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REFLECTIVE ESSAYS

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From the Editor...

Shannon O. Brooks

I am pleased to present 2025's final issue of the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* (JHEOE), Volume 29, Issue 4. This collection highlights the many ways higher education institutions partner with communities, ranging from examining student identity development through community engagement and the creation of assessment tools to the role of rural colleges as anchor institutions. The articles featured in this issue explore the nuances of service-learning in multiple contexts, the internal power dynamics inherent in grant-funded engaged research, and the transformative impact of longer-term higher education access programs. Together, these contributions offer a comprehensive look at how scholars and practitioners are navigating collaborations between the academy and the public sphere to foster more reciprocal, sustainable, and impactful engagement.

Building on these overarching themes, the **Research Articles** section opens with a focus on civic identity development. Leading off this section is "Authoring civic identities in figured world," Kaligotla's case study which draws on theories of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1999; Kegan, 1982, 1994) and figured worlds (Holland et al., 1998) to understand how civic identity is developed through curricular community engagement. This study identifies five phases of development during which students integrate college and civic experiences into their identity.

Transitioning from theoretical frameworks of identity to the practical need for empirical measurement, Tantia et al. present "Development and validation of Service-Learning Experience Scale." This article charts the creation of a new instrument tested with 290 students in India, moving beyond student learning outcomes toward a holistic measurement of student development. The result is the Service-Learning Experience Scale (SLES), a tool designed as a multidimensional measurement of students' service-learning experiences. This article provides a robust overview of previous literature about existing instruments along with a study examining the utility of the SLES for institutions, faculty, and partners to use to interpret the impact of service-learning.

While these first two studies focus on the student experience, our final research article shifts the lens toward higher education's impact on rural communities. In "Rural anchor institutions: How rural public colleges support the well-being of rural people and communities," Jenks et al. flip the script on the typical study focused on urban-serving anchor institutions by examining the characteristics and missions of Rural Public Colleges (RPCs) and their importance and functioning in rural communities through an anchor institution lens. Findings demonstrate that RPCs function as anchor institutions in crucial ways, including providing postsecondary access, employment, and development of unique economic activities specific to rural communities. By examining RPCs through the anchor institution lens, the authors demonstrate how these schools are vital to postsecondary access, local employment, and rural public health.

Projects with Promise are early-stage descriptions of projects and partnerships that describe preliminary research and evaluation, plans for sustainability, and lessons learned for future research. The first article in this section provides an overview of the Rutgers Future Scholars Program and its impact. Gale et al. describe a college access program that partners with five school districts across New Jersey to provide a range of programming for first-generation students designed to increase college access and attainment. Evaluation of the impact of this program demonstrates a positive impact on psychosocial outcomes—such as grit, perseverance, and communication—and the educational achievement of participating students.

This article is followed by a study by Hodge et al. that examines student participation in the Shelter Crew Program, which provides an opportunity for students to volunteer with Catholic Charities Shelters serving individuals experiencing homelessness in a course employing critical service-learning pedagogy. In this study, students' written reflections and focus groups illustrate changes in student perception related to their understanding of homelessness and their interest in continuing to engage and volunteer.

Our final Project with Promise article is a unique piece by a student participant in a community-engaged learning (CEL) course at Gonzaga University co-authored with his faculty advisor. Noah reflects on his experience as a student in Foundations in Sports Outreach, a CEL course partnering with Gonzaga Family Haven, and how this experience led him to coordinate a sports outreach program as part of his honors project. This article fills an important gap by providing insight into the multidimensional learning that takes place in these experiences and impact of CEL beyond the classroom.

Finally, this issue concludes with our **Reflective Essay** section, which moves from specific projects to broader critiques of the field's professional and research practices. Denny et al. lead off this section by exploring the intersection of grant writing and public engagement, proposing a framework that prioritizes ethical, collaborative project development from the design phase.

Deepening this look at internal university dynamics, Chikkatur and Oliver explore the power imbalances between faculty and staff involved in grant-funded participatory action research (PAR), questioning who receives recognition for the labor of engagement. The issue then concludes with Adelaja's essay on expansive public-private research collaborations. Drawing on the author's experience, the piece examines "boundary activities" at the nexus of the university, government, and private sectors that result in innovative entrepreneurial activities.

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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Authoring Civic Identities in Figured Worlds: A Case Study of a Curricular Community Engagement Program

Lalita Kaligotla

Abstract

Civic identity is of scholarly import given ongoing investments in community engagement in higher education. Despite extensive scholarship, gaps remain in our understanding of students' civic identity development. This case study explicates the ways in which a curricular community engagement program influenced the development of baccalaureate students' civic identity. Leveraging theoretical borderlands (Abes, 2009), and bringing to bear two theories in identity development—self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1999) and figured worlds (Holland et al., 1998)—the study offers a new perspective about the impact of curricular community engagement in shaping students' civic identity. Findings revealed that early experiences influenced students' college choices and subsequent civic work in college. Furthermore, curricular community engagement played a critical role in the evolution of students' identities as civic agents and engaged citizens, highlighting that such experiences are crucial to fulfilling the civic mission of higher education institutions. Findings have important implications for pedagogy, policy, and praxis.

Keywords: higher education, civic identity, self-authorship, figured worlds

As democracies grapple with intractable problems, including persistent inequality, climate change, propagation of disinformation, and deep-rooted health and educational inequities, there is ever greater need for engaged citizens and civic leaders (Sun & Anderson, 2012; Youniss, 2011). Participation in civil society is not a default condition. Instead, it is a set of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are acquired—they are learned and therefore must be taught (Dewey, 1916). Institutions of higher education play an important role in developing citizens who are critical to finding solutions for systemic challenges (Astin & Astin, 2000). Establishing collective goals and working with others to achieve them are essential components of civic leadership (Christens & Dolan, 2011) and vital for democratic societies (Krause & Montenegro, 2017).

Preparing students for civic participation is recognized as integral to the mission of higher education (Allen, 2016; Daniels et al., 2021; National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012). A core purpose of universities is "effectively educating students to be creative, caring, constructive citizens of democratic societ[ies]" (Harkavy, 2006, p. 9). University-based civic engagement has been recognized as important, particularly since the 1980s with the founding of Campus Compact in 1985 (Campus Compact, n.d., "Our History"). Despite these efforts, civic and political participation among American youth remains low (Kiesa et al., 2022), as does their opinion of our nation's institutions (Pew Research Center, 2023). Therefore, it is vital to better understand and enhance the ways in which college students develop a sense of civic identity.

This instrumental case study leverages "theoretical borderlands" (Abes, 2009, p.

141) as a framework, bringing to bear two important theories on identity development—self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1999; Kegan, 1982, 1994) and the theory of figured worlds (Holland et al., 1998)—to glean insights about the ways in which a university-based curricular community engagement program fostered civic identity among students. The following section will provide an overview of relevant literature.

Literature Review

Civic identity has been described as a form of identity in which one sees oneself as "an active participant in society with a strong commitment to working with others" for the common good (Hatcher, 2011, p. 85, as cited in Hudgins, 2020). It comprises values, behaviors, attitudes, and knowledge (Johnson, 2017) that together shape one's sense of self as a civic agent—an individual who is able to work across differences to address social challenges (Boyte, 2009).

This framing is in alignment with literature describing identity formation as developing a sense of self (Baxter Magolda, 2001), developing a sense of self in relation to others, and developing a capacity for meaning making (Kegan, 1994). Knefelkamp (2008) suggested that civic identity should be considered on par with other identities such as race, ethnicity, gender, and nationality, and that developing civic identity should be one of the outcomes of college education. Although some scholars have used the notion of engaged citizenship interchangeably with civic identity (see, for example, Lott, 2013; Youniss et al., 1997; Youniss & Yates, 1999; Zaff et al., 2010), extant literature falls short in investigating the development of civic identity (Johnson, 2017).

Consensus about the role of higher education in preparing engaged citizens with the capacity to effect social change (Mlyn & McBride, 2020; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2005), and the proliferation of community-engaged curricular and cocurricular programming, may suggest that civic engagement is inherent to college education. However, there is variability in the nature and extent of civic engagement among college students as well as in our understanding of how it may shape their civic identity (Johnson, 2017; Rhoads, 2009). Dominant theories about college student development have largely centered on cognitive developmental models (King et al., 2009), with less exploration of other modes. Extant research also does not fully account for students from nondominant groups (Taylor, 2016). Given the increasing diversity in higher education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), greater inclusivity in the study of student development is imperative. Finally, current literature is focused more on identifying and characterizing developmental stages and less on contextually specific processes. In other words, we know more about "the producer of change, but not its process" (Granott & Parziale, 2002, p. 2). Addressing this shortfall necessitates answering the call to study development of civic identity in context (King et al., 2009; Patton et al., 2016; Taylor, 2017).

Identity is a complex construct that is conceptualized across psychology and sociology (Deaux & Burke, 2010); it is construed and developed through membership in formal or informal groups, and through socially derived meanings (Bringle & Wall, 2020). Individuals often have multiple coherently organized identities that are enmeshed in the contexts within which they operate (Knefelkamp, 2008). These identities confirm self-worth (Klein et al., 2007), provide purpose (Bronk, 2013; Damon, 2001; Malin, 2018; Malin et al., 2017), and facilitate social and civic interactions (Bringle et al., 2015; Mitchell et al., 2013; Yates & Youniss, 2006). Knefelkamp (2008) described civic identity as characterized by (a) engagement with others; (b) intellectual and ethical development; (c) holistic practice, encompassing critical thinking and empathy; and (d) individual choice reinforced by repeated action and active reflection. Therefore, civic identity can be thought of as one's self-concept facilitated by one's civic and educational experiences (Steinberg et al., 2011; Bringle & Clayton, 2021). The following section discusses the theoretical framework that undergirds the study.

Theoretical Framework

This study was informed by the theoretical borderlands approach put forth by Abes (2009). Joining other voices arguing for leveraging multiple paradigms in research and analysis, or "paradigm proliferation" (Donmoyer, 2006; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005; Lather 2006; Tierny, 1993), Abes made the case for bringing together multiple theoretical perspectives not as a methodological "blueprint" but "as one possibility." Thus, utilizing theoretical borderlands provides a window into "students' complex understandings and experiences with their identities . . . as they navigate their realities" (Abes, 2009, pp. 141–144).

Self-Authorship and Civic Identity

Building on Kegan's (1982, 1994) work on identity formation, Baxter Magolda applied the notion of self-authorship, or the "capacity to define one's beliefs, identity, and social relationships," to identity development among college students (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 269). In her 21-year longitudinal study of individuals aged 18 to 39, Baxter Magolda extended Kegan's findings that epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal factors help build belief systems that shape identity and facilitate the development of authentic and mature relationships with diverse others (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Self-authorship occurs through a process of information gathering, reflection, and analysis. With youth in particular, self-authorship includes exploration and reevaluation of values, making meaning of information gathered through experiences, and prioritizing goals that are consistent with one's sense of self.

Baxter Magolda described self-authorship as evolving along a developmental trajectory from relying on external factors, moving toward internal motivators, and arriving at self-authorship—an understanding of self-in-context. The various phases on the journey to self-authorship include following formulas defined by external forces; arriving at the crossroads, where one seeks to become more autonomous; authoring one's life, characterized by reflection and realignment of one's beliefs; and establishing an internal foundation where a "solidified comprehensive system of belief is established" (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. 155). Self-authorship emerges through a learning partnership model (Baxter Magolda, 2004) by creating contexts that facilitate meaning making. Additionally, principles that optimize self-authorship include validating learners' capacity to know, enabling them to have greater agency in the learning process, and framing learning as a process of mutual construction of meaning. Curricular community engagement experiences during college are a critical avenue for facilitating the development of civic identity, as they enable students to have greater and more structured involvement as well as agency in community-engaged learning. Such work also provides rich contexts for civic work and meaning making. The overarching goal of facilitating the journey toward self-authorship is to "help young adults make the transition from being shaped by society to [then] shaping society" (Baxter Magolda, 1999, p. 630).

Figured Worlds of Civic Identity

Learning occurs in complex ways, combining acquisition of knowledge and development of identities in the contexts within which knowledge is acquired (Gonsalves et al., 2019). By extension, it is hard to grasp learning and learning outcomes without understanding students' interactions with the contexts within which they are learning (Engeström, 1987). These contexts are shaped by broader discourses and philosophies of the institutions and fields of learning, which in turn are shaped by key figures and relevant actors that are part of these ecosystems (Lemke, 2001). Thus, in applying the theory of figured worlds to understand how civic identity is shaped, it is useful to examine how students navigate the discourses and spaces in which civic learning is facilitated, and how in so doing, they are learning to be civic agents.

Put forth by Holland et al. (1998), figured worlds are psychologically constructed and interpretive worlds or communities that operate "dialogically and dialectically and are defined by power dynamics and spaces of agency and improvisation" (Chang, 2014, p. 30). Figured worlds are metaphorical realms where identities are developed through dialogue, debate, and navigating power dynamics, with relationships playing an important role. They are avenues whereby identities are produced and individuals "figure" who they are in relation to social and cultural contexts of which they are a part. Within these contexts "particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and certain outcomes are valued over others" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 52). Thus, figured worlds shape behaviors and influence actions (Hatt, 2007).

In the context of curricular community engagement where there are a variety of actors and learning occurs in multidimensional ways, figured worlds offer a framework to understand how identity is shaped. Another interesting aspect is the notion of positionality within figured worlds. Positionality has been explicated in educational contexts, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields where students assign themselves certain positions such as "math nerd" or "science girl," and these positions in turn shape who they are (Carlone et al., 2014; Cipollone et al., 2020; Gonsalves et al., 2019). Thus, "figured worlds rely on cultural models" (Jackson & Seiler, 2013, p. 828) or "schemas that capture or guide attention, help evaluate the value of experiences, or enable the drawing of inferences" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 297). Additionally, some actors and certain positions may hold implicit power and influence within figured worlds without explicit authority or institutional endorsement (Gonsalves et al., 2019). The theory of figured worlds has been used to understand identity formation in many contexts, and offers great potential to understand how civic identity develops—it expands our heuristic models beyond the psychological realm to social and cultural factors. The following section describes the research design and data collection processes; it also includes the author's positionality statement.

Research Design

Given the dynamic nature of the interactions that the research question raises—how and what are the ways in which curricular community engagement experiences shape students' civic identity—and given that students' identities develop as they actively construct and make meaning of their experiences, this study was informed by the constructivist (Dewey, 1938; Piaget, 1969/1971) paradigm, and situated within the interpretivist framework (Glesne, 2011). Students simultaneously shape and are shaped by contexts as they interact with them.

The Case

In accordance with Merriam's (1998) definition of a case as a "single entity or unit, or phenomenon occurring in a bounded context" (p. 27), the study explored how curricular community engagement experiences shape students' civic identity, focusing on a specific curricular community engagement program. The case study was based on a nationally recognized, yearlong, cohort-based curricular community engagement experience for undergraduate students (Colby et al., 2003; 2007) at a private, not-for-profit, research intensive, four-year institution. The program includes two courses that bookend a central community engagement experience, with the initial course (in the spring) designed to prepare students for the community engagement experience in the summer. The program's culminating experience is the second course, which students take during the fall semester following their community engagement project. This course enables students to reflect on their community-based work and envision their civic work going forward.

Data Collection and Research Ethics

Data were gathered through semistructured interviews with study participants and from secondary sources (obtained with permission) such as course material and websites describing programmatic elements, including course and project details. Secondary data were selected based on their relevance to the case (i.e., the curricular community engagement experience that was the focus of this study), information shared by participants during interviews, and documents accessible in the public domain (websites, etc.).

To ensure trustworthiness in the research, the study was conducted adhering to procedural as well as contextual ethics and best practices, including garnering appropriate Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, and adhering to ethical processes throughout (such as ensuring participants' agency, safety, transparency, and clarity). Semistructured virtual interviews, lasting 60–90 minutes each, with 13 students all part of one cohort of the program, were conducted by the researcher and probed their past, ongoing, and anticipated community engagement experiences. The interview format incorporated both flexibility and structure (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), navigating the conversation based on contextual cues and information.

Positionality Statement

In the spirit of critical reflexivity, I would like to acknowledge a deep commitment to pluralism. I am an educator and a proponent of experiential learning, particularly of community-engaged pedagogies. As a scholar, I subscribe to the philosophies of constructivism and pragmatism and believe that we each create our realities and make meaning of our experiences based on our backgrounds, deeply held values, and lived experiences. While recognizing that this lens likely shaped the work, I tried to ensure fidelity to the research process by incorporating reflexivity throughout, and by examining the biases that I might bring to the research. I strived to maintain fairness, respect, and openness to the perspectives of study participants, and integrity in reporting study findings. I am deeply appreciative of the generosity and vulnerability with which participants shared their stories, and I did my utmost to preserve their voices as shared—it is my sincere hope that participants' own stories shine through.

The next section describes the data analysis process and delves into the findings of the study.

Data Analysis

Data from primary (interviews) and secondary (content analysis of documents shared) sources were coded and analyzed to seek patterns, and to understand how and the ways in which civic identity was shaped. Coding and interpretation were initially conducted independently by the author and then cross-verified with a colleague. All interviews were recorded after consent was obtained from participants and transcribed using the software tool Otter.ai (https://otter.ai). Leveraging Miles et al.'s (2020) approach, a coding strategy was developed for direction and consistency. MAXQDA (https://www.maxqda.com/), a software tool used for qualitative data analysis, was utilized. A priori codes based on themes from extant literature were initially used, followed by axial codes in later stages (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For example, an initial code was on civic experiences prior to entering college. Based on this initial coding, axial codes that emerged were experiences with family, experiences in school, and so on. This process resulted in grouping and better interpretation, which enabled delving deeper into themes that emerged. A "dynamic and recursive" approach guided data collection and analysis (Merriam, 1998, as cited in Yazan, 2015, p. 145). In other words, analysis of data collected in the initial stages helped shape data collection in ensuing phases. Questions were sharpened or dynamically shifted, and a winnowing process was utilized for data analysis, moving from broad themes that emerged across multiple sources, narrowing to more specific themes. Findings represent participants' own words and language (Miles et al., 2020). To triangulate, secondary data were mined for themes that stood out or that corresponded with primary data (Bowen, 2009).

Study Participants

Interviews yielded diverse and wide-ranging narratives about students' community engagement experiences and civic journeys. Pseudonyms of interviewees, along with their self-reported identities including self-identified gender, pronouns, and ethnicity/race, are listed in Table 1.

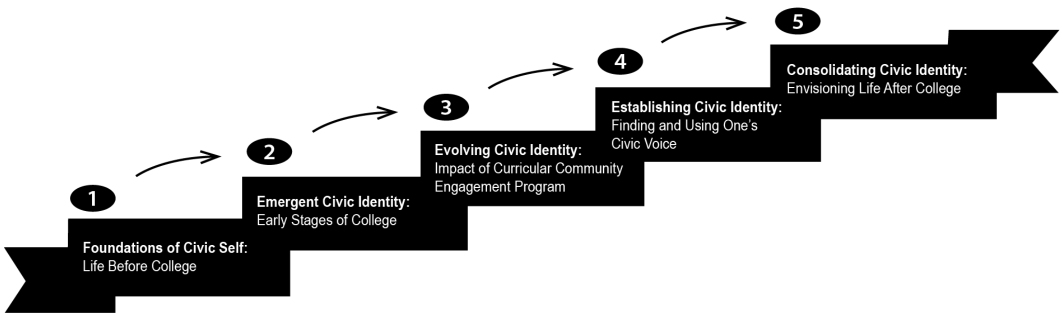
Findings

Informed by models proposed by Baxter

Table 1. Self-Reported Identities of Student Participants

Pseudonym	Self-reported identities: Gender identity, preferred pronouns, race/ethnicity
Brandon	Male, he/him, African American
Danielle	Female, she/her, Biracial (Black/White)
Jay	Male, he/him, Asian American
Kayla	Female, she/her, Biracial (Mexican/White)
Leonard	Male, he/him, Asian
Michelle	Female, she/her, White
Olivia	Female, she/her, Asian American
Paz	Two-spirit, they/them, Latine/Native American
Raina	Female, she/her, Asian American
Ron	Male, he/him, Asian American
Sam	Male, he/him, Asian American
Sara	Female, she/her, Biracial (Arab/South Asian)
Sofia	Female, she/her/ella, Hispanic/Latinx

Figure 1. Trajectory of Authoring Civic Identity



Magolda (2001) and others (Johnson, 2017; Nagaoka et al., 2015), the findings of this study indicate that civic identity is shaped in five phases along a developmental trajectory as described and illustrated in Figure 1.

Phase 1. Foundations of Civic Self—The Influence of Early Experiences

Early experiences were central to discovering civic life and shaping civic identity for all students. These experiences paved the way for a sense of belonging, a desire to give back, and finding purpose. For instance, one of the students, Olivia, noted, "I wasn't the person running marathons, you know, I was the one who'd go to the beaches and pick up trash to protect the environment." Some students volunteered with family, church groups, or schools, shaping their values and aspirations. Others, from less civically oriented families, leaned toward community service in pursuit of a sense of belonging. Social connections that come with community service served both in catalyzing and sustaining civic work. Early influences on students' civic identities weren't just about finding their place, which they were; they were also journeys toward personal growth, empowerment, and self-efficacy. Students transitioned to college not as "blank slates" but with foundational identities shaped by formative experiences.

Phase 2. Emergent Civic Identity—Transition to College

Having entered college during the COVID-19 pandemic, participants experienced complex and multifaceted journeys in transitioning to college. They adapted to change, overcame challenges, and built resilience at a pivotal stage in their lives. They also found belonging and navigated their academic and extracurricular activities in interconnected ways. For instance, Paz, a student who described themselves as Latine, spoke about their involvement in a student-run ESL training program for Latino/a adults as "empowering"; Sofia, a student from a migrant farmworker family, spoke in similar terms about her involvement with Define American, a student-run organization that advocates for immigrants, migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers; Leonard, who came to college with a background in the performing arts, was engaged in civic outreach through his involvement with a student-run performing arts group; and Jay, who had a long-standing commitment to combating climate change, engaged with organizations advocating for environmental issues. All of these factors made for a rich narrative of growth and reaffirmation of purpose, but also continued evolution and fine-tuning of their civic identities.

Narratives provide a glimpse into values, aspirations, and experiences, and how they continued to shape students' evolving identities during a transformative period in their lives. Although participants did describe encountering developmental obstacles, they also reflected on the critical role these experiences played in helping them build resilience, and in finding alignment between personal values and societal needs. For instance, Sofia spoke about feeling at a disadvantage in comparison to many of her peers who came to college with "an elite private school education," and felt she "had to work twice as hard." Many students, especially those like Sofia who were first in their families to attend college, also felt that their civic identities were deeply intertwined with a sense of responsibility to uplift the communities that they were from. Sofia spoke about her work in college and her future aspirations thus: "The work I am doing now, the work I'm going to continue to do isn't just for myself, it's for every person from my community who didn't have the chance to make it."

