges and universities commit to engagement for relevance. In 1985 Frank Newman wrote:

> If there is a crisis in education in the United States today, it is less that test scores have declined than it is that we have failed to provide the education for citizenship that is still the most significant responsibility of the nation's schools and colleges. (p. 31)

Newman's report caught the attention of presidents of institutions across the nation, and subsequently 110 presidents joined together to form Campus Compact—an organization whose aim was to educate students on how to be citizens. As noted by Hartley and Saltmarsh (2016), the first meeting of Campus Compact focused discussion on advancing public service through volunteerism and integrating community-based activities into courses. There was both early skepticism toward giving credit for service and support for what is typically referred to as service-learning.

Next there was the rise of service-learning along with a number of scholars and practitioners developing a set of principles that grounded the rise of service-learning as a pedagogy and movement. Between 1998 and 2004 the infrastructure to support community engagement grew across institutions of higher education. Between 2004 and 2012 the emphasis on civic education expanded, evidenced by publications, awards, and the development of offices and centers to lead the efforts of community engagement on campuses across the country (Hartley & Saltmarsh, 2016). Hundreds of institutions have an office or center that focuses on community engagement and service-learning, and these offices may even expand their function to advancing social justice. In the last paragraph outlining the history of civic engagement, Hartley and Saltmarsh wrote:

> They [next generation engagement scholars] entered into their faculty careers with an expectation that they would be able to be engaged scholars—that they would be able to do engaged scholarly work in all aspects of their faculty role. They expected that the institution would provide the intellectual space and support to allow them to thrive as engaged scholars. They did not enter faculty careers resigned to delayed fulfillment of their ideals through accommodation to traditional norms only to be able to thrive later in their post-tenure careers. They would not have to heal the divisions in their inner life because they would resist the disciplinary and institutional cultures that fostered such division. (p. 31)

And so here we are. Yes, there are publications, research and scholarly articles, and offices across the nation that support and lead the advancement of the public purpose of higher education. However, we must ask whether this blended effort of service to community, development of civic skills, and studies within specific academic disciplines are as seamless as Hartley and Saltmarsh imagined at the time. What are the experiences of these "next generation engaged scholars"? It might be that we still have some work to do to realize the ability for

all engaged scholars to thrive in the academy. Although the reality of an academician shaping their professional, personal, and civic identity is complex, maneuvering the tenure and promotion process in all its varied forms—and often constructed on R1 research expectations—seems, at least to these two authors, an unnecessary obstacle. We further contend that this obstacle should not be left to the young, new assistant professor to "make the case" to overcome and prove that their engaged scholarship is meaningful enough to warrant continued progress and/or promotion.

Civics and Democracy in Higher Education

It is an agreed-upon notion that higher education has a role in civics education and that, in upholding our democracy, colleges and universities have a responsibility to equip students with the knowledge and critical thinking skills necessary to understand the principles of democracy and the importance of civic engagement (Newman, 1985; Weerts, 2019). Colleges and universities encourage the development of an informed and active citizenry through extracurricular activities, community engagement, community-based research, and volunteerism as well as service-learning initiatives. Through these many forms of engagement, students can learn to apply their knowledge in practical ways that contribute to the betterment of society. For success in this endeavor, students must have guidance from faculty who are also doing those things well. And to do these things well, faculty must be engaged in careful, thoughtful relationship-building in the community, and students must be guided in transformational work in addition to transactional work. Transactional projects that have an exchange of time for service such as volunteering at a local food pantry are important; society, however, needs students to learn how to be engaged in transformational work in their professions and their communities. This is how faculty serve as boundary spanners to enhance student learning and benefit society.

The vision and missions of institutions across the country can be realized only through individual action, through connecting and relationships with community, people to people. Connecting this way requires going out into the community, joining associations, and attending events, all of which take time; time that is not rewarded nor recognized as essential for community-engaged scholars. Mintz (2022) noted two trends that give credibility to the need for the academy to reflect on its role in a democracy. First, "Civics education is all the rage. If there's any issue that the nation's political leaders agree upon, it's this: that the teaching of civics and knowledgeable, responsible citizenship has never been more important or necessary" (para. 1). Interestingly, not only is there consensus on the need for embedding responsible citizenship into higher education, "as many as two-thirds of Americans now think U.S. democracy is in crisis" (para. 9). Higher education is at a crossroads where questions are raised about the relevance of academia and about the often agonizing path to tenure for faculty who are engaged in a community. Engaged faculty are directly relevant in their communities, and by the nature of who they are and their discipline are impacting programs and services directly.

Personal Well-Being

The significance and importance of this issue connects to the challenges faced by higher education institutions—community-engaged scholars and boundary spanners are those academics whose practice is directly impacting communities yet who may struggle in the tenure and promotion process if their work does not align with more traditional metrics of success. A Google search on the "criticisms of higher education" produces countless results. Chamorro-Premuzic and Frankiewicz (2019) wrote:

> And while research is the engine of growth and innovation, which explains the strong emphasis top academic universities place on it, it should not be an excuse to neglect the actual education offered to students, including the critical issue of preparing them for the real world. (para. 10)

The authors of this essay, and many community-engaged scholars "preparing students for the real world" suffer in the academy because of their focus on community engagement. One author recalls talking with an assistant professor pretenure. This person described themselves as miserable due to the requirement to publish in journals they didn't see as relevant to their work, and added that the organizations in the community they partnered with would suffer in the years just before they became tenured.

In fact, the literature supports the sentiments of this pretenure faculty member. Self-reported levels of stress are highest among academic professionals at the lowest ranks; lack of perceived control, feeling intensely scrutinized, and having poor work–life balance can contribute to the difficulty of coping with the stress. In addition, when faculty receive mixed messages (contradicting information from different sources) and the promotion standards seem like a moving target (with expectations shifting and changing), frustration and confusion are enhanced (Wells et al., 2019). It is important to note the added burdens and challenges present for women and people of color in the tenure and promotion process. There is substantial evidence in the literature that retention rates for female faculty and faculty of color are lower than for their male and White counterparts. Isolation and demoralization are also higher for female faculty and faculty of color (Durodoye et al., 2020). A 2023 brief from the American Psychological Association pointed out that when pursuing academic careers, faculty of color are specifically looking for departments that are explicit in their prioritization of community engagement and recognition of faculty contributions to the community. In fact, the recommendations cited in the report as beneficial for faculty of color would improve the mixed messages, moving targets, and general misalignments for all faculty. This report recommended, among other things, aligning tenure expectations with opportunity and need, being creative with scholarship metrics beyond such elements as the more traditional citation counts, and aligning expectations of faculty with institutional values (APA, 2023).

We believe, and the evidence supports, that community-engaged scholarship can and should be rigorous, complex, meaningful, and relevant. There are clear standards for high-quality community engagement. It is demoralizing when institutions, through their promotion and tenure processes, tell faculty that what they know is important (engaging in their communities) doesn't "matter" professionally. It is a form of professional violence against the value systems of scholars who are ready and willing to do the hard work of collaboration. Changing institutional practices or measurement standards around tenure and promotion to include metrics around community engagement should still retain a focus on rigor and scholarly quality. Institutions can prioritize both rigorous scholarship and creative community engagement. Individual faculty are carrying the burden of upholding the stated engagement values of their institutions and paying the price in their own well-being. Straightforward institutional solutions are present that could both improve faculty well-being and promote the values and goals of colleges and universities. In short, alignment is possible. Faculty well-being will improve and institutions will continue to improve their relevance in society. We know this because we live it.

About the Authors

Disa Cornish, PhD, *is an associate professor in the Public Health program at the University of Northern Iowa. She teaches at the undergraduate and graduate levels at UNI, including courses such as Epidemiology, Planning and Evaluation, Maternal and Infant Health, and Statistics. Her research has focused on public health program evaluation, maternal and child health, and applied data collection methodologies and survey design. Dr. Cornish is chair of the Black Hawk County Board of Health. She earned her undergraduate and master's degrees from the University of Iowa and her doctorate in health promotion and health education from the University of Alabama at Birmingham.*

Julianne Gassman, PhD, *is the McElroy Professor and director of community engagement at the University of Northern Iowa. In this role she thinks strategically about the interface between UNI and its community from local to global. Dr. Gassman also teaches in the Recreation, Tourism and Nonprofit Leadership program. She has numerous publications in the areas of community engagement/service-learning, nonprofit management, youth development, and organizational culture. She has presented nationally and internationally.*

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Exploration of the Conceptualization of the Third Mission of Agricultural Faculties: A Qualitative Metasynthesis Study

Hoda Izadi, Seyed Mahmood Hosseini, and Kurosh Rezaei-Moghaddam

Abstract

This study addresses the ambiguity surrounding the third mission of universities, which stems from a lack of a unified definition. It provides a comprehensive investigation of this mission within agricultural faculties by employing a systematic review of 150 articles, culminating in the selection of 32 final articles for qualitative analysis. The findings identify six primary approaches to the third mission, extracting their key components and corresponding activities. These approaches are then compared based on 16 distinct features. By clarifying the factors that influence the selection of each approach, this research offers a clear picture of the third mission and the outcomes associated of each path. The results show that the most suitable approach for implementing this mission must be holistic and tailored to the specific conditions of each country and society. Ultimately, by providing a transparent view of the third mission, the study's findings can guide policymakers in selecting the appropriate approach for this critical mission.

Keywords: higher education impact, partnership models, university–society engagement, higher education policy, institutional accountability

In the last few decades, the third mission (TM) of universities has developed as a new mission beyond teaching and research to engage with various stakeholders and support economic and social development. The university's role in addressing societal challenges and fostering informed and productive citizens and promoting civic engagement through the TM has gained consensus, but the exact definition of university engagement and the mechanisms to fulfill this role remain elusive (Izadi et al., 2020).

Universities increasingly prioritize their TM, societal engagement. However, approaches vary. The traditional bottom-up model, emphasizing trust, faces challenges from top-down pressures for formalization (Menter, 2024). According to recent studies, certain public universities in Europe do not have a well-structured framework for their TM endeavors, resulting in inconsistencies in their societal and economic engagements (Spânu et al., 2024). Agricultural faculties, for instance, delegate rural community needs to other departments, neglecting broader well-being (Nanseki & Nguyen, 2023).

Given these challenges, universities, particularly agricultural faculties, face specific obstacles in implementing their TM. A lack of clarity regarding the university's societal role hinders understanding of TM benefits and operations (Uyarra, 2010). Diverse perspectives exist on restructuring universities for the TM, but declining public funding and shifting priorities necessitate adapting managerial, organizational, and financial paradigms. The absence of a definitive TM framework has led to entrepreneurial strategies and increased industry collaborations (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020).

The lack of a unified interpretation of the TM hinders the translation of findings into practical applications and generates ambiguity in the literature. The absence of a precise TM definition leads to unclear measurement indicators, undefined dimensions, and limited understanding of the factors influencing TM emergence. Consequently, universities often focus on narrow aspects of their TM, failing to grasp its holistic nature. Conversely, policymakers require a comprehensive understanding of the TM's multifaceted nature.

To address these challenges, this study conducts a systematic review and comparative analysis of existing TM literature. The analysis identifies diverse university–society engagement approaches within the TM framework, further exploring the dimensions, activities, and influential factors associated with each approach.

The Third Mission of the University: Definitions and History

Academic literature identifies three distinct generations of universities: the teaching-focused medieval university, the research-oriented modern university, and the contemporary university with a strong emphasis on societal engagement over time. Universities have evolved from primarily educational institutions to entities that combine teaching, research, and societal impact. The first and second generations concentrated on academic activities within the institution, but the third generation focuses on universities using their external capabilities to solve social problems and create innovation (Schneijderberg et al., 2021).

Boyer (1996) introduced the paradigm of the TM of universities, emphasizing the application of knowledge. This mission focuses on societal engagement, extending beyond traditional teaching and research. Third-generation universities aim to create societal value by transferring knowledge and capabilities to society. They collaborate with various stakeholders, including industry and government, to address societal challenges and drive innovation (Maximova et al., 2016).

The TM of higher education institutions can be understood from two primary perspectives. The first perspective examines how universities function economically through their role in competitiveness, workforce development, and knowledge commercialization (Pinheiro et al., 2017; Trencher et al., 2014). The second perspective focuses on social university impact through social development, individual empowerment, and community engagement (Mdleleni, 2022). These perspectives, known as "backward linkages" and "forward linkages," determine the multiple ways universities engage with society.

The TM in agricultural higher education in the United States originated from the Morrill Act of 1862. The Morrill Act of 1862 established land-grant universities to meet national agricultural and scientific requirements. The institutions operated to connect academic knowledge with societal needs while promoting innovation and economic growth. The Hatch Act together with the Smith-Lever Act expanded agricultural faculties' responsibilities for community development and extension services. The programs established connections between university researchers and farmers and rural communities to deliver education and resources, which enhanced agricultural techniques and rural living standards. The Boyer Report (1998) established a turning point by declaring engagement as an essential mission for universities. The "third mission" concept emerged as a result of this development, which defines universities' role in solving societal problems through knowledge generation and practical implementation and knowledge sharing.

Theoretical Framework: The Six Approaches of the Third Mission

The TM of universities and agricultural faculties can indeed be achieved through the six approaches. These approaches include the knowledge factory, engagement with industry, entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship, sustainability, and a committed system.

The knowledge factory approach emphasizes the outputs of a university, which are its graduates and the knowledge generated through various channels such as books, articles, and journals. This approach recognizes the importance of fundamental research and exploration in generating value for industry, the economy, and the general public (Matthews, 2023).

Engagement with industry refers to the exchange of knowledge and technology between universities and industry. This

collaboration aims to benefit both parties and is characterized by stability and the avoidance of interference with either party's primary responsibilities and functions (Scandura & Iammarino, 2022).

The entrepreneurial approach involves universities focusing on transforming commercialization and intellectual property into institutional objectives. This approach includes activities related to technology transfer and the utilization of intellectual property while maintaining engagement with the university's traditional missions (Feola et al., 2021).

Social impact is an important aspect of the TM, and universities contribute to society by adopting an entrepreneurial approach that emphasizes social benefits. By pooling resources and creating innovative uses of these resources, universities generate social benefits and contribute to societal change (Lehmann et al., 2024).

Sustainability in higher education involves implementing sustainable development principles and concepts within universities. This approach includes identifying and finding solutions for sustainable economic, social, and environmental development, as well as applying these principles in the university's infrastructure and daily operations (Podgórska & Zdonek, 2023).

The systemic approach focuses on empowering and promoting regional development. It involves establishing thorough contact between governmental and nongovernmental players at the regional level and prioritizing regional needs and adaptive responses by universities. This approach views universities as interconnected nodes within a regional–global innovation system (Rusciano, 2024).

The theoretical framework, illustrated in Appendix A, provides a conceptual foundation for understanding the six approaches to the TM of universities and agricultural faculties.

Research Method

The qualitative research method of metasynthesis combines and interprets multiple qualitative study findings to produce a more complete understanding of a phenomenon. The purpose of metasynthesis differs from that of meta-analysis in that metasynthesis creates new theoretical frameworks instead of analyzing quantitative data. The process of comparing and translating and interpreting data from different studies through metasynthesis enables researchers to gain a more profound understanding of intricate social and educational matters, including the transformation management of universities and higher education institutions (Bergdahl, 2019).

In this study, the six-phase method developed by Lachal et al. (2017) was employed to conduct the metasynthesis analysis. This structured approach comprises multiple precise steps for extracting, synthesizing, and interpreting data from various qualitative studies. Figure 1 shows the flow steps, and each of these steps will be explained in the following sections.

1. Formulating the Research Question

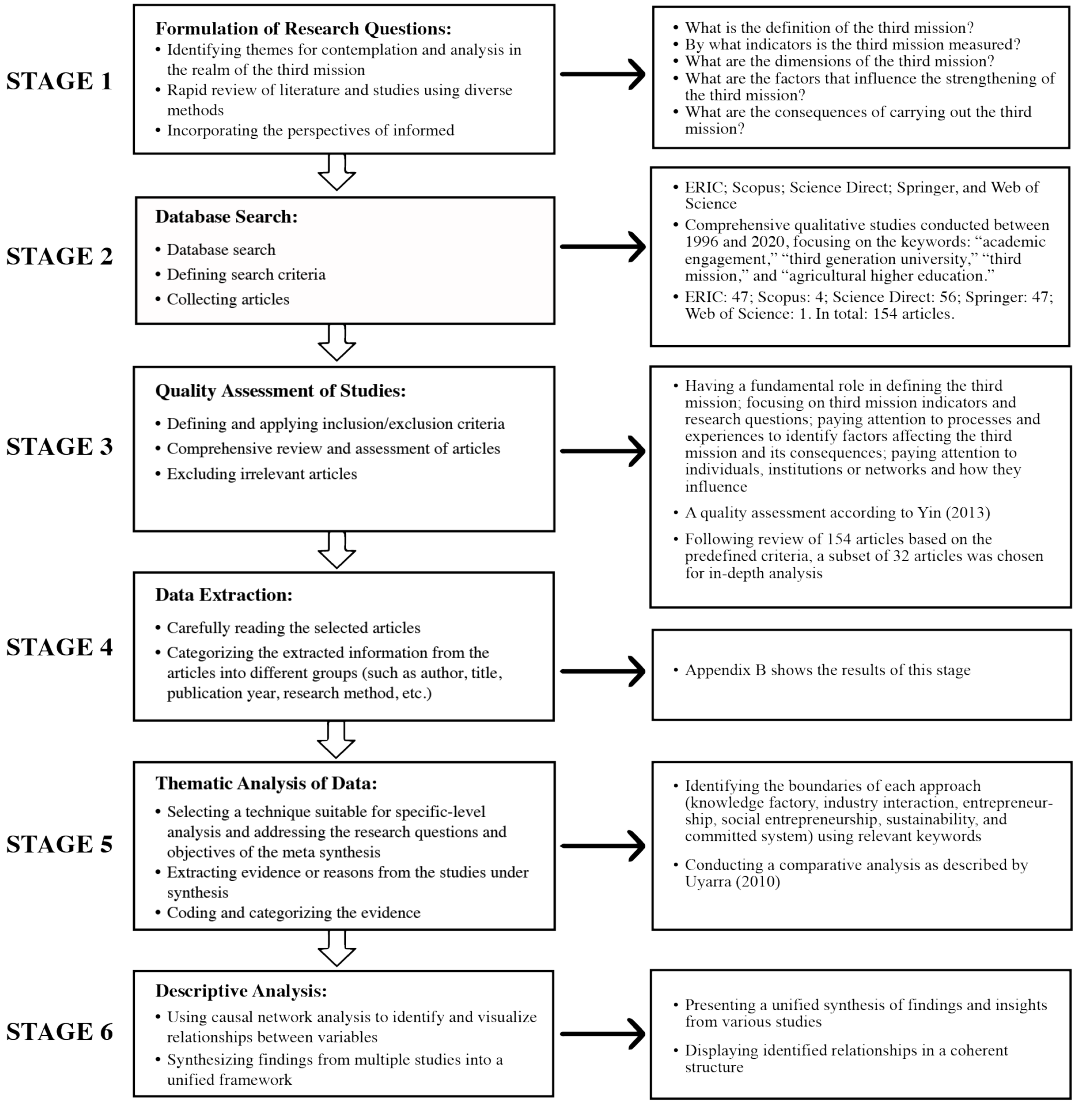
   In conducting a metasynthesis and reviewing the literature, the study centered on five primary inquiries:

   - What constitutes the definition of the TM?
   - What encompasses the dimensions of the TM?
   - What factors impact the enhancement of the TM?
   - What outcomes result from the TM?
   - Overall, what characterizes the TM of agricultural faculties?