Phase 3. Evolving Civic Identity—Impact of the Curricular Community Engagement Program

The yearlong curricular community engagement program was cohort-based and comprised two courses bookending a summer experiential community-based project. The program emphasized ethical community engagement, with facilitated discussions and open dialogue in place of traditional lectures. As the students described it, faculty made space for authentic and occasionally difficult conversations, which facilitated reflexivity, deep listening, and a collaborative approach to working with communities. For instance, Michelle said that the program "challenged me to ask myself about the civic purpose of my education," enabling her to make linkages between academic work and civic work. Combining academic preparation with independently designed projects enabled students to pursue causes that had personal resonance, thereby fostering a deeper and more sustained sense of civic responsibility. Paz, whose project was at an organization working to expand community services to non-native (English) speakers described the work thus: "We have this big community . . . it is such a good resource to mobilize . . . how can we use it to create equitable access . . . uncovering the strengths of Latinx community networks that help make our families healthier."

Acknowledging the significance of both identity and shared humanity, students highlighted the importance of fostering relationships in a diverse yet interconnected world. They also grappled with the tensions of working with, and in, communities where their identities differed from that of community members, learning to navigate these circumstances with honesty and humility. For instance, Sara had this to say about her community engagement project:

> If I wanted to do community work, there is a part of me that's like, don't you have to have the same identity as the people? But I also realized that you're not always going to walk in and be the same person as the people you're trying to support. And so, what do you do about that? When you share an identity, it does not necessarily mean you understand the person completely. That's a false narrative. I feel like a good community organizer knows that no matter what, even if you share very similar identities with the people that you are working with, it still is a lot of work to understand the community. But also, the amount of work and the amount of listening and the amount of time you must sit on your hands and resist the urge to act . . . extends the farther your experiences are than the people you're working with.

Recognizing that social change doesn't always require large-scale action, but can start with smaller, incremental steps, seemed to help students prepare for the long arc of civic work. Almost all of the students spoke about the notion of "thinking big and acting small," something they had discussed in class. Jay elaborated on how this helped him think about his own work in advocating for climate action:

> It's easy to talk about changing a whole system, but it's actually better to have a different conversation, to do something different, when you could for example, start a composting initiative, and build awareness about an environmental issue. . . . get kids involved in it. That's more useful and feasible.

Thus, the curricular community engagement program played an explicit role in both enabling students to have greater agency in the learning process and in creating contexts that facilitated civic behavior and shaped civic identity; it also gave them the tools and language to sustain their civic behavior and civic identity beyond program participation.

Phase 4. Establishing Civic Identity and Finding One's Civic Voice

According to study participants, college education should go beyond preparing students for workforce participation, and should also foster personal growth, cultivate critical thinking, build democratic skills, and develop the willingness to engage with communities. Academic and extracurricular activities were an avenue by which students built skills and knowledge for personal and professional growth, but they also seemed to play a part in shaping their sense of identity and purpose. There was significant overlap between choice of academic (both majors and minors) and extracurricular activities among participants. Students found synergistic ways to connect their work in the classroom to activities beyond it. They often leveraged academic skills toward advocating for issues that they cared about, indicating the exercise of (civic) agency. Education was viewed not only as essential for career preparation, but also as necessary to leverage for broader societal benefit. Jay's perspective on the purpose of college was illuminating:

> It isn't just about efficiency or isn't just to make as much money as possible. Going to a place like [this university] or to any college for that matter comes with the responsibility that you're not just going to go out and earn a lot of money, but you're also going to make a difference . . . to lift up communities, or address issues you care about.

Scholarships, financial aid, and other funds to make college more accessible facilitated greater civic participation among study participants. As Sam put it, the expectations of a college education and a career completely flipped once he knew he had a scholarship to support his education. He said,

> My expectations of college have absolutely changed because I came to the university without a scholarship. I was investing into my education so wanted a return on that investment (e.g., a higher paying job). Getting a scholarship flipped that script—now it was the university investing in me. This is a whole different ball game—I do things because I think they're intrinsically important, intellectually stimulating, or serve some public good.

Thus, students were finding powerful ways to fine-tune their civic voices and discovering a sense of agency by shaping public discourse through their civic work. It was also evident that as students were crafting their academic, cocurricular, and extracurricular experiences in ways that were synergistic with their interests and identities, they were also actively constructing these experiences around how they saw themselves and whom they saw themselves becoming—in other words, identities and lived experiences. The positions that these identities placed them in were instrumental in helping them craft their civic role and purpose.

The civic journeys that the students were on led to growth and development in their capacities as leaders and agents of change. Through critical reflexivity and by intellectually vesting themselves into a variety of causes, the students grew in maturity and efficacy of actions. Their notions of what it meant to be a leader and an agent of social change seemed to evolve from more traditional stereotypes toward a broader and more collective orientation. For example, Jay said that through his experiences he came to recognize and appreciate that the "hardest part of leadership is how you articulate your vision in a manner that encapsulates and connects to the vision of other people." Similarly, Sofia said,

> My work made me reevaluate leadership—what should it look like? And sometimes it's good to give power to people who are closest to the problem. Because they should have agency to provide solutions.

Collectively, students' perspectives portrayed adaptive leadership—a transformation in their understanding of themselves as leaders and civic agents.

Phase 5. Envisioning the Future—Consolidating Civic Identity and Looking Ahead

As students looked back on their time in college and looked to their futures beyond college, they reflected on the evolution of their expectations of college—shifting from a singular focus on gaining marketable skills to intentionally building experiences and relationships. Leveraging their education to advance social causes appeared to be a central concern for many of them. Several believed that extant social structures and policies presented profound challenges for their generation, and continued to create untenable circumstances, particularly for marginalized communities. They believed these challenges could be addressed only by seeking community-centered and community-informed solutions. As Paz said, "Given what we just went through [referring to the pandemic], I could never fathom not doing something for [my] community, especially now, especially after the pandemic." In short, they gave voice to a generation that is faced with existential crises and has little faith in current leaders or institutions to tackle them justly. As Sara put it, "You know climate change is here. . . . sometimes I'm like, wow, the world is ending, and no one seems to care."

In envisioning their ongoing civic journeys, although the specific trajectories varied, students seemed committed to doing work that would make a difference, regardless of its context, nature, or scope. They also imagined working on the issues that they cared about, for the near-term future, reflecting recognition of the long, slow arc of change. For instance, Jay imagined continuing his work advocating for climate action beyond his time in college:

> I would love to work on the global issue of climate justice . . . how can we build alliances between different communities all across the world, so that they can share knowledge with each other? And pursue strategies that aren't driven just by, like corporate interests, but rather like community-based action?

However, the struggles of choosing something that resonated with their civic selves, and balancing that with what they deemed to be a means to a sustainable livelihood, was also paramount for many. As Sofia, a student whose parents are migrant farmworkers, put it, "I want to do so much work for my community, but I can't help others if I am not helping myself. And that means financial stability." For some students, choice of direction seemed clear—either a job that would lead to a sustainable salary, or else work that felt meaningful, with the hope that it would bring a sustainable income. Others, however, were not satisfied with what they saw as mutually exclusive trajectories. These students viewed their futures with hope and optimism, yet also with uncertainty, and the weight of responsibility. As Michelle put it, "Much of the work of building community happens around tables. So, I'm hoping that I'm hosting dinner and having conversations around a table and hoping that soon I actually have a table."

Data also suggested that civic identity is shaped not solely by individual psychological factors but also through social and cultural influences, or figured worlds (Holland et al., 1998). Conceptualized as culturally constructed spaces where individuals voluntarily enter or are recruited, they are instrumental in shaping one's experiences and actions. Figured worlds serve as "landscapes of action," where individuals "learn to recognize each other as a particular sort of actor, sometimes with strong emotional attachments." Integral to "identity work," figured worlds elucidate how individuals construct their identities within various social contexts, influencing their actions and perceptions through assumed or assigned social roles within interconnected figured worlds (Urrieta, 2007, pp. 107–108). Figure 2 provides a depiction of elements and processes involved in the figured worlds of civic identity.

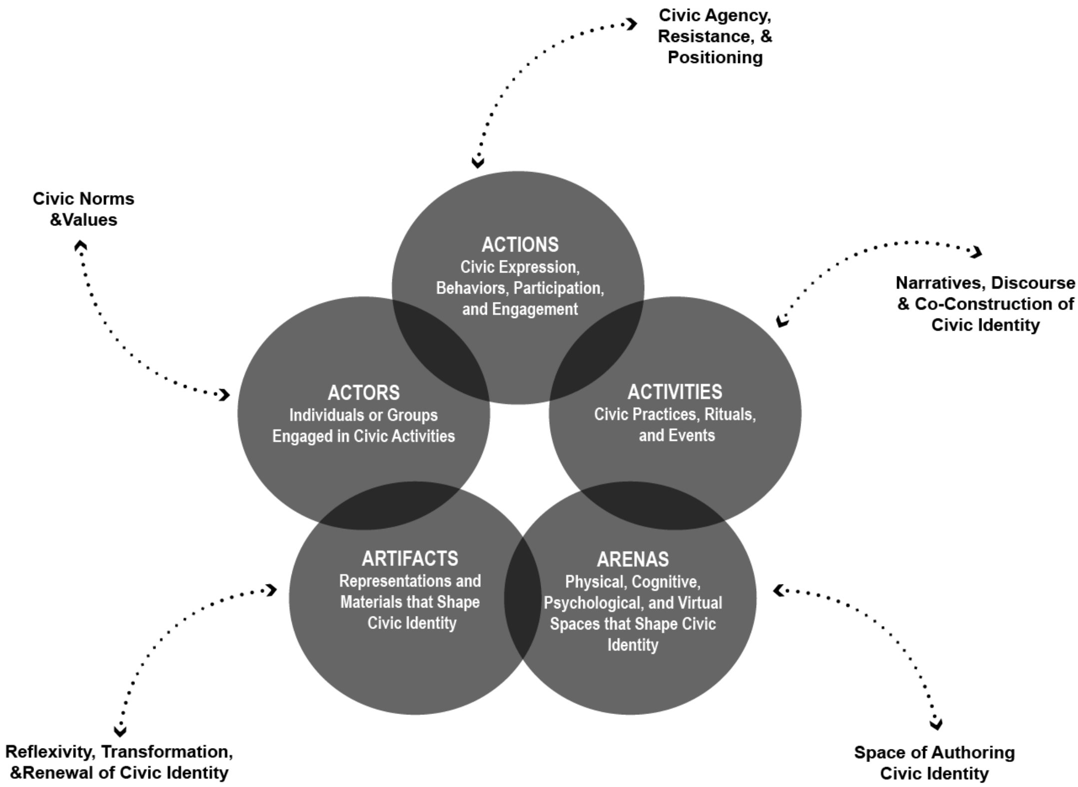
Elements of Civic Worlds

Identity is shaped by figuring out one's sense of self as one moves through the various "worlds" one participates in and how one relates to and learns from other actors in these spaces. Since figured worlds are socially constructed and culturally replicated, interactions and engagement with others are critical. Individuals "figure" who they are and how they move through the "worlds" they are part of over time and across different contexts. Holland et al. (1998) described these ways of navigating spaces as "roles" that are created and recreated through actions and activities that people engage in (p. 98). Of note here is that individuals have agency in shaping these actions. Five critical elements comprise figured worlds—actors, actions, activities, arenas, and artifacts. These elements are described and contextualized to study findings below.

Actors: Individuals (or Groups) Engaged in Civic Activities and Interactions

As Urrieta (2007) framed it, figured worlds are "peopled by characters," and study findings revealed several influential characters and actors who were important in the process of students' civic identity development (p. 109). Influential actors ranged from parents and grandparents to teachers and community members, as well as their peers. Serving as role models and exemplars of civic behavior, they were critical to how students saw themselves in civic contexts as well as the ways in which they developed civic values and norms. As Michelle, whose first experiences with volunteering were around providing meals to homeless people through the church she attended with her mother and her maternal grandparents,

Figure 2. Figured Worlds of Civic Identity



explained it, "It was a strong part of my family's ethic to give back."

Actions: Civic Expression, Behaviors, Participation, and Engagement

The actions of these influential actors were crucial to how students learned civic norms and how these norms helped shape their own civic actions and civic sense of self. Themes of "doing like" influential actors or "doing for" important causes were salient throughout, and shaped how participants saw themselves. For example, Olivia described her interest in education stemming from her high school language arts teacher, an Asian American woman like her. Olivia described this teacher as going above and beyond to make a difference in her students' lives—staying for hours after school, supporting students' academic and extracurricular work with equal gusto, and creating a sense of community in her classroom. Olivia elaborated, "You know, one of the reasons why students succeed in school is because they have a sense of community. Like someone cares about them, or they have someone they can confide in or trust, you know like my own experience."

The students were enmeshed with both who they were, and who they were choosing to become. Particularly useful in interpreting and understanding study findings was that understanding of self, as shaped by navigating figured worlds over time and space (from adolescence to adulthood, for instance, or through curricular and other spaces) is dynamic and constantly shaped by actions of self and of the other. Thus, figured worlds are recreated by work, by work with others, and "across landscapes of action" (Urrieta, 2007, p. 109).

Holland et al. (1998) recognized and called out both conceptual and material ways in which identity is shaped and suggested that behavior is better viewed through the prism of "self in practice, not as self in essence" (p. 31). Students created and recreated their civic selves both conceptually and materially over time, through the choices they made and the actions they took. Through these actions, their perspectives evolved and matured into new(er) senses of self or to more consolidated ones. In other words, they ascribed new meaning to their actions over time. For instance, students described how work had to have greater meaning and purpose than just a means to a livelihood, or they distinguished their own choices about areas of study and career pathways as distinct from others who made different choices. As Paz put it,

> I come from a community that has done so much for me. I have been given so much, so many opportunities . . . that I have a community that I am responsible to . . . so, I'll frame it this way: in many Native American cultures, when we do healing circles, or talking circles, when you introduce yourself, you say, who am I accountable to? And people respond with—my elders, my family, my community, native people as a whole. . . . And so, I think even being a part of certain cultures that prioritize community networks and prioritize taking care of one another . . . I think because of that, I can't really fathom a life outside of that, you know can't really fathom not doing that.

Thus, figured worlds of civic action seemed to provide them with the agency to influence their own choices and behavior. As Hatt (2007) put it, figured worlds often serve as "guidelines" or "social forces" influencing how people act and "practice" within social spaces (p. 149–150).

Activities: Civic Practices, Rituals, or Events

Students spoke about several activities that were instrumental to learning civic behaviors and in fostering civic identity. Starting from volunteering and community service, evolving into more formal avenues of engagement such as curricular and extracurricular activities, reading, discussions, and dialogue about civic behaviors and community engagement, several practices and rituals related to civic engagement seemed to shape students' civic identity. Examples included developing practical means to advance change, such as the notion of "thinking big, and acting small," or practicing well-being—"taking care of one's personal ecology"—both of which were mentioned by almost all participants as powerful principles that were taught and reinforced through their curricular engagement program. In these instances, participants seemed to create new discourses, artifacts, or even new "liberatory worlds" (Urrieta, 2007, p. 111). The ability to independently envision, develop, and implement a community-based immersion experience through the program, leading to tangible and intangible outcomes, was impactful in both shaping and consolidating students' civic identities. In many ways, the program enabled students to find and fine-tune their civic voices. For instance, Raina summed up one of her big takeaways from the program—applying it to her everyday life, she said that civic engagement is often unrealistically defined in grandiose terms. She felt sometimes it can just be a matter of "being a good community member, getting to know your neighbors, helping with issues in your neighborhood, and not just solely focused on your own life."

Arenas: Physical, Cognitive, Psychological, or Virtual Spaces That Foster Civic Identity

The arenas within which these actions took place were important. Be it in the context of community, the classroom, or formal and informal meeting spaces for the cohort, the actions, conversations, and messages that were exchanged and absorbed within these spaces were avenues by which students developed civic identity. For example, Danielle noted that program faculty were able to create "special" spaces so she and her cohort peers "could genuinely learn from one another." Or when Olivia (and several others) described consulting or other career paths as "a whole 'nother world," I got the impression that she was making a distinct choice of not wanting to be part of that world precisely because, as she saw it, "it is so harmful." In addition, the psychological contexts within which students made meaning of the experiences, the mindsets they were developing about civic work, also served as a mechanism in shaping civic identity. Lastly, virtual spaces such as blogs, podcasts, newsletters, and the group chat that the cohort had created for themselves were influential in enabling civic agency, and in enabling students to use their voice. These spaces socialized students and, in some instances, were a measure of accountability to engage in civic behaviors. As several students put it, "learning to value community" and "learning to be in community" were values they learned to appreciate both through facilitated conversations in class and in other spaces outside class.

Artifacts: Symbols, Representations, and Materials That Shape Civic Identity

Holland et al. (1998) characterized artifacts in figured worlds as mediating thoughts and feelings that enabled individuals to build the capacity to position themselves for themselves. Artifacts can therefore be interpreted through a prism of "a collectively remembered history" and can offer "possibilities for becoming" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 36). Artifacts are "psychological tools that are collectively developed, individually learned, and made socially and personally powerful." They serve as mechanisms facilitating everyday actions but also as symbols of individual or collective memory that propagate certain behaviors or actions. They shape "developmental histories" of activities past and present (pp. 60–62). Symbols, representations, or other similar abstractions played a part in encouraging civic behaviors and ultimately in shaping civic identity. For example, just as Paz talked about accountability to one's community being prioritized in Native American culture, Sam described learning from his community mentor that community work ought to "move at the speed of trust."

The Process of Identity Formation

If the elements described above served as vehicles for identity development, the catalysts that gave these vehicles momentum were several process-related factors. They catalyzed the evolution and consolidation of civic identity throughout the developmental stages described previously. These processes are highlighted below.

Engagement, Participation, and Relationships: Developing Norms and Values Through Civic Work

Social and cultural norms determine how individuals navigate figured worlds. Paraphrasing Urrieta (2007), identity is not just made up of labels that individuals assign themselves or that are assigned to them; it is "very much about how people come to understand themselves, how they come to 'figure' who they are through the 'worlds that they participate in'" (p. 107). Individuals' identities are shaped by how they absorb and apply civic norms in their day-to-day decision making and ways of being. Students in this study created metaphorical worlds to make meaning of their community engagement experiences, replicating norms or embracing values exemplified by influential individuals. These experiences often held deep symbolism and were associated with admired or aspirational figures. Michelle described her aspirations and the influence that her grandparents had on her thus: Her grandfather was a pediatrician who often saw patients on government-supported health insurance even though it was not financially lucrative, and her grandmother was a family therapist who worked with "troubled children." For them, work and personal lives were intertwined. Similarly, she said that she could never imagine work being a "nine to five" endeavor. As she envisioned her future life unfolding, she said, "I see myself working evenings because that's when this kind of work happens. That's when relationships are built, that's when town halls are held. . . . That's when so much of life is. . . ." Notions of "responsibility to community" and "caring for each other" stood out in shaping civic identity from adolescence, during college, and beyond. These notions were part of the figured worlds that students moved through and shaped how they saw themselves, who they saw themselves becoming, and what was deeply enmeshed with their sense of self.

Space of Authoring—Artifacts and Discursive Elements

Students seemed to negotiate their civic identities by seeking alignment with their own evolving values, beliefs, and the roles they envisioned for themselves. Channeling Bakhtin, Holland et al. (1998) described "space of authoring" as an important element within figured worlds in shaping identity. Engagement and participation with artifacts or discursive practices could lead to "embodiment of [this] identity" (Mayes et al., 2016, p. 613). Findings suggest that although students may have had a predisposition for civic engagement prior to participation in the curricular community engagement program, the artifacts (from program application to course readings and course deliverables) were all primed to create spaces and avenues for students to author their own civic destinies. Additionally, although the ways in which students engaged with these artifacts and discursive elements—including classroom discussions and dialogue, engagement with peers and community partners—were unique and personalized to their own civic journeys, all of these factors did facilitate authoring of civic identity. As Mayes et al. showed in their study about citizenship positions enacted and embraced by elementary school children, the figured worlds of civic identity overlapped or diverged depending on the positions that the students themselves chose to take. For students like Sofia and Paz, giving back to their communities was integral to their civic identities, whereas for others, like Jay, Sara, or Sam, the cause they were passionate about, be it climate advocacy, gentrification, or gerrymandering, was the catalyzing element.

In understanding students' civic life trajectories, the metaphor of "lamination" (Holland & Leander, 2008, p. 131) was useful. Related to identity, this process works by one's sense of self being built and thickened with layers of memories, experiences, and artifacts. Although each layer may be distinctive, it also bonds together with new layers. This flow between worlds creates overlapping and synergistic layers of identity (Brown, 2017). Regardless of the ways in which their worlds aligned or diverged, it appeared that program participation offered students tools by which to construct, define, and perform their civic selves (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007), which then became enmeshed with their other identities and histories of self. As Sofia eloquently framed it, "The work I am doing now, the work I'm going to continue to do isn't just for myself, it's for every other person from my community who didn't have the chance to make it."

Narratives, Discourses, and Coconstruction

According to Holland et al. (1998), identity becomes consolidated through discourse and collective meaning making, or coconstruction of worlds that individuals share. With increasing involvement in civic work, students seemed to develop shared meaning and shared rituals of civic work. Notions of "being in community" or "working with community members" or "thinking big and acting small" were all examples of cognitive hooks that students used to chart their civic journeys. In these situations, students' increasing investment in civic worlds and civic work often manifested as "spoken discourse and embodied practice" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 251). Students were retelling and replicating many of the lessons learned through the curricular community engagement experience into their everyday parlance and into day-to-day practice. For instance, in discussing the evolution of their ongoing civic journeys beyond college, there was a recurring motif of a vision of continued engagement with community. Although it was hard for participants to predict the specific contours that this engagement would take, they could not envision a future devoid of public service or civic work. As Holland et al. (1998) framed it, identity is what "people tell others [about] who they are, but even more important, what they tell themselves and then try to act as they are who they say they are. . . ." (p. 3).

Agency, Resistance, and Positioning—The Metanarratives of Civic Identity

How students "positioned" themselves with regard to their civic selves was determined not only by factors such as background and personal history, but also by how individual aspirations and ideals influenced thoughts, behaviors, and ways of interpreting the world. Although the program curriculum was influential in positioning students as civic leaders and in preparing them for public service, students seemed to improvise and exercise their own civic agency (Hatt, 2007). They developed a sense of civic self by resisting dominant narratives. One such narrative thread that emerged was that of seeking work that gave them a sense of purpose, and in positioning themselves as distinct from peers whom they could not find identity alignment with. Phrases like "I'd be miserable as a consultant," or the need to "be around people who care," or not wanting to be like "the finance bros" came up in describing one's aspirations. Furthermore, negotiations around positionality, and space of authoring, are powerful avenues for producing identities. Positionality refers to roles that are assigned to individuals or that they create for themselves within figured worlds, whether that of a "finance bro" or that of "people who care." Similarly, and with regard to narratives, individuals encounter narratives that can be either oppressive or liberating and where prestige and rank are determined based on one's identity alignment. In the context of this case study, terms like "caring," "community," "fulfillment," "purpose," and "public good" all seemed to impact how one saw oneself and one's identity as serving a larger civic purpose rather than a more narrow, individualistic one.

Reflexivity, Transformation, and Renewal of Civic Identity

Identity is a dynamic process influenced by evolving interactions and experiences within figured worlds. Given the ongoing and long-term practice of civic work, figured worlds become spaces of possibility where individuals have agency in determining the "roles" that they play. Thus, when students were making choices about their community engagement activities, their outcome was both additive of new identities and affirmative of previously existing ones. As Paz explained, their passion for community work took root early in their life and has been an ongoing aspect of their sense of civic responsibility. They explained,

> When I moved from public school to a private school, I was the only one from my neighborhood, and perhaps one of a few from a low-income, Latine community. Community service was a way for me to stay connected to my roots—it ignited a fire in me. Given where I come from, and where I am now, I owe it to my community to give back. It is really important to me.

As opportunities for repeated participation and choices to engage arose, accompanied by an "emotional charge," so did the accumulation and internalization of civic identity as a form of self-authoring (Holland & Leander, 2008, p. 137). As one of the participants, Leonard, put it, it was easy to "follow old patterns."

Discussion

Quoting Horace Mann, who said, "a different world cannot be built by indifferent people," the "Presidents' Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education" (Ehrlich, 1999) emphasized the unique role of universities in shaping graduates' democratic knowledge and values. Looking back a quarter century since then, higher education institutions have embraced the call by implementing various initiatives to cultivate civic skills and values among students. Despite the recognized benefits of such programs, little is known about their impact on shaping students' civic identity. This study sought to understand how college students' civic identities are shaped as a result of their participation in a curricular community engagement program. Leveraging theoretical borderlands as a framework, and drawing upon self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1999; Kegan, 1982, 1994) and the theory of figured worlds (Holland et al., 1998), this study examined students' civic journeys to shed light on their development as civic agents in democratic societies. By blending together two theories of identity development, the study offers a heretofore unexplored perspective in civic engagement scholarship to understand the ways in which civic identity may be fostered in the context of college. Combining a constructivist–developmental model with figured worlds, it explicates the ways in which curricular community engagement experiences may help shape college students' civic identities. Findings of the study have implications for shaping pedagogy, praxis, and institutional policy.

Patterns about students' civic journeys and civic identities revealed by this study suggest that precollege experiences were influential in shaping students' civic sense of self. This finding aligns with prior research indicating that students' early experiences influence their college decisions, including where and whether they attend, as well as academic and extracurricular choices (Campbell, 2006; Johnson, 2014). In addition, demographic factors were also instrumental in shaping participants' civic outlook, especially among students from minoritized communities, who expressed a sense of responsibility toward uplifting their communities. In transitioning to college, students expressed engaging in self-discovery, finding purpose, overcoming challenges, and building resilience, all of which were critical to shaping their civic identities. Curricular community engagement enabled the development of civic purpose through classroom discussions, relationships with peers, and connections with faculty and community partners.

Study findings also suggest that the process of authoring one's civic identity occurs through developmental tasks such as values exploration, affirmation, or divergence (Pizzolato, 2005), making meaning of one's experiences, determining the course of one's life, and taking steps along that path. Similar to previous studies (Baxter Magolda et al., 2010; Pizzolato, 2003), this study revealed that students from minority groups seemed to move toward authoring civic identity with greater urgency. These experiences of marginalization or "provocative moments" (Pizzolato, 2005, p. 628) propelled them toward greater clarity about their civic identity. Baxter Magolda (1999) has long advocated that universities play an important role in promoting self-authorship. Leveraging constructivist–developmental approaches, universities can empower students to become active participants in the learning process (Thomas et al., 2021), interpret their experiences, and cocreate knowledge, particularly through high-impact practices (Kuh, 2008) such as community-engaged learning. According to Baxter Magolda (2009), faculty play a crucial role, fostering self-discovery, reflection, and growth, and enabling students to have greater agency in the learning process. The findings of this study further reinforce the critical role of faculty in supporting students in the evolution of their civic identities. Student-driven factors such as examining one's beliefs and engaging with diverse others (Barber & King, 2014; King et al., 2009) complement faculty-driven factors. Experiential learning, highlighted as an important avenue for self-authorship (Breunig, 2005; Gregory, 2006), fosters qualities like self-efficacy, critical thinking, and leadership (Flood et al., 2009; Heinrich et al., 2015; McGowan, 2016). Study findings support these earlier conclusions and further suggest that these aspects of experiential learning are vital to the development and evolution of civic identity.

Applying figured worlds to adult education and lifelong learning, Erstad and Sefton-Green (2013) suggested that learner identities are shaped at and along learning moments and are often expressed as epiphanies. Many such learning moments were sprinkled throughout students' civic trajectories, and one resounding epiphany laced throughout several narratives was the importance of "being with community" that seems to have been catalyzed by a reading in the program. A noteworthy point with regard to the effect of the program in shaping students' civic identity is that of "affinity spaces," where students are part of a community and learn from others (Gee, 2004, p. 68). The notion of "space" has primacy here where identity work occurs. The program seemed to offer just such an affinity space, helping create both physical and virtual spaces where students learned from and with each other, with faculty playing powerful facilitatory roles. Thus, individual civic identity shapes behaviors, actions, and interactions, contributing to collective civic worlds. Civic work then becomes part of cultural practice that is "used to give meaning to others and to [oneself]" (Hatt, 2007, p. 158).

Findings highlighted the complex interplay of personal experiences, social influences, and self-perceptions in shaping civic identity. Holland and Leander (2008) elegantly described how the various elements of one's life—social, cultural, and personal—become intertwined over time like strands in a rope, so that "an object with characteristics distinctive from those of the original ingredients results. A rope differs in form and behavior from the fibers that compose it" (p. 134). Similarly, as students engaged in different and more complex civic work, their civic identities continued to evolve and mature, assuming more distinct forms than previous iterations. Identities incarnate over time through repeated positioning and through engaging with frequently used artifacts and discourses that align with this positioning. Hence, students' civic work seems to be not only in alignment across the various aspects of their lives as college students but also synergistic with how they imagined their life stories evolving. Thus, figured worlds are always "in process," always "undergoing transformation in practice" (Holland, 2010, p. 273), and identity is "about becoming, rather than being" (Brown, 2017, p. 94). The following section discusses the limitations of this study, implications of this work, and future directions.

Study Limitations, Implications, and Future Research

Limitations

This qualitative case study of participants in one curricular community engagement program was conducted at a highly selective school in the U.S. Southeast. It provides a glimpse into the experiences of some students who were part of this program, and the ways in which their experiences in and beyond this program may have shaped the evolution and consolidation of their civic identities. However, given the nature, scope, and context of the study, there are several limitations for the transferability of findings.

The participants of this study were 13 students who were part of a selective curricular engagement program. Findings were distilled from participant interviews and document analysis of course material shared by faculty (course syllabi and reading material) and content produced by the students. They offer a snapshot of the experiences of these particular students, based on personal reflections (both retrospective and prospective) at this point in time. Additionally, this study site (both program and university) has a long and well-recognized commitment to community engagement. Given that institutional culture has an impact on student outcomes, including students' civic experiences (Berger & Milem, 2000; Bringle & Hatcher, 2000; Dey et al., 2009; Young et al., 2007), the distinctiveness of this locus is a consideration for transferability of study findings.

That said, this study makes an important contribution to the literature. It extends current research and offers new evidence in support of the benefits of curricular community engagement experiences. More importantly, it marries two prominent theories on identity development to examine the impact of curricular community engagement in shaping civic identity among college students. Using the work of Abes (2009) as a model, this study "create[d] a theoretical borderland" between constructivist-developmental frameworks and figured worlds in interrogating the development of civic identity. Although the respective theories individually provide a rich understanding of the process and influences involved in identity development, combining them yields a far more tapestried understanding of the evolution of civic identity. This borderland where students make choices and decisions about college based on aspects that are integral to their identities, and the ways in which these identities are "fused, performed, and . . . [are continually] becoming" is an important contribution of this study (Abes, 2009, p. 148). It is an integrative approach where social, political, and cultural factors are just as influential as cognitive processes. As a result, this study has important implications for student development theory and for curricular praxis.

Implications

This study has three key implications for pedagogy. First, students valued the combination of experiential learning and conversations with peers. Corroborating other literature (Domangue & Carson, 2008), they also found opportunities for reflection to be beneficial, suggesting that curricula should prioritize such experiences to foster civic self-authorship. Second, students benefited from crafting and executing independent community engagement experiences, facilitating greater commitment to civic work. Therefore, experiential curricula should provide students autonomy in designing projects. Third, this study underscores the benefits of cohort-based models in creating learning communities (Roholt et al., 2009; Weerts & Cabrera, 2015) that enhance civic skills and foster civic identity. Students learned (with and) from each other to shape collective civic worlds through their interactions with each other. Due to their "high touch" nature, such programs require more planning and resources, but pay dividends by creating learning communities that foster civic skills and shape civic identity.

Participants expressed immense satisfaction about the community engagement program, emphasizing its value in preparing them for ethical community engagement. Given the selectivity of such programs, investing more resources and democratizing access will pave the way to expanding civic skills among college students. After all, democracies depend on citizens engaging with their communities. Extant literature emphasizes the benefits of service-learning on individual outcomes like graduation, retention, and long-term civic involvement. Going beyond these metrics, this study amplifies communal aspects, including the sense of belonging fostered by the program. Given deep schisms (Balz & Morse, 2023) in our society, and inequities in access to civic learning and opportunities for engagement among youth (Kiesa et al., 2022; Zaff et al., 2003), there is need to replicate such success stories to build community and connections among college students.

Future Research

Given limited research on the impact of community-engaged pedagogies in shaping civic identity, there is need for further study across types of institutions, and with larger samples. Such research could lead to a more pluralistic understanding of how community engagement shapes civic identity. In addition, our understanding of how civic identity evolves over time can be further deepened through longitudinal studies following students from adolescence into adulthood.

Conclusion

This study makes a significant contribution by extending current research and providing new evidence about the benefits of curricular community engagement. It combines two prominent theoretical streams on identity development, creating a "borderland" between constructivist-developmental frameworks and figured worlds to understand the evolution of civic identity among college students. Paraphrasing Abes (2009), experimentation with such borderlands allows for a paradigmatic shift in understanding student development and the civic purpose of a college education. This borderland where students make choices and decisions about college based on factors that are integral to their identities, and the ways in which these identities are "fused, performed, and . . . [are continually] becoming" (Abes, 2009, p. 148), is an essential contribution of this study. It is an integrative approach where social, political, and cultural factors are just as influential as interpersonal ones. As such, it has important implications for student development theory and for curricular praxis. Above all, it amplifies students' stories in making the case for how civic identity is shaped in the context of college. These stories corroborate the significance of curricular community engagement and bring us closer to fulfilling one of the loftiest missions of higher education—enabling students to author their civic identities.

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Development and Validation of Service-Learning Experience Scale

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Abstract

The growing integration of service-learning into academic content reflects higher education institutions' efforts to provide an environment that strengthens teaching, learning, and service to the community. This research article documents the development and testing of an instrument that measures service-learning experiences among higher education students in India. Our study involved the voluntary participation of 290 students; data was collected through Google Forms. The resulting scale measures six major aspects of students' experiences in service-learning projects: curriculum, meaningful service, student learning and reflection, faculty support and involvement, peer support and participation, and accomplishment. The demonstrated scale showed an adequate degree of reliability. The content validity confirmed that positive experience is accounted for by service-learning projects, which is the objective of the instrument. The study will be valuable for faculty members to create effective service-learning courses and help students engage in such activities in an organized manner.

Keywords: service-learning, students' experience, scale development, higher education institutions, discriminant validity

Growing globalization, combined with rapid technological advancement, has provided opportunities for human progress and, at the same time, brought about some unexpected concerns in terms of social, economic, environmental, and cultural aspects (OECD, 2018a). The education system should provide an environment that forms a synthesized learning principle among students to navigate unpredictable surroundings. Different pedagogy is incorporated to promote civic engagement. Time and again, educational institutions should allow students to participate in civic engagements and socially responsible activities. Education should help students handle their own lives and cope with their surroundings. It prepares them to face those challenges that are yet to originate. Schleicher (2019, as cited in OECD, 2019, p. 5) viewed education as no longer confined to teaching students something. However, it is essential for them to develop navigation tools with reliable compasses to resolve their problems in an unprecedented and uncertain world. The key driving factors are imagination, attitude, knowledge, skills, and, most importantly, shared values and a sense of responsibility, which will improve the world. Future-ready students must adapt and thrive for upcoming, volatile socioeconomic factors. The OECD Learning Compass (OECD, 2019) report focused on three sets of skills. The first is cognitive and metacognitive skills, which center on students' critical thinking. Second, practical and physical skills center on students' ability to use information and technology. Third, social and emotional skills center on the behavioral aspects of students and how they exercise their civic responsibilities (OECD, 2018a, 2018b). This analysis is aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), which aim to achieve social, cultural, economic, and environmental sustainability.

The changing landscape in the educational sector emphasizes that higher education institutions (HEIs) should discharge their responsibilities. One of the goals of HEIs is to provide service to the community through undergraduate and graduate programs. The education system has gone through transformational change. On the one hand, it includes support for economic growth. At the same time, it focuses on social capital. Educational institutions should embrace a curriculum that recognizes students' civic engagement needs and aspires to incorporate social skills. Active learning strategies play a pivotal role in driving student development by engaging students and sensitizing them to real-world settings. These strategies have proven to support improved student performance and internalized learning (Haidet et al., 2014; McKeachie, 1999). Institutions must create platforms where students can apply their specialized domain knowledge in higher educational settings. However, the challenge lies in accurately measuring the attainment of graduate attributes, often resulting in a disconnect between academic outcomes and industry expectations. Research suggests that, unlike traditional pedagogy, which primarily assesses rote learning and memorization skills, hands-on experiences instill a more profound sense of purpose and contribute significantly to the overall development and practical knowledge application (Valarmathi et al., 2024).

Service-learning should prioritize student learning and community well-being, offering students opportunities to explore and learn in a judgment-free environment. This approach ensures that their learning is meaningful for academic purposes and applicable to real-life situations and future careers. Educational institutions must strive to evaluate student growth and readiness for future endeavors, recognizing the need to apply knowledge to real-world problems to develop and foster crucial 21st-century skills such as communication, problem-solving, creativity, and leadership (Tantia et al., 2024). Problem-based learning, simulations, and case-based learning are effective methodologies for encouraging students to question their understanding and apply their knowledge in practical scenarios. By incorporating these active learning strategies, institutions can bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application, preparing students to thrive in diverse professional environments. The current study attempts to evaluate existing scales in service-learning that measure student development. The primary focus of the study is to provide a tool that assesses student experiences enriched with active learning while contributing to community development.

Rationale for Tool Development

Service-learning is emerging as an educational approach integrating academic learning with community engagement. Students are involved in an organized series of activities that allow them to use their domain knowledge for the community's needs. Globally, service-learning has gained popularity and is embedded in many institutions' vision, mission, and philosophy. It instills civic and social responsibility in students while improving their personal and professional growth. Many HEIs have tried to measure learning outcomes resulting from service-learning. However, research on students' learning experience, rather than merely verifying the attainment result, is necessary. In order to measure and evaluate these experiences, educational research must be employed to help educators, researchers, and administrators apply evidence-based decision-making using a reliable measurement tool. Table 1 summarizes widely used scales developed by researchers to measure the outcomes and experiences in various dimensions.

Table 1 lists research scales developed to measure outcomes in service-learning, their benefits, and students' attitudes toward community engagement and civic responsibility. However, the absence of a well-articulated conceptual framework hinders understanding the effectiveness of service-learning and the strategies adopted for its implementation. Globally, educational institutions need a standardized tool that measures both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of students' experience in service-learning.

Snell and Lau (2020) introduced the Service-Learning Outcomes Measurement Scale (S-LOMS), which measured four dimensions: self-awareness, personal and professional skills, knowledge application, and civic orientation and engagement. The knowledge application dimension measured students' academic achievement. The personal and professional skills included problem-solving, critical thinking, interpersonal relationships, self-reflection, and creativity. Civic orientation measured students' empathy and responsiveness to community needs. Finally, the self-awareness measure applied to students' understanding of themselves and their self-esteem. The tool mainly focused on mapping learning out-

Table 1. Appraisal of Scales Measuring Outcomes, Benefits, and Management in Service-Learning

Serial number	Scales and authors	Components of the scales
1	Snell & Lau (2020). Service-Learning Outcomes Measurement Scale (S-LOMS)	Knowledge application, civic orientation engagement, self-awareness, and personal and professional skills.
2	Toncar et al. (2006). Service Learning Benefit scale (SELEB scale)	Citizenship, personal responsibility, practical skills, and interpersonal skills.
3	Shiarella et al. (2000). Community Service Attitudes Scale (CSAS)	Connectedness, costs, benefits, seriousness, awareness, intentions, career benefits, and normative helping attitudes.
4	Ahmad et al. (2021). Service-Learning Management Scale (SLMS)	Planning, training, evaluation, decision-making, need analysis, implementation, learning goals, coordination, relationship, and responsibility.
5	Gul et al. (2022). Service Learning Management Scale (SLMC)	Student placement, planning and collaboration, training and orientation, evaluation and need analysis.
6	Shek et al. (2021). Subjective outcome evaluation scale	Service activity, service implementers, perceived benefits.

comes in educational institutions in Hong Kong.

Toncar et al. (2006) developed the SELEB (SErvice LEarning Benefit) scale, which measured four factors. The practical skills dimensions measured students' application of their knowledge in real-world problems, critical thinking, problem-solving, and acquiring workplace skills. The interpersonal skills measured were the ability to work with peers and leadership and communication skills. The citizen subscale measured students' ability to meet community needs through social responsibility and community involvement. The last measure focused on taking personal responsibility.

Shiarella et al. (2000) developed a Community Service Attitudes Scale (CSAS) with eight dimensions: costs, benefits, awareness, intentions, normative helping attitudes, connectedness, seriousness, and career benefits. The scale was based on the Schwartz model (Schwartz, 2012) and mainly addressed students' responses to community engagement. It weighed the attitude of students on awareness of community needs and their willingness to help. The scale tried to evaluate students' commitment and seriousness for service, along with being empathetic and fulfilling the meaningful needs of the community. It also measured students' ability, norms, awareness, and intentions for community service.

Ahmad et al. (2021) proposed and validated a Service-Learning Management Scale (SLMS), which examined the dynamics of its implementation in different cultures and contexts. The scale addressed the planning and training needs for management of the successful implementation of service-learning programs in educational contexts. Many factors contributed to the successful completion of the programs, such as partnerships with the community, conducting need analysis, developing decision-making skills, and teaching students to be socially responsible. The scale addressed service-learning programs from preparation to final implementation, keeping students' learning and faculty and administrators' preparations in view.

Gul et al. (2022) developed and analyzed the Service Learning Management Scale (SLMC) with four subscales: Planning and Collaboration, Evaluation and Need Analysis, Students' Placement, and Training and Orientation. At the planning stage, the Planning and Collaboration subscale measured how different stakeholders in service-learning could collaborate. The Evaluation and Need Analysis subscale focused on developing assessment and evaluation strategies with community partners. The Students' Placement subscale measured students' autonomy to take up service-learning projects. Finally, the Training and Orientation subscale measured the effectiveness of training and orientation for students on service-learning.

Shek et al. (2021) conducted and measured subjective outcome evaluations of service-learning. Their subjective outcome evaluation scale assessed service activity, service implementation, and perceived benefits for students. The service activity measure examined students' perception of the course content, design and format, and the atmosphere in which the service activity was executed. It also reflected their involvement, interest, and motivation. While completing the service-learning projects, the service implementation factor measured students' readiness and resilience. Finally, the perceived benefits factor measured their holistic development and relationship-building with different stakeholders of service-learning. The scale was limited to a few activities only and might not be suitable in all contexts.

The present research captures students' experience in service-learning as it relates to the curriculum. Specifically, we examine experiences of meaningful service, faculty support and involvement, student learning and reflection, peer support and involvement, and accomplishment as they are gained while implementing service-learning projects.

Unlike most other modes of instruction, service-learning engages students in applying academic learning. Thus, it provides a real-world task, the foundation for understanding the learning objectives and outcomes. Several tools for evaluating the effectiveness of service-learning are available, and a few selected ones have been chosen for this study as they better capture the essence of service-learning and provide foundational support to other researchers. Before providing the reasoning in the summary, it is essential to mention a few prominent studies that have utilized these scales.

Lo et al. (2022) adapted their cognitive learning outcome from service-learning, using four items derived from the S-LOMS. Other parts of their research are also based on the S-LOMS. Chan and Snell (2021) firmly believed that S-LOMS could effectively capture the self-perceived developmental impact on students from different cultures involved in service-learning. The SELEB scale provides foundational skills for other scale development. For example, Albinsson et al. (2015) used the review process for their DART scale development, incorporating essential components based on the SELEB scale. Lau and Snell (2021) believed that future research could combine the S-LOMS and SELEB scales for further studies, which could involve representatives as an additional influence. Ibrahim (2017) composed a new scale to assess the community-based learning benefit, considering several scales, including the SELEB scale. The SELEB scale has strengthened his research's convergent validity. Schwieger (2015) researched a service-learning project in distance learning classes, with the SELEB scale being reviewed thoroughly for this research. Doolittle and Faul (2013) validated the civic engagement scale (CES) using the CSAS for construct validation. Canney and Bielefeldt (2016) selected items from the CSAS, which was established after thorough testing. Meethal and Thomas (2024) developed a scale to measure farmers' perceptions about the effectiveness of Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs), taking significant inputs from the CSAS for construct validity and other dimensions. Doehring et al. (2009) implemented two subscales from the CSAS to investigate the sense of connectedness and empathy for people in the community. Popovich and Brooks-Hurst (2019) adapted and improved the existing few CSAS items on community engagement. Camacho-Tamayo and Bernal-Ballen (2023) applied factor analysis primarily based on the SLMC (Gul et al., 2022). Cheng et al. (2024) referred to the factor analysis applied to the multidimensional anxiety scale for children, which was consistent with previous studies of the subjective outcome evaluation scale (SOES). Shek et al. (2022) found that their outcome evaluation measures strongly align with SOES.

From several reviews, we can see that the scales cover a broad spectrum of outcomes. The S-LOMS focuses on personal and social responsibility, academic learning, and career skills. The SELEB scale focuses on how students are engaged and their reflection. The CSAS measures the development of students' sense of civic responsibility. The SLMS delivers a comprehensive approach to managing entire service-learning programs in educational institutions. The SLMC focuses on management practices, drawing inputs from past practices and experiences. The SOES emphasizes the personal development of students involved in service-learning. Literature reveals that all these scales have undergone testing to ensure their validity and reliability, such that users of the scales receive accurate, consistent, and reliable results across different demographics and research contexts. These scales are globally adapted due to their cultural compatibility and inclusive nature. For instance, the S-LOMS, developed in Hong Kong, is applicable in different cultural settings. The SELEB scale, focused on experiential learning, has broader applicability beyond the United States.