2. Searching the articles in databases and modifying the search parameters

   To gather articles, five social science databases—ERIC, Scopus, ScienceDirect, Springer, and Web of Science—were utilized. The search was conducted in English, focusing on four keywords: "academic engagement," "third generation university," "third mission," and "agricultural higher education". Articles within the time frame of 1996 to 2020 were retrieved. Boyer's research in 1996 emphasized significant scientific advancements and a paradigm shift in higher education concerning the TM and societal engagement. This time frame was chosen to align with this shift.

Figure 1. Metasynthesis Process Flow



3. Assessment of the studies' quality and the criteria for the article inclusion in the final analyses

In the metasynthesis process, the third phase involved incorporating qualitative case studies that were relevant to the primary analysis. These articles specifically focused on the university's TM and contributed significantly to understanding it. Table 1 outlines the criteria for including articles in the analysis. Throughout the article review process, any articles that did not prioritize the TM as the main subject or failed to address the research questions were excluded. Articles that underwent review and employed either a qualitative or synthetic methodology were included, and those lacking clarity in separating qualitative and quantitative components were omitted. Although appropriate keywords were used, the initial search yielded articles unrelated to the subject or from fields other than agriculture. These articles were discarded. After a thorough examination and assessment based on the criteria, a total of 154 qualitative studies were retrieved.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Reason/logic
Making a significant contribution to the establishment of the TM's definition	This criterion aids in conceptualizing the TM and its definition.
Focusing on examining the metrics related to the TM by analyzing previous studies and research questions	This criterion allows for the evaluation of studies that have research questions or aims that are connected to the functional definition of the TM.
Focusing on the procedures and experiences to discern the elements that influence the TM	This criterion facilitates the identification of the influential factors and their impact based on past experiences.
Focusing on the procedures and experiences of the TM to ascertain the outcomes resulting from it	This criterion allows for the assessment of the outcomes of the TM based on past experiences.
Focusing on the individuals, institutions, or networks and how they affect the TM	This criterion facilitates the identification of the principal activists involved in executing the TM.
Examining the quality	The quality of all studies has been assessed based on their precise reporting style, clear integration of theory and empirical evidence, comprehensive background information, clarity of research objectives and data sources, ability to address research questions, explicit presentation of findings, utilization of appropriate research methods, and consideration of ethical concerns.

4. Extracting and presenting official data

The evaluation process resulted in selecting 32 articles for the final analysis. The selected articles were organized in Appendix B, which includes an assigned number for identification, author names, journal, and research methodology.

5. Data analysis

The researchers analyzed 34 articles through data analysis to extract findings and discussions from each article. The research partners agreed on data extraction and categorization methods that were applied to each article through coding. The process involved choosing an appropriate method for specific-level analysis, addressing research questions and objectives of the metasynthesis, extracting evidence or reasons from the studies under synthesis, and coding and categorizing the evidence.

6. Presentation of analysis

The purpose of this metasynthesis stage was to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of the TM, examining its various components, dimensions, and outcomes. A descriptive, inductive approach was adopted, involving a two-level analysis: individual article analysis, followed by a synthesis of the entire data set. To enhance the rigor of the analysis, two reviewers independently coded and analyzed the data.

Findings

Components of the Third Mission: Synergy of Six Approaches

The TM operates through a collaborative needs-based method that goes beyond disciplinary limitations. The approach requires active participation together with systematic engagement of multiple stakeholders. These

sustainable activities are founded on innovation, which appears in multiple ways. The TM establishes value creation as its main objective while maintaining ethical principles. Its diversity and flexibility are influenced by contextual factors and diverse pathways. Through these conditions, the TM demonstrates its informative and educational potential. Appendix C provides a comprehensive overview of the specific types of engagement between universities and society.

Third Mission Activities: A Comprehensive Perspective on Six Approaches

The TM works to establish sustainable development in particular geographic areas or social subsystems. The TM adopts social dimensions as its main focus through a social entrepreneurship perspective, whereas the entrepreneurial approach focuses on economic development and industry connections. The systemic approach evaluates development through economic, cultural, social, and environmental aspects. The TM activities fall into the following five domains: (1) development and extension, (2) continuous education and learning, (3) innovation and technology transfer, (4) networking and public communication, and (5) collaborative and interactive research. Appendix D provides a detailed overview of these dimensions and illustrative examples of activities based on the examined articles.

Comparative Analysis of Engagement Strategies Between Universities and Communities

A comparative analysis of the six distinct university–society engagement approaches is presented in Appendix E. These approaches are characterized by a unique combination of 16 components, including the philosophical underpinnings that explore fundamental questions related to the university's TM and address challenges faced by academics and policymakers. Additionally, these components encompass the academic orientation toward societal engagement, stakeholder engagement strategies, the essence of engagement itself, key influencing factors for implementation, political implications, and the university's focus on innovation. The time frame for planning and realizing outcomes, communication channels with stakeholders (e.g., industry, government, organizations, civil society), and the university's institutional framework for TM implementation are also considered. The framework consists of structural components, management and administration autonomy, and organizational focus that motivates members. We analyze these components to understand better the elements that affect university–society engagement strategies' quality and effectiveness.

Selection of Approaches: Factors Influencing the Selection of the Six Approaches of the Third Mission

The choice of TM approach depends on multiple internal organizational elements and external environmental factors. The university needs to assess its ability to draw in businesses and its current corporate values. The following factors will be examined in detail to determine their impact on the decision-making process.

Attitude and Knowledge Toward University

The orientation of the TM is significantly influenced by societal expectations. In certain private universities, a heightened parental focus on future career prospects can lead to a greater emphasis on business-oriented education. Moreover, private universities often rely on their reputation within society. The perception of university science, the acceptance of the university's role, and the value attributed to its research by stakeholders significantly impact the priority given to the TM, regardless of the specific approach employed.

The preferred approach for engagement depends on multiple factors, including stakeholder views about university science value, university social acceptance, research worth, and regional obstacles. The university needs to build trust with society to establish effective connections with its stakeholders.

The trust placed in university research and technology by society, particularly industry, is vital for initiating engagement, especially through economic means.

The State of Collaboration With the Agricultural Industry

The level of engagement between universities and the agricultural industry is influenced by a variety of factors. Indicators of entrepreneurship and the ability to attract enterprises are significant determinants of the extent of university–industry collaboration and TM implementation. The development of these relationships depends on both entrepreneurial methods and successful

communication with industry partners.

Multiple obstacles prevent both collaboration and the implementation of advanced university technologies. The unpredictable nature of resource and technology prices, together with their limited sustainability, creates challenges for industrial owners to evaluate and forecast risks, which restricts their decision-making abilities. The limited willingness of industrial owners to collaborate with universities for entrepreneurial purposes stems from their restricted adoption of university technologies.

The financial condition of enterprises also plays a critical role. Companies facing financial difficulties are often unable to invest in scientific research and practical applications conducted by universities. Government grants serve as effective instruments to foster partnerships between academic institutions, industrial sectors, and public authorities. The grants offer financial backing to small firms that lack research and development capabilities to establish triple helix collaborations. This support creates knowledge-based macro policies that will boost domestic entrepreneurship.

Macro Policies of the Country

Higher education systems operate within national frameworks because policymakers and government entities determine their purpose and function. National development programs use higher education as a key driver to advance both social and economic development. Consequently, a country's macro policies and decisions significantly influence the approach taken toward the TM.

Macro policies directly impact the organization, administration, and investment in the TM. However, conflicting objectives among different government entities can sometimes lead to systemic challenges. The process of seeking funding and resources becomes more favorable when universities follow national, provincial, or industry policies and procedures. As a result, society will actively seek university engagement to address their concerns.

The government's policies have a direct impact on the TM activities of the university through financial resources, revenue, and intermediate structures. Tax incentives and exemptions for industry–university collaborations can enhance access; stimulate research, particularly in emerging technologies; and promote entrepreneurship. Additionally, government mandates for specific TM approaches and their associated corrective processes can significantly impact the university's primary missions.

The Level of Development of the Country

The level of national development, particularly economic growth, significantly influences the selection of TM approaches. Universities in developing economies usually focus on their function in national development strategies and nation-building programs. Conversely, countries with higher incomes and rankings prioritize having the best research and knowledge-based universities.

When companies engage in the TM, they often adopt a knowledge factory approach to achieve their goals. Economic development has been a significant factor in determining university rankings. Incentive policies and informal incentives offered by ministries and organizations further influence the impact of economic development on the TM. The emphasis on rankings and financial gains sometimes creates distance between the TM and other organizational elements, especially social and cultural aspects.

The economic development level of a nation determines its capacity to build relationships with universities. Better economic conditions enable private companies to pay their employees and scholars higher wages, which affects the way they engage with the university. The economic crisis has led to reduced budgets for the TM and challenges in obtaining financial support from government, departments, and foundations. Such challenges can hinder the growth of social entrepreneurship.

International Factors

International goals and policies, such as the Millennium Development Goals, can impact TM methods by shaping curricula and influencing internal organizational objectives and strategies. Global ranking indicators also play a significant role in determining the most suitable TM approach by influencing university policies and promotion laws.

It is important to note that although the university's global ranking is a factor, the TM is implemented distinctively. The aspiration to achieve a higher global ranking, particularly in terms of TM performance, has a significant impact on the university's approach.

Third Mission Implications: Expected Results from Each Approach

The implementation of the TM with an economic focus requires the creation of new business concepts, the improvement of existing ones, and the development of cost-effective business operations. The approach works to improve both job market understanding and management decision-making abilities while maintaining industry regulations and local government requirements. The approach aims to boost product quality while reducing investment risks and building partnerships between entrepreneurs. Universities can reduce production costs and start new manufacturing processes through their research activities that focus on economic challenges. This type of private sector partnership leads to financial stability, practical technology development, and regional economic growth stimulation.

The sustainability-oriented TM method works to protect the environment while reaching particular goals. Educational initiatives for sustainability at universities help improve industrial operations while dealing with climate change effects. The approach delivers additional social advantages, which include increased self-assurance, knowledge development, and stakeholder empowerment. The approach supports the achievement of sustainable development goals through its efforts to eliminate hunger and promote inclusive education and establish sustainable economic systems. Universities can enhance health and well-being, promote gender equality, and improve resource accessibility by actively involving local communities in their innovation system.

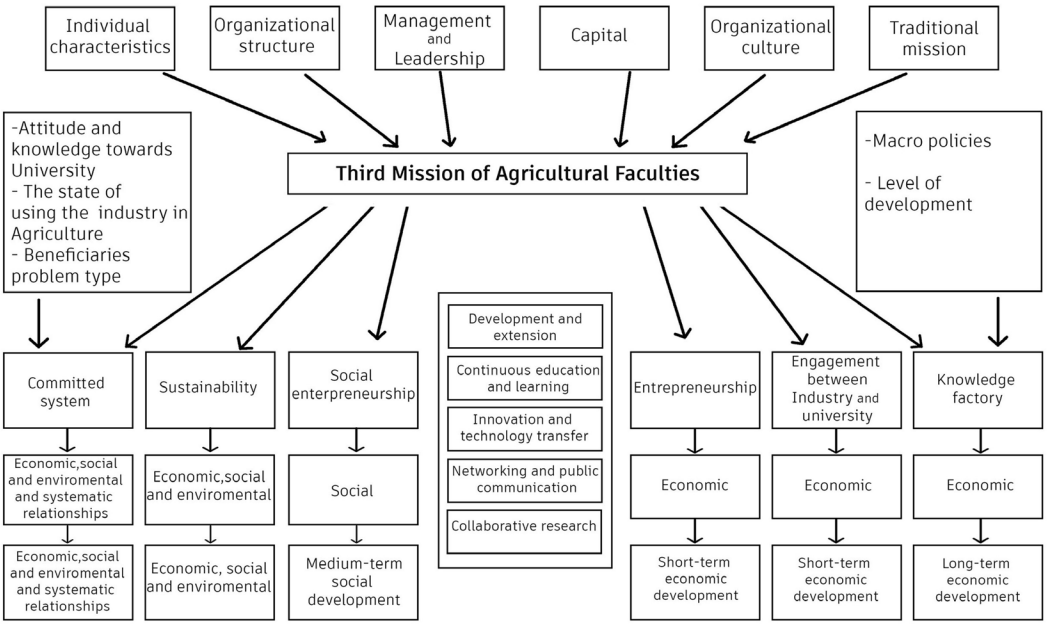
The implementation of the TM through any method produces similar results, which include developing social trust, employee participation, staff development, curriculum improvement, and research excellence. Appendix F presents the TM's outcomes based on its constituent approaches.

Conclusion

The TM stakeholders, who include policymakers and higher education administrators, show strong interest in comprehending the diverse aspects of this initiative. The university's TM faces challenges because of insufficient understanding and irregular implementation, which reduces its effectiveness. Existing research lacks a unified interpretation and clear measurement indicators, leading to fragmented approaches.

This study addresses these limitations by conducting a systematic review of various approaches to university–society engagement within the TM framework. By providing

Figure 2. The Third Mission of Agricultural Faculties Based on Six Approaches



a comprehensive understanding of its dimensions, activities, and influential factors, this research aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Based on the findings of this study, we propose a framework for understanding the TM in agricultural faculties, highlighting key dimensions, activities, and influential factors. Figure 2 provides a comprehensive overview of the TM in agricultural faculties as delineated in this study.

The TM varies across six distinct approaches in terms of dimensions, influential factors, and outcomes. The optimal approach depends on evaluating external elements, which include societal demand alongside the nature of societal problems, the state of the agricultural industry, national development level, and national policy. The absence of a universal solution exists even when countries share economic, social, political, and cultural elements. The various resources and capabilities of universities prevent them from implementing a single uniform approach to their social engagement. A strategic approach that includes specific goals and steady measures will prove more successful than fragmented approaches for achieving TM objectives. Because of its complex nature, the agricultural sector demands a systemic and holistic approach to achieve overall societal well-being and comfort.

The implementation of an integrated method becomes necessary for maximizing agricultural knowledge; applying science and technology for solving poverty and hunger; optimizing human nutrition; and achieving livelihood improvement, equity, environmental sustainability, and economic prosperity. The achievement of the TM along with sustainable development depends on an innovation system that consists of multiple interconnected elements. Agricultural faculties must establish a systemic approach that emphasizes university involvement in the innovation system because sustainable agricultural growth represents their highest priority.

The TM requires policymakers and higher education institutions and researchers to work together for establishing supportive environments that promote innovation. Research should focus on the particular challenges and prospects of TM implementation across various settings, with emphasis on developing countries. The resolution of these matters will enable us to achieve the TM's complete potential while creating a sustainable and equitable future.

About the Authors

Hoda Izadi *is a researcher specializing in higher education and agricultural entrepreneurship. Her research interests focus on agricultural entrepreneurship, academic entrepreneurship, and higher education management. She has explored the role of universities in fostering entrepreneurship and conducted extensive studies on the relationship between higher education and innovation in the agricultural sector. She earned her bachelor's and master's degrees in agricultural extension and education from the College of Agriculture at Shiraz University, Iran. She then obtained her PhD from the College of Agriculture at the University of Tehran, Iran.*

Seyed Mahmood Hosseini *is a professor in the Department of Agricultural Extension & Education, University of Tehran, Iran. He has served as vice president of Zanjan University, the president of Iranian Association of Agricultural Extension & Education, and the head of the Department of Agricultural Extension & Education in the University of Tehran. He has widely published in international and national journals in various areas of his field, including higher education in agriculture. He received his MS degree in agricultural education from Texas A&M University and PhD degree majoring in agricultural extension & education from Cornell University, USA.*

Kurosh Rezaei-Moghaddam *is professor of agricultural extension and education at Shiraz University. His research interests include sustainability, agricultural innovations, behavioral models, rural entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial ecosystems, and sustainable development in rural areas. He received his PhD in agricultural extension and development from Shiraz University.*

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Appendix A. Theoretical Framework of University–Society Engagement Approaches and Key Concepts

	Approach types		
	Knowledge factory	**Engagement between industry and university**	**Entrepreneurship**
Keywords	Contingent value (Determine the value of knowledge based on its potential market application) One-way transfer of knowledge (To transfer knowledge primarily from the university to society, with limited interaction or feedback) Profitability (To generate financial returns) Basic research (Aimed at advancing knowledge, without immediate practical applications) Knowledge-based economy (To foster an economy driven by the creation and application of knowledge) Research institutions (To conduct research and generate new knowledge)	Triple helix (To model innovation involving universities, industry, and government) Technology transfer (The process of transferring technology from research institutions to industry) Economic development (The process of improving the economic well-being of a region or nation) Technology and development (The application of technology to address societal challenges) Industry productivity (The efficiency and effectiveness of industrial processes) Profitability (The emphasis is on generating financial returns) Commercialization (To bring new products or services to market) Technological innovation (To develop new technologies) Knowledge-based economy (To foster an economy driven by the creation and application of knowledge) Gaining wealth (To accumulate wealth through economic activities) Employment creation (To generate jobs) Relationships (To establish and maintain connections between industry and university)	Entrepreneur university (To foster a university environment that encourages entrepreneurial thinking, innovation, and the creation of new ventures) Technology transfer Technical innovation (To develop new technical solutions) Science and technology parks (To create environments that foster innovation and technology development) Intellectual property and royalties (To protect and monetize intellectual property rights) Technology and development Organizational structure (To establish and maintain an effective organizational structure) Profitability Commercialization Technological innovation Knowledge-based economy Gaining wealth Employment creation

	Approach types		
	Social entrepreneurship	**Sustainability**	**Committed system**
Keywords	Social sensitivity (Awareness of social issues and a commitment to addressing them) Social innovation (The development of innovative solutions to social problems) Charity affairs (Charitable activities and donations) Voluntary contributions (Donations made voluntarily) Spiritual action (Actions motivated by spiritual or ethical principles) Philanthropy (Charitable giving)	Balanced development (To develop in a way that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs) Environmental protection (Protecting the environment and natural resources) Sustainable development Process innovation (Innovation in the way products or services are produced or delivered)	Continuous education (Ongoing learning and development) Social, economic, and cultural development (Development that encompasses social, economic, and cultural aspects) Enlightenment of society (Educating and empowering the public) Quadruple helix (A model of innovation involving universities, industry, government, and society) Innovation system (A system that fosters innovation and technological change) Co-creation (Collaborative creation of new products or services) Cultural growth centers (Centers that promote cultural development) Local and regional development (Development at the local and regional level)

Appendix B. Final Articles Used in Metasynthesis

No.	Author, year	Research methodology	Journal
1	Lee et al., 2020	Documentary research	Comparative Education
2	Kesten, 2019	Content analysis	International Journal of Educational Methodology
3	Mejlgaard & Ryan, 2017	Documentary research	Research Evaluation
4	Rinaldi et al., 2017	Case study	International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education
5	Hadidi & Kirby, 2012	Interview	Industry and Higher Education
6	Callagher et al., 2015	Documentary research	International Journal of Learning and Change
7	Koryakina et al., 2015	Case study	European Journal of Higher Education
8	Benneworth et al., 2015	Case study	European Journal of Higher Education
9	Woollard et al., 2007	Interview	Industry and Higher Education
10	Hellström, 2007	Content analysis	Policy Futures in Education
11	Salarnzadeh et al., 2011	Interview and documentary research	Global Business and Management Research: An International Journal
12	Lyon et al., 2011	Collaborative research	Journal of Rural Studies
13	Enciso et al., 2017	Case study	Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology (TOJET)
14	Neary & Osborne, 2018	Case study	Australian Journal of Adult Learning
15	Preece, 2011	Case study and action research	Journal of Adult and Continuing Education
16	Sataøen, 2016	Documentary research	Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research

No.	Author, year	Research methodology	Journal
17	Galvão et al., 2020	Case study	Journal of Rural Studies
18	Maximova et al., 2016	Case study	International Journal of Environmental and Science Education
19	Puangpronpitag, 2019	Grounded theory	Procedia Computer Science
20	Dentoni & Bitzer, 2014	Grounded theory	Journal of Cleaner Production
21	Brundiers, 2017	Content analysis	International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction
22	Gosens et al., 2018	Case study	Energy Research & Social Science
23	Wakkee et al., 2018	Interview and observation	Technological Forecasting and Social Change
24	Etzkowitz et al., 2018	Case study	Technological Forecasting and Social Change
25	Rinaldi et al., 2020	Case study	Journal of Sustainable Tourism
26	Kruss and Gastrow, 2017	Case study	Science and Public Policy
27	Hansson et al., 2005	Case study	Technovation
28	Zavale & Macamo, 2016	Interview	International Journal of Educational Development
29	Rinaldi & Cavicchi, 2016	Case study	Agriculture and Agricultural Science Procedia
30	Liefner & Schiller, 2008	Case study	Research Policy
31	Dalmarco et al., 2017	Content analysis	Technological Forecasting and Social Change
32	Hansson et al., 2005	Case study	Technovation

Appendix C. Synergy of University Engagement Approaches with Society in the Third Mission in Constituent Components

Approach type / Component	Knowledge factory	Industry and university	Entrepreneurship	Social entrepreneurship	Sustainability	Committed system	Confirming articles
Informative and instructive	*	*	*	*	*	*	14, 25, 28, 30, 31
Diverse and flexible	Insufficient evidence	Insufficient evidence	*	Insufficient evidence	*	*	6, 7, 8, 13
Systematic and organized	Insufficient evidence	Insufficient evidence	*	Insufficient evidence	*	*	7, 25
With added value	*	Insufficient evidence	*	Insufficient evidence	*	*	6, 19
Interdisciplinary and comprehensive	Insufficient evidence	Insufficient evidence	*	Insufficient evidence	*	*	6, 16, 19, 20, 24, 25, 26
Engagement-oriented and communication-based	Insufficient evidence	Insufficient evidence	*	*	*	*	4, 5
Ethical	Insufficient evidence	Insufficient evidence	*	*	*	*	4, 5
Both ends are beneficial	Insufficient evidence	*	*	*	*	*	21, 25, 17, 18, 14
Small scale	Insufficient evidence	Insufficient evidence	*	Insufficient evidence	*	*	6, 26
Being innovative	*	*	*	*	*	*	4, 8, 23, 26
Based on specific time and place	Insufficient evidence	*	*	*	*	*	4, 6, 14, 23, 25
Participation oriented	Insufficient evidence	*	*	*	*	*	4, 6, 7, 12, 14, 21

Note. "Insufficient evidence" in the reviewed articles highlights a need for further research to clarify university–society engagement approaches.

Appendix D. Activities of the Third Mission Based on the Approaches of Engagement Between the University and Society

Activities	Example	Knowledge factory	Industry and university	Entrepreneurship	Social entrepreneurship	Sustainability	Committed system	Confirming articles
Development and extension	Developing traditional rural art forms							
	Supporting the production of diverse and native agricultural products							
	Development of the value chain of agricultural products		*	*	*	*	*	4, 14, 25, 30
	Integrating traditional knowledge with modern agricultural techniques							
	Revitalizing rural culture with local handicrafts							
Continuous education and learning	Extension publications							
	Presentation of the seminar							
	Short-term courses							
	Farm day		*	*	*	*	*	28, 5, 7, 4, 1, 6, 20, 31
	Manuals							
	Field visits							
	Comprehensive training of people							

Activities	Example	Knowledge factory	Industry and university	Entrepreneurship	Social entrepreneurship	Sustainability	Committed system	Confirming articles
Innovation and technology transfer	Issuing patent licenses and “knowledge” licenses to industries	*	*	*	*	*	*	27, 2, 3, 8, 6
	Sharing facilities (such as laboratories, equipment, and physical environment)							
	Providing advice to industry or organizations							
	Patent							
	Granting permission							
	Launching a new production line in companies							
Networking and public communication	Memorandums of understanding		*	*	*	*	*	4, 16, 17, 20, 14, 24
	Radio and television programs							
	Web interviews							
	Oral questions and answers							
	Media articles							
	Membership in councils and committees							
	Membership in the board of directors of companies or private sector organizations							
Collaborative and interactive research	Joint laboratories	*	*	*	*	*	*	29, 6, 7, 16
	Contractual research							
	Collaborative research							
	Consulting services							

Appendix E. Comparison of the Six Approaches in the Main Constituent Components

Approaches and features	Knowledge factory	Engagement between industry and university	Entrepreneurship	Social entrepreneurship	Sustainability	Committed system
Philosophy	• Materialism	• Materialism	• Idealism	• Humanism	• Perennialism	• Pragmatism
Target	• Production of scientific knowledge • Increase in income	• Data exchange • Increase in income	• Active commercial role and increase income	• Production of knowledge with the aim of spiritual action	• Application of knowledge for balanced development	• Developmental role
The core of the university	• Basic research	• Practical faculty members with strong industry connections	• Market	• Ethics and values	• University students and graduates	• Extension and involvement in the innovation system
Engagement orientation	• Unidirectional	• Implicit reciprocity	• Open two-way	• One-way engagement between university and civil society	• Open two-way	• Responsive
Political implication	• Joint collaboration based on the geographical location of university and industry • Increasing capital for research	• Promotion of certain types of communication links or communication channels over others	• The necessity of mediators and organizational arrangements and incentives to confirm communication	• Adding value and human dimension to the engagement of the university with society	• The need to increase knowledge, encourage open-mindedness, and improve skills and social responsibility in establishing interaction for sustainable development	• Connecting university missions and other policies at different levels
Approach to innovation	• Product innovation	• Product innovation	• Process innovation	• Social innovation	• Organizational structure innovation	• Community-oriented and systemic innovation
Time frame	• Short term	• Short term	• Short term	• Medium term	• Medium term	• Long term

Approaches and features	Knowledge factory	Engagement between industry and university	Entrepreneurship	Social entrepreneurship	Sustainability	Committed system
Structures	• Basic research institutions • Scientific centers	• Industry liaison offices • Research and development centers	• Innovative growth centers • Technological growth centers • Science and technology parks • Applied research centers	• Social networks • NGOs	• Teaching and training facilities and equipment	• Cultural growth centers • Technological, innovative growth centers • Problem-based transfer • Continuing education and professional development centers and implementation of joint programs
Government budget	• Many	• Average	• Average	• Many	• Average	• Low to average • Solving real problems in society
Gaining budget	• Publishing authoritative research	• Project oriented • Technology transfer • Mutual investment • Third party	• Patent • Reproductive companies • Startups	• Grants • Loans • Crowdfunding	• Green investments • Green technologies	• Diverse
Diversity of income streams	• Dependent on government aid	• Private	• Provision of licenses • Intellectual property rights • Third-party funding	• People's aid • International organizations • Charity funds	• Reducing resource consumption and optimal consumption • Reducing waste production • Optimizing water consumption • Management of repair and maintenance of devices and equipment instead of replacement	• Stakeholders and partners

Approaches and features	Knowledge factory	Engagement between industry and university	Entrepreneurship	Social entrepreneurship	Sustainability	Committed system
Key influencing factors	• University inputs, resources, and infrastructure required for research	• Structural factors of companies such as size, age, absorption capacity, research and development budget, innovation strategy	• Organizational structure, management practices, and faculty behavior and motivations (faculty members)	• Individual characteristics	• Knowledge, attitude, and skills of graduates and students, responsibility of academics	• Number and synergy between universities or groups, university leadership, coherence or alignment of policies/ incentives, regional system configuration, regional policy and institutional capacity of universities.
Channels	• Publications	• Publications • Personal relationships	• Providing patents, licenses and through structures	• Personal relationships	• Education • Research • Scientific seminars	• Diverse
Main stakeholders	• University • Industry	• University • Industry • Government	• University • Entrepreneurial companies • Small and medium businesses • Government	• University • Charities • Civil Society	• University • Other universities • Graduates	• University • Industry • Government • Farmers • Nongovernmental institutions • Researchers
Organizational focus	• Raw materials and equipment • Buildings	• Raw materials and equipment • Buildings • Professional students	• Project oriented • High level technology • Development of people	• Persons • Personality characteristics • Norms and values	• Improving processes • Skill development	• Leadership • Synergy of groups • Connections
Control and management	• Government and senior officials outside the organization	• Hierarchical and bureaucratic	• Entrepreneurial • Flexible	• Open control system	• Hierarchical but collaborative • Collaborative management between groups	• Flexible • Collaborative management with external stakeholders

Appendix F. The Result of the Third Mission Based on Constituent Approaches

Dimension	Examples	Knowledge factory	Industry and university	Entrepreneurship	Social entrepreneurship	Sustainability	Committed system	Sample articles
Economic development	New business process design		*	*				30
	Development of new technologies				*	*	*	12
	Reduce production cost		*	*				27
	Launching a new production line		*	*				27
	Reducing production costs		*	*				27
	Change in production materials		*	*				27
	Improving the production process				*		*	23
	Reducing investment risk		*	*				30
	Market dynamics				*		*	12
	Change in market potential		*	*				27
	Sustainable economy			*	*	*	*	25
	Creation of new companies		*	*				21
	Development of existing companies		*	*				21
	Provision of skilled labor	*	*	*				7
	Helping small and large businesses	*	*	*				7
	Increase product quality		*	*		*		30

Dimension	Examples	Knowledge factory	Industry and university	Entrepreneurship	Social entrepreneurship	Sustainability	Committed system	Sample articles
Development of job opportunities	Better understanding and knowledge about the job situation		*	*				30
	Providing experiences and learning		*	*				30
	Career success		*	*				30
	Getting to know the rules with business		*	*				30
	Addressing the knowledge gap of stakeholders		*	*				30
Development of traditional missions	Learning and increasing the information and knowledge of business managers				*		*	23
	Access to resources				*		*	13
	Curriculum development			*		*		18
	Conduct qualitative research		*	*				27, 18
Increasing university income	University profits		*	*				27
	Financial stability of the university			*	*		*	29
Environmental development	Development of green technologies in the university					*		30
	Reducing the effects of climate change				*	*	*	23
	Food security			*	*	*	*	25
	Increase health and well-being				*	*	*	12
	Making green innovations		*	*		*		30

Dimension	Examples	Knowledge factory	Industry and university	Entrepreneurship	Social entrepreneurship	Sustainability	Committed system	Sample articles
Social Development	Gender equality			*	*		*	25
	Community empowerment			*	*		*	25
	Altruism				*		*	13
	Diversity and social inclusion	*	*	*			*	7

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The International Service-Learning Network: A Community of Practice Designed for a Pandemic

Phillip Motley, Katherine M. Robiadek, Mark Charlton, Steve Grande, Sharon Hutchings, Alison Rios Millett McCartney, Mary McHugh, Dari Sylvester Tran, and Marie Xypaki

Abstract

The International Service-Learning Network is a group of university teaching faculty and staff in the United States and United Kingdom who formed a community of practice in 2020 around issues of service-learning and community engagement and to provide cross-institutional support during the COVID-19 pandemic. This reflective essay analyzes two sets of reflections written by Network members—the first set written in 2021 and the second set in 2023. The reflections describe many of the disruptions and impacts that affected community engagement for students, teaching staff, and community partners as well as the changes and innovations that emerged from the global crisis in both countries. We analyze these reflections, synthesizing noted observations that broadly affected our institutions, and offer suggestions and guidance for other community-engaged practitioners to consider.

Keywords: service-learning, community engagement, pandemic, students, partners

In spring 2020, colleges and universities worldwide were challenged to support campus and community needs in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Grenier et al., 2020). These efforts assumed added urgency in summer and fall 2020 as the effects of unrelenting racial injustice came into greater focus alongside the ramifications of the pandemic. These conditions motivated the teacher-scholars of the newly formed International Service-Learning Network (ISLN) to increase the use and recognition of service-learning methods to create additional capacity for the needs of local organizations while benefiting student learning. Through bimonthly online meetings that included academic staff participants from 14 institutions in the United Kingdom and the United States, we learned about our differing institutional, political, and societal contexts for service-learning education. (See Appendix for institutional descriptions of service-learning.) We present here our reflections on the comparative issues and lessons we've attempted to harness to save and advance service-learning education.

The first ISLN meetings convened in fall 2020 and entailed broad discussions as a community of practice. We shared problems and issues we were facing at our institutions due to the pandemic. We explored ways to keep service-learning programs running and enhance offerings to address the unique challenges presented by community and institutional lockdowns, heightened political uncertainty, and social unrest amidst Brexit, the 2020 U.S. elections, and increased focus on racial injustices. In spring 2021, we transitioned to a formal symposium structure, which included presentations of ongoing service-learning projects and programs at our respective institutions and collaborations for research dissemination. As the incorporation of service-learning and community engagement has been increasing globally (Bringle et al., 2011), the symposium format offered a productive platform for ISLN participants to sustain and enhance service-learning programming at member institutions, while also increasing the collective understanding of the challenges, benefits,

and best practices in place in the United States and United Kingdom.

In early 2021, members of the group produced 10 reflective essays that described the impacts, challenges, and innovations occurring on our different campuses that affected students, academic staff, and community partners. The essays helped us better understand what we had in common as we worked to maintain current practices and innovate during this challenging period. In spring 2023, we agreed to write follow-up essays; six were completed, allowing us to further examine the impacts of the changes that were forced upon us and the solutions that were created to address identified challenges. The ISLN reflections included here are collated by broad categories that emerged among them and are synthesized for lessons learned.

Relevant Literature

Service-learning, according to Bringle and Hatcher's (1995) definition, is

> a credit-bearing, educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and then reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (p. 112)

Service-learning is noted as a high-impact practice (Kuh, 2008) and a form of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) that endeavors to provide students with authentic learning opportunities where they can implement course-based, disciplinary knowledge through hands-on applied experiences to address community needs (Whitney & Clayton, 2011). Service-learning helps students make meaning by connecting theoretical knowledge to direct experience with community partners (Brown, 2011; Hashemipour, 2006). In service-learning courses, students have opportunities to work in partnership with community members who may be different from themselves in a variety of ways (Clayton & Ash, 2004; Zoltowski et al., 2012). Learning outcomes for students participating in service-learning experiences include increased knowledge of community and civic issues, intercultural awareness and skills development, and a deeper understanding of issues of diversity, equity, privilege, and power (Chittum et al., 2022; Endres & Gould, 2009).