Similarly, countries with solid civic education programs also use the CSAS. The SLMC, though developed in Pakistan, is not restricted to that country and is used globally for leadership development in service-learning. The SLMS, also created in Pakistan, has been adopted globally due to its emphasis on moral and social motivation in education. The SOES can potentially focus on student engagement globally, although it was initially used in China.

These studies reflect the evolution in education, setup, goals, and practices. The scales align with educational needs in service-learning, providing helpful information for educators, researchers, students, community partners, and program administrators. The coverage of the S-LOMS is comprehensive, encompassing multiple dimensions of service-learning impact. The SELEB scale covers student engagement and reflection entirely. The CSAS focuses on civic responsibility. The SLMC focuses on gauging the management practices of service-learning in terms of both effectiveness and efficiency. The SLMS aims to bring long-term sustainability to the program by integrating newer dimensions of service-learning, which interests educational institutions. The SOES covers a wide range of subjective outcomes for students engaged in service-learning.

Collectively, these scales address a wide range of outcomes. The SLMS provides a complete view of student development. The CSAS is foundational in measuring and developing civic responsibility. The SELEB scale offers an experiential core to service-learning. The SLMS helps to understand, evaluate, and improve service-learning programs. The SLMC focuses on filling the evaluation gap of previous research, thus providing an improved and detailed tool for enhancing service-learning program management. The SOES measures the effectiveness of service-learning programs to enhance their quality. These scales are user-friendly, offering a comprehensive view of service-learning validated by different research and relevant globally. Thus, the scales provide a robust framework for measuring service-learning dimensions and supporting the field. They incorporate foundational support for evaluating service-learning as well as the latest theories and practices of education relevant to today's world.

Numerous research studies have been conducted on the outcomes, benefits, and added value of service-learning for students. However, relatively few have focused on capturing students' experiences, especially in countries like India, where service-learning has not yet gained significant popularity. Developing a scale to measure students' engagement processes and progress is crucial for achieving the desired outcomes from service-learning. This scale should resonate with the local educational environment. A scale measuring students' experiences is vital to enhance reliability and encourage educational institutions to understand and support students' needs. Applying such a scale would strengthen service-learning implementation and facilitate its comparison and application in different contexts.

Thus, the current research would help HEIs to understand the effectiveness of service-learning implementation and develop corrective mechanisms. This study proposes a multidimensional measurement scale with six subscales, the Service-Learning Experience Scale (SLES), to enable HEIs to assess students' experiences.

Methodology

Tool Development

After reviewing the existing service-learning scales, an initial pool of items measuring service-learning experiences from different perspectives was developed. The authors engaged in discussions to create a construct that measured the service-learning experiences of higher education students. This construct was based on six aspects of service-learning students' experiences: the service-learning curriculum, offering meaningful service to the community, students' learning and reflection, faculty support and involvement, peer support and involvement, and accomplishment. About 60 items were considered for the subscales outlined in Appendix A. Significant changes were made to the items to bridge the gaps in the existing scales and suit students in the Indian higher education system. For this measure, we developed a four-point scale: strongly agree (4), agree (3), disagree (2), strongly disagree (1). All the items were positive statements.

The modified items were reviewed by two experts in the teachers' educational domain and three service-learning experts in higher education for qualitative validation. Seeking experts' views to change items is necessary to enhance items' accuracy and relevance, ensuring that the items effectively measure desired traits. Further, it serves to minimize biases inherent in subjective judgments. These items were presented to the five experts in the table format, with options to accept, modify, or reject each. Twenty-three items were modified based on the experts' recommendations.

Face Validity

Hair et al. (2011) defined face validity as the extent to which the meaning of items is consistent with the construct's definition in line with the researcher's judgment. Items such as "The SL course or curriculum offered is engaging and stimulating" were changed to "Curriculum is engaging and stimulating," and "Enables to undertake service-learning activities and projects" to "Service-learning activities and projects to be undertaken." The tool's face validity was established.

Study Sample

The pilot study employed judgmental sampling to choose the respondents. The inclusion criteria involved higher education students from private educational institutions with at least 3 months of mandatory service-learning project experience. The data was collected from students in Bengaluru's HEIs. Consent to contribute to the survey was pitched in the beginning. The participants were informed about the need for the study's objectives and could withdraw anytime. Survey forms were dispersed through Google Forms, as all students had access to them and used them for many purposes. It took approximately 10 minutes to complete the instrument. Keeping the data confidential and using it for research only was communicated. The response received was assigned and systematically pooled for further statistical analysis.

There were 290 respondents for the study, and the sample size was more than the required minimum to ensure reasonable representativeness across HEIs. The ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board. Table 2 represents the respondents' demographic details across the represented disciplines: arts, humanities, and social sciences; sciences; commerce and management; and engineering. The sample included an adequate representation of undergraduate and postgraduate students and of students who took on a shorter (< 3 months) or longer (> 6 months) duration of the service-learning project. The courses offered 1 and 2 credits.

Table 2. Demographic Details of Respondents

Demographic	Categories	Count	Percent
Discipline	Arts/humanities/social sciences	188	64.8%
	Sciences	38	13.1%
	Commerce & management	22	7.6%
	Engineering	42	14.5%
Duration of service-learning project	< 3 months	126	43.4%
	3–6 months	98	33.8%
	> 6 months	66	22.8%
No. of Credits	1 credit	112	38.6%
	2 credits	178	61.4%
Degree	UG	175	60.3%
	PG	115	39.7%
Gender	Male	89	30.7%
	Female	197	67.9%
	Prefer not to say	4	1.4%

Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 19 and the Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS), Version 16.

Factor Analysis

Factor analysis was employed to ascertain the structure of subscales of the construct correlations among a large set of interrelated variables (Hair et al., 2011). The main objective of the analysis was to create smaller, composite factors to retain maximum data from the original variables. Two methods were applied to the SLES to determine the subscales, principal component analysis (PCA) and varimax rotation. PCA aimed to identify patterns and reduce the subscales with minimum data loss. Varimax rotation maximized the sum of variances of squared loadings, making factors interpretable.

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Table 3) were employed to finalize the items in the scale. These statistical methods were adequate to evaluate sampling. The KMO value ranged from 0 to 1, with the ideal value above 0.6 being widely accepted. The value resulting from Bartlett's Test of Sphericity should be less than 0.05.

The KMO measure was reported to be high (.971), and Bartlett's Test ($p < .000$) suggested that the PCA could be undertaken. Upon engaging in exploratory factor analysis, factors and communalities of the SLES were assessed. As an initial process, eigenvalue > 1 was applied as a guide for extracting components. As illustrated in Appendix B, which shows communalities of the SLES, it was found that all items had values > 0.500.

The PCA analysis extracted six subscales with a cumulative 74.643% variance. Table 4 shows that the explained variance ranged from 7.062% to 74.643%. Furthermore, the criteria for retaining the six subscales were eigenvalues greater than one. Later, the researchers could describe and label each factor based on the items' descriptions. The cutoff point of 0.5 for the factor loading was used as the threshold to ensure practical significance.

Cross-loading items not included in Appendix C are items 1, 4, 11, 12, 14, 25, 26, 27, 30, 31, 36, 43, 44, and 54 and items whose factor loadings are <.400, namely 9, 16, 19, 20, 21, 29, 32, 33, 34, 35, 52, 59, and 60. All these items were deleted, and 33 items were extracted in an exploratory factor analysis.

Overall, the PCA of SLES revealed a six-subscale structure of 33 items. The SLES appears valid and reliable as factorization explains a reasonable percentage of variance (Table 4) and has a high Cronbach's alpha (Table 5). These results indicate that

Table 3. KMO and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity for Sampling Adequacy

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		**.971**
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. chi-square	21335.680
	df	18910.000
	Sig.	.000

Table 4. Total Variance Explained

Factor	Initial eigenvalues			Rotation sums of squared		
	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %
1	37.32	60.19	60.19	11.06	17.84	17.84
2	2.95	4.76	64.96	10.42	16.81	34.65
3	2.28	3.68	68.63	7.69	12.41	47.06
4	1.49	2.41	71.04	7.46	12.04	59.09
5	1.21	1.95	72.99	5.26	8.49	67.58
6	1.03	1.65	74.64	4.38	7.06	74.64

Table 5. Average Variance Extracted and Construct Reliability for Each Subscale in the Final Measurement Model

Subscales	AVE (%)	# of items	CR (%)	Coefficient alpha
Curriculum	58.81%	6	59.63%	.920
Meaningful Service	50.92%	5	54.53%	.910
Student Learning and Reflection	55.96%	4	64.69%	.912
Faculty Support and Involvement	59.61%	6	84.07%	.963
Peer Support and Involvement	52.81%	7	80.53%	.949
Accomplishment	59.23%	5	57.65%	.918

Table 6. AVE and Squared Interconstruct Correlations (SIC)

Subscale	AVE (%)	CU	MS	SLR	FSI	PSI
Curriculum (CU)	58.81%	-				
Meaningful Service (MS)	50.92%	58.00%	-			
Student Learning and Reflection (SLR)	55.96%	55.35%	67.89%	-		
Faculty Support and Involvement (FSI)	59.61%	50.97%	45.96%	52.99%	-	
Peer Support and Involvement (PSI)	52.81%	39.31%	51.55%	47.88%	44.22%	-
Accomplishment (AC)	59.23%	53.72%	62.72%	59.00%	48.86%	61.20%

the SLES constructed is robust, and further analysis can be performed.

The second part of scale development established confirmatory processes that tested the proposed measurement theory, which can be represented with a model that shows how measured variables come together to represent constructs. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) enables testing of the measured variables to define the construct. To ensure good construct validity of the SLES, construct reliability (CR), variance extracted (VE) values, and discriminant validity, the values of average variance extracted (AVE) and squared multiple correlations (SMC) are compared among the six subscales, using structural equation modeling (SEM). Using the AMOS software, SEM was adopted to confirm the subscales manifested in the study. Maximum likelihood estimations are the default options for SEM programs, including AMOS.

Construct Validity

Construct validity is the extent to which a set of measured variables represents the theoretical latent construct they are designed to measure (Hair et al., 2006). It is made up of four components: convergent validity, discriminant validity, nomological validity, and face validity. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analytic processes are applied to assess the construct validity of SLES.

Convergent Validity

Convergent validity is the extent to which indicators of a specific construct converge or share a high proportion of variance in common. Standardized factor loadings in the measurement model, CR and AVE, were computed to assess convergent validity.

Hair et al. (2006) noted that CR values should be greater than 60% and AVE should be above 50%. Table 5 supports the convergent validity of the six subscales identified in the SLES. The values support the internal consistency of the data.

Discriminant Validity

The discriminant validity examines the extent to which an independent variable is truly distinct from other independent variables in predicting the dependent variable (Hair et al., 2006). It is the extent to which a subscale differs from other subscales. To validate the discriminant validity evidence, the AVE values between dimensions are compared to squared multiple correlations of the two (Hair et al., 2006). If all AVE estimates are more significant than the corresponding squared interconstruct correlation estimates (SIC), then the construct is said to have discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

The discriminant validity for the SLES was established using the AVE coefficient of correlation and SIC values. Table 6 shows that out of 15 squared interconstruct correlations, four SIC values are greater than the AVE. The indicators have more in common with the construct they are associated with than with other constructs. Therefore, the six subscales of the SLES demonstrate discriminant validity.

Nomological Validity

Nomological validity is the extent to which a scale correlates in theoretically predicted ways with other distinct but related subscales. The interconstruct covariances are positive and significant for the SLES (Table 7); hence, nomological validity is confirmed.

As the variables involved in the study satisfy qualitative and quantitative validation, and the measurement model shows adequate fitness to the data, the six subscales are operationally defined as follows.

Operational Definitions

Curriculum is a structured framework with sufficient hours allotted to community engagement. The service-learning curriculum clearly defines the learning outcomes and is attainable. The curriculum is stimulating, enables students to undertake reciprocal learning, and is mutually beneficial.

Meaningful Service relates to tangible outcomes achieved through service-learning projects. Students can reflect on their preconceptions and assumptions about the community, address genuine community needs, add incremental value, and provide solutions within the community.

Student Learning and Reflection refers to the intentional process of examining the application of domain knowledge to address community concerns. It enables students to understand their potential and apply their academic learning to solve community issues. It allows students to confirm facts with the community and correct their *course of action and behavior.*

Table 7. Results of the Covariances Among the Subscales

			Estimate	SE	CR	*p*
PSI	↔	MS	.211	.022	9.385	***
PSI	↔	AC	.236	.026	9.160	***
PSI	↔	CU	.201	.026	7.812	***
PSI	↔	FSI	.256	.029	8.866	***
PSI	↔	SLR	.229	.025	9.212	***
MS	↔	AC	.234	.026	9.158	***
MS	↔	CU	.241	.028	8.582	***
MS	↔	FSI	.257	.029	8.976	***
MS	↔	SLR	.268	.026	10.158	***
CU	↔	AC	.237	.030	7.957	***
FSI	↔	AC	.271	.032	8.531	***
SLR	↔	AC	.255	.028	9.061	***
FSI	↔	CU	.303	.036	8.348	***
SLR	↔	CU	.265	.031	8.523	***
FSI	↔	SLR	.310	.033	9.381	***

Note. *** $p < .001$; SLR = Student Learning and Reflection, CU = Curriculum, PSI = Peer Support and Involvement, MS = Meaningful Service, AC = Accomplishment, FSI = Faculty Support and Involvement

Faculty Support and Involvement indicates faculty members' passion and availability to students for completing service-learning projects through interactions, feedback, grading, reflection, and community engagement assessment.

Peer Support and Involvement examines the role of team members in sharing the work allotment, becoming supportive, and providing suggestions for service-learning projects. Peer members bond well, help, respect ideas, and contribute to completing projects on time.

Accomplishment shows the students' experience and achievements in personal growth and community recognition, as well as the confidence and resilience of students for service-learning assignments.

Scoring Norms and Interpretation of SLES

Percentile scoring is used to develop the norms for SLES. Table 8 indicates the percentiles, and Table 9 indicates the scoring norms.

Conclusion

The existing scales measure students' personal development, civic engagement, academic enrichment, and learning outcomes. Popular scales, such as the Service-Learning Student Survey (S-LSS), Student Learning and Development Outcomes Inventory (SLDOI), and Service-Learning Outcomes Battery (SLOB), are mainly focused on learning outcomes (Conway et al., 2009; Eyler & Giles, 2010). The SLES tool addresses the gaps in the present literature on service-learning. Understanding the relationship between service-learning and students' experiences provides a blueprint for HEIs to implement a service-learning framework for holistic student development. This tool's strength helps depict qualitative service-learning aspects by capturing students' experiences. It measures students' experiences through varied lenses, such as the curriculum that has been framed, accomplishment, meaningful service, peer interaction, and faculty support, along with student learning and reflection. It attempts to measure the students' experiences in each phase of the service-learning implementation. It aids in deepening and broadening the role of educational institutions in understanding and implementing service-learning. Further, it will help these institutions examine the gaps and shortcomings of the existing systems and support and revisit areas for improvement in implementation. It will enable management, faculty, instructors, and community partners to understand their roles in facilitating student learning and delivering meaningful service to the community.

Additionally, it can be used to reflect on

Table 8. Percentiles for the Subscales of SLES

		CU	MS	SLR	FSI	PSI	AC
N	Valid	290	290	290	290	290	290
Percentiles	25	2.6667	3.0000	3.0000	2.8333	3.0000	3.0000
	50	3.0000	3.0000	3.0000	3.0000	3.0000	3.0000
	75	3.3333	3.4000	3.2500	3.2083	3.4286	3.4000

Table 9. Norms for Interpreting the Scores for the Six Subscales of SLES

Subscale	Low	Moderate	High
Curriculum (CU)	Below 2.66	2.67–3.32	Above 3.33
Meaningful Service (MS)	Below 3.00	3.01–3.39	Above 3.40
Student Learning and Reflection (SLR)	Below 3.00	3.01–3.24	Above 3.25
Faculty Support and Involvement (FSI)	Below 2.83	2.84–3.19	Above 3.20
Peer Support and Involvement (PSI)	Below 3.00	3.01–3.41	Above 3.42
Accomplishment (AC)	Below 3.00	3.01–3.39	Above 3.40

the quality of education and stakeholders' development in the Asian context. It can be utilized for qualitative and quantitative analysis, adopting a diverse approach to evaluating and assessing student learning. The SLES tool enriches existing research by offering a standardized framework to assess the efficacy and impact of service-learning initiatives. It indicates a comprehensive measurement of students' engagement, the depth of their learning, and the extent of community impact. The scale is very useful in measuring the service-learning process of any institution. The utility of the scale can be enhanced when students' experiences are mapped to the attainment of course outcomes. The implementation of service-learning will benefit all community and institution stakeholders when the process is under control. It fills a crucial gap in measuring the multifaceted outcomes of service-learning experiences.

Although the tool has the potential to provide a roadmap for educational institutions, it has a few limitations, including the need for development to capture the multidimensional essence of service-learning holistically. A larger sample size and application in different parts of the world would help to increase reliability of results, as well as adding depth and nuance to our understanding. The tool is customized in the Asian context. It relies heavily on faculty and peer support for service-learning, which could introduce bias. It does not include factors of evaluation, areas of improvement, and gaps in students' experiences.

Further studies can be conducted to measure the long-term effects of service-learning experiences and assess how they influence students' personal and professional development over time, including their career choices, civic engagement, and social responsibility. Cross-cultural studies can be conducted to assess the tool's applicability across different cultural contexts and comprehend the impact of cultural differences on the outcomes of service-learning experiences. Intervention studies can be explored to examine the effectiveness of directed interventions in improving specific aspects measured by the tool. Development programs for faculty and students could be initiated to increase their support for service-learning, and assessment of these programs could promote meaningful engagement and support for students participating in service-learning activities. Further, the integration of service-learning in higher education curriculum design and different models of curriculum integration can be explored.

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Appendix A. Initial Subscales and Items for the Service-Learning Experience Scale

Subscale	**Curriculum**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**
1	The curriculum is well-designed and structured.				
2	Sufficient hours are allotted for community engagement.				
3	Learning outcomes are clear and attainable.				
4	Opportunity is given to use domain knowledge in community engagement/service.				
5	Enables undertaking service-learning activities and projects.				
6	Helps to exchange knowledge and skills between the classroom and the community.				
7	The curriculum offered is engaging and stimulating.				
8	Curriculum is beneficial to the overall learning experience of students.				
Subscale	**Meaningful Service**				
9	Need analysis is conducted before undertaking SL through interaction with community members.				
10	The service offered is valuable to the community.				
11	SL project benefits the people served.				
12	SL activities are in response to the needs of the community.				
13	SL projects have visible outcomes for those being served.				
14	Through SL, students are passionate about making a difference in the community.				
15	Students are committed to carrying out meaningful service in the community.				
Subscale	**Student Learning and Reflection**				
16	SL requires one to reflect regularly throughout the service project.				
17	SL helps one to reflect on the community’s concerns and provide suitable solutions.				
18	Reflection helps students to re-examine preconceptions and assumptions about the community.				
19	Reflection’s practice and strategies are straightforward.				
20	SL reflections are considered for assessments and evaluations.				
21	SL captures the reflection of learnings, challenges and opportunities.				
22	Reflection enables us to gain a deeper understanding of the community.				
23	Reflection has enabled a greater appreciation for the discipline (subjects).				
24	Reflection enables us to understand our abilities and talents.				
25	Reflection enables us to understand areas of improvement.				
26	SL helps to identify and analyse different viewpoints and multiple perspectives.				

27	SL helps in conflict resolution and peer decision-making.				
28	SL helps people think critically and creatively to solve problems.				
29	SL helps one to work collaboratively with others to achieve common goals.				
30	SL actively seeks to understand and respect diverse backgrounds.				
31	SL helps to learn from the community while offering and receiving service.				
32	SL helps to recognise knowledge in the community and overcome stereotypes.				
33	SL prepares for active social engagement and responsibility.				
34	SL improves academic learning and deepens appreciation for domain knowledge.				
35	SL helps to apply the knowledge and skills learnt in class to real-world situations.				
Subscale	**Faculty Support and Involvement**				
36	Instructors prepare/orient students appropriately to undertake service projects.				
37	Instructors are enthusiastic and passionate about SL.				
38	Instructors are available when needed for any assistance and support.				
39	Students receive many insights through interaction with instructors.				
40	Instructors provide timely feedback for completing service projects.				
41	Instructors guide one on how to reflect and engage with the community's members.				
42	Instructors provide rubrics/criteria for grading and assessment.				
43	Instructors are approachable and willing to help.				
44	Instructors are open to new ideas and suggestions.				
Subscale	**Peer Support and Involvement**				
45	Group members in the SL project are generally supportive and motivated.				
46	Students develop a good bonding and relationship with teammates.				
47	Work allotment for each member of the project is fair and evenly distributed.				
48	Team members are open to suggestions and changes in the SL project.				
49	Team members help each other for the timely completion of the project.				
50	Group members respect the ideas and opinions of the SL project.				
51	Team members could learn from others while undertaking the SL project.				
Subscale	**Accomplishment**				
52	Satisfied with the completion of the SL project.				

53	Recognised by the community members for work.				
54	Received constructive feedback from faculty instructors.				
55	I had the opportunity to share the SL project with peers.				
56	Believed that the SL project would add value to the profile.				
57	Overcame the challenges faced in the SL project.				
58	The service-learning experience was beneficial to personal growth.				
59	Through the SL experience, a lasting difference was made in the community.				
60	Overcame the risks involved in the SL project.				