Despite the accolades that service-learning receives for being an identified high-impact practice (Kuh, 2008), it is not without its challenges. Questions persist about barriers that prevent minoritized students from participating in these experiences (Chittum et al., 2022) and how to account for the wide variety in quality and range of practices described as service-learning. Authentic engagement within and with communities requires extensive planning and can be time consuming, logistically demanding, and disruptive for participants (Jacoby, 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges and manifested new ones (Grenier et al., 2020). Given that the pandemic was broadly disruptive for higher education institutions (UNESCO, 2024), service-learning offices, programs, faculty, staff, students, and community partners were also relatedly affected. In many cases, service-learning courses and programs were paused or halted altogether, partnerships were impacted, and participants in university–community relationships were anxious to engage. At the same time, innovative thinking led to numerous creative interventions and approaches to maintaining connections between the university and community (Gresh et al., 2021; Nayagam et al., 2021).

Due to social distancing requirements, digitally mediated approaches to service-learning often became necessary. The provision of service-learning via alternative methods such as online meeting platforms has been occurring for some time (Jacoby, 2015), but a full comparison of virtual versus in-person approaches is needed (Lin & Shek, 2021). Although shifting to virtual service provision presented many challenges to faculty, students, and community partners, this pivot provided benefits, as service-learning participants at all levels have had the opportunity to learn new ways of interacting (Tian & Noel, 2020; Reif-Stice & Smith-Frigerio, 2021). Furthermore, regardless of new delivery modalities, the impacts of service-learning for university students and their community partners remain significant and "can help students practice clinical skills, develop cultural humility and cross-cultural knowledge, gain an understanding of social inequities and health care disparities, and build positive relationships with their community" (Veyvoda & Van Cleave, 2020, p. 1542).

2021 Reflections

Managing Courses and Partnerships

A consistent theme across many of the 2021 essays centered on which parts of service-learning education we should strive to save and which parts would need to be put "on hold." Individually and as a community of practice, we explored various conceptions and dimensions of service-learning and how differences in basic terminology, structure, and administration coexisted with other challenges at our institutions (Minnesota Campus Compact, 2018). In the United Kingdom there is little recognition of the term "service-learning." The reflections of several ISLN members revealed practices in the U.K. similar to service-learning, but described using other terms. Many U.K. faculty members are more comfortable with the terms "community-based learning" and "community-engaged learning," leading to the question of whether a high number of teaching faculty in the U.K. have been involved with service-learning as a practice for some time but were simply unaware of specific terminology to classify their courses and other experiences as such.

De Montfort University (DMU), located in Leicester, England, and a long-standing civic anchor for the city, adopted an explicit focus on service-learning as a way to create additional capacity for the needs of local organizations while benefiting students and their learning experiences during the pandemic. In the United States, North Carolina's Elon University formalizes service-learning courses through an application process and the requirement for a minimum of 40 hours per semester of student service. During the pandemic, a proposal was made to officially recognize a wider range of pedagogic approaches to service-learning. Students enrolled in courses partnered with for-profit local businesses were historically not eligible for service-learning designation, which often excluded students in the university's schools of business and communications. Another challenge to understanding and carrying out service-learning activities was faced by Merrimack College, in North Andover, Massachusetts, which follows the Carnegie Classification Framework for community engagement (Carnegie Classification, n.d.), defined as "collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity." The college's relationships with community partners were tested early in the pandemic, but many survived. An unlikely benefit may have been the strengthening of the institution's understanding of partnership and reciprocity. In the spring 2020 semester, many Merrimack service-learning classes pivoted to substitute or alternative experiences so students could finish coursework without completing the experiential activity in person. At the same time, the college worked to redesign service-learning opportunities through direct collaboration with partner agencies. The process helped Merrimack learn that digitally mediated, online mechanisms can work and be beneficial but can also be more time intensive and burdensome for all involved. Nottingham Trent University (NTU) is located in the economically deprived city of Nottingham, England (Nottingham City Council, 2019). The university's Community Engagement and Volunteering (CE&V) team led efforts to reassess its work with voluntary sector partners (Clayton et al., 2010) and its approach to building relationships with local residents (Bringle et al., 2009) when deciding to transition service-learning modules to online modalities. Although NTU successfully transitioned many service-learning modules to online delivery for students working with several organizations, some were ultimately canceled by community partners because of the challenges and complexities presented.

Teaching and Program Innovations

Multiple reflections share how the pandemic delivered new challenges to service-learning practices as experienced by institutions in the United Kingdom and United States. A common impact was the need to fundamentally alter the delivery of university-to-community activities, including service-learning, for reasons including compliance with national, state, and institutional restrictions and to ensure the safety of staff, students, and members of the public. Traditional methods of teaching service-learning courses were pivoted to online modalities while simultaneously attempting to maintain long-standing relationships with external stakeholders, many of whom also faced significant impacts to their own operations. Questions arose for U.S. and U.K. institutions: What new protocols and procedures would need to be adopted? If the preferred direct interaction was not possible,

what approaches might work to continue the necessary interactions for informing learning and maintaining community impact? How to prevent instructors from abandoning service-learning practices in the short term, but perhaps for even longer?

The need to transition teaching approaches so radically—and abruptly—presented opportunities and challenges. For example, the reflections from NTU suggest that the situation presented chances to innovate on current methods: Partners didn't express much concern when service projects were moved online. However, partners were concerned about students' abilities to immediately grasp the current crisis and additional underlying contexts and then move with speed and competence on specific projects. Like NTU, many other ISLN institutions transitioned to online service-learning as a solution to the challenges presented by social distancing requirements. For example, the University of Wisconsin–Superior (UWS), in Superior, Wisconsin, acknowledged a complete move to virtual service-learning. Students studying Multicultural Education completed 20 hours of in-person service with community agencies. During the pandemic, this requirement changed to participation in a virtual cultural exchange program that paired UWS students with international students to learn about each other's cultures, practice English language skills, and develop academic friendships. In the U.K., NTU's Criminology program's compulsory service-learning module moved online. Teaching staff developed virtual community-engaged projects through their contacts and drew heavily on existing service-learning literature that focused on the need for "authentic relationships" (Mitchell, 2008) and "transformational partnerships" (Clayton et al., 2010). Using characteristics of successful faculty–student partnerships from Bovill and Bulley's (2011) adaptation of Arnstein's (1969) "ladder of citizen participation," NTU developed its own "matrix of participation" to explore levels of student participation in curriculum design. By inviting students as partners in the redesign process, NTU was able to demonstrate that their values hold true for service-learning experiences even when the format and modality shift.

Students' Experiences

In addition to innovations that saw many institutions transition in-person service-learning activities to online formats, several developments that specifically focused on students and their experiences with service stand out. For example, before the pandemic, University College London (UCL) brought together students, instructors, and community partners to create curriculum for its Community Engaged Learning Service (CELS) project, which mobilizes research to develop community-engaged programs. CELS was adapted during the pandemic to mitigate the impact of social distancing, which resulted in the development of a toolkit for shifting projects online. As stated above, NTU similarly used its "matrix of participation" tool (Bovill & Bulley, 2011) to involve students in curriculum design. Notable improvements resulting from the curriculum codesign process include minimization of logistical issues, ease of student and partner meetings and presentations, and the creation of digital spaces for collaboration and file sharing for students, instructors, and community partners.

Other partnership programs were threatened or constrained by the pandemic, including the long-standing Model United Nations program partnership between Maryland's Towson University (TU) and area public high schools. This 18-year partnership continued during the pandemic through the implementation of online orientation sessions for high school student participants, digital voting processes and assessment data collection, and online inclusion of Model U.N. alumni from around the world who otherwise might not have participated. Activating these alumni increased mentoring opportunities and created a new stream of alumni financial support for the program.

Development and Support

The pivot to online teaching and efforts to engage and support staff to continue the provision of service-learning activities in the face of the pandemic led to significant and demonstrable solutions, including the development of novel online assignments, student project cocreation, and the unlocking of campus-specific activities by promoting online activities to wider communities. Elon University modified an existing in-person "lunch and learn" speaker series to Zoom and made it available to participants beyond the campus in an effort to more successfully bridge communities. The net effect was a sizable increase in attendance of Elon participants and also new external audiences, demonstrably improving equity of participation. Historically, Elon

has provided a year-long, cohorted scholars program to initiate participating faculty members into community engagement practices. During 2020–2021, the university adopted two online communities of practice (Lee & Choy, 2020) as an alternative method of faculty development during the pandemic. DMU similarly adopted the community of practice model to train new staff in service-learning pedagogy. DMU also worked collaboratively with other U.K. institutions, such as NTU, UCL, and King's College London, to create a practitioner network for discussing best practices about service-learning, nationally. TU's Model United Nations program developed online training programs for student and alumni volunteers, which expanded the inclusion of participants and better facilitated the sharing of important information between volunteers and conference organizers.

Communities at Risk

The pandemic highlighted inequalities and injustices in higher education and beyond. To serve the most vulnerable local populations, some ISLN member institutions adapted existing programs; others created new programs. Virginia's James Madison University (JMU) launched new campus programs to provide services to unhoused individuals when health and safety concerns led to the shutdown of regional shelters, filling a gap in service that had previously been offered by several faith-based organizations. JMU also collaborated with the local school district, university educators, and a nonprofit agency to create a free educational "pod" for 20 local elementary grade students needing daytime supervision. The program was staffed by volunteers using COVID-safe protocols and provided free meals and transportation, plus support for online learning.

Refugee populations suffered similar challenges during the pandemic. Guilford College in Greensboro, North Carolina, worked to address refugee needs by partnering with its Every Campus A Refuge (ECAR; https://everycampusarefuge.net) program, which provides refugee families with housing and use of on-campus facilities. ECAR's impact was further strengthened when Guilford created a curricular component attached to two academic minors that require students to study global and local issues around forced migration and refugee resettlement. The curriculum of both minors flips the traditional service-learning model where students are trained in authentic scenarios off-site by bringing the community and service-learning on-site. NTU reaffirmed critical approaches to service-learning in its sociology programs by requiring students to do, not just study, public sociology, for which "service-learning is the prototype" (Burawoy & Van Antwerpen, 2004, p. 9). For example, NTU sociology students worked with a local refugee charity to develop service user participation in organizational governance. Before the pandemic, students engaged with the charity by listening to members' views and participating broadly in the wider organization. This effort became more ambitious and focused during the pandemic. As partners met the NTU students and discussions shifted to participatory governance, the service became more complex, driven by a broad commitment to deeper and more genuine participation across the organization.

Strategic Planning

The onset of COVID-19 and the changes that were brought in at pace across the higher education sector encouraged some institutions to become more agile and develop strategic approaches to community engagement. DMU strategized how to support the city's pandemic recovery by offering extra capacity to local organizations through embedded service-learning. DMU's public engagement team was able to match the city's needs during the pandemic with courses that provided opportunities for students to volunteer, conduct research, or mobilize knowledge in support of local organizations. DMU also partnered with other U.K. universities and the European Association of Service-Learning in Higher Education (EASLHE, https://www.easlhe.eu) to apply the United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals (Division for Sustainable Development Goals, n.d.) as a framework for impact, recovery, and postpandemic service-learning provision. With a similar aim at meaningful community partnerships, Elon University worked with study abroad sites to create international service-learning (Hartman & Kiely, 2014; Motley & Sturgill, 2013; Warner & Esposito, 2008) as well as local service-learning opportunities that meet intercultural and global learning goals that are normally reached through study abroad (Hartman et al., 2020).

2023 Reflections

In 2023, ISLN members reflected again about the effects of the pandemic on the service-learning experiences of their faculty, staff, students, and community partners. Although the 2022–2023 academic year began a return to routine functioning of courses, programs, and other learning experiences, the continuing effects of the pandemic were clearly still evident.

Return to Normal?

The 2022–2023 academic year saw, perhaps, the most significant shift toward returning to normal programming across the higher education landscape, including many aspects directly related to community engagement. Many of the adaptations that ISLN member institutions had implemented to address COVID-19 challenges for community engagement activities were discontinued or reduced. However, the effects of the pandemic on students, instructional staff, and community partners continued to be evident. Several ISLN members described a new lag in student involvement with community engagement and name the overarching effects of the pandemic as the primary cause.

In spring 2020, the University of the Pacific, in Stockton, California, was selected to offer a state-based Americorps service-learning program (Americorps, n.d.). The program was structured for partnership with local organizations and was designed to accommodate 10 student Civic Action Fellows each year. Each Fellow would provide 500 hours of service to one of the organizations to earn full-time credit and a living allowance. Classes moved online as the pandemic struck, and yet the program was still able to recruit an inaugural cohort of Fellows who met their service goals online. By the second year of the program, students struggled to fulfill the required 500 service hours, and mental health challenges emerged for many. As a result, many students shifted from full-time to part-time Fellows, requiring the university to extend the allotted time for fulfilling service hours and to increase the overall number of students in the program. The program's faculty director also observed complications with partner organizations, as many students and nonprofit staff were drained by significant burdens from the pandemic. However, the university is now more aware of mental health struggles experienced by community engagement participants and has increased related support services. Similarly, NTU noted how fatigue affected students, instructional staff, and community partners; it slowed the return to normal functioning of community engagement activities, an effect that was complicated by some partner organizations having closed, reduced services, or severed ties to the university during the pandemic. At the same time, NTU noted a rise in new organizations that address specific issues related to the pandemic, bringing the potential for new service-learning partnership opportunities to the university.

Emergent Practices

Across higher education, the flexibility of holding meetings online has provided a measure of convenience and access that many institutions will be reluctant to relinquish. For example, TU's Model United Nations program continues to benefit from online training sessions where university students coach high school students about the program, thus alleviating scheduling and transportation concerns and allowing program alumni to participate as volunteers. TU is likely to maintain their use of online meetings, as this strategy has improved the access, reach, and impact of the program. Elon has decided to continue providing "lunch and learn" community engagement speaker meetings online, which has broadened the opportunity for attendance and participation to local community members. NTU is retaining pandemic-based solutions for service-learning practices, including the provision of online spaces for partner collaborations alongside the option to conduct activities in person. NTU students have commented on a change in their mental health, noting specifically that being able to participate in service-learning projects has created a greater sense of agency in their lives, something that was seriously eroded due to the pandemic. Similarly, many of NTU's community partners have welcomed the resources provided by students during the pandemic, and also the solidarity of purpose with the university.

Postpandemic, Elon noted a slowing of new service-learning course applications, which created concern about the sustainability of community engagement practices. The university therefore considered the range of professional developmental opportunities for service-learning faculty members and identified a need to better support mid- and advanced-level faculty members, not just beginner level. For example, Elon's

long-standing Service-Learning Scholars program, designed for faculty new to community engagement, was reinstated, but the university elected to continue with the community of practice model as an additional avenue for experienced service-learning faculty development.

Developing Strategies for Success

Developing and reinforcing bonds with service-learning community partners was a significant strategy during and after the pandemic at Hood College in Frederick, Maryland. The institution quickly defined a clear need to maintain and cultivate contacts with community partners for internships that are required for students enrolled in the college's nonprofit and civic engagement minor and the service-learning course required in the university's Honors Program. Subsequently, this recognition motivated the faculty director to join the planning committee for the off-campus Frederick Nonprofit Summit and to use the planning process to bring guest speakers to courses while placing students in nonprofit internships.

Finding ways to help students feel engaged and motivated after the pandemic has been an ongoing challenge, as noted by many ISLN members. JMU recently adopted the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Division for Sustainable Development Goals, n.d.) as a structure for all community-based projects to motivate students feeling overwhelmed, hesitant, or otherwise affected by the pandemic to return to service-learning and to delineate a more deliberate connection from local projects to larger, global concerns. JMU notes that when students feel like they are part of something larger than themselves, it counters their sense that little can be done to change the seemingly intractable negative course of the planet.

NTU has been strategic about what it carries forward from pandemic-based solutions to current service-learning practices. In maintaining some of these practices, NTU adopted a blended approach, which involves keeping the use of online communication tools. For all community-engaged projects, students now set up a digital space they can use for online communication with partners and for document storage, which is accessible to all parties in the partnership.

Discussion and Recommendations

The return to prepandemic levels of functioning for ISLN member institutions is an ongoing effort. However, ISLN institutions note significant and potentially lasting adjustments to their service-learning courses, community engagement programs, and community partnerships. Three years of living in a continual pandemic-induced crisis had detrimental effects on all involved; however, positive outcomes have been noted, ones born of adaptation and change. In the midst of continued social, political, and economic uncertainty, widespread fatigue, and ongoing public health concerns, ISLN member campuses have innovated new approaches to support service-learning provision, sustain existing programs that engage communities most in need, and address student concerns and conditions related to community engagement.

Best Practices for Supporting Service-Learning

Even prior to the pandemic, supporting service-learning courses and other community-engaged programs could be challenging. On many campuses, the return to offering service-learning courses has been slow due to a loss of capable and interested instructors, students, or community partners, as well as a shifting set of regulations for how this work can be conducted. However, the pandemic provided an opportunity for all involved to explore ways this work can be performed remotely using digitally mediated platforms. We suggest that institutions consider developing protocols for how and when service-learning can be shifted online, including what criteria would dictate doing so. In addition to being prepared for a possible future pandemic or other crisis, institutions should work to establish best practices for online service-learning provision, as these alternative approaches may benefit the situational needs of a faculty member, student, or community partner.

At many institutions, digital communication platforms also benefited non-course-related community engagement experiences and programs. Digital technologies clearly aided the Model United Nations partnership between TU and the Baltimore County Public School System, which emphasizes equity of access. In contrast to most Model U.N. con-

ferences of its size, TU made attendance free for high school and college participants and then adapted to the pandemic's constraints by coordinating preconference college-student-led training sessions for high school participants by using virtual meeting platforms. The shift to digital tools also allowed for increased engagement of former conference participants, helping to build active support networks for current participants and increase the fund-raising goals of the annual event.

The pause in many of the routine higher education community engagement functions due to the pandemic allowed time and space for those involved to pause and reflect. For example, at Elon University, the slowdown provided time for deep conversations about language and terms, ultimately leading the university to discontinue use of the term "service-learning" in favor of "community-based learning." The events of the pandemic, combined with national and international social upheaval, contributed to this decision, one predicated on a desire to remove the word "service" from the defining term used for learning experiences that often involve marginalized populations. The additional decision to begin including local for-profit businesses as viable community partners was also an outcome of this reflection and allowed the university to address reports from the area health department, which stated economic development as one of the region's top three most pressing community needs. Another example is the decision that several institutions, including NTU, Merrimack, and UCL, made to provide space for students and community partners to collaborate with teaching faculty to determine how service-learning experiences are designed and provided.

Addressing and Managing Student Needs

The impacts of pandemic exhaustion remain with us, but we believe they are lessening and will continue to do so. However, the continued effects have crystalized a need to more clearly define reasons for student engagement in service-learning. Students now want to fully understand what's at stake in terms of outcomes, including how community engagement work can impact systems of oppression or benefit their career preparation. Strategies adopted by institutions like De Montfort University and James Madison University to center the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Division for Sustainable Development Goals, n.d.) as foundations for community engagement activities are clear attempts at doing just that. In fact, their work motivated the ISLN group to use the SDG framework to launch an online student community of practice as a joint project during 2022–2023. This three-part program included a guest speaker from the United Nations, introductions to service-learning concepts in the U.S. and U.K., critical deliberation about the SDGs, and student-led, cross-institutional collaborative projects designed to increase understanding of the global–local connections of the SDGs. We encourage institutions to explore similar ways of connecting service-learning experiences to broader issues and initiatives at the local, national, and international level. This approach may help students working with area community partners to connect their localized efforts to broader national and international concerns in ways that are motivating and capable of enhancing their sense of civic responsibility.

Intentionally connecting the high-impact practices (Kuh, 2008) of global engagement with service-learning may offer another approach to motivate students to reinvest in community engagement experiences. Students can benefit from intercultural learning experiences by adding a service-learning component to existing study abroad or study away programs. Providing students with the opportunity to work collaboratively in the authentic context of community partners' lived experiences may reinvigorate their appetite for community engagement. Similarly, with careful planning and partner selection, local service-learning projects can connect students with meaningful intercultural learning experiences. During the pandemic, when plane travel wasn't an option, Elon University worked to assign students enrolled in an international service-learning course to projects in the local community that met the same intercultural and global learning objectives.

Although the rise in mental health challenges for college students was already occurring (Salimi et al., 2023), the pandemic clearly exacerbated the situation in numerous ways. Diminished access to mental health services (particularly face-to-face), transitions to online learning environments (often away from campus), increased needs to care for family members, and struggles to maintain social connectedness all contributed to heightened feelings of anxiety and depression (Lee et al., 2021; Yarrington et al.,

2021). This effect has been especially pronounced among women (Prowse et al., 2021) and students of color (Saltzman et al., 2021), two demographic groups that comprise a large percentage of community engagement participants. However, opportunities to engage with service-learning appear to be acting as an antidote to some of these effects. At NTU, sociology students report that postpandemic participation in projects that support local community governance has been effective at increasing their general motivation, developing a heightened sense of civic agency, and creating a renewed investment in their work.

Sustaining Critical Community Engagement

As the immediate effects of the pandemic fade, there is the potential that the innovative and highly valued aid that was provided to communities in critical need of support could be reduced or eliminated. However, the Every Campus A Refuge program at Guilford College can serve as a model for others to emulate. ECAR was in place before the pandemic and has continued providing assistance to refugee families to this day. Acknowledging that not every institution has the same level of deep, holistic commitment to service as Guilford College, an institution founded by the Quakers in 1837 (Guilford College, n.d.), we suggest that universities use the pandemic to take stock of what resources can be regularly provided to members of communities that are most at risk at any given time or circumstance. For example, institutions might consider supporting food reallocation programs that transfer unused meals and other food products to communities in need, thereby addressing a defined community need while simultaneously reducing waste and environmental impact. The story of James Madison University's creative support of at-risk area elementary students during the pandemic is an excellent demonstration of how permanent university resources, both material and human, can be temporarily reallocated when most needed. Recognizing the possibility of future threat to higher education institutions, universities might consider in advance what resources they have at their disposal to provide during a crisis, bearing in mind that the community most in need could potentially be portions of their own student body. Furthermore, finding ways to leverage academic courses, projects, or research to study the benefits of institutions acting as dependable community support anchors may offer additional incentives for institutions to provide this level of community assistance.

Institutions might also consider finding ways to involve student leaders in participatory governance conversations with partner organizations or civic agencies. As institutions like Nottingham Trent University have learned during the pandemic, giving students a measure of agency during discussions about difficulties faced by local communities has the potential to empower them to take an increased level of ownership over these challenges.

Takeaway Considerations

Based on our analysis of the 2021 and 2023 reflections, we offer the following summarized list of recommendations for postpandemic service-learning provision in higher education contexts:

- Managing courses and partnerships:
  - Take time to clearly define service-learning practices during both normal and crisis periods, and for when provision is in-person versus through online modalities.
  - Recognize how time intensive, burdensome, and stressful it is for teaching faculty, as well as community partners, to have to pivot and facilitate learning opportunities in the context of crisis and rapid change.
- Teaching innovations:
  - Plan for how to maintain partnerships in-person during crises and what to do if projects have to transition online.
  - Plan for potential impacts on teaching staff, students, and community partners during a crisis.
- Students' experiences:
  - Plan for how to maintain and facilitate continued student involvement in service-learning activities during a crisis.

    - Plan for online training and partnership collaboration activities, and consider virtual inclusion of program alumni as mentors.
- Program and professional development:
    - Consider collaborating with students and community partners in course or program development discussions.
    - Consider forming communities of practice (COP) for service-learning practitioner development.
- Communities at risk:
    - During a crisis, consider creative ways to support at-risk K-12 and refugee student needs.
    - Consider involving student leaders in participatory governance conversations with partner organizations or civic agencies
- Strategic planning:
    - Consider embedding service-learning directly within partner organizations to better support their capacity.
    - Use the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals framework to implement service-learning and motivate student involvement.
    - Consider ways to intentionally connect service-learning with study abroad and global education courses and programs.
    - Be intentional about leveraging intercultural and global learning opportunities during local service-learning sites and experiences.

Conclusion

The themes collected here demonstrate that amidst the great challenges that COVID-19 brought to universities, including literally existential threats, the desire to maintain and further develop service-learning programs yielded significant opportunities for growth, innovation, and learning. Many of the changes and adaptations adopted in response to the pandemic have allowed institutions to develop creative new approaches to service-learning provision, thus benefiting student learning goals and enhancing outcomes for community partners. At the same time, many institutions are still struggling to reinvigorate community-engaged learning experiences for their students and to regain the myriad connections and footholds they had in their respective communities.

The ISLN reflective essays addressed the challenges of conducting service-learning throughout a pandemic and beyond, but were anecdotal and reflected the experiences of ISLN members and institutions, solely. There is much more to be said, done, and studied about the effects of the pandemic on higher education's place and role with community engagement. The reflections presented here highlight specific adjustments to service-learning practices that warrant further consideration, such as increasing accessibility through digital platforms, creating communities of support to nurture and motivate faculty and staff to promulgate engagement activities, or increasing awareness about ways that service-learning can address student mental health concerns. Although the pandemic was challenging for all, in many respects we have survived and grown stronger. The words of one ISLN member sum up the many positive observations collectively made through the reflections of our own community of practice: "In the most challenging of times we've seen our students and partners doing outstanding work—amazing to witness!"

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About the Authors

Phillip Motley *is professor of communication design and serves as the Faculty Fellow for Community-Based Learning at Elon University in Elon, North Carolina, USA. His research interests include design and studio-based learning, community-engaged practices, and immersive pedagogies. He received his BA from Davidson College and MFA from North Carolina State University.*

Katherine M. Robiadek *is assistant professor of political science and a Core Faculty member in the Honors Program in Philosophy, Politics, and the Public at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio, USA. Her political theory research focuses on democracy and the role of imagination in politics. She received her MA and PhD in political science from the University of Wisconsin, Madison.*

Mark Charlton *is the net zero and climate action research theme director, the associate director of Sustainable Development Goal impact, and teaches policy in the department of Politics at De Montfort University in Leicester, U.K. Mark's current research looks at efforts to tackle climate change through political participation in marginalized communities by encouraging students to engage in learning through civic projects.*

Steve Grande *is assistant professor in the Department of Graduate Psychology and the program director of the College Student Personnel Administration program at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, USA. He previously served as director of service-learning at JMU and executive director of civic and global engagement at Mary Baldwin University. He earned his PhD in student affairs from the University of Maryland.*

Sharon Hutchings *is a senior lecturer in sociology at Nottingham Trent University in Nottingham, U.K. Her research interests include work and employment, community engagement, and community education with participatory action research as a preferred approach. She received her MEd in education from the Open University.*

Alison Rios Millett McCartney *is professor of political science and faculty director of the Honors College at Towson University in Towson, Maryland, USA. She is also the faculty director for the Model United Nations program for TU. Her research interests focus on civic engagement education and policy, experiential learning, honors education, and European politics. She received her PhD in foreign affairs from the University of Virginia.*

Mary McHugh *is the executive director of civic and community engagement in the Stevens Service Learning Center at Merrimack College in North Andover, Massachusetts, USA, and is a member of the Political Science department. She received her BA from Colby College and her MA from Boston College. She currently serves on the American Political Science Association Council and is a member of the editorial board for the Journal of Political Science Education.*

Dari Sylvester Tran *is the faculty director of the #CaliforniansForAll College Corps program and professor of political science at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California, USA. Her scholarly interests are at the intersection of civic obligation and political power and she has designed several successful service-learning programs emphasizing civic engagement. She has been recognized for her contributions to student mentorship, service-learning, and social justice.*

Marie Xypaki *is the head of Learning and Teaching Enhancement at SOAS University of London in the U.K. She has extensively advised on the design of higher education curricula to embed sustainability and inclusivity considerations. Her research focuses on community-engaged learning and knowledge cocreation with a focus on underrepresented communities.*

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Appendix. Institutional Descriptions of Service-Learning and Community Engagement

Elon University

Elon University defines community-based learning as a fundamentally academic endeavor in which engagement in service activities takes place through reciprocal and mutually beneficial partnerships with the greater community designed to advance the public good. It is an experiential education approach involving collaborative relationships, guided by the expertise of professors and community practitioners, to integrate student learning with community needs. Community-based learning partnerships engage students with entities such as nonprofit organizations, schools, government agencies, or locally owned businesses.

Hood College

Hood College defines service-learning as a component of experiential learning. Students provide direct service to community organizations through the college's honors program. The program includes a required credit-bearing course in which students learn about critical service-learning topics and then carry out service projects with external community partner organizations.

Towson University

At Towson University, faculty are mentored in how to develop service-learning classes, including a dedicated fellows program. Courses receive a service-learning designation if they include at least 15 hours of required service activities with an instructor-approved community partner.

Nottingham Trent University

At Nottingham Trent University, the Community Engaged Learning program allows students to apply knowledge from their academic courses to real-life issues. The program offers a hands-on approach to help students develop practical skills and make a positive social impact while supporting the goals of our community partners.

De Montfort University

De Montfort University follows the definition of the European Observatory of Service Learning in Higher Education (2019):

> Service-learning is a pedagogical approach that integrates meaningful community service or engagement into the curriculum and offers students academic credit for the learning that derives from active engagement within the community and work on a real-world problem. Reflection and experiential learning strategies underpin the learning process and the service is linked to the academic discipline. (para. 5)

James Madison University

At James Madison University, the Community Engagement and Volunteer Center is charged with coordinating service-learning experiences. These range from supporting faculty who seek to integrate curricular community engagement, service-learning associated with student organizations, students involved in cocurricular experiences, and nonacademic departmental initiatives. JMU builds collaborative and mutually beneficial relationships with community organizations focused on addressing community concerns and supporting social justice.

University College London

Higher education institutions in the United Kingdom use various pedagogical frameworks to address engagement with community partners in teaching, including service-learning, community-engaged learning, community-based research, participatory action research, and public engagement. University College London uses the term "community-engaged learning" to emphasize the benefits for the community. At UCL, the service provided is direct but non-credit-bearing.

SOAS University of London

SOAS focuses on Africa, Asia, and the Middle East as lenses through which to interrogate planetary questions. SOAS emphasizes the development of international partnerships with universities in the Global South. Social justice and decolonization are central to university–community partnerships. Although some partnership modules involve direct service, they are generally non-credit-bearing and not mandatory.

University of the Pacific

Experiential learning at Pacific is mainly driven by academic units, though there are efforts under way to connect the many projects across the university's three campuses. Pacific is a comprehensive university that offers a variety of service opportunities, including direct and indirect; faculty, institution, and student-led; credit-bearing; and extracurricular. Currently there is no centralized office or department that runs service-related programs or classes.

Merrimack College

Merrimack College embraces civic and community engagement as a transformative partnership aligned with the college's mission to enlighten minds, engage hearts, and empower lives. Rooted in the Catholic faith and Augustinian values of truth-seeking, inquiry, and dialogue, Merrimack fosters mutually beneficial exchanges of knowledge and resources with communities at local, national, and global levels. Through online and in-person community engagement, these partnerships enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching, and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; and steward a lifelong commitment to civic responsibility.

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Connecting Theory and Practice: Our Experiences Developing Assignments and Opportunities for Undergraduate Students to Serve Communities

Alan Santinele Martino and Meaghan Edwards

Abstract

This article explores innovative pedagogical approaches in a Canadian critical disability studies program, showcasing liberatory pedagogy through praxis. It emphasizes integrating community engagement with academic theory, exemplified by diverse assignments empowering students as social change agents. Assignments include collaboratively developed applied outputs (e.g., comic books, board games), involving community leaders' lived experiences, and nontraditional capstone projects (e.g., educational materials, community events) fostering advocacy and inclusion. These initiatives challenge academic boundaries, transforming societal attitudes. The article enriches discussions on higher education best practices, urging educators to embrace critical, community-engaged learning opportunities. These initiatives prepare students to navigate and influence disability and societal dynamics. The authors advocate for an educational paradigm as dynamic as society, ensuring students effect tangible, positive change.

Keywords: critical disability studies, community-engaged pedagogy, praxis in higher education, inclusive curriculum design, knowledge translation in academia

Students demonstrate greater engagement and interest in a subject when they understand its relevance to the real world (Mebert et al., 2020; Wollschleger, 2019). This finding is further supported by the observation that students show a keen interest in assignments with social significance and meaningful content (Layman et al., 2007). Community-based learning initiatives or research projects rooted in community engagement offer students practical experience that complements their academic studies (Kuh, 2008). This method is particularly effective because it integrates active learning through application, an effective practice in enhancing learning outcomes (Roberts, 2002). As Strangfeld (2013) argued, students "become sociologists by doing sociology, not just reading about it" (p. 200). Similarly, the principles of critical disability studies are best acquired through direct engagement and application, as this field demands an examination of power structures, societal norms, and systemic inequities.

Critical disability studies and community-engaged scholarship share a commitment to rethinking traditional hierarchies of knowledge and recognizing the value of lived experiences. Both fields challenge conventional notions of how we teach, learn, and know, advocating for an educational paradigm that prioritizes collaboration, reflexivity, and social transformation. Community-based learning creates a bridge between academic theory and real-world application, emphasizing the cocreation of knowledge with communities rather than the top-down dissemination of expertise. This approach aligns seamlessly with critical disability studies, which positions disabled individuals as knowers and agents of change rather than passive subjects of study. Together, these approaches foster a reimagining of education as a space for

liberatory praxis, where learning is deeply intertwined with efforts to dismantle ableism and other forms of structural oppression.

As scholars in the field of critical disability studies, we too have observed a compelling trend: An increasing number of our students are driven by the desire to imbue their professional paths with profound societal impact. This inclination toward meaningful career aspirations highlights the need for educational practices that are not only intellectually stimulating but also socially conscious. Assignments, as a core component of teaching in higher education, offer a unique opportunity to bridge the gap between academic theory and real-world application (Wollschleger, 2019). By designing assignments that are socially meaningful, educators can foster a learning environment that encourages students to connect with the material on a deeper level. Moreover, such assignments can serve as a catalyst for students to critically engage with societal issues, promoting a sense of responsibility and empowerment to effect change. In this context, the role of educators extends beyond imparting knowledge; it involves inspiring students to envision and work toward a more equitable and inclusive society.

In embracing the principles of critical disability studies, we recognize the importance of challenging traditional educational norms and advocating for a curriculum that integrates socially meaningful assignments. This article emerges from our collective experiences as educators in developing course assignments that treat knowledge not as a mere abstract concept but as a tool for tangible societal benefit. In this article, we delve into a series of case studies, each showcasing a distinct course assignment that we have integrated into our teaching repertoire. These case studies serve as exemplars of pedagogical innovation, reflecting our commitment to an educational philosophy that is both critical and community engaged. Through a detailed examination of these assignments, we aim to illustrate the practical application of theoretical concepts, the fostering of critical thinking skills, and the enhancement of students' abilities to contribute to meaningful societal discourse. Each case study provides an in-depth look at the objectives, methodologies, and outcomes associated with the respective assignments, offering insights into how they align with and advance the goals of our critical disability studies program. By sharing these examples, we hope to contribute to the broader conversation on academic best practices and to inspire fellow educators to adopt and adapt approaches that bridge the gap between academic study and social action. Such an approach may not only prepare students for their future careers but also equip them with the critical thinking and empathy necessary to navigate and contribute to a rapidly changing world.