Appendix B. Communalities of the Service-Learning Experience Scale

No.	Items	Extraction
1	The curriculum was well-designed and structured.	.715
2	Sufficient hours were allotted for community engagement.	.682
3	Learning outcomes were clear and attainable.	.764
4	Opportunity to use domain knowledge in community engagement/service gained.	.617
5	Enabled to undertake service-learning activities and projects.	.724
6	Helped to exchange knowledge and skills between the classroom and the community.	.709
7	The curriculum offered was engaging and stimulating.	.789
8	The curriculum is beneficial to the overall students' learning experience.	.750
9	Need analysis was conducted before undertaking SL through interaction with community members.	.604
10	The service offered was valuable to the community.	.720
11	SL project benefited the people served.	.733
12	SL activities were in response to the needs of the community.	.746
13	SL projects had visible outcomes for those being served.	.731
14	Through SL, students were passionate about making a difference in the community.	.690
15	Students were committed to carrying out meaningful service in the community.	.740
16	SL was required to reflect regularly throughout the service project.	.765
17	SL helped students to reflect on the community concerns and provided suitable solutions.	.725
18	Reflection helped students reexamine preconceptions and assumptions about the community.	.738
19	Reflection practices and strategies were clear.	.693
20	SL reflections were considered for assessments and evaluations.	.731
21	SL captured the reflection of learnings, challenges, and opportunities.	.737
22	Reflection enabled students to gain a deeper understanding of the community.	.786
23	Reflection enabled greater appreciation for the discipline (subjects).	.738
24	Reflection enabled understanding of abilities and talents.	.804
25	Reflection enabled understanding of personal areas needed to improve.	.761
26	SL helped to identify and analyze different viewpoints to gain an understanding of multiple perspectives.	.782
27	SL helped with conflict resolution and peer decision-making.	.668
28	SL helped students to think critically and creatively to solve problems.	.690
29	SL helped students to work collaboratively with others to achieve common goals.	.641

No.	Items	Extraction
30	SL actively sought to understand and respect diverse backgrounds.	.778
31	SL helped students learn from the community while offering and receiving service.	.757
32	SL helped students recognize knowledge in the community and overcome stereotypes.	.747
33	SL prepared for active social engagement and responsibility.	.746
34	SL improved academic learning and deepened appreciation for domain knowledge.	.789
35	SL helped to apply the knowledge and skills learned in class to real-world situations.	.722
36	Instructors prepared/oriented students appropriately for undertaking service projects.	.844
37	Instructors were enthusiastic and passionate about SL.	.837
38	Instructors were available when needed for assistance and support.	.787
39	Students received many insights through interaction with instructors.	.822
40	Instructors provided timely feedback for the successful completion of service projects.	.805
41	Instructors guided students on how to reflect and engage with community members.	.868
42	Instructors provided rubrics/criteria for grading and assessment.	.764
43	Instructors were approachable and willing to help.	.807
44	Instructors were open to new ideas and suggestions.	.853
45	Students received constructive feedback from faculty instructors.	.731
46	Group members in the SL project were generally supportive and motivated.	.757
47	Students developed a good bonding and relationship with teammates.	.753
48	Work allotment for each member in the SL project was fair and evenly distributed.	.731
49	Team members were open to suggestions and changes in the SL project.	.819
50	Team members helped each other complete the project promptly.	.764
51	Group members respected the ideas and opinions of the service-learning project.	.826
52	Team members could learn from others while undertaking SL projects.	.816
53	There was satisfaction in the completion of the SL project.	.705
54	There was recognition by the community members for work.	.664
55	There was an opportunity to share the SL project with peers.	.721
56	There was a belief that the SL project would add value to the profile.	.775
57	Team members overcame the challenges faced in SL projects.	.721
58	The SL experience was beneficial to personal growth.	.750
59	Through SL experience, a lasting difference in the community was made.	.756
60	Students overcame the risks involved in the SL project.	.705

Appendix C. Rotated Component Matrix

	Subscales					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Sufficient hours are allotted for community engagement.			.752			
Learning outcomes are clear and attainable.			.705			
Enables undertaking service-learning activities and projects.			.606			
Helps to exchange knowledge and skills between the classroom and the community.			.657			
It is engaging and stimulating.			.679			
Beneficial to overall students' learning experience.			.663			
Offers service that is valuable to the community.				.714		
Shows visible outcomes for those being served.				.663		
Service rendered is committed and meaningful to the community.				.529		
Service helps to analyze community issues and suggests alternative solutions.				.614		
Service helps to reexamine preconceptions and assumptions about the community.				.624		
Reflection enables one to gain a deeper understanding of the community.						.595
Reflection enables one to have a greater appreciation for the discipline.						.599
Reflection enables one to understand abilities and talents to learn effectively.						.621
Reflection enables one to think critically and creatively to solve problems.						.586
Instructors are enthusiastic and passionate about SL.		.775				
Instructors are available when needed for any assistance and support.		.782				
Students receive many insights through their interaction with instructors.		.769				
Instructors provide timely feedback for the successful completion of service projects.		.786				
Instructors guide on how to reflect and engage with community members.		.813				
Instructors provide rubrics/criteria for grading and assessment.		.704				
Peers are generally supportive and motivated.	.718					
Service-learning helps to develop good bonding and relationship with peers.	.773					
Work allotment for each member is fair and evenly distributed.	.638					

	Subscales					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Peers are open to suggestions and changes in the SL project.	.792					
Peers help each other for the timely completion of the project.	.785					
Peers respect shared ideas and opinions.	.822					
Peers learn and care for each other's learning.	.737					
Receive recognition from the community members for the work.					.611	
Students receive the opportunity to share SL projects with other teams.					.538	
Students believe that the SL project would add value to the profile.					.654	
Enables students to overcome challenges faced in the SL project.					.667	
Experience is beneficial to personal growth.					.565	

Note. Subscale 1 = Peer Support and Involvement, 2 = Faculty Support and Involvement, 3 = Curriculum, 4 = Meaningful Service, 5 = Accomplishment, 6 = Student Learning and Reflection

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Rural Anchor Institutions: How Rural Public Colleges Support the Well-Being of Rural People and Communities

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Abstract

This study explored 118 Rural Public Colleges (RPCs) throughout the United States and the counties in which they are located. The findings show that RPCs act as anchor institutions by facilitating rural health infrastructure and workforce and economic development. Despite narratives of declining enrollments among RPCs, the study finds evidence of growing enrollments among many RPCs as well as diversifying student bodies, which points to the importance of these institutions to promoting rural postsecondary access. The study concludes with research, policy, and practice recommendations to strengthen the contributions RPCs make as anchor institutions to the people and communities they serve.

Keywords: anchor institutions, rural higher education, college access and success, rural public health

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, some rural public colleges (RPCs) faced challenges, including population losses and competition from other colleges contributing to enrollment declines (Grawe, 2018). As a result of state funding cuts, RPCs have less revenue per student than urban and suburban colleges (Koricich et al., 2020). Some state policymakers are also considering merging or closing RPCs, which would create rural job losses and curtail rural postsecondary access (Whitford, 2020). COVID-19 intensified these challenges as RPCs faced revenue losses from closed or underutilized residence halls and dining facilities, as well as increased costs to mitigate the spread of the virus (Mitchell, 2020). When faced with funding cuts and enrollment declines, RPCs are often unable to increase tuition because doing so can cause enrollment losses and erode their access missions (Doyle, 2020).

The second coronavirus relief bill passed by Congress in late December of 2020 allocated $23 billion to higher education, which was short of the amount requested by higher education organizations to prevent widespread budget cuts (Murakami, 2020). *The Chronicle of Higher Education* estimated that, as a sector, higher education shed at least 10% of its workforce between February and October 2020 (Bauman, 2020). As part of the CARES Act, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services announced a targeted allocation of $10 billion to support rural hospitals. The announcement acknowledged that rural hospitals "are more financially exposed to significant declines in revenue or increases in expenses" and "operate on especially thin margins" compared to urban hospitals (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). We argue that the same is true for RPCs. Like hospitals, RPCs are vital social institutions that directly contribute to rural educational attainment, cultures, and economies (Orphan & McClure, 2019). In this article we conceptualize RPCs as "anchor institutions" for rural communities, meaning they are invested in specific places and unlikely to move (as businesses might), and they are essential to the well-being of their regions (Orphan & McClure, 2019; Serang et al., 2013).

This study explored how 118 RPCs contributed to rural communities during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although this study does not focus on the pandemic per se, we chose to study RPCs during this time because doing so exposed how RPCs serve their communities, particularly in times of crisis. The selected colleges prioritize postsecondary access, particularly for populations that have had difficulty entering and finishing college. We were guided by these research questions: Which institutions are rural public colleges? And how do RPCs serve as anchor institutions for their communities? We first wanted to identify RPCs and then understand how they contribute to public health, workforce development, and postsecondary access, because rural communities often face acute disparities in these areas (North Carolina Rural Health Research Center, 2020; Provasnik et al., 2007).

This study found that RPCs act as anchor institutions by facilitating rural health infrastructure and economic development. Despite narratives of declining enrollments among RPCs, we found that enrollments were growing and becoming more diverse across the 118 colleges. We also created a novel approach to empirically identifying broad access institutions (BAIs) that serve rural communities. The article concludes with policy, practice, and research recommendations to advance and strengthen the significant contributions of RPCs.

Literature Review

To contextualize our study, we reviewed research about educational attainment, public health, and economic disparities among rural communities. We also reviewed research exploring how colleges and universities promote community development in light of these challenges.

Rural Educational Attainment and Opportunity

Rural communities have lower educational attainment levels compared to other locales, although high school graduation rates have improved (Gibbs, 1998; Provasnik et al., 2007). Research has found that rural students attend college at lower rates than their suburban and urban peers (Gibbs, 1998; Koricich et al., 2018; Yan, 2002). One study found that rural students were more likely to delay college attendance and not to be continuously enrolled (Byun et al., 2015). Rural college students are also more likely to be low-income and first-generation (Koricich et al., 2018; Sowl & Crain, 2021). Racial disparities additionally shape the experiences of rural students of color. For example, Sansone et al.'s (2020) examination of community racial composition and college-going rates in Texas found that the proportion of Latinx students among a community's college-going population was smaller than the proportion of Latinx residents in the community's overall population, with this disparity being greatest in rural areas.

Hughes et al. (2019) explored how rural students' college choice processes are influenced by the availability of postsecondary options and familial, school, and community influences. Research shows that rural students have a greater likelihood of attending community colleges (Byun et al., 2017; Irvin et al., 2017; Koricich et al., 2018) and that many rural students do not have the same proximity to a variety of postsecondary options as their urban and suburban peers.

Regions without BAIs are more likely to be rural (Hillman & Weichman, 2016; Rosenboom & Blagg, 2018). A previous study found that the majority of public, bachelor's-granting institutions in rural and town settings were baccalaureate institutions and regional public universities (Koricich et al., 2020). Also less represented in these rural communities are research-intensive universities, which, on average, have higher endowment assets, which correlate with student success. The relative lack of resources for RPCs shapes the academic and cocurricular opportunities for students (Koricich et al., 2020).

On balance, this research demonstrates that BAIs are important facilitators of rural postsecondary access, yet not all rural communities have BAIs. Some RPCs navigate constrained funding environments, which affects their ability to support rural students.

Rural Public Health

Rural communities experienced lower mental health, employment, earnings potential, job availability, and overall quality of life during the COVID-19 pandemic (Mueller et al., 2020). This situation is due, in part, to inadequate health care access. Rural populations also tend to be older, have a greater chronic disease burden, and express negative feelings toward preventive care—all factors compounding rural health disparities (Slater, 2023). Financial means to pay for services, proximity to services, confidence to communicate with health care providers, and stigma are additional barriers to health care for rural residents. These challenges are particularly acute for the one in five rural Americans who are immigrants, Indigenous, or people of color—groups who routinely experience difficulties accessing appropriate health care due to systemic inequities (Junod et al., 2020).

Another ongoing challenge for rural health care is a shortage of health care workers, though community nonuse, such as being unable to find an appropriate care provider, may also be a factor (Slater, 2023). Rural people are also more likely to lack health insurance and broadband internet access, which constrains telehealth availability. Rural communities often lack access to dental, mental health, substance use disorder, postnatal, and home health care, which can be services offered by colleges and universities within the region. The role of public colleges in addressing rural public health challenges has been underexamined in the literature with the exception of Orphan and McClure (2019), who found that one Appalachian rural regional public university had adapted campus programming to address the health needs of its local community. This research demonstrates that rural communities faced health challenges prior to the pandemic that have become exacerbated.

Rural Community Development

Educational institutions promote community development in rural communities. At the postsecondary level, Miller and Tuttle (2007) found rural communities rely heavily on their local community colleges, which play multifaceted civic, social, and economic roles. Moreover, growing up near a college has led people in rural communities to have significantly different, and more positive, views of local education. Having an affordable, accessible college nearby may reduce or mitigate rural "brain drain" by providing reason for local residents to stay. Community-specific job training and continuing education can encourage students to remain in their hometowns after graduation. For example, institutions that serve rural communities might offer degree paths in agriculture or tourism if those are important industries in the region, and students can take that knowledge and skill back home when they graduate, which promotes workforce development (Koricich et al., 2022; Orphan & McClure, 2019).

Maxim and Muro (2020) found that Great Lakes regions with a regional public university experienced fewer job losses during the Great Recession than regions without one. These communities also recovered faster from the Great Recession and had higher per capita income. The most common majors students pursued at these institutions were in business, education, and public health—three areas that align with the workforce needs of rural communities. In a follow-up analysis, Maxim and Muro (2021) argued that regional public universities are anchor institutions that are especially important to economically distressed communities.

The Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (ARRC) released a report identifying 1,087 rural-serving institutions (RSIs), or institutions that serve rural communities (Koricich et al., 2022). ARRC differentiated between rural-serving and rural-located institutions, stating that rural-located institutions are in places that state or federal classifications have designated as rural, whereas RSIs may be adjacent to rural counties, have varying population sizes in the home county, be adjacent to a metro area, and confer degrees within rural economic areas of need. RSIs account for 83% of postsecondary institutions located in low-employment counties, more than two thirds of postsecondary institutions located in persistent poverty counties, and 53% of postsecondary institutions located in persistent child-poverty counties.

As this literature review demonstrates, rural communities face unique disparities that anchor institutions, such as public colleges, could address. Although research demonstrates that rural institutions support workforce development and postsecondary access, we know less about how they enact a broader anchor institution mission to promote postsecondary access and public health in rural communities. The current study addresses these knowledge needs by exploring how RPCs serve as anchor institutions.

Theoretical Framework

We used the anchor institution framework to explore how postsecondary institutions support rural communities (Harris & Holley, 2016). Anchor institutions are "locally embedded institutions, typically non-governmental public sector, cultural or other civic organizations, that are of significant importance to the economy and the wider community" (Goddard et al., 2014,

p. 307). Anchor institutions include hospitals, community foundations, government agencies, and postsecondary institutions (Birch et al., 2013; AITF, 2009), all of which foster urban development and provide direct employment while increasing purchasing power and sustaining real estate stability (Harris & Holley, 2016).

At its core, an institution anchors its community through "mission, invested capital, and relationships to customers or employees . . . tied to a certain location" (Webber & Karlström, 2009). Some researchers specify that anchor institutions are urban, though the meaning of "city" has expanded to include suburbs, exurbs, periurbs, and "the urban space within which anchor institutions are expected to operate" (Birch et al., 2013, p. 9). Anchor institutions may also have short-term, project-oriented initiatives in addition to longer term shared decision making and goal setting with the community (Fulbright-Anderson et al., 2001). The economic benefits provided by anchor institutions are notably important to community-based organizations.

Medical centers acting as anchor institutions provide benefits through public health initiatives like clinics, an increase in grocery stores in communities, and increased graduation rates for K-12 students due to improved physical health (Slater, 2023). During the COVID-19 pandemic, medical anchor institutions—both university- and non-university-affiliated—created innovative health services to reach rural communities, such as mobile units for testing and vaccines, door-to-door screenings and education, smartphone access, and programming targeting people with substance use disorders.

Scholars have primarily used the anchor institution framework to examine organizations in urban settings; however, Fulbright-Anderson and colleagues (2001) acknowledged that there are different definitions of community, which may include rural regions. Additionally, recent research has examined how a regional public university acted as a rural anchor institution by investing in community capitals, demonstrating the utility of this framework for exploring how RPCs serve their local communities (Orphan & McClure, 2019).

We conceptualize rural anchor institutions as postsecondary institutions that align their institutional operations with the needs of their rural communities. In this way, rural anchor institutions are distinct from urban anchor institutions, as they would address the unique issues facing rural communities. Rural anchor institutions could provide direct employment opportunities for the region (Koricich et al., 2022) while contributing to the economic resilience of communities through promoting civic engagement, specialized trainings, strategic microloans, and cohort-based education for local entrepreneurs (Plaut et al., 2013). We also conceptualize rural anchor institutions as BAIs that intentionally foster postsecondary access to address the educational disparities facing rural communities (Crisp et al., 2021; Provasnik et al., 2007). Taylor and Luter (2013) highlighted how tutoring and service-learning opportunities connect college students with local communities to improve public education—rural anchor institutions might engage in activities like this as well. Rural anchor institutions may also attend to the public health issues facing their local communities. RPCs serving as anchor institutions could consciously and strategically apply long-term, place-based economic support in combination with human and intellectual resources to improve the surrounding community (Hodges & Dubb, 2012).

Methods

Our methods focused on first identifying RPCs and then exploring how they served their rural communities as anchor institutions. Our analysis began with all public, bachelor's-granting institutions in all 50 states with the Carnegie classifications of Baccalaureate (Diverse Fields and Arts & Sciences) Institutions, Master's Institutions, and Research/Doctoral Institutions. Because we were interested in examining institutions that enacted place-based missions as potential anchor institutions, we excluded institutions with a dominant online-only focus. Community colleges are also significant to rural communities and merit attention (Miller & Tuttle, 2007), but we focused on bachelor's-granting institutions. We answer our first research question (which institutions are RPCs) in the Methods section, and our second (how RPCs serve as anchor institutions) in the Findings section.

Which Institutions Are Rural Public Colleges?

We were interested in identifying RPCs that fostered postsecondary access. We used exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to investigate the extent to which specific variables would cluster together in ways that are easily recognizable as institutional accessibility. Some researchers tied broad accessibility to a single indicator, such as institutions that admit at least 80% of students (Crisp et al., 2021). Although an 80% admissions rate demonstrates an aspect of accessibility—namely, admissions—we were interested in developing a more comprehensive approach to identifying BAIs. To do so, we initially included what we expected to be direct measures of accessibility (like admissions rates) and antecedents of accessibility (like higher enrollments for Pell-eligible students). This analysis was designed to be somewhat agnostic in the early stages (including more variables than the literature would suggest) to provide a more open analysis of the ways in which institutions cluster in the EFA, and then the later stages involved combining what we learned from the EFA with the literature to identify a more comprehensive measure for identifying BAIs.

We included 18 variables in the first analysis, which we drew from prior research about accessibility and BAIs (Crisp et al., 2021): out-of-state cost, in-state cost, standardized test scores, research mission, average net price, average net price for the lowest income bracket, online program offerings, remedial education offerings, percentage admitted, percentage of students with Pell, percentage White students, percentage Asian students, percentage Black students, percentage Hispanic students, HBCU, percentage of students with loans, average amount of loans, and percentage of students from out of state. Factor analysis with varimax rotation yielded three factors with eigenvalues above 1.0. We ran the analysis again with three factors retained. The eigenvalues for the three retained factors were 3.69, 3.65, and 2.85. Some variables loaded on multiple factors, but the variables that loaded strongly on Factor 1 clearly revealed evidence of an access-focused clustering among institutions. Factor 2 was unique in its loading of HBCU status and percentage of students identifying as Black/African American. Factor 3 was unique in its loading of variables associated with wealthy institutions (high net price, high percentage White, high percentage out of state). We then took the variables that loaded on Factor 1 (lower in-state cost, lower out-of-state cost, lower net price, lower test scores, higher percentage admitted, online program offerings, remedial education offerings, a non-research-focused mission, higher percentage White, lower percentage Asian, higher percentage of students with loans, and lower percentage of international students) and compared these variables with the literature on BAIs and with our goal of identifying elements that are more closely connected to the decisions made by the administration of the institution, not just correlates of access.

Our analysis and evaluation resulted in our identifying six variables within three categories that we used to define BAIs: accessibility in admissions, cost, and inclusive academic offerings (see Table 1). For accessibility in admissions, variables included the admissions rate and the 25th percentile for math standardized test scores. For cost, the variables included in-state tuition and fees and the average price after financial aid. For inclusive academic program offerings, the variables included whether institutions had developmental education courses and at least

Table 1. Variables Used to Identify Broad Access Institutions

Variable component	Component loadings
Accessibility in admissions	• Admissions rate • 25th percentile for math standardized test scores
Cost for students	• In-state tuition and fees • Average price students pay after financial aid
Inclusive academic programs	• Presence of remedial course offerings to support underprepared students • Availability of fully online undergraduate degree programs
To determine rurality	• Urbanization

Note. Data obtained from NCES (2020).

one completely online undergraduate program, which demonstrates a commitment to educating students who are physically unable to come to campus. We combined these variables into a factor score, with institutions above the mean being included in the final group. Public institutions listed as having open admissions policies were automatically added to the group of BAIs, resulting in a group of 327 institutions.

Next, we identified which of the 327 BAIs we identified were rural. We explored the multiple definitions from various government agencies, including county-level Census definitions, definitions from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service (USDA-ERS), state-level definitions, and institution-level definitions from the U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS; National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). The IPEDS definition of urbanization (locale) includes four categories (city, suburb, town, rural) and three subgroups within each category, resulting in 12 groups. We compared these differing governmental definitions and found consistency between the IPEDS town and rural designations and the other county-based definitions of rural. Ultimately, we coded rural institutions by collapsing the IPEDS urbanization variable, with all town and rural designations coded as rural and all city and suburb designations coded as nonrural, which resulted in a group of 118 RPCs and 209 non-RPCs (see Appendix for the list of RPCs).

As Figure 1 shows, the final group of RPCs is geographically diverse, with 39 U.S. states represented. The group includes eight Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), eight Hispanic-Serving Institutions, one Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution, and six Native American-Serving Nontribal Institutions. The average headcount enrollment was 4,300, but there was a range. Some RPCs had headcount enrollments over 20,000, and others had fewer than 1,000. Most of the BAIs are undergraduate-focused colleges that primarily enroll in-state students.

Exploring How Rural Public Colleges Act as Anchor Institutions

To explore how and whether RPCs acted as anchor institutions for rural communities,

Figure 1. Distribution of Rural Public Colleges Across the United States

Note. Data obtained from NCES (2020).

we performed exploratory descriptive statistical analyses comparing the RPCs to the non-RPCs (results presented in the Findings section). Loeb et al. (2017) emphasized the importance of descriptive analyses in education to identify socially important phenomena that have not previously been recognized. They demonstrated that descriptive analysis can stand on its own as a research product and can inform policy and practice. Because no research had examined RPCs in this way at the time of our analysis, we used descriptive analysis to gain a better understanding of their contributions and characteristics.

Our first step was to examine the communities served by the 118 BAIs we identified to understand how they might be acting as rural anchor institutions. Using county-level data from the American Community Survey (United States Census Bureau, 2022) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (2020), we examined employment, educational attainment, poverty, and disability rates. We also examined public health data from the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute's County Health Rankings and Roadmaps, as well as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, to understand the public health context and recent coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) metrics. We compared rural counties with at least one BAI to nonrural counties with the same. We used *t*-tests to determine whether differences between rural and nonrural counties were statistically significant. Tables 2 and 3 include the results from our *t*-tests and associated *p* values, showing a statistical significance at either the .05 or .01 level.

We then analyzed enrollment and programmatic data of BAIs in rural and nonrural counties. When appropriate, we compared RPCs to non-RPCs to understand how each sector acted as anchor institutions, and to determine whether there were differences in how each group of BAIs enacted an anchor institution mission depending on locale. Below is a list of sources we used for the variables we conceptualized as indicating an anchor institution mission through our analysis of prior literature and our theoretical framework.

- County-level data from the American Community Survey, including employment, low employment, educational attainment, poverty, and disability rates (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).
- Public health data from the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute's County Health Rankings and Roadmaps (2022) to understand the public health context and recent COVID-19 metrics.
- Data from the U.S. Small Business Administration (n.d.) regarding institutions that host a small business or technology development center.

Table 2. Educational Attainment Comparison of Rural and Nonrural Counties With Broad Access Institutions

	No diploma	HS diploma	Some college	College degree
Rural mean	9.87%	30.14%	32.2%	27.8%
Nonrural mean	11.01%	25.49%	30.77%	32.73%
t-score	2.04	–6.86	–2.56	4.72
p-value	$p < .05$	$p < .01$	$p < .05$	$p < .01$

Table 3. Percentage Poverty Comparison of Rural and Nonrural Counties With Broad Access Institutions

Rural mean	14.43
Nonrural mean	18.14
t-score	–6.52
p-value	$p < .01$

- Data from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (2018) to determine which rural colleges hosted museums.
- IPEDS data on bachelor's, master's, doctoral, certificate, and associates degrees awarded; top 10 types of degrees awarded; enrollment (headcount and FTE); admissions rates; enrollment rates for adult students, students of color, and low-income students; online enrollments; tuition and fees; state appropriations; auxiliary revenue; per student revenue; net tuition revenue per student; number of employees employed by institutions (NCES, 2020).

This research utilized existing, publicly available databases, so no IRB approval was necessary.

Findings

Our analysis indicated that RPCs act as anchor institutions in support of their rural communities in a variety of ways, including increasing access to education, sustaining the local workforce, and fostering access to health care, which was especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each finding and its related data are discussed in turn.

Fostering Rural Postsecondary Access

The first way in which the RPCs we examined served as anchor institutions was through fostering rural postsecondary access. Although students from many rural areas graduate from high school and enter college at similar rates to those of nonrural students, fewer rural students complete college. According to the Economic Research Service (Parker, 2016), low education counties are those in which 20% or more of residents do not have a high school diploma or equivalent. The difference in the number of rural versus nonrural low education counties that we examined was not statistically significant. Only 3% of the rural counties we examined were designated as low education, compared to 5% of nonrural counties. However, as Figure 2 shows, the rural counties had a lower percentage of residents with college degrees (including certificates). This difference in postsecondary attainment could be due to rural residents having fewer postsecondary options, as well as higher poverty, which makes it difficult to afford college. In the rural counties we analyzed, 18% of residents live at or below the poverty line, compared to 14% in the nonrural counties. This finding suggests that RPCs, as BAIs, may be serving larger shares of students with financial needs than BAIs in nonrural areas.

Our analysis found that between 2003 and 2018, aggregate enrollment at the 118 RPCs increased, both in terms of full-time enrollment (FTE) and headcount enrollments (Figure 3 shows average FTE per institution and average overall enrollment, which includes FTE and headcount). The latter measure is important because many RPCs serve students who attend part time, and headcount is a better indicator of the number of students they serve. Our findings show that RPCs have maintained a commitment to serving rural communities and, in some cases, expanded the number of students they serve over time.

We found that RPC students have become more racially diverse over time, which may reveal an institutional focus on serving residents in their rural communities, as well as reflecting the racial diversification of rural communities. As Figure 4 demonstrates, the majority of RPC students are White. However, the share of White students has declined. The percentage of Black students has remained relatively constant, but the share of Hispanic/Latinx students has increased. This latter finding is likely driven, in part, by the fact that the rural Latinx population grew by 50% between 2000 and 2010 (Ajilore & Willingham, 2020). RPCs are also an important access point for Indigenous and Native American students, a majority of whom live in rural communities (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

RPCs also enroll above-average shares of adult students and students receiving Pell grants compared to all bachelor's degree granting public colleges (see Figure 5).

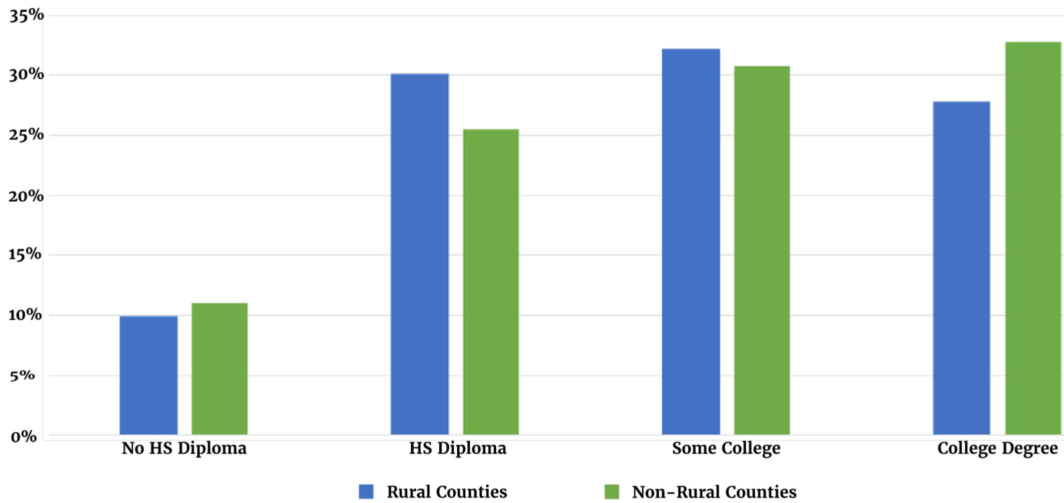
As many institutions reduced in-person instruction due to COVID-19, online education became critical to ensuring students could continue their educations. Even prior to the pandemic, delivering educational offerings online or in hybrid formats was a part of promoting access, particularly for colleges serving rural populations that may live far from campus (Orphan & McClure, 2019). Figure 6 shows that, since 2012, there has been an increase in the percentage of RPC undergraduates enrolled partially or entirely online.

Online enrollments for RPC graduate students increased at a much higher rate over the same time period, showing potential alignment between campus operations and regional employment needs. As Figure 7 shows, the share of graduate students enrolled entirely online increased from 35% to 50%. Unlike undergraduate students, there has been no corresponding increase in the share of graduate students enrolled in hybrid programs. Rather, this proportion has remained fairly static, with only a slight decline since 2012. Although the data do not allow for disaggregation of online students by home county, the growth in fully online programs expands the regional reach of RPCs and promotes rural postsecondary access.

Sustaining Local Economies and Fueling Community Development

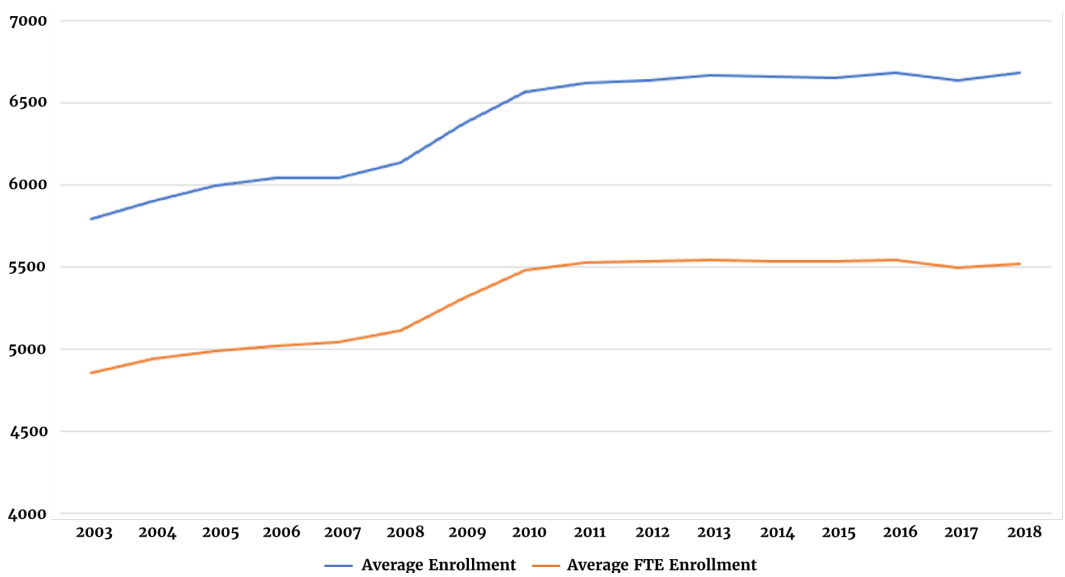
Second, we found that RPCs are aligning institutional operations with community and economic development efforts in their rural

Figure 2. Percentage of Residents with College Degrees by Rural and Nonrural Counties



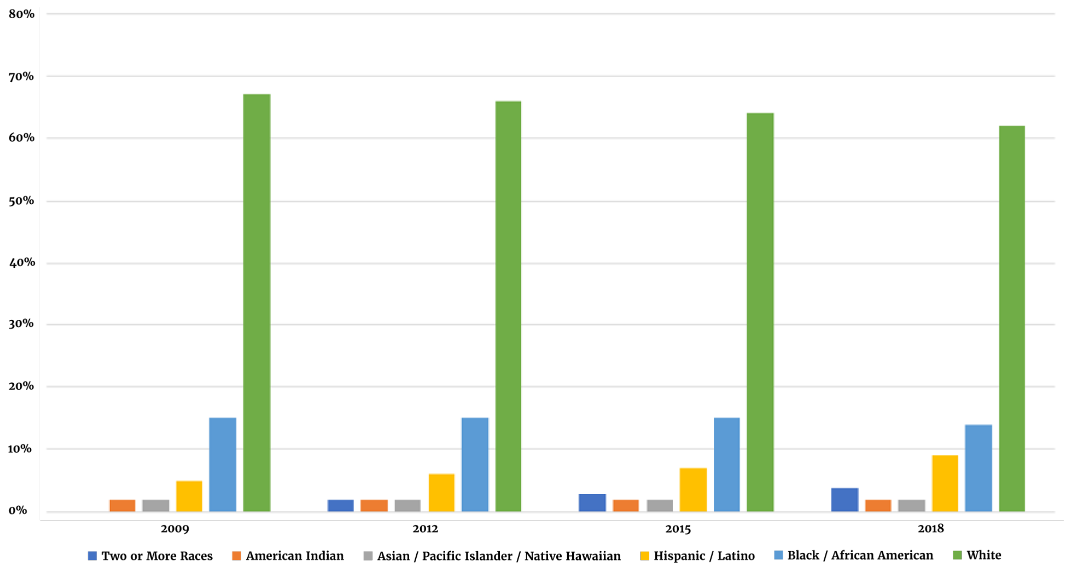
Note. Data obtained from the American Community Survey (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

Figure 3. Average Aggregate and Full-Time Student Enrollment Among Rural Public Colleges, 2003–2018



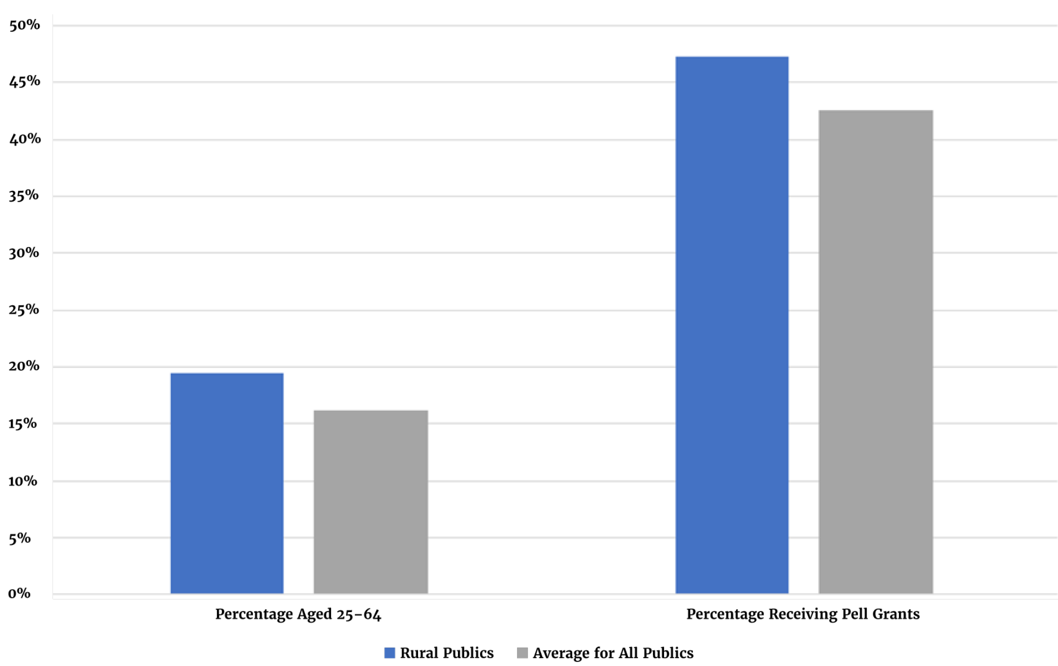
Note. Data obtained from IPEDS (NCES, 2020).

Figure 4. Undergraduate Student Enrollment at Rural Public Colleges by Race/Ethnicity



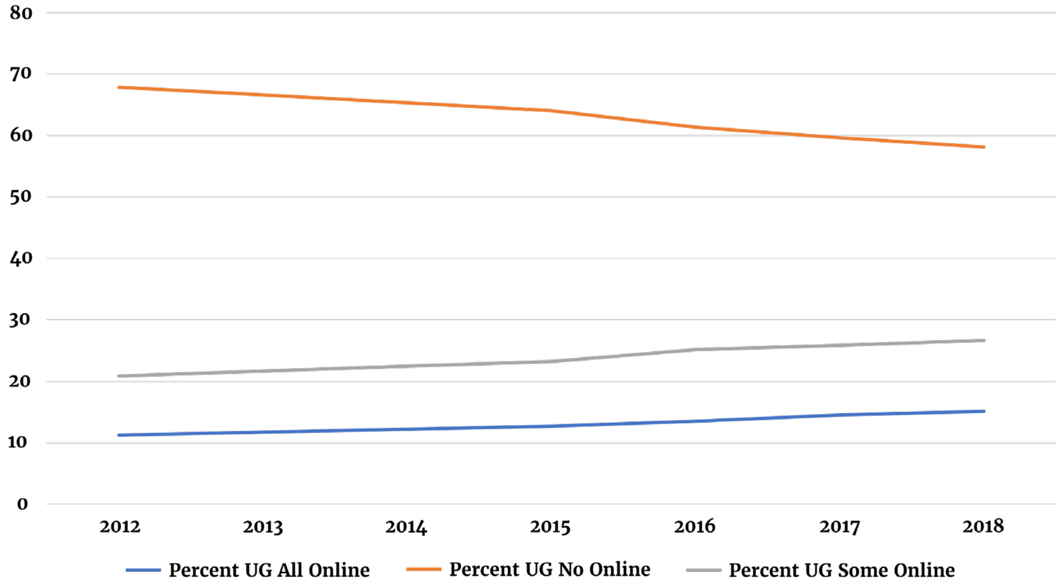
Note. Data obtained from IPEDS (NCES, 2020).

Figure 5. Average Enrollment at Rural Public Colleges and All Public Colleges by Age and Pell Grant Recipients



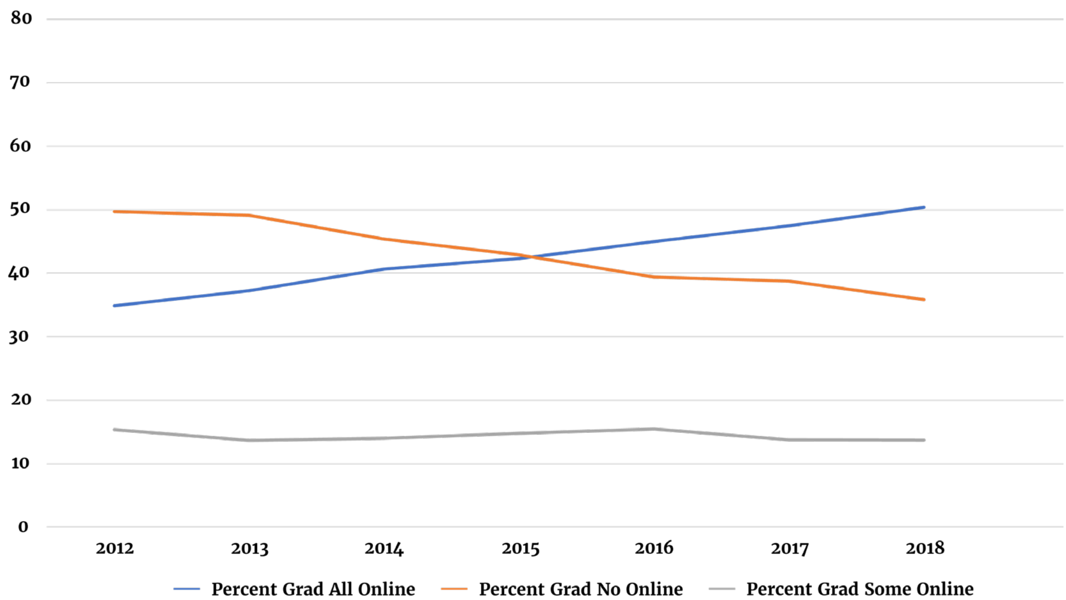
Note. Data obtained from IPEDS (NCES, 2020).

Figure 6. Percentage of Enrolled Undergraduate Students at Rural Public Colleges by Online Course Modality, 2012–2018



Note. Data obtained from IPEDS (NCES, 2020).

Figure 7. Percentage of Enrolled Graduate Students at Rural Public Colleges by Online Course Modality, 2012–2018



Note. Data obtained from IPEDS (NCES, 2020).

communities. RPCs are often large employers in counties with limited job opportunities. According to the American Community Survey (Sanders, 2025), low employment counties are those in which less than 65% of residents aged 25–64 are employed. Our analysis of employment rates of counties (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.) found a statistically significant difference in the number of rural counties with an RPC designated as low employment versus nonrural counties with a BAI. Seventeen percent of counties with RPCs were low employment counties, compared to 7% of nonrural counties with a similar institution, suggesting that some RPCs serve counties with fewer employment opportunities or counties with more unemployed people.

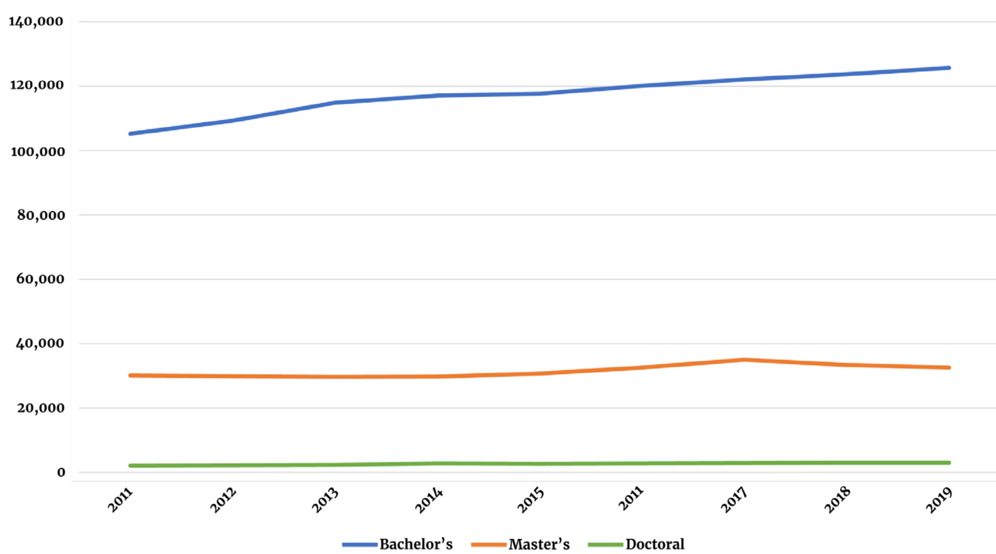
On average, RPCs employed over 500 people, not including third-party contractors (NCES, 2020). These institutions may create jobs that prevent their counties from being designated as low employment. Our analysis found that 19 out of the 115 counties served by RPCs were low employment counties; however, that number would jump to 51 if the jobs provided by RPCs were ended. To further explore the role of RPCs in local employment, we compared two counties that were not designated as low employment: Watauga County in North Carolina and Marquette County in Michigan (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). In Watauga County, almost 75% of adults are employed. Appalachian State University (ASU), an RPC, is one of the county's major employers, with 3,217 faculty and staff members (NCES, 2020). Using just direct employment of 3,217, ASU is responsible for 19% of the jobs in Watauga County. In a hypothetical scenario in which the jobs provided by ASU were lost, Watauga County's employment rate would drop to 61%, making it a low employment county. In Marquette County, 68% of adults are employed (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Northern Michigan University (NMU) has 1,050 faculty and staff members, representing an estimated 5% of jobs in the county (NCES, 2020). Without the jobs provided by NMU, Marquette County would be designated as low employment.

Beyond direct employment, we found that 47% of the RPCs host a small business or technology development center. These centers are important because rural communities have higher per capita self-employed business rates than urban communities (Thiede et al., 2017).

Another way RPCs foster local economies is through workforce development. As shown in Figure 8 and Figure 9, RPCs are focused on undergraduate education, slowly increasing the number of bachelor's degrees awarded each year alongside marked growth in certificates and associate's degrees.

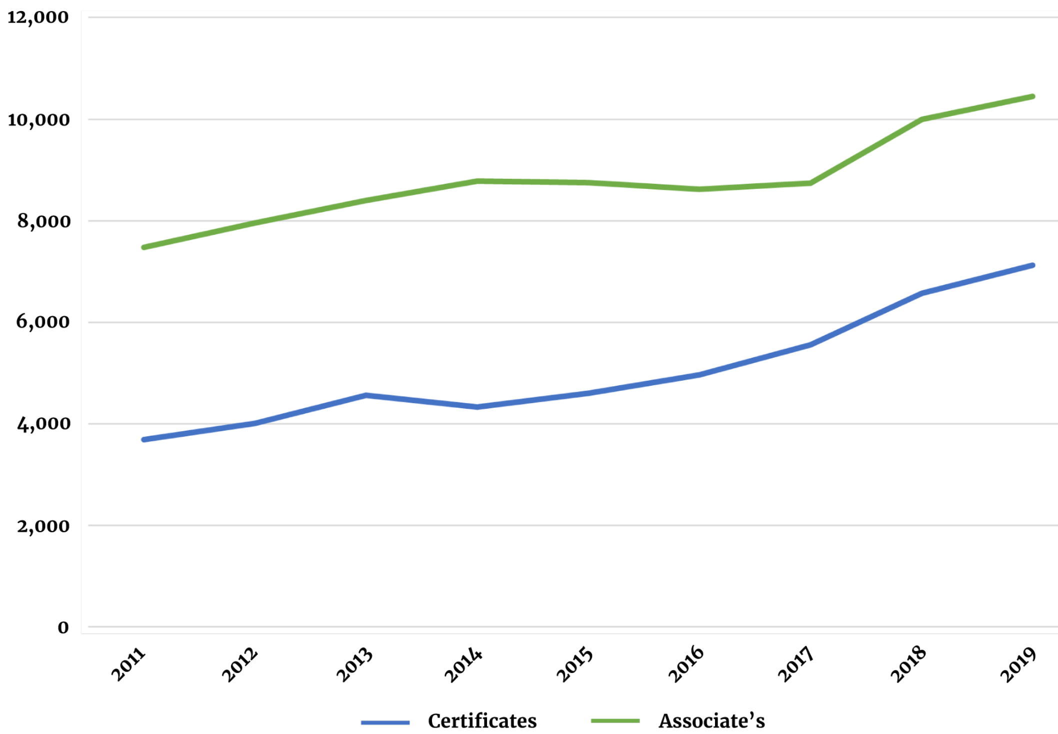
We further found that RPCs had aligned their degree and certificate offerings with high-demand industries in rural communities. The major industries in rural communities across the United States include hos-

Figure 8. Total Degrees Awarded by Rural Public Colleges, 2011–2019



Note. Data obtained from IPEDS (NCES, 2020).