Our Context

The authors are both faculty members within a critical disability studies program in Canada. We are community-based researchers with years of experience working with disabled people, especially people labeled/with intellectual disability, and service providers across various research projects. The first author is a cisgender man, queer tenure-track scholar of color, living with invisible disabilities. The second author is a tenured White woman with invisible disabilities.

Our objective as educators is to immerse our students in a curriculum that offers critical perspectives on disability and disability justice. Although our program is uniquely situated within a faculty of health sciences rather than the social sciences, the majority of our faculty members bring a wealth of expertise from the social sciences, particularly from fields such as sociology and disability studies. This interdisciplinary foundation enriches our program, infusing health sciences with critical social perspectives that challenge traditional biomedical approaches to disability. By bridging these academic realms, our faculty contribute to a nuanced curriculum that interrogates the intersections between health, society, and disability, offering students a comprehensive, multifaceted education that prepares them to address complex issues within both health care and societal contexts. Our program uses an educational model, named Inciting Change Makers (ICM) framework, aimed at supporting students to incite positive social change through critical engagement and disruption, meaningful mentorship, and community action (Edwards & Rankin, 2023). Course curricula are meticulously designed to introduce students to intricate interplays between disability and various social identities, fostering an understanding of the multifaceted experiences of disability across different societal intersections.

Our program in critical disability studies is distinctively characterized by the incorporation of practical experience through community-engaged learning opportunities. This key component of our curriculum bridges theoretical learning with tangible application, ensuring that by the completion of their undergraduate studies, students will have engaged in a minimum of 384 hours of hands-on work in real-world settings. These practicum placements are diverse, ranging from involvement with community organizations, including service providers and advocacy groups, to active collaboration with faculty members on research initiatives.

This melding of academic rigor with societal engagement equips our students with the tools to critically analyze and actively participate in the shaping of their communities. Through such engagement, they are not just observers but become catalysts for change, challenging existing paradigms and contributing to better practices.

Community-Engaged Learning

The field of critical disability studies is fundamentally about the collaborative generation of knowledge, with a strong emphasis on partnership with communities to dismantle systemic inequalities (Yoshida et al., 2016). It is a discipline that actively seeks to amplify the voices of disabled individuals, positioning their experiences and insights at the forefront of scholarly inquiry and policymaking (Reaume, 2014; Yoshida et al., 2016). This approach is not about "giving voice" but about recognizing disabled people as knowers, cocreators of knowledge, and agents of change (Barnes, 2004). By engaging with the lived realities of disability, scholars and community members together interrogate and challenge the structures that perpetuate ableism, exclusion, and marginalization (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Critical disability studies transcends traditional academic boundaries, advocating for a transformative impact that reshapes societal attitudes and fosters inclusive, community-driven social change (Thomas, 2007).

In the literature on pedagogical approaches within undergraduate education, community-engaged learning stands out as a method that significantly enhances the educational experience (Botchwey & Umemoto, 2020; Rubin et al., 2012). This form of experiential learning involves students in activities that address community-identified needs while enhancing their academic learning, personal growth, and civic responsibility (Donahue & Plaxton-Moore, 2018; Preston et al., 2013). Studies have shown that assignments performed in collaboration with community partners not only deepen students' understanding of course content but also increase their skills in applying knowledge to real-life situations (Bandy, 2011; Botchwey & Umemoto, 2020). Such partnerships provide a tangible context for theoretical concepts, fostering a learning environment that encourages critical thinking, problem-solving, and reflection (Grise et al., 2020; Kraft, 2000).

Furthermore, the integration of community-based projects within coursework is highlighted as a key strategy for reinforcing student learning outcomes. These projects often require students to engage directly with different social groups, enabling them to develop a more nuanced perspective on social issues (Donahue & Plaxton-Moore, 2018; Preston et al., 2013). The literature emphasizes that when students are actively involved in the learning process, especially in a way that contributes to the public good, they exhibit enhanced academic motivation, improved interpersonal and communication skills, and a stronger sense of social responsibility (Hatala et al., 2017; Preston et al., 2013). Importantly, such pedagogical models align with the growing demand for higher education institutions to produce graduates who are not only knowledgeable but also socially aware and equipped to contribute meaningfully to society (Chan, 2016; Lapointe, 2022). At the same time, community partners see benefits in these collaborations (Karasik, 2019).

Bridging Theory and Practice Through Meaningful Community Partnerships

As scholars deeply dedicated to the confluence of theory and practice, particularly within the dynamic realm of critical disability studies, we have conscientiously endeavored to craft course assignments that empower students to cocreate resources alongside our community partners. This initiative stems from our conviction that such collaborative engagements serve as an exemplary pedagogical strategy for imparting crucial skills. It is pivotal that our students learn to navigate and incorporate community needs in their work, working in tandem with stakeholders to forge solutions that are both impactful and sustainable. The cultivation of community partnerships

is central to our ethos, as we forge robust connections with local organizations. These alliances are not just theoretical constructs but fertile grounds for students to meaningfully apply their burgeoning knowledge, ensuring a reciprocity that benefits all stakeholders involved.

The nurturing of community partnerships stands as a cornerstone of our ethos, reflecting a deep commitment to building enduring, meaningful connections with local organizations. For us, the development of these relationships is not a transactional process but a collaboration that unfolds over time, characterized by mutual dedication and continuous dialogue. As community-based researchers and educators, we place immense value on these partnerships. These partnerships are far from superficial or "one-off" encounters; they are imbued with a sense of trust and shared purpose, evolving through regular engagement and a shared commitment to addressing community needs. We see these connections as vital to our work, providing a foundation upon which we can collaboratively explore, learn, and enact change. They enable us to bridge the gap between academic research and community action, ensuring that our efforts are grounded in the realities and priorities of those we aim to serve. Moreover, these relationships underscore the importance of reciprocity and respect, guiding principles that inform not only our research methodologies but also our pedagogical approaches. For us, the cultivation of community partnerships is an ongoing process that enriches our work, enhances our students' learning experiences, and contributes to the broader societal impact of our academic endeavors. Through these collaborations, we are reminded of the value of patience, the importance of listening, and the transformative power of working alongside community partners toward common goals.

In our efforts to cultivate meaningful community partnerships, we employ several strategies to ensure these relationships are collaborative, reciprocal, and deeply integrated into our teaching practices. First, we dedicate time to building trust with partners, often engaging with them through ongoing research projects, community events, or advocacy work long before assignments are conceptualized. For example, our long-standing relationship with the Alzheimer Society was built through mutual collaboration on community programs, enabling us to design assignments that directly align with their needs and priorities. This foundational trust allows partners to feel confident that their contributions will be respected and valued in the classroom setting. Second, we actively integrate community perspectives throughout the life cycle of assignments. At the outset, we consult with partners to identify pressing issues or resource gaps that could benefit from student contributions. Third, we engage partners in the outcomes of assignments to ensure the final outputs serve their intended purpose. For example, the educational modules created for service providers in the Mad Studies course (described below) were reviewed by community partners, who provided input on their usability and clarity before implementation. Once finalized, these modules were integrated into the training programs of service organizations, amplifying their impact. This process of engaging partners in both the creation and application of assignments not only enhances the relevance of student work but also strengthens the connection between classroom learning and community needs.

Community partners play diverse roles across assignments, ranging from knowledge contributors to cocreators and end users of student outputs. For instance, some partners, like health care providers, serve as content experts during the development phase, whereas others, such as advocacy organizations, use the final products as educational tools within their networks. This flexibility allows us to tailor partnerships to the unique strengths and goals of each collaborator, ensuring a mutually beneficial relationship. By centering community voices and fostering collaborative engagement at every stage, we illustrate how partnerships can transform classroom learning into a shared endeavor that bridges academic study with real-world impact.

Fostering Innovation and Inclusivity

In our course assignments, we also champion the integration of access and accessibility at every stage—from the germination of ideas to the tangible delivery of assignments. This approach instills a mindset that prioritizes inclusivity and fosters innovative communication strategies, thereby enabling our students to transcend traditional paradigms of knowledge dissemination. Central to our pedagogical strategy is the prioritization of inclusivity, where course materials and assignments are meticulously crafted with

accessibility as a cornerstone. This commitment guarantees full engagement for all students, creating a learning environment that is as diverse as the society it mirrors. Hand-in-hand with this inclusivity is our drive to foster innovation in communication. We empower students to convey their research and insights in a multitude of formats, thereby broadening their audience and enhancing the permeability of academic work into the public sphere. We encourage students to "think outside the box," and by using a nonpunitive pedagogical approach, we attempt to create a space where students feel empowered to take risks in their assignments.

The integration of community-centered assignments within our critical disability studies curriculum has not only enriched the academic experience of our students but also underscored the profound potential for academic programs to enact real-world change. The implications of this pedagogical approach extend far beyond our classrooms, suggesting a roadmap for curriculum development across various academic disciplines. In our latest curriculum review, both current and former students consistently emphasized the significance of integrating theory with practical application. They valued the chance to produce outputs that have the potential to enhance the lives of disabled individuals within our communities. The application of theoretical frameworks to community engagement initiatives can positively shape how critical disability studies knowledge is perceived and utilized. By encouraging students to consider the practical implications of course concepts on individual and societal levels, we can foster a deeper understanding of the structures that govern social interactions and institutions.

We embrace a shift in evaluation methods, moving away from the traditional confines of exams and essays to embrace project-based assessments. This shift is more than a pedagogical preference; it's a reflection of our dedication to showcasing and nurturing the ability of our students to enact real-world change, thereby encapsulating the very essence of their academic journey. Next in this article, we showcase a suite of assignments that are emblematic of our unwavering dedication to a pedagogy that is deeply rooted in community collaboration. Through these projects, we underscore our belief that the true measure of academic excellence lies in its capacity to contribute constructively and creatively to society at large.

Cocreated Applied Outputs

Board Games for Community Partners

Initially, we focus on the application of board games as an educational resource within two undergraduate courses: (1) Disability and Aging and (2) Women With Disabilities and Reproductive Health. These specific case studies illuminate the potential of board games, when integrated into coursework, to serve as effective instruments for not only imparting knowledge but also fostering empathy and encouraging engagement with societal issues. Through these examples, we demonstrate how board games can transcend their traditional entertainment role, becoming tools for students' exploration of complex subjects related to disability and health.

Disability and Aging Course. In his disability and aging course, the first author developed an assignment that involved students working in groups to design board games or activities that were specifically tailored for older adults with disabilities. The primary objective of this board game was to support players in maintaining or developing relevant physical and/or cognitive skills. Students were challenged to think creatively, empathetically, and innovatively to create games that promoted inclusivity and enriched the lives of their players. The board game or activity was to be developed with older adults (age 60 and above) with disabilities in mind. To equip our students with practical expertise, Ali Cada, the director of Adult Day and Creative Programs at the Alzheimer Society of Calgary, graciously conducted a session to impart valuable insights and best practices for devising engaging activities for older adults with physical and/or cognitive impairments. The idea was that, after development in class, board games would actually be shared and used by the organization.

The game had to be accessible and easy to understand, accommodating different levels of physical and cognitive capabilities. Students were expected to consider using large, clear fonts, distinct colors, tactile elements, and other accessibility features. The game was to be designed with the intent to maintain or enhance specific physical and/or cognitive skills relevant to older adults. These skills could include memory, problem-solving, fine motor skills, coordination, or balance. Students had to choose an engaging and appropriate theme for the

board game that would resonate with the target audience. The storyline should be interesting and encourage players to immerse themselves in the game world.

The assignment process was structured to foster both the creation and refinement of the students' board game projects. Students first developed an initial draft of their board game, establishing the groundwork for their ideas and designs. This stage was followed by a peer review phase, where they critiqued and provided feedback on the games devised by their classmates. This collaborative evaluation aimed to offer constructive insights, aiding each group in enhancing their game. Concluding the process, students incorporated the feedback they received and submitted the final draft of their board game. Each step in this sequence was given equal weight in the overall assessment, ensuring that students were evaluated on their ability to innovate, engage, and refine effectively.

As a final outcome, students submitted the board game prototype along with a written report explaining the design process, rationale behind the gameplay mechanics, considerations for accessibility, and the ways the game supports physical and/or cognitive skill development in older adults with disabilities. As the semester concluded, the culmination of our students' efforts was the integration of their assignments into the Alzheimer Society's extensive repertoire of activities, thereby enriching their collection with fresh, innovative concepts. Students spoke often about how knowing that the games would go to an actual community partner motivated them to work extra hard in making the board games relevant and attractive to older adults.

Reproductive Health Resources. In an independent study course titled Women with Disabilities and Reproductive Health, the first author worked one-on-one with a critical disability studies undergraduate student. The course's learning objectives were ambitious and multifaceted, aiming to cultivate a nuanced understanding of intersectionality, a deep awareness of the stigmatization faced by women with disabilities in reproductive health, and the ability to discern systemic barriers to equitable health care access.

The collaborative efforts of the two instructors of the independent study—one a sociologist (the first author) and the other a professor from the Obstetrics and Gynecology department—were pivotal. The course's centerpiece was an assignment that tasked the student with the creation of a board game designed to inform women with developmental and/or intellectual disabilities about reproductive health and, potentially, serve as a tool for health care professionals and family members. The development of the board game was informed by a series of consultations with relevant community organizations, health care professionals, and, crucially, women with disabilities who provided extremely important insights. Disabled women's contributions were particularly valuable, guiding the game's design to ensure it conveyed the most pertinent information in an accessible and engaging manner. In addition, experts from Obstetrics and Gynecology ensured the content's scientific accuracy.

Since the assignment's completion, a prototype board game has been developed to assist women with developmental and/or intellectual disabilities in navigating doctor appointments and improving communication regarding reproductive health matters. Additionally, the course featured an assignment where the student crafted a mini social media campaign directed at health care professionals. One notable creation from this campaign was an infographic designed to educate health care providers on making their offices more accessible to disabled women, encompassing a range of disabilities. This multifaceted assignment not only addressed the course's learning objectives but also exemplified the transformative potential of educational projects that incorporate lived experiences, expert knowledge, and community collaboration to effect change in societal norms and health care practices.

Knowledge Mobilization Assignment: Comic Books

For this assignment, students were tasked with producing a mini comic book, a format that merges visual storytelling with text, to explore and communicate issues pertinent to Mad Studies. Mad Studies is an emergent interdisciplinary field that critically examines how society perceives and interacts with the concept of mental health and madness, challenging the prevailing narratives and power dynamics within psychiatric systems (LeFrançois et al., 2013). It advocates for the rights, voices, and epistemologies of those deemed "mad" by societal standards, pushing for a radical shift in

understanding and practice. This assignment required students to distill complex concepts into a 10-page comic book, complete with a cover, accompanied by a write-up of no more than 250 words. The idea was for students to engage creatively with course material, making scholarly ideas both accessible and compelling. Students were encouraged to use digital resources or hand-drawn methods to craft their comic books, focusing on clarity of message over artistic perfection.

Critical questions posed for the assignment guide students in their creative process: They must decide on the central issue of madness they wish to highlight, avoiding sanist or pathologizing narratives and instead adopting a critical Mad Studies perspective. Character development was key, with consideration for protagonists, potential antagonists, and supporting characters, as well as their motivations and emotional journeys that formed the story arc. These questions not only served to frame the assignment but also to deepen the students' engagement with the core themes of the course. The assessment of the comic books was based on several criteria: the extent to which students engaged with and applied readings and concepts from the course; the demonstration of an understanding of Mad Studies perspectives; the overall quality of the comic book; and the clarity, coherence, and originality of both the visual and written narratives.

The invaluable insights provided by our community partners have been instrumental in shaping the pedagogical strategies we employ to disseminate information within the community effectively. Their recommendations have been not only heard but actively integrated into the development of our course assignments. For instance, the idea of using comic books as a medium for knowledge translation emerged directly from discussions with two of our community partners. These partners highlighted comic books' unique ability to convey complex messages through a blend of visual and textual storytelling, making it an especially engaging and accessible format for diverse audiences. In response, we have embraced this approach, recognizing its potential to democratize information and enhance community engagement. By incorporating these methods into our assignments, our aim was to empower our students to think creatively about knowledge dissemination. The comic book assignment, in particular, exemplifies this ethos, challenging students to distill academic concepts into a format that is not only educational but also resonant with the broader public. It is a testament to our dedication to fostering a reciprocal learning environment, one where the exchange of ideas between academia and community partners fosters mutual growth and a deeper impact on the community we serve.

Educational Modules for Service Providers

In this assignment, in groups, students were tasked with designing an educational module for service providers. This module was to be centered on mental health but reflect the principles of Mad Studies. The modules were meant to inform, engage, and empower community partners. In addition, they aimed to illuminate the complexities surrounding mental health, focusing on societal attitudes, the nuances of language, and the power of personal narratives. The educational tool developed by the students was designed to be a blend of didactic and interactive elements. Students were encouraged to employ a diverse array of media formats, such as videos, infographics, and hands-on activities. This approach was intended to create an inclusive and accessible learning environment, accommodating various learning styles and preferences.

For the format of this module, students were presented with two options. The first option was a PowerPoint presentation with a maximum of 40 slides. The second option was a workbook in PDF format, capped at 25 pages. Regardless of the chosen format, the module should include several key components: an ice-breaker activity to initiate engagement, clearly stated learning goals in bullet format, detailed content on the subject, interactive learning activities to promote active participation, integration of multimedia elements to enhance understanding, a list of additional helpful resources, and a section for references. This structured approach ensured that the module was both educational and engaging, catering to the diverse needs of the audience.

The module was envisioned to be a comprehensive resource for community partners. It was designed to foster a deeper understanding of mental health issues and support initiatives surrounding these topics. This resource aimed to be more than just informational; it was intended to be a practical tool that community partners can regu-

larly utilize. Based on anecdotal feedback, students expressed a high level of appreciation for the opportunity provided by this assignment. It allowed them to adopt the role of a teacher, which in turn facilitated a deeper self-evaluation of their understanding of the material. More importantly, they valued the chance to create a practical and beneficial resource for the community. This aspect of the assignment not only enhanced their learning experience but also contributed to their sense of accomplishment and community engagement.