Figure 9. Total Certificates and Associate's Degrees Awarded by Rural Public Colleges, 2011–2019



Note. Data obtained from IPEDS (NCES, 2020).

pitality and tourism, resource management and extraction, health professions, small business ownership, and education (USDA, 2020). Figure 10 shows that the top 10 degrees produced by RPCs align with these industries, with business, health professions, and education occupying the top three spots, demonstrating alignment between degree offerings and rural economic needs.

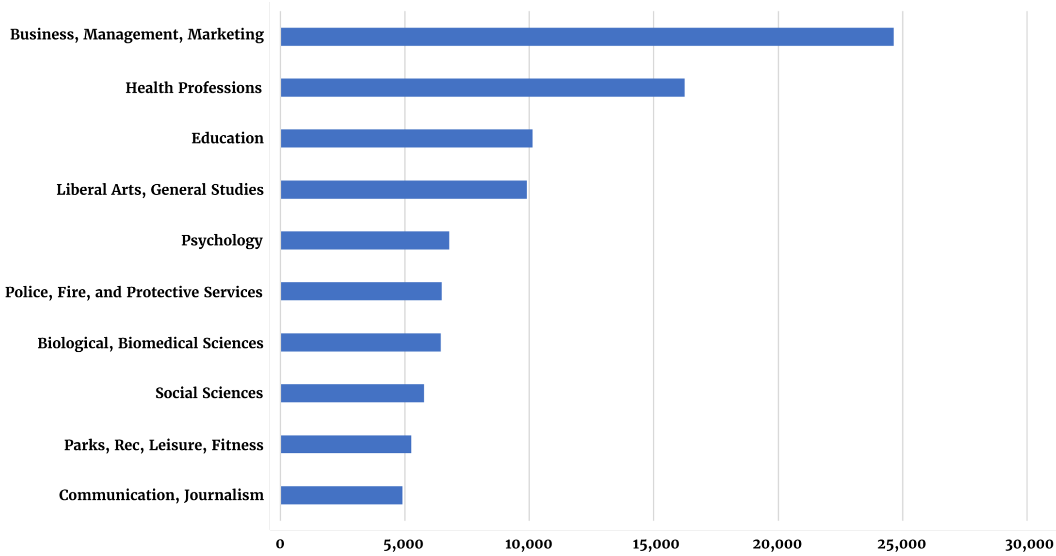
RPCs also produced 16,248 degrees in health professions and related programs, including 9,662 nursing degrees, 13,067 teaching certificates, and 6,573 degrees in homeland security, law enforcement, firefighting, and related protective services in 2019. Research has surfaced shortages of nurses, teachers, and police officers in some rural areas, emphasizing the importance of RPCs offering these degrees (Burrows et al., 2012; Latterman & Steffes, 2017; Weisner et al., 2020). Furthermore, many rural communities are rich in natural resources and have robust tourism and natural resource management sectors. A 2020 Brookings Institution report found that "of the 121 U.S. counties with more than a fifth of their workforce in hospitality, 89 are rural areas" (Loh et al., 2020). RPCs produced 5,261 degrees in parks, recreation, leisure, and fitness management in 2019. As was discussed, rural communities are also hubs of entrepreneurship and small business ownership, and RPCs graduated 24,635 business majors in 2019.

Beyond direct economic and workforce development, we found that RPCs support the cultural life of their regions. Using data from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (2018) we found that 64% of the RPCs host a museum. In some cases, rural communities are far from cities where museums and performances may be more readily available, and some of the RPCs hosted the only museum in their county. These findings demonstrate how RPCs foster economic and community development as anchor institutions.

Service to Rural Communities with Acute Public Health Challenges

Beyond training public health professionals, as shown in Table 4, RPCs serve counties with acute public health needs. The County Health Rankings and Roadmaps (University

Figure 10. Top Baccalaureate Degrees Awarded at Rural Public Colleges by Major/Industry, 2019



Note. Data obtained from IPEDS (NCES, 2020).

of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, 2022) provides annual, county-level rankings for health outcomes based on factors like length of life, quality of life, and quality of health care. Roughly one quarter of the rural counties in our analysis were ranked in the bottom quartile in their state for health outcomes. One measure included in the rankings is the percentage of people reporting poor or fair health, and 41% of the rural counties fell below the state average in this measure. Although many of the counties struggled with poor health outcomes, this was not universally true. A significant number of the rural counties (40%) were in the top quartile of health outcomes.

We additionally found that about one quarter of the rural counties had a population-to-physician ratio below their state's average. Some of these counties therefore may have physician or health professional shortages, creating barriers to adequate health care. This finding is corroborated by data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services showing that slightly less than one third of the rural counties examined have at some point been designated as medically underserved areas (MUAs), which are geographic areas with a shortage of primary care health services. The count of MUAs may be an underestimate because the analysis did not include multicounty service areas and census tracts, which are also eligible for the designation. Among the rural counties served by RPCs that we examined, 37% of counties were designated as having a mental health professional shortage. As was true with health outcomes rankings, some of the rural counties performed well with respect to the number of primary care physicians. For example, Ohio County, West Virginia, includes the city of Wheeling and recorded the lowest population-to-physician ratio in our sample at 627 people to one physician. By contrast, Marshall County, in the northwest corner of Minnesota, had a population-to-physician ratio of 9,356 to one (University of Wisconsin Public Health Institute, 2022).

These analyses are concerning, given data on COVID-19 in rural areas. According to the White House Coronavirus Task Force, a red zone is an area experiencing more than 100 new cases per 100,000 people in the last week (Whyte, 2020). All but five of the rural counties we analyzed—or 96%—were designated as COVID-19 red zones in November 2020. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also showed that people in rural areas were dying at a rate nearly two and half times higher than those living in urban areas (Duca et al., 2020).

As noted previously, many RPCs educate nurses and people entering important health professions. We also found that five of the RPCs examined have a college of medicine, and another 12 have partnerships with

Table 4. Number and Percentage of Counties Where RPCs Are Located by Acute Public Health Needs

	Number of counties	Percentage of counties
Ranked in the bottom quartile for health outcomes	29	25%
Federally designated as medically underserved	35	30%
Federally designated as mental health professional shortage area	44	37%
COVID-19 red zone	113	96%
Population-to-physician ratio below state average	29	25%
Percentage of population reporting poor/fair health above state average	48	41%

Note. Data obtained from the University of Wisconsin Public Health Institute (2022).

colleges of medicine at other institutions. Nearly all of these programs have initiatives to increase the number of doctors in rural areas. These contributions are particularly salient, given data showing many states and hospitals are facing staff shortages (Khullar, 2020). Still other RPCs responded to COVID-19 by providing access to testing and helping disseminate public health information. As these findings show, RPCs serve rural communities with acute public health challenges.

Discussion

Previous literature describing anchor institutions has primarily examined institutions that support urban economies and communities (e.g., Goddard et al., 2014). Examples of anchor institutions included hospitals, universities, and local governments (AITF, 2009; Birch et al., 2013). As our findings demonstrated, RPCs can play a critical role in supporting rural communities, particularly during times of crisis. We showed that as anchor institutions, RPCs can serve communities facing disparities in public health, employment, and educational attainment.

One of our findings explored how RPCs can contribute to rural postsecondary access and equity. The majority of public, bachelor's granting institutions in rural areas are baccalaureate institutions like those we examined (Koricich et al., 2020). We also found that rural anchor institutions are located in counties with higher poverty rates and lower college completion rates. Given that proximity to college is an important factor in students pursuing postsecondary education (Hillman & Weichman, 2016; Rosenboom & Blagg, 2018), the presence of these institutions is important to ensuring educational opportunity and attainment. We also found that as a sector, RPCs have growing enrollments and increasingly serve student populations that have been marginalized in higher education. Aligned with previous findings related to college access and socioeconomic status and race (Byun et al., 2015; Sansone et al., 2020), we found that RPCs enroll higher numbers of adult students and Pell recipients. We also found that the student bodies of RPCs have become more racially diverse. In particular, we saw the Latinx student population increasing across many of these institutions. This increase makes sense, given that these populations are found in rural areas and have been increasing in number over the past few decades (Ajilore & Willingham, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Despite prior research showing that lack of broadband internet would hinder rural communities from participating in online education (Rosenboom & Blagg, 2018), we found increasing enrollments in online programs at both the undergraduate and graduate level, which suggests that many RPCs do in fact offer some form of distance learning.

Another important finding indicated that RPCs are large employers in their communities, which aligns with previous anchor institution research showing that anchor institutions are often major employers (Harris & Holley, 2016; Koricich et al., 2022). We found a statistically significant difference in the number of rural counties with RPCs that were classified as low employment compared to nonrural counties. Additionally, we found that RPCs employ large numbers of local residents, which may prevent a county from being labeled as low employment. On average, RPCs employed over 500 people and provided millions of dollars in regional income. Our examination of counties with a large percentage of the population employed by postsecondary institutions found that in the absence of these institutions, many rural counties would have a drastic increase in unemployment. This occurrence would be particularly detrimental to rural economies, considering that rural counties often already face high rates of unemployment or are economically distressed (Maxim & Muro, 2020; Mueller et al., 2020; U.S. Census Bureau, 2022).

Our findings also uncovered that other economic activities like entrepreneurship and small business are supported by RPCs through continuing education and outreach in programs that provide business incubation and reskilling. The RPCs we examined also educate students in fields that are beneficial to local economies, such as resource management, health professions, education, and hospitality and tourism. Our final finding demonstrates how RPCs provide education and training in medicine—sometimes with degrees specifically tailored to the needs of rural communities.

Implications and Recommendations

Our findings create implications for the role of RPCs as anchor institutions. As the nation strives to increase college attainment rates, it will be critical to support the BAIs with experience serving larger proportions of rural students, given the educational attainment disparities they face. Although we saw enrollment growth across the sector, some of the RPCs were experiencing enrollment declines. Part of the variations in enrollments we observed can be attributed to regional population trends, with some U.S. regions experiencing population fluctuations that can affect college enrollments (Grawe, 2018; USDA Economic Research Service, 2019; Gardner-Cook, 2025). Apart from regional demographics, students' college choices may also be influenced by the natural amenities of the surrounding area (Dotzel, 2017), as well as by large and successful collegiate athletics programs (Pope & Pope, 2009). Enrollment in higher education is usually countercyclical: During recessions, enrollment tends to increase; this phenomenon may have contributed to the enrollment increases that occurred between 2008 and 2010. Enrollment tends to decrease when the economy is stronger, as was the case in the second half of the 2010s (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). In rural communities, college enrollment at RPCs provides local access to degrees in areas of need and economic strength.

Variations in enrollment across the RPCs studied create a need to recognize that enrollment growth is not a universal trend across these institutions, nor should it be a single marker of institutional value or health, given the variety of services RPCs provide their communities. Although RPCs provide many resources to the surrounding community, the number of these institutions compared to the overall rural land area in the United States is low. Those that do exist are constantly facing budget cuts and scrutiny from policymakers, potentially endangering the very important work these institutions perform to support their communities. As policymakers consider proposals to close RPCs in the face of enrollment declines, implications are created for rural collegiate access, given that most students attend college close to home (Hillman & Weichman, 2016).

As we have shown through the findings from our descriptive analyses, RPCs are also important anchors for rural economies. In fact, our results support that the unique missions of rural anchor institutions enable them to provide services that are difficult to replicate in other organizations. In addition to financial capital, rural anchor institutions provide cultural capital in the form of arts venues, museums, sporting arenas, meeting spaces, libraries, and other academic-adjacent resources (Orphan & McClure, 2019). Closing or merging RPCs due to enrollment declines could threaten rural economies as well as overall community well-being.

Beyond challenges around inadequate funding, our study creates implications for how funding is dispersed to postsecondary institutions during crises, like the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in the early stimulus packages, funding was allocated to postsecondary institutions based on FTE (Anguiano, 2020). As our findings show, RPCs provide postsecondary access to many part-time students. Thus, using FTE undercounts the number of students that these institutions are serving. Policymaker choices about how to allocate stimulus funding during crises thus carries implications for RPCs whose student bodies have different enrollment behaviors than urban institutions or wealthier institutions (Sansone, 2023).

To address these implications, we offer recommendations for research, policy, and practice. Our study examined students served by RPCs using descriptive quantitative methods; however, we were unable to examine the qualitative experiences of these students. We hope our study inspires future research exploring the experiences of rural students once they enroll at a rural anchor institution. Important qualitative studies have shed light on the experiences of rural students (e.g., Ardoin & McNamee, 2020), and we look forward to seeing future qualitative research in this area. We also invite scholars to use our BAI metrics to identify and study other types of BAIs, including those in nonrural areas.

We also encourage scholars to continue examining how RPCs support their broader communities. In this study, we considered economic, public health, and education supports, but those are only a few of the many benefits that rural anchor institutions might provide that improve community well-being (Orphan & McClure, 2019). Given the diversity of rural communities, we recommend exploring rural anchor institutions through specific economic industry lenses, which might uncover nuances in organization–community relations, depending on whether a rural community is, for example, predominantly supported through agriculture, tourism, mining, or fishing.

We hope future scholars will adapt and apply the anchor institution framework when examining other types of institutions that serve rural communities. We focused on public colleges in rural counties, but research should explore whether other organizations such as large corporations or tourism centers serve in similar ways. Examining how rural anchor institutions benefit communities of color, aging populations, and communities with large immigrant populations would also produce important findings. As this study demonstrated, anchor institutions are not limited to one type of organization, nor do they contribute to just one community—exploring the breadth of applications of the anchor institution framework is a worthwhile endeavor.

Regarding practice, our study suggests that rural anchor institutions provide access to higher education that is not found in rural locations lacking a BAI, but access to higher education is only the first step; institutions must support student success so that they graduate. One step in doing so would be to create culturally responsive programming that addresses the unique needs of rural students. NYKids (Leo & Wilcox, 2020), a research and publication team at the University at Albany, identified strategies to surface the assets found in rural communities that included modifying course offerings to reflect rural cultures and partnering with community members and organizations to support student mental health and remediate the effects of poverty. RPCs are well suited to adopt these practices, which in turn could enhance student success.

As we found, rural anchor institutions are at times the only provider of critical services in surrounding areas. If not already under way, such campuses should consider expanding the reach of programming to include the community as part of the target audience. The collaboration between higher education leadership and the local community leaders is essential to the longevity of both RPCs and their surrounding communities.

Public policy can also be better leveraged to support the work of rural anchor institutions. First, we recommend that emergency and other types of postsecondary funding be based on headcount rather than FTE. The federal government should also fund the Higher Education Act Part Q for Rural-Serving Postsecondary Institutions to provide incentives for campuses to serve rural communities. An important step in doing so is identifying and defining which rural colleges are rural-serving institutions. The Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges developed an approach and metric for identifying rural-serving institutions that may be useful to policymakers when tailoring public policy and funding to leverage these institutions in support of rural communities (Koricich et al., 2022).

To support RPCs in their efforts to improve rural public health, we also recommend that policymakers allocate funding to establish teaching health clinics, mobile clinics, and hospitals at RPCs and strengthen partnerships with area health care providers to train health care professionals. A number of states provide loan forgiveness for graduates of health science programs who work in rural communities—we believe the programs should be present throughout the United States.

Beyond increasing public funding, modifications can be made to existing state and federal policies and programs that would enhance the ability of RPCs to serve as anchor institutions. To cultivate regional economic development, the federal government could modify the Rural Business Development Grant programs to encourage RPCs to incubate small businesses. Increased funding for the Workforce Opportunity for Rural Communities (WORC) initiative and restoring funding for tribal workforce development would additionally spur greater economic development in rural communities. To address regional teacher shortages, the Teacher Education Assistance for College and Higher Education (TEACH) Grant Program can be adapted to explicitly incentivize teacher education graduates to work in rural schools.

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill included a Rural Playbook that would address a variety of challenges facing rural communities, including those around broadband access, transportation, climate change, and clean water (White House, 2022). Although it was encouraging to see rural communities emphasized in this federal legislation, there was little mention of how postsecondary institutions like RPCs might serve as anchor institutions for implementing these programs. We encourage the federal government to leverage the power and potential of RPCs in improving rural infrastructure moving forward.

Our findings show that RPCs, acting as rural anchor institutions, are vital social institutions that foster postsecondary access, economic development, and public health in the communities in which they are situated. With effective state and federal policies and strengthened commitment to institution–community relationships and programming, RPCs can continue to be pillars of flourishing rural communities.

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Appendix. List of Rural Public Colleges

Adams State University
Alcorn State University
Appalachian State University
Arkansas Tech University
Bemidji State University
Black Hills State University
Bluefield State College
Central State University
Central Washington University
Chadron State College
Concord University
Dakota State University
Delta State University
Dickinson State University
East Central University
Eastern Illinois University
Eastern Kentucky University
Eastern New Mexico University Main Campus
Eastern Oregon University
Eastern Washington University
Elizabeth City State University
Emporia State University
Fairmont State University
Ferris State University
Fort Hays State University
Fort Valley State University
Georgia Southern University
Georgia Southwestern State University
Glenville State College
Grambling State University
Henderson State University
Humboldt State University
Indiana University–East
Kentucky State University
Southern Utah University
Southwest Minnesota State University
Southwestern Oklahoma State University
Stephen F Austin State University
Sul Ross State University
SUNY College at Brockport
SUNY College at Plattsburgh
SUNY College of Agriculture and Technology at Cobleskill
SUNY College of Technology at Canton
SUNY Oneonta
Lake Superior State University
Langston University
Lock Haven University
Louisiana State University–Alexandria
Louisiana Tech University
Mayville State University
Minot State University
Mississippi University for Women
Mississippi Valley State University
Montana State University
Montana State University–Northern
Montana Technological University
Morehead State University
Murray State University
Nevada State College
New Mexico Highlands University
Northeastern State University
Northern Michigan University
Northern State University
Northwest Missouri State University
Northwestern Oklahoma State University
Northwestern State University of Louisiana
Oklahoma Panhandle State University
Oklahoma State University Main Campus
Peru State College
Pittsburg State University
Prairie View A & M University
Rogers State University
Sam Houston State University
Shawnee State University
Shepherd University
South Dakota State University
Southeastern Oklahoma State University
Southern Arkansas University Main Campus
University of West Georgia
University of Wisconsin–Platteville
University of Wisconsin–River Falls
University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point
University of Wisconsin–Stout
University of Wisconsin–Whitewater
University of Wyoming
Valley City State University
Wayne State College
West Liberty University

Tarleton State University
Texas A & M University–Commerce
Texas A & M University–Kingsville
Texas A & M University–Texarkana
The University of Montana–Western
The University of Tennessee–Martin
The University of Virginia's College at Wise
Troy University
University of Alaska Southeast
University of Arkansas at Monticello
University of Central Missouri
University of Hawaii at Hilo
University of Idaho
University of Maine at Augusta
University of Maine at Fort Kent
University of Maine at Machias
University of Maine at Presque Isle
University of Maryland Eastern Shore
University of Minnesota–Crookston
University of Mississippi
University of Nebraska at Kearney
University of North Carolina at Pembroke
University of North Georgia
University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma
University of South Dakota
University of West Alabama
West Texas A & M University
Western Carolina University
Western New Mexico University
Wright State University Lake Campus

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Understanding the Logic and Aims of Rutgers Future Scholars: A College Access Program Providing Hope and Opportunity to New Jersey

Adrian Gale, Kim Williams, and Aramis Gutierrez

Abstract

This article describes the Rutgers Future Scholars (RFS) program, established in 2007 to address the daunting challenges that hinder access to higher education for low-income, first-generation students. RFS spans 5 crucial years, offering academic and summer programming, mentorship, family support, and college tours. This comprehensive approach aims to enhance college readiness, identity development, social skills, academic achievement, and high school persistence, ultimately leading to college enrollment. RFS's commitment to scholars is unwavering and aligns with restorative justice practices, emphasizing relationship-building and support over punitive measures. It serves as a beacon of hope for underserved communities. RFS seeks to create systemic changes within educational systems and empower students to overcome barriers to higher education by fostering partnerships, tailoring programs to unique contexts, and leveraging multisite locations. The article sheds light on the transformative potential of programs like RFS in reshaping the trajectories of underrepresented youth and expanding access to higher education.

Keywords: college access, academic programming, adolescence, educational equity

In the United States, a college degree provides access to multiple quality of life markers, including higher employment, better health, and a more stable family (Lawrence, 2017). For far too many Americans, achieving a college degree is almost impossible because of a lack of financial resources or knowledge about the college application process (Greenfield, 2015). In response to issues of college access, universities; local, state, and national governments; and nonprofit organizations have established college access programs (CAPs), which promote educational and economic equity by empowering historically disadvantaged youth from low-income households. CAPs provide resources, support, and experiences (academic mentoring, financial counseling for students and their families, test preparation courses, and tuition assistance) that supplement the college readiness support students may or may not receive in their educational or familial settings (Ward, 2006).

Involvement in CAPs enables students to engage in academic and social activities on college campuses rather than work in areas unrelated to their academic careers (Allen et al., 2008; Hune & Gomez, 2008). Students who participate in CAPs have better odds of completing advanced college preparatory curricula such as Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses than non-college-access-program participants (Domina, 2009; St. John et al., 2008, 2011). Likewise, studies have found that CAP participants are more likely to enroll in college (Bowman et al., 2018; Glennie et al., 2014), have higher GPAs in reading and math (Cabrera et al., 2006; Ellis & Helaire, 2018), SAT and ACT scores (Morgan et al., 2015), and academic motivation and critical thinking skills (Beer et al., 2008; Gale, 2021) than non-college-access-program participants.

Participating in CAPs also enables students to develop networks with school personnel and program staff, providing them with academic resources and strategies for college success (St. John et al., 2011). Over the past 20 years, many universities, such as Rutgers University, have implemented initiatives to increase access to higher education for underrepresented students in their respective regions. University-sanctioned college access initiatives combine merit-based (i.e., meeting academic requirements to access programs and receive financial funding) and need-based (i.e., identifying students who are socioeconomically in need of resources) approaches to help students access programs to increase access to their institutions. Rutgers Future Scholars (RFS) is a unique and ambitious CAP that combines a tailored approach to programming with an unconditional commitment to program participants. The purpose of this article is to describe the logic model that undergirds RFS, as well as outline this program's aims. This article also describes how RFS has sought to empower and transform the lives of underrepresented and lower income youth and their families through programming.