Bringing Lived Experience to the Classroom

Faculty in our program see the community, our allies outside the university setting, as integral cocreators of knowledge and learning opportunities. We recognize and actively center the expertise of those with lived and living experience. The second author takes an approach to curriculum development and assessment design that involves those with expertise in the choice of topics and methods of assessment in undergraduate courses. Our larger department has granted special funding for compensating guest speakers with lived experience. In practice, the contributions of community collaborators with lived experience go beyond guest talks. In a course on Mad Studies, for example, one self-advocate from the antipsychiatry movement, a psychiatrist identifying as a Mad ally, a family support person for an adult identifying as Mad, and a community support worker and author with living experience were consulted on course content. It was collaboratively decided that students would be required to read about the position of each community contributor in the Mad movement in Canada. Students then engaged with content recommended by community contributors, such as peer-reviewed articles; legislation (e.g., The Alberta's Mental Health Act); and advocacy writing and media items such as social media threads, podcasts, and editorials. Once the prereading and background research had been completed by the students and monitored by the course instructor through weekly discussion posts online, community contributors joined a panel in a 2-hour class session. Students were required to ask informed questions prepared ahead of time and note the responses of the panelists. The following week students were asked to report on their own learnings, their personal reflections and experiences with the material, and the panel event. Students were graded on their preparation and their reflexivity, including newly formed responses to mainstream mental health campaigns and treatment strategies.

The intention of this assignment was to guide students through a transformational, critical learning experience. Although a simple guest talk might have been impactful, the choice of background readings, the active centering and recognition of lived and living expertise, and the bridging of Mad Studies theory to community activism and praxis provided unique mentoring opportunities and models of change-making for students hoping to effect systemic change.

Alternatives to Traditional Capstone Projects

Our faculty members' programs of research are often transdisciplinary in nature, and we welcome opportunities to supervise students outside critical disability studies. Positive social impact and systems change is central to our supervisory roles, and we intend for all our students, even those at the undergraduate level, to not only learn from our community collaborators but to actively contribute to disability-justice-focused work with equity-deserving groups. The term "equity-deserving groups" refers to groups that face systemic discrimination and inequality that prevent access to resources and opportunities often available to other social groups (Government of Canada, 2022; these groups may also be called equity-denied groups or equity-seeking groups). This particular term importantly "highlights the fact that equity should be achieved from a systemic, cultural or societal change and the burden of seeking equity should not be placed on the group" (Government of Canada, 2022, Notes). Our commitment to creating social change is not only an abstract idea or a "nice-to-have," but an integral aspect in our consideration of research outputs.

Students tasked with producing traditional research papers for their capstone projects are also expected to invest time in developing outputs collaboratively designed with the community. The second author's extensive research into the experiences and needs of community collaborators and students has yielded several key principles for creating collaborative, impactful student work. Paramount among these principles is the cultivation of relationships among supervisors, students, and community

partners. Regular meetings with the research team, which include students and faculty, nurture connections and provide an enjoyable, relaxed environment for peer and faculty support. These sessions often spark creative ideas for research outputs, with more experienced students guiding their junior counterparts. Additionally, weekly meetings that include community partners reinforce these bonds and maintain open communication channels. It's crucial to continually address the design of meaningful capstone outputs in these discussions, integrating this focus into the course timeline. Community collaborators and students may not be familiar with designing impactful capstone outputs, so this goal must be intentionally mentioned at each meeting and worked into course timelines.

The community-engaged capstone approach has catalyzed a range of impactful initiatives. For instance, public policy students, working in close collaboration with self-advocates and relevant organizations, crafted a survey to gauge the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on individuals with disabilities. The resulting survey, made accessible through translation into plain language, served not only as an instrument for community dialogue and media outreach but also as a cornerstone for the students' theses.

In another project centered on food security, students leveraged insights from families directly affected by the issue, resulting in both noteworthy theses and essential documents now utilized by a collective of food security organizations to drive policy and systemic change. These students further extended their impact by disseminating their findings at a community event, thereby engaging with stakeholders and the general public.

Currently, two health sciences undergraduates are deeply invested in an inclusive research project, working in partnership with coresearchers who have intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. Although their capstone requirements were initially limited to simple data collection, the students have committed 2 years to nurturing meaningful relationships with their coresearchers. Their collaborative work is expected to yield a comprehensive set of best practices and educational resources that will support inclusive research endeavors across community and academic settings.

The implementation of this dual-focused assessment and assignment strategy can be quite challenging for both supervisors and students. Confronted with the conventional constraints of capstone projects at many universities, students are required to deliver a thesis that satisfies the rigorous criteria of honors-level academic work within certain time constraints. Students who choose to incorporate community engagement into their thesis work must navigate the complexities of in-depth collaborations with community partners. These partnerships often operate on timelines that do not align neatly with university schedules, presenting additional challenges for students to manage alongside their academic expectations. Although this multifaceted process is intricate and time-intensive, students typically find it enriching and are made aware of these additional demands at the beginning of their capstone projects.

Community Impact: Tangible Benefits of Community-Engaged Assignments

The assignments in our critical disability studies program are designed not only to enhance student learning but also to generate meaningful, concrete benefits for the community. By centering the needs and expertise of community partners in the design and implementation of these projects, the assignments produce outputs that address real-world challenges while fostering collaboration between students, faculty, and community members.

For example, the board games developed in the Disability and Aging course were integrated into the Alzheimer Society's programming, offering accessible and engaging resources that promote cognitive and physical engagement for older adults with disabilities. These games filled gaps in the organization's activities, aligning with their mission to foster social connection and skill retention. Similarly, the independent study project on reproductive health produced a board game and infographic that empower women with developmental and intellectual disabilities to better navigate health care settings. By addressing communication barriers and inaccessible information, these resources created practical solutions for both patients and providers, enhancing inclusivity in health care practices.

The comic books created in the Mad Studies course transformed complex academic concepts into accessible visual narratives. Shared

with advocacy groups and community partners, these outputs have been used to educate the public and spark conversations about mental health, amplifying awareness and challenging societal perceptions. Additionally, the educational modules designed by students for service providers have been adopted for staff training and client engagement. By incorporating multimedia elements, interactive activities, and accessibility principles, these modules offer practical tools to address challenges identified by community partners, advancing the quality of service delivery.

Across these examples, the community impact of our assignments is clear: They provide organizations with innovative tools, fill resource gaps, and amplify the voices and needs of marginalized groups. By ensuring that the outputs of these projects are both relevant and actionable, we uphold a commitment to reciprocity in our partnerships. Our approach to community-engaged learning not only equips students with the skills to address complex societal issues but also creates lasting benefits for the communities we serve, demonstrating the transformative potential of academic–community collaboration.

Lessons Learned

As we reflect on our efforts to integrate community-engaged pedagogy into a critical disability studies curriculum, we recognize both successes and areas for growth. These lessons provide valuable insights for educators looking to adopt similar approaches and ensure continuous improvement in their practices.

Balancing Academic and Community Expectations

One of the ongoing challenges is managing the alignment between academic timelines and the often slower, relational pace of community work. Community partners may require more time to review or implement student-generated outputs, which can conflict with rigid university schedules. To address this issue, we have begun implementing more flexible timelines for deliverables and emphasizing the importance of patience and adaptability to our students.

Supporting Students in Navigating Emotional Labor

The deeply relational nature of these assignments often involves emotionally charged topics, such as systemic inequities or lived experiences of discrimination. These experiences enhance learning; however, they can also create emotional labor for students. We are working to incorporate more robust supports, such as dedicated check-ins and mental health resources, to ensure that students feel prepared and supported as they engage in these meaningful, but sometimes challenging, assignments.

Strengthening Partnerships Through Reciprocity

Although our partnerships with community organizations are strong, we recognize the need for more structured mechanisms to ensure reciprocity. Students benefit from learning opportunities, but ensuring that community partners consistently derive tangible benefits requires ongoing dialogue. For example, we are exploring postcourse evaluations for partners to gather feedback and identify areas where the outputs could better align with their needs.

Expanding Accessibility and Inclusivity

Accessibility is a cornerstone of our pedagogical philosophy; therefore, we continually strive to refine and expand our approach. Students may have varying levels of familiarity with accessibility principles, which can result in outputs that require further refinement. Providing detailed guidance and examples of accessible design early in the course has emerged as a strategy to ensure high-quality outputs.

Creating Opportunities for Reflection

Lastly, we have found that structured opportunities for reflection deepen student learning but can be inconsistently implemented across assignments. Moving forward, we will incorporate mandatory reflection exercises, such as journaling or peer discussions, to help students critically evaluate their experiences and articulate the connections between theory and practice.

Building Faculty Capacity

Faculty engaged in community-based pedagogy often require additional time and resources to manage partnerships and mentor students. This work is rewarding but also labor-intensive, and institutions must recognize and support it. We advocate for workload adjustments and professional development opportunities to ensure faculty can sustain their commitment to this approach without experiencing burnout.

Building Tranferable Skills

More importantly, by embedding research skills, evidence-based practices, and collaborative methodologies into the core of critical disability studies education, we prepare students to enter the workforce as not only thinkers and analysts but as active agents of change. These skills—such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration—are transferable across sectors and essential for addressing complex social issues in diverse settings.

Our approach instills in students the capacity to navigate interdisciplinary challenges, engage with stakeholders, and implement solutions that are both context-specific and scalable. For example, the ability to design accessible resources, such as board games or educational modules, fosters adaptability in fields ranging from health care to community advocacy. The integration of lived experiences into project design also prepares students to lead with empathy and inclusivity, traits increasingly valued in industries prioritizing equity, diversity, and inclusion. Moreover, the emphasis on knowledge translation and communication ensures that students can effectively bridge the gap between theory and practice, making academic insights actionable and impactful in real-world contexts. This pedagogical model not only contributes to their professional readiness but also empowers them to serve as catalysts for systemic change in their communities and beyond.

Conclusion

By discussing our classroom experiences and sharing examples of course assignments, this article underscores the transformative power of academic learning when merged with community collaboration. It is within this innovative educational space that we see Paulo Freire's vision of liberatory pedagogy come to life, as our students engage in praxis, applying the theories from their classrooms to the lived experiences of disabled people in the community. Our role as educators in this process is not just to transmit knowledge, but to facilitate the creation of new understandings through partnerships that both challenge systemic inequities and center the voices of disabled individuals.

The case studies presented in this article reflect a deep commitment to an educational philosophy that views knowledge not as a static entity but as a dynamic force for social change. By integrating practicum hours and fostering critical engagement with course concepts, we have seen students evolve into not only scholars but also advocates and allies to the disability community. Their work, exemplified by assignments like the creation of board games and comic books, not only serves educational purposes but also functions as a medium for creating more social awareness and igniting new discussions among service providers and community organizations.

Reflecting on our pedagogical approaches, we recognize the imperative to continuously adapt and respond to the evolving needs of both our students and our community partners. Our program stands as a testament to the belief that the ultimate measure of our success as educators lies in our ability to equip students with the tools to become architects of change and to do so by working with communities. This collaboration is the true essence of a critical disability studies program—one that is deeply woven into the fabric of community, activism, and the pursuit of a more just society.

As we look forward, we hope that the reflections shared in this article will spark conversations and inspire other programs to continue reflecting on the nexus of academia and activism. The journey of bridging the gap between theory and practice is ongoing, and we are committed to contributing to this collective endeavor, always striving to enhance the impact of our work both within and beyond the university walls. It is our hope that the dialogues initiated through our case studies will continue to resonate, fostering a future where inclusive, community-driven education becomes the norm rather than the exception.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

About the Authors

Alan Santinele Martino *is an associate professor (teaching) in the Community Rehabilitation and Disability Studies program at the University of Calgary. His research focuses on the intersections of disability, gender, and sexuality, with a particular interest in the intimate and sexual lives of disabled people. He received his PhD in sociology from McMaster University.*

Meaghan Edwards *is an associate professor (teaching) in the Community Rehabilitation and Disability Studies program at the University of Calgary. Her research focuses on health equity, with specific interests in critical disability studies, inclusive research practices, and food security. She received her PhD in education from the University of Sydney.*

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(Re)imagining Graduate Education Professional Development Spaces for Community-Engaged Practitioner-Scholars

Dissertation Overview

Trina L. Van Schyndel

Abstract

This basic, exploratory qualitative dissertation study (Van Schyndel, 2022) examined professional identity development of community-engaged practitioner-scholars through their participation in a U.S.-based community engagement professional association's graduate student fellowship program. Semistructured interviews with 15 program alumni revealed six common themes grouped into two sections. "The people" focused on participants' backgrounds and ways of work, and "the setting" focused on participants' experiences of tension within the academy and their development of new conceptualizations, new relationships, and new practices through the fellowship program. Findings suggested that program participation was critical to not only their ongoing professional identity development as community-engaged practitioner-scholars, but also their ability to persist through graduation in the face of challenging higher education environments. Professional associations can provide an alternate setting to what graduate students may experience inside the academy, especially by offering programs designed with principles of relationship-building, community, wellness, and inclusion. Additional recommendations and implications for practice are included.

Keywords: graduate education, community engagement, professional identity, professional association, fellowship program

In grounding this dissertation study, it is important to know a few things about me. First, in addition to being a recent doctoral degree recipient, I was also recently the membership director for Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life, a national community engagement professional association in the United States. I have held leadership roles in two other community engagement professional associations—Campus Compact and the International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE)—and I have worked as a staff member in several university–community engagement offices in the U.S. Through both my academic and professional journey over the past decade, I have embraced and found a lot of joy in being a scholar, as well as a practitioner, in the community engagement field. Yet I would be remiss to not also acknowledge my whole personhood. During my graduate studies in particular, being a friend, a neighbor, a daughter, a sister, and a proud aunt to a niece and nephew have been really important parts of my life. Additionally, I come from a family of mostly educators, farmers, and health care workers whose legacy is one of commitment to caring for others. Being surrounded by these individuals as professional and personal examples, especially my mother, who was a professor of nursing with a focus on community health, has had an inordinate amount of influence on my life journey.

Second, during my graduate studies my experiences with IARSLCE and its Graduate Student Network transformed my research. I was part of a group of scholars who conducted a collaborative autoethnographic research study (Kniffin et al., 2021) that showed commonalities across our individual graduate student stories regarding our professional motivations, experiences, and resulting outcomes related to holding the role of the chair of the IARSLCE Graduate Student Network. One of the related commonalities from this study was a lack of support for the emerging identities and practices of community-engaged practitioner-scholars at higher education institutions and/or within graduate programs. I should also note that those institutions or programs did not always actively oppose community engagement; rather, these students needed to seek out support, resources, and community elsewhere. The second commonality was finding support for emerging identities and practices through involvement with the association and its graduate student network. Two primary areas of support emerged: (a) professional development opportunities and (b) strong relationships through a network of peers and mentors. The experience and knowledge I gained throughout this collaborative research process led me to wonder about the experiences of graduate students highly involved in other community engagement professional associations. How were those graduate students connecting to professional development opportunities and professionals in the field of community engagement? How were these opportunities and connections supporting their emerging identities around community engagement?

These are the personal, academic, and professional experiences and resulting questions that inspired this dissertation research, which explored how a professional identity as a community-engaged practitioner-scholar is fostered through participation in professional associations while in graduate school.

Background

Within higher education institutions, conversations about institutionalizing community engagement are ongoing. Increased institutionalization of community engagement already occurs through the establishment of centers and the creation of professional staff roles; the inclusion of community engagement in mission statements, presidential statements, and strategic planning (Welch, 2016); and national recognition of community engagement through the Carnegie Community Engagement classification (American Council on Education, n.d.). Some scholars argue that socialization of graduate students toward community-engaged work is an essential component to continued institutionalization of community engagement (O'Meara & Jaeger, 2006; Sandmann et al., 2008; Stanton, 2008).

Further, there are ongoing efforts to professionalize the field of community engagement. Not only have multiple professional associations focused on community engagement existed for several decades (e.g., Campus Compact, the Engagement Scholarship Consortium, the International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement, Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life), but in the last decade there have been efforts to determine necessary professional competencies for community engagement. Some of those efforts are aimed at graduate students (Doberneck et al., 2017), and others are aimed at scholar-practitioners more broadly (Dostilio, 2017). Additionally, Campus Compact (n.d.) offers credentials for what it considers to be core community engagement competencies.

Finally, recent scholarship focuses on the experiences of community-engaged graduate students, primarily within higher education institutions or graduate programs. Such experiences include their advising or dissertation experiences (Jaeger et al., 2011, 2014), participation in service-learning or community-engaged coursework (Dinour et al., 2018; Lu & Lambright, 2010; McDonough et al., 2017), outreach education opportunities as a substitute for teaching assistantships (Laursen et al., 2012), graduate certificate programs (Matthews et al., 2015), and institutional learning communities (Mathis et al., 2016). Despite progress on embedding community engagement within the fabric of graduate education in an institutional setting, the best way to orient and train graduate students to be community-engaged practitioner-scholars is still relatively new territory for the community engagement field.

Regarding graduate student learning and experiences within community engagement professional associations, although these spaces are mentioned in reflective scholarship (Gilvin et al., 2012; Post et al., 2016),

only Kniffin et al. (2021) have published research on the experiences of community-engaged graduate students within professional associations. More research on this topic is needed to better understand the full range of factors and spaces that may play a role in influencing graduate students to claim community-engaged identities and pursue community-engaged work after graduation.

There are a variety of ways to examine professional identity development. Through the concept of socialization, we can begin to understand graduate student professional identity development through participation in a myriad of spaces. According to the model of graduate student socialization initially developed by Weidman et al. (2001), socialization represents "the processes through which individuals gain the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for successful entry into a professional career requiring an advanced level of specialized knowledge and skills" (p. iii). It also posits that this "entry" includes adoption of a professional identity and that socialization happens across different dimensions of the graduate student experience, including in graduate school programs and higher education institutions, as well as professional and personal communities.

Since Weidman et al.'s model was initially published in 2001, multiple researchers have tested it and offered useful critiques. In a revised version of the model (published after data collection and analysis for this dissertation study took place), Weidman and DeAngelo (2020) highlighted research studies that interrogated certain model areas, like identity, as well as areas that remain underexplored within the model, like professional communities. These critiques demonstrate that socialization toward a particular professional identity, specifically through professional associations as a type of professional community, remains an underexplored area of research. This dissertation study contributes to growing this body of research and to understanding if and how professional associations may factor into graduate student socialization toward community engagement.

Research Design and Methods

This dissertation study was a basic, exploratory qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) that examined professional identity development of community-engaged practitioner-scholars through participation in a community engagement professional association's graduate student fellowship—the Imagining America (IA) Publicly Active Graduate Education (PAGE) Fellows program. I used this guiding research question: How does participation in a graduate fellows program offered by a community engagement professional association contribute to the professional identity development of a community-engaged practitioner-scholar? The Michigan State University Institutional Review Board approved the study prior to the onset of research.

Data collection occurred through semi-structured interviews with 15 PAGE Fellows program alumni who self-identified as community-engaged scholar-practitioners and participated in the fellowship between 2008 and 2017. At the time of their participation in the PAGE program, just over two thirds of participants were doctoral students, and the remaining participants were master's students. Participants were enrolled in disciplinary graduate programs in the arts, education, humanities, and social sciences, as well as interdisciplinary graduate programs like American studies, ethnic studies, and liberal arts. At the time they were interviewed, participants' professional titles included artist, curator, director/manager, fellow, founder, professor/instructor, and scholar. A little over half of participants worked in or adjacent to higher education institutions in units such as academic centers or departments, libraries, and museums. The remaining participants were located outside higher education institutions in associations, entrepreneurial pursuits, and software startups.

Data analysis was completed through thematic analysis of interview transcriptions, using an inductive rather than a deductive approach to make meaning from the data. The first coding cycle used an initial coding (i.e., open coding) and categorization process (Saldaña, 2015, pp. 115–119) focused on being open to any discrete codes and categories that emerged from the data. However, multiple participants questioned or chose not to separate out their professional identity and work from other aspects of their identity and lives. Therefore, informed by the first round of coding, the second round of coding used a more holistic approach—one less focused on breaking apart interviews into discrete codes. The second coding cycle used a process of

theming the data (Saldaña, 2015, pp. 198–204) focused on identifying "big ideas" across interviews that brought discrete codes into a more meaningful whole and led to identification of broader overarching themes. From this two-step process six major themes emerged, which were then divided into two findings sections.

Findings

The first section, the people, focused on two themes: *backgrounds* of participants and their *ways of work* as community-engaged practitioner-scholars. Backgrounds highlighted significant aspects of participant backgrounds that they chose to share and felt were key to understanding their professional identities and work. These backgrounds were often deeply intertwined with their values and motivations for their work. Ways of work highlighted the varied ways participants described and talked about their current professional identities and work as community-engaged practitioner-scholars.

The second section, the setting, focused on four additional themes: *Tension within the academy*, *new conceptualizations*, *new relationships*, and *new practices*. Tension within the academy highlighted the challenges community-engaged practitioner-scholars faced within academia, both as graduate students and as recent graduates. The remaining three themes demonstrated how the PAGE program provided a necessary space for these community-engaged practitioner-scholars to move forward in their emerging identity development, despite these challenges, through the development of new conceptualizations, new relationships, and new practices.

The People

> I wonder if there are probably privileges in being able to separate your personal and your professional. Who gets to do that? And who wants to do that? What's the value? What's the risk? What are some unintended consequences of separating them or not? What kind of emotional energy and labor goes into separating them or not? What structures at play in our institutions force us to separate them or not? How do spaces feel when you separate them or not? (Jane)

The decision to frame the findings by dividing the six themes into two sections was inspired by Jane—a study participant. (This dissertation overview includes quotes from one participant; see the full dissertation for additional participant quotes.) Jane wondered about the separation of aspects of identity, specifically separating the personal from the professional, and whether doing so is a privilege experienced only by White individuals. Although this study did not seek to examine the questions Jane posed or connections between personal and social identities and professional identity, these connections clearly emerged from the data. Reflection on the questions Jane posed in her interview led to a first section focused on the people in the study and rich descriptions of study participants that more fully illustrate their multiple identities, characteristics, and life experiences, as well as their professional work and roles.

Backgrounds

Participants' backgrounds, including unique personal and social identities, characteristics, and life experiences, were intricately intertwined from childhood to adulthood. Identities and characteristics that emerged from participant interviews included gender, nationality/culture, race/ethnicity, class, religion, first-generation college student status, and parental or relationship status. Participant life experiences included geographical locations, familial relationships, educational settings, world events, and experiences with privilege and marginalization. Although each participant claimed distinct identities, characteristics, and life experiences, they nonetheless developed and shared similar values and motivations to become community-engaged practitioner-scholars. Regardless of their degree type, graduate program, or discipline, these backgrounds, values, and motivations wove their way into participants' graduate school experiences and future professional roles and careers.

Ways of Work

The complexity of participants' identities, characteristics, and life experiences mirrored the complexity of how they described their identities and work as community-engaged practitioner-scholars. Participants utilized different language (civic, community, activist, public, etc.) and narratives (i.e., when with community engagement colleagues vs. disciplinary colleagues) to describe their work. Yet they also found

common ground in how their work spanned multiple boundaries (e.g., between the university and community or across disciplines and methods) as it imagined and drove forward a more equitable and just world.

The Setting: Higher Education Institutions

> PAGE Fellows just gave me these beautiful examples of scholars who are trying new things and stepping outside of their disciplinary perspectives and being really attached to their neighborhoods, their home communities, their communities that they made these genuine connections with. They're all doing leadership while they were facing a lot of resistance from their peers or from their institution, from faculty advisors. And doing it anyway. (Jane)

Although no interview questions specifically addressed challenges to their emerging identity development, most participants spoke to the challenge of finding supportive spaces for their emerging professional identities as community-engaged practitioner-scholars. Participants, including Jane, specifically named different aspects of and experiences within the academy as unsupportive, which led to the decision to provide rich descriptions of these tensions before addressing participants' experiences with the PAGE program.

Tension Within the Academy

As participants described not only their current professional roles, but also their journeys into those roles from graduate school onward, many stories of tension within the academy emerged. Participants found their emerging identities, including the values and motivations behind those identities, out of alignment with the values and norms of higher education institutions. During their graduate studies, most often these tensions were within academic programs, departments, and even the broader institution that did not support and sometimes directly challenged the emerging community-engaged practitioner-scholar identities of participants. Similar tensions emerged during job searches, both from within their graduate institution (e.g., advisors) and from institutions to which they were applying (e.g., search committees). For those who chose to work in academia, tensions remained evident once they were employed and on an academic career path toward promotion and tenure.

The Setting: IA PAGE Fellows Program

> My first civic memory that really motivated me to want to be in community engagement practices stemmed from my mom . . . at a young age I saw her resistance and her really creative tactics. . . . One of my [other] motivations I would say is really my dad. . . . my mom always brought the head, and my dad brought the hands. I can also see in him so much heart. I really strive in my teaching and in my personal life to try to align the head, heart, and hands. (Jane)

Jane used the metaphor of aligning head, heart, and hands to describe how her family was one factor that shaped her development as a community-engaged practitioner-scholar. She also noted a strong connection between her past familial relationships and experiences, the values and perspectives she holds, and the professional choices she makes. This metaphor and way of thinking was in line with how other study participants described their own development as community-engaged practitioner-scholars and how some even referred to the PAGE program as a family. Reflection on this metaphor led to a second section focused on rich descriptions of participants' experiences with the PAGE program and IA and framed these experiences through the development of new conceptualizations (i.e., revelations of the mind—or head), new relationships (i.e., affirmations of the heart), and new practices in their work (i.e., transformations of the hands).

New Conceptualizations

Participants pointed to the PAGE program and the broader IA network as places where they examined tensions within the academy and emerged with a variety of new professional conceptualizations. Participants realized that there were others inside and outside academia working to reimagine higher education and community engagement. They also observed how arts-based and/or justice-oriented approaches to community engagement could be incorporated into their community-engaged work. Participants then began shifting their own mindsets and moving toward more integrated professional identities and ways of work that embraced community engagement within their research, teaching, or other practice. This movement included developing and

utilizing new vocabulary and narratives around their work. As a result of these shifts and embraces, participants felt more confidence to consider new future professional possibilities as community-engaged practitioner-scholars.

New Relationships

At the same time as participants were examining these tensions and developing new individual conceptualizations of themselves, many were also developing new relationships. They found people within the PAGE program and the broader IA network to whom they related in ways they could not relate to others in their existing professional networks. In finding these people, participants were able to start conversations about their work from a different place, less focused on explaining and justifying their efforts and more focused on understanding and affirming their work. As they developed these new relationships, participants discovered that the relationships felt more compassionate, familial, and relational versus competitive, individualistic, and transactional. Through these types of affirming relationships, participants felt supported and sought to collectively construct professional development opportunities for their emerging identities as community-engaged practitioner-scholars.

New Practices

Finally, because of their individual and collective development, participants both experienced and developed a set of new practices as community-engaged practitioner-scholars. The PAGE program and the broader IA network were spaces where participants were inspired to make and be the change they wanted to see in the world and in academia, including by supporting future community-engaged graduate students. This inspiration also sparked new ways of thinking, being, and doing, especially more interdisciplinary and arts-based approaches to their work as community-engaged practitioner-scholars. Additionally, participants also experienced greater alignment not just in their paid jobs, but also in their life purpose.

Discussion

> I showed up to the [PAGE] summit, and . . . I had just come from caregiving for my dad for the weekend. I missed multiple dissertation deadlines, and I was just not feeling good. Couldn't sleep the night before. I just was not feeling confident, and here I was in this academic space. I'm like, "Great, another reason I have to perform today." We were going around for introductions. It got to me, and I just started crying. I couldn't even get it out, and I said, "Come back to me. I just need a little bit of time." I had never done that before. It was so embarrassing, but I couldn't hold it in. Then we kept going around the circle, and it got to [another fellow]. He started off and said, "I want to share this Adrienne Rich quote, 'There must be those among whom we can sit down and weep and still be counted as warriors.'" Then he proceeded with his introduction. I just felt instantly drawn to this human and felt this sense of relief about what had just happened, as opposed to shame for not performing my academic self or my professional self in that space. [The fellow who shared that quote] described it as radical care. . . . I felt that instantly when he said that quote. Then that carried forth with me—a space where you can care for people where they're at and yes, carry forward supporting their public engagements, identities, projects and scholarship, and career paths, but it's caring first and foremost for each other as humans. (Jane)

This story shared by Jane reflects the power of the PAGE program in participants' professional and personal journeys. The PAGE alumni who took part in this study were diverse in terms of identities, characteristics, and life experiences. Similarly, the way they named and went about their current work as community-engaged practitioner-scholars also varied. However, their values and motivations were similar and accompanied them on their journeys through graduate education, including the PAGE program, and into their future professional roles as community-engaged practitioner-scholars.

Participants also shared the experience of challenging higher education institutional environments due to their unique identities, characteristics, experiences, values, and motivations as community-engaged practitioner-scholars. They brought those challenges into the spaces of the PAGE pro-

gram and the broader IA network. Rather than finding additional tension, they found the opposite—a community that recognized their challenges and actively worked to address them through reimagining higher education and community engagement. They also found an affirming community where they could collectively work to provide a supportive space to further explore and learn new ways of knowing, doing, and being that embraced community-engaged identities and work.

As part of participants' professional and personal journeys, IA and the PAGE program provided necessary spaces for them to acknowledge a lack of alignment of their head, heart, and hands with the values and structures of the academy and to move toward greater alignment through new conceptualizations, relationships, and practices developed through participation in the PAGE program. After participating in the PAGE program, participants felt more confident embracing new community-oriented aspects of their identity and work, more motivated to expand the scope of their community-engaged work, and more driven to pursue community-engaged roles and create similar spaces for others interested in this type of work. These spaces were critical not only to participants' ongoing professional identity development as community-engaged practitioner-scholars, but also to their ability to persist through graduation in the face of challenging higher education environments. Just as importantly, these spaces were also critical to their survival and growth as human beings.

Although socialization (Weidman et al., 2001) toward community engagement (i.e., networking and mentoring) did occur through IA and the PAGE program, the fellowship setting also focused on graduate student well-being and inclusion and functioned in a way similar to counterspaces (Case & Hunter, 2012). The framework of counterspaces provides an avenue for "thinking critically about and investigating how settings—and the transactional processes that unfold within them—are associated with the promotion of psychological wellness for various marginalized populations" (Case & Hunter, 2012, Abstract). Additionally, IA and PAGE focused on building relationships and graduate student professional development in community with one another, similar to how communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) function. The framework of communities of practice points to social learning as "the fundamental process by which we learn and so become who we are" (Wenger, 1998, Abstract). Although socialization is a commonly used lens to understand graduate student professional identity development, communities of practice and counterspaces are other lenses that provide additional understanding of community-engaged graduate students' experiences and identity development through relational and communal professional development settings like the PAGE Fellows program. In particular, the lens of counterspaces points to the importance of relational and communal professional development spaces that both acknowledge harm and promote healing. When rhetoric does not match reality for higher education institutions' commitment to community engagement, community-engaged practitioner-scholars may find that relational and communal counterspaces to the academy are necessary. These spaces allow them to reset and reframe, collectively organize, and push back against normative socialization processes of the academy that do not acknowledge or encourage them to embrace their complex, multifaceted identities, values, and motivations and that pose a challenge to their well-being.

Limitations

This study focused on one professional association (IA) and specific professional development program for graduate students within that professional association (the PAGE program). Other community engagement professional associations offer professional development for graduate students, but those programs were outside the scope of this study. Eligibility for the PAGE program is limited to graduate students who study at IA member institutions, which are all U.S.-based institutions, so the study sample was limited to students studying at U.S.-based, IA member higher education institutions. In line with the focus of IA, the PAGE program primarily supports graduate students whose work and/or graduate programs are in the arts, humanities, and design fields, so the study sample did not represent the full diversity of graduate programs, academic disciplines, or professional roles. Therefore, results are not generalizable to all graduate students or all professional associations.

Implications

This study offers several key takeaways for consideration by both scholars and practitioners with regard to professional development via professional associations for graduate students who identify as community-engaged practitioner-scholars. These takeaways also have relevance to research or practice associated with community engagement associations, programs for emerging community-engaged practitioner-scholars, and other learning environments outside community engagement, higher education, or professional associations where individuals are experiencing professional marginalization. For one example, see Van Schyndel's (2023) publication, *Interdisciplinary Graduate Student Fellowship Development: Including Community Engagement and the Arts and Humanities*, which translates these research findings into recommendations for how others might create similar fellowship programs focusing on graduate education and professional development inclusive of methods of community engagement and of the arts, humanities, and humanistic social sciences.

Recommendations

1. Individuals must be treated like whole people, beyond just a professional or academic being, to truly understand any aspect of their experiences. Doing so is particularly fundamental to creating supportive spaces, communities, programs, or policies for graduate students with an interest in community engagement.

2. Those supporting the professional development of community-engaged practitioner-scholars must be prepared and open to considering the layered identities, characteristics, and experiences of these individuals, as well as the related and complex values and motivations behind the work these individuals do. They must also acknowledge that the work of community engagement is often complicated and messy, which can add an additional layer of complexity to graduate studies that include a focus on community engagement.

3. Learning and development experiences, within both higher education and professional associations, must not only acknowledge personal identities, characteristics, experiences, values, motivations, and professional desires and realities, but also encourage graduate students to draw upon them as they explore and grow into new professional roles and community-engaged work.

4. Many higher education institutions do not support whole-person development as just described, so it is important to acknowledge that graduate students interested in community engagement may be experiencing marginalization on multiple levels during their graduate studies, including as community-engaged practitioner-scholars.

5. However, graduate students may also find spaces of resistance to marginalization through participation in professional or personal communities. Professional development spaces like IA and the PAGE program can have a deeply positive impact on graduate students and their professional identities and practices as community-engaged practitioner-scholars. The higher education and community engagement fields must work toward creating more of these kinds of spaces, educating faculty and staff about these spaces, and developing centralized hubs of resources for graduate students seeking this kind of additional support.

Conclusion

To support sustained well-being and professional development of boundary spanners (Van Schyndel et al., 2019; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010) in graduate education who view themselves as community-engaged practitioner-scholars, we must look to successful professional development examples in many educational settings, including outside graduate school programs—especially as academia has the potential to harm, as well as benefit, graduate students. Professional communities, such as professional associations, can provide an alternate setting to what graduate students may experience inside the academy, especially when offering graduate student programs designed with principles of relationship-building, community, wellness, and inclusion in mind. Graduate student professional development offered by professional associations must go beyond invitations to networking and mentoring opportunities. It must build relational communities of individuals with commitments to being inclusive of the wide range of identities, characteristics, and

backgrounds they encompass. Spaces where individuals are encouraged and supported to bring their whole selves to this work *and* to push back against norms of academia that go against their values and motivations as community-engaged practitioner-scholars will help pave the way toward a more just and inclusive future for the field and greater well-being for community-engaged practitioner-scholars. This exploratory study shares an example of one such space, IA's PAGE Fellows program, and calls on future researchers to examine a greater diversity of graduate students and organizational contexts that similarly set graduate students up for success as professionals and human beings.

About the Author

Trina L. Van Schyndel, Ph.D. *(she/her) is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Minnesota Institute on the Environment. Her current research focuses on program development for community-engaged graduate students and professionals. She earned her PhD in higher, adult, and lifelong education from Michigan State University and MS in natural resources from the University of Wisconsin - Stevens Point.*

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