Rutgers Future Scholars Program Overview

In response to the scarcity of opportunities for first-generation and underserved youth in the vicinity of Rutgers University's campuses in New Brunswick, Piscataway, Newark, Camden, and Rahway (established in 2016), the RFS program was established in 2007. The institution supports this university-wide initiative and aims to equip promising students from low-income backgrounds, who will be the first in their families to attend college, with the necessary preparation for college admission. Spanning 5 years, from eighth to 12th grade, RFS operates during both the school year and the summer. The program employs a range of strategies, including summer programming, mentorship, family academies, college tours, and social–cultural enrichment trips throughout the school year, with the ultimate goal of enhancing college and workforce readiness, fostering identity and social skill development, and improving student achievement and persistence in high school, ultimately leading to college enrollment.

Upon successful completion of the 5-year program and acceptance into Rutgers University, students can receive assistance with tuition. In some cases, they may also access financial aid from other universities through state and federal grants and private scholarships. This comprehensive approach exemplifies the commitment of RFS to empower students and provide them with the necessary resources and support to overcome barriers to higher education, ensuring their successful transition into college and beyond.

RFS Theory of Change

RFS employs a comprehensive and sequential multiyear curriculum that encompasses various components, such as academic enrichment, university programming, social-cultural enrichment, counseling and support, mentoring, and academic coaching, throughout the 5-year program. RFS aims to motivate scholars in academic, social, and personal domains by providing the hope and promise a college education offers. This targeted programming strives to increase the likelihood of high school completion, postsecondary institution application, and enrollment, as depicted in Table 1, which depicts the program's logic model.

Figure 1 illustrates the structure of the Rutgers Future Scholars experience, including core supports provided across the five program years and expected pathways toward college enrollment.

The overarching goals that guide the mission of RFS are threefold. The program's primary goal is to increase the graduation rate of promising students from low-income backgrounds who are traditionally underrepresented in college, ensuring a successful transition into higher education. Second, RFS invests in the Newark, Camden, Piscataway, New Brunswick, and Rahway communities. Newark, Camden, Piscataway, and New Brunswick are home to Rutgers University's main campuses; Rahway is the first expansion site not home to a Rutgers campus. RFS fosters partnerships between educational institutions, school districts, community-based organizations, government entities at the state and local levels, and the business community. Finally, RFS seeks to establish a flexible model that encourages other higher education institutions to collaborate with various stakeholders, effectively creating educational opportunities for underserved youth from low-income communities and catalyzing systemic changes within the surrounding educational systems.

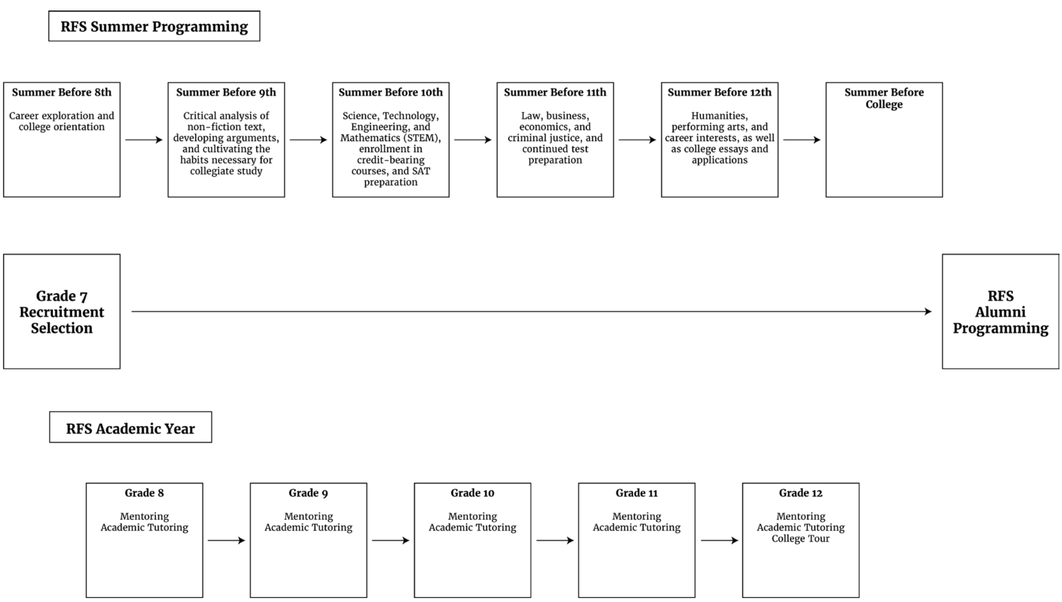
Who Are RFS Scholars?

Since its establishment in 2007, the RFS

Table 1. Logic Model of Rutgers Future Scholars

Inputs & resources	Interventions & activities	Outputs	Short-term outcomes	Long-term outcomes
• Funding • RFS staff; Director; Mentors; Summer instructors • Rutgers University facilities • Middle and high schools	• Summer programming • Academic year program • Social and emotional skill development • College exposure • Academic, college, and career counseling • Art and cultural enrichment • Parent engagement and college knowledge • Student/family support (as needed) • Alumni support	• 215 new Scholars	• Increase GPA	• Alumni graduating and enrolling in college • Alumni successfully complete coursework and earn degrees

Figure 1. The Rutgers Future Scholars Experience



program has served over 3,000 students, offering them valuable services. The current group of RFS scholars consists of 44% Latin/Hispanic, 35% Black/African American, 8% Multiracial, 6% Asian/Pacific Island, 4% White, and 3% belonging to other racial categories. Regarding gender distribution, 55% of RFS scholars are female, and 45% are male. To become an RFS scholar, students face a competitive selection process, as the program receives hundreds of applications annually. With limited capacity, each year RFS can accept only 215 seventh-grade students, who hail from over 40 schools in New Jersey.

To be eligible for consideration to RFS, youth must fulfill specific criteria. First, they must attend a public school governed by the district's Board of Education, excluding charter schools. Additionally, students must demonstrate good academic standing or exhibit academic promise as of 7th grade. Financial need is also a crucial factor, determined by participation in a reduced-price lunch program. Furthermore, applicants must obtain recommendations from either school faculty or community members. Finally, preference is given to students who would be the first in their families to pursue higher education. RFS program staff meticulously review each application, considering factors such as academic potential, financial need, and personal circumstances to select the final cohort of scholars. The application review process involves professionals from RFS and representatives from Rutgers University departments, including admissions, financial aid, undergraduate support programs, and partnering school districts.

Context Matters: RFS Home Communities

One of the major considerations for RFS is the role of context and student location in program delivery. RFS programming operates in five school districts across New Jersey, each with unique characteristics. RFS school districts differed concerning (1) the socioeconomic status of the city (income and education of residents) and (2) community structure (see Table 2 for a more detailed description of these demographics). The populations of Camden, New Brunswick, and Newark represent some of the lowest socioeconomic statuses in New Jersey. In addition, Camden, New Brunswick, Newark, and Rahway's 4-year high school graduation rate is lower than the New Jersey state average of 90.4%. Concerning urbanicity, Newark schools are the most urban and have the highest public school population, at 41,510 students. In the Newark district, 73.5% of students qualify for the free/reduced-price lunch program; in New Brunswick, all students are on free/reduced-price lunch (Snyder et al., 2019).

On the other hand, Camden is the least urban of the RFS school districts, with a public school population of 7,487. New Brunswick school system has a total population of 10,217 students, of which 48% qualify for the free/reduced-price lunch program. Piscataway is a suburban town with a public school population of 7,137. It has the lowest percentage of free/reduced-price lunch, 33.5%. Since 2016, RFS has expanded to include enrolling and serving students in the Rahway, New Jersey school district. Rahway has the smallest school district of the RFS districts, with 4,054 students and 56.6% of students receiving free/reduced-price lunch (Snyder et al., 2019).

Finally, in addition to the issues described above, each school district has unique issues that must be considered when developing programming. For example, approximately two thirds of the New Brunswick school district students speak a second language at home, reflecting the city's diversity (New Brunswick Public Schools, n.d.). Piscataway is the only RFS district designated as a "Highly Effective School District" by the New Jersey Department of Education after evaluating the district's operations management, personnel, instruction and program, and governance and fiscal management. The multisite nature of RFS allows the program to tailor programming to meet each community's needs. Further, these differences in the school population and environment create opportunities to generate knowledge about how to serve low-income, first-generation students in various contexts and identify opportunities for building networks and pooling resources across schools and school districts.

Academic Year Programming

The academic year programming of RFS is structured around a 5-year personal development plan designed to support scholars from the summer before eighth grade until college preparation in the final senior year. Each year focuses on specific aspects of academic and personal enrichment and growth. Scholars engage in workshops and events, facilitating identity formation in the first year. Subsequent years target self-

Table 2. Rutgers Future Scholars School District Demographics

Campus	District information (2018–2019)	Economic status	Graduation/postsecondary achievement
Camden Campus	• Number of traditional public schools: 19 • Total enrollment: 7,487 • Student to teacher ratio: 9:1	• Free lunch: 53.2% • Reduced-price lunch: 0.3%	• Four-year graduation rate: 69.1% • College enrollment: 35.2%
New Brunswick	• Number of traditional public schools: 11 • Total enrollment: 10,217 • Student to teacher ratio: 13:1	• Free lunch: 47.9% • Reduced-price lunch: <0.1%	• Four-year graduation rate: 78% • College enrollment: 56.5%
Newark	• Number of traditional public schools: 61 • Total enrollment: 41,510 • Student to teacher ratio: 14:1	• Free lunch: 69.3% • Reduced-price lunch: 4.2%	• Four-year graduation rate: 76.1% • College enrollment: 53.7%
Piscataway	• Number of traditional public schools: 10 • Total enrollment: 7,137 • Student to teacher ratio: 13:1	• Free lunch: 26.6% • Reduced-price lunch: 6.9%	• Four-year graduation rate: 94.4% • College enrollment: 84.6%
Rahway	• Number of traditional public schools: 6 • Total enrollment: 4,054 • Student to teacher ratio: 12:1	• Free lunch: 46.6% • Reduced-price lunch: 10%	• Four-year graduation rate: 87.6% • College enrollment: 73.3%

Note. District-level demographic data (e.g., enrollment, number of schools, student–teacher ratios, and free/reduced-price lunch eligibility) were obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics (Snyder et al., 2019). Graduation and postsecondary outcomes were retrieved from the New Jersey Department of Education's *2020–2021 School Performance Reports* (New Jersey Department of Education, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d).

empowerment, social and civic engagement, career and workplace exploration, and college preparation. These targeted objectives enable scholars to confront and overcome challenges, enhance their test-taking skills for college entrance exams, and explore various career paths. Scholars participate in mentoring, college readiness, enrichment, tutoring, academic support, and team-building seminars to support their academic journey.

Recognizing the unique circumstances of each school district's location, the program tailors its programming to address each community's specific challenges and opportunities. Recognizing the unique opportunities in each location, RFS in Newark leverages the city's strong network of community-based organizations and emphasis on STEM education by collaborating with local universities, tech incubators, and corporate partners to offer mentorship and hands-on STEM programming, such as coding workshops or engineering design challenges. In Camden, where proximity to major health care institutions aligns with a growing focus on public health and social services, the program may provide specialized exposure to health care careers through internships, shadowing opportunities at Cooper University Hospital, and partnerships with local nonprofits focused on community wellness. Meanwhile, in New Brunswick/Piscataway, home to Rutgers University's main campus, RFS students may benefit from increased access to university faculty, research labs, and college-level courses, with opportunities for dual-enrollment programs, extended summer residential experiences, and direct mentoring from Rutgers students.

RFS provides a structured and supportive environment designed to foster academic, social, and personal development, ensuring scholars are well-prepared for college and career success. Scholars are provided with an active and focused environment that fosters academic, social, and personal development by offering workshops, events, and seminars. The program equips scholars with the necessary skills for college entrance exams and career exploration and creates a supportive space for their growth. Through these efforts, RFS acknowledges and addresses each school district's unique challenges and opportunities, ensuring a customized approach that maximizes the potential for scholar success.

Summer Institute

During the summer, RFS scholars engage in specialized programs hosted at local Rutgers campuses. These summer programs have a dual objective: enhancing scholars' academic skills and providing exposure to various career paths and college majors, particularly in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), as well as liberal and performing arts. The experience of living on a college campus further immerses scholars in the college environment. The curriculum of the summer programs includes both credit and noncredit courses and activities that foster connections between classroom learning and real-world applications. The structure of the summer programming aligns with the academic year curriculum, with each year building upon the knowledge and skills acquired in the previous year. In the first year, the focus is on identity formation. Year 2 centers on critically analyzing nonfiction texts, argument development, STEM, and cultivating study habits essential for college-level education. Year 3 focuses on law, business, economics, criminal justice, and SAT preparation. In Year 4, career exploration and college orientation are accompanied by ongoing test preparation support. Finally, the summer before senior year concentrates on humanities, performing arts, career interests, college essay writing, and college application guidance.

RFS offers summer programming that enables scholars to enhance their academic competencies and explore diverse career opportunities. Scholars can develop their academic skills through these programs while gaining valuable exposure to various career paths. Scholars are encouraged to bridge the gap between theoretical learning and practical application by integrating theme-based projects into the curriculum. The structured progression of the summer programs ensures a systematic approach to preparing scholars for college and beyond. From exploring personal identity and self-awareness as individuals and RFS scholars to subject-specific studies, focused test preparation in later years, and career exploration with college orientation, the summer programs offer scholars a well-rounded educational experience. By incorporating STEM, arts, and humanities courses; credit-bearing classes; and critical thinking exercises, the program provides scholars with the necessary skills and knowledge to excel academically. Moreover, the diverse range of subjects explored in the program's later years enables scholars to explore potential fields of interest and make informed decisions about their future pursuits. The culmination of the summer programming in the senior year involves a comprehensive focus on humanities and college application support, ensuring that scholars are well-prepared for the transition to higher education and their desired career paths.

The RFS Promise: Unconditional Commitment

One of the unique features of RFS is its motto, "Once a Scholar, always a Scholar," which shows RFS's commitment to scholars. RFS guarantees an unconditional commitment to scholars and their families, setting it apart from the punitive zero-tolerance policies in many urban schools. School districts implemented these policies to create safer school environments. However, unlike zero-tolerance approaches, RFS focuses on providing consistent support and opportunities for scholars to thrive. Although zero-tolerance policies initially addressed serious drug and weapon offenses, these policies have expanded to include minor disciplinary infractions (Schiff, 2018; Skiba & Rausch, 2006a). Schools sometimes respond to minor student violations with punishments like those in the criminal justice system (Cribb Fabersunne et al., 2023; Giroux, 2003). This punitive approach disproportionately affects students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and those with disabilities, often pushing them out of the education system and into cycles of academic disengagement and criminalization (Payne & Welch, 2017). In contrast, RFS fosters a culture of belonging and long-term investment in students' success, ensuring that scholars are supported through challenges rather than penalized and excluded.

Students who experience overly harsh discipline are more likely to do poorly in school, develop negative attitudes toward education, and drop out (Payne & Welch, 2017; Skiba & Rausch, 2006b). Because of the harm that historically underrepresented populations like Black and Latino students have experienced through zero-tolerance policies, the RFS mantra of "Once a Scholar, always a Scholar" is based on restorative justice practices that focus on building relationships and repairing harm rather than punishments that encourage repetition (Payne & Welch, 2015; Welch & Payne, 2018). People generally respond better in environments that foster social engagement rather than social control (Payne & Welch, 2017). Unlike zero-tolerance policies, restorative justice in schools seeks to bring students closer to the community rather than alienate them. RFS believes in supporting the students through hardships and triumphs and promises to serve as a constant resource, always believing in scholars' ability to succeed. Restorative justice techniques include discussions in safe environments, such as student conferences and peer mediation, which allow students to guide others through a restorative process (Payne & Welch, 2017). Within the RFS model, many of these components are involved in building stronger, supportive relationships with scholars.

Schools implementing restorative justice practices have witnessed positive outcomes, including reduced suspensions and expulsions, fewer disciplinary infractions, fewer office referrals, and improved academic achievement (Payne & Welch, 2017). Although the implementation of restorative justice programs in schools has been limited, educators and practitioners acknowledge the potential of these programs to support students in their educational journey while addressing racial disparities in disciplinary policies and outcomes (Schiff, 2018). Through its unwavering dedication to restorative justice approaches, the RFS program has never dismissed a student, highlighting its commitment to fostering a supportive and inclusive environment.

Expected Impact of RFS

The overarching goal of RFS is to enhance college access for all participants, accompanied by intermediate short-term and long-term goals for scholars' postcollege acceptance. Through the 5-year program, RFS empowers scholars to excel academically, personally, and socially during middle and high school. Regarding long-term objectives, RFS aims to increase college acceptance and promote college persistence and completion. Moreover, RFS strives for eventual local policy and practice changes that positively impact educational access and success for low-income and first-generation students. RFS seeks to foster enduring transformations in educational opportunities and achievements for marginalized communities by actively pursuing these comprehensive goals.

Internal analysis of outcome data has shown that RFS substantially impacts the educational achievement of its participants, particularly in terms of high school retention, graduation rates, and college enrollment. Findings from a 2017 internal report revealed that an impressive 99% of RFS scholars were actively enrolled and making progress toward their graduation. Notably, these students exhibited remarkable academic performance, boasting an average GPA of 3.3, with over 50% actively engaging in honors and advanced courses. These outcomes highlight the effectiveness of the RFS program in providing support and empowerment to low-income and first-generation students, nurturing a culture of academic excellence, and facilitating access to higher education opportunities.

Evaluating the Effectiveness of RFS

Led by the lead author of this article, each summer for the past 4 years, Rutgers Future Scholars has assessed the psychosocial impacts of its programming, such as self-efficacy, grit, confidence in academic abilities, future orientation, and communication, using a 30-minute survey. This project received IRB approval through Rutgers University (IRB# E12-427). These assessments have shown that strong social support networks significantly enhance students' academic performance, self-efficacy, and well-being. Mentorship and peer support have emerged as critical factors in helping students navigate academic challenges and stay motivated. The findings from these assessments will be used to improve the programming, ensuring it effectively supports students' needs and fosters their success.

The ongoing evaluation of RFS will be expanded to assess the program's effectiveness further and ensure its continued success and impact. Building on current evaluation efforts, this expanded assessment will track students' outcomes from entering the program in eighth grade through high school graduation and beyond. RFS will continue to analyze key metrics such as academic performance, college persistence, career achievements, and overall life satisfaction. These insights will not only help identify strengths and areas for improvement but will also guide future program enhancements and strategic planning.

A crucial aspect of this expanded evaluation will be the systematic collection and analysis of data that highlight the program's long-term impact on participants. By leveraging scholar feedback, academic records, and postgraduation tracking, RFS will refine its support structures to meet the needs of underserved students better. This continuous, data-driven assessment will ensure that RFS remains a transformative force in improving educational and career outcomes while adapting to the evolving challenges scholars face.

Next Steps for Expanding RFS

Building on its success, RFS is committed to expanding its reach by developing a comprehensive framework for replication across universities and institutions. This expansion strategy will ensure that more underserved students benefit from the program's proven model while upholding the core principles that define RFS. Establishing strong partnerships with university administration, faculty, and student organizations will be central to this effort, creating a supportive infrastructure that fosters sustainability and enhances student success.

By leveraging existing university resources—such as academic support services, mentorship programs, and community engagement initiatives—RFS will seamlessly integrate into diverse institutions. The effectiveness of this approach is demonstrated by its successful adaptation at peer institutions, including the University of Michigan, James Madison University, the University of Toronto, Stony Brook University, Louisiana State University, and Temple University. Through targeted outreach, professional development, and strategic planning support, RFS will empower partner institutions to cultivate a culture of educational equity and opportunity, ultimately building a national network to advance college access and success for first-generation, low-income students.

To support further expansion, RFS will prioritize securing sustainable funding through grants and partnerships with local businesses. Additionally, RFS will develop training workshops and webinars to equip university staff with the skills needed for successful program implementation. RFS aims to transform higher education cultures and ensure that first-generation and low-income students reach college and thrive by continuing to foster a nationwide network of institutions committed to educational equity.

Conclusion

RFS is an ambitious college access program dedicated to supporting high-achieving youth from low-income households in New Jersey to attain admission to colleges and universities. The program accomplishes this objective by providing comprehensive financial, social, and academic assistance through the collaboration of RFS staff, peers, and families. To further these goals, RFS implements a range of purposeful interventions, including summer and academic-year programs, the development of social and emotional skills, college exposure opportunities, mentorship, and academic coaching. The program's unwavering commitment to scholars' success and its tailored programming for specific locations enhance the effectiveness of RFS in facilitating college access. Ultimately, the RFS program holds immense potential in transforming life trajectories and opening doors to new opportunities for its participants.

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Exploring the Impact of a Community-Engagement Project on Students' Perceptions of Housing Justice and Insecurity and Their Intention for Continued Engagement

Jessica P. Hodge, Bernard Brady, and Teri Mueller Dorn

Abstract

This study employs a critical service-learning framework to examine how participation in a university-led service-learning initiative influences students' understanding of homelessness and housing justice. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach—including focus group discussions and analysis of students' written critical reflections—the research extends existing scholarship by exploring how community-based learning experiences reshape students' perceptions of individuals experiencing homelessness. Additionally, the study explores whether a program designed to foster sustained engagement encourages students' ongoing involvement even after the completion of an academic course, and whether the program deepens their understanding of advocacy and housing justice. Findings indicate that students highly valued their participation, and many expressed intentions to remain involved beyond the course. Students also offered feedback for improving the program to better equip them to be advocates. The study concludes with recommendations for future research to advance similar programs in fostering meaningful outcomes for both students and the local community.

Keywords: critical service-learning, university program, advocacy, homelessness, housing justice

Understanding how service-learning influences student engagement, awareness, and advocacy has become an important area of focus in higher education, especially within the framework of critical service-learning. Existing research highlights its transformative potential in shaping students' views of marginalized communities, promoting civic responsibility, and supporting long-term activism. This study builds upon that foundation by examining how structured, community-based learning experiences influence students' understanding of complex social issues such as homelessness and housing justice, thereby contributing valuable insights to the ongoing discourse.

The American Association of Colleges and Universities lists service-learning as a high-impact practice within higher education and defines this type of learning as a way to "engage students in field-based applied learning with community partners" (Chittum et al., 2022, p. 4). The benefits and learning gained by students through service-learning have been well documented (Astin et al., 2000; Jacoby, 2015; Lake et al., 2021; Lim, 2018; Mobley, 2007; Solomon & Tan, 2021), and many assert that "service learning has become a standard of higher education" (Davis, 2015, p. 253). Research consistently shows how high-impact learning practices such as service-learning are beneficial for college students, particularly for students from historically underserved communities, as they often do not have the same access to high-impact learning experiences in other contexts (Kuh, 2008).

Service-learning experiences allow students to connect what they are learning in their academic studies to contexts beyond the classroom. These experiences provide an opportunity for students to link theory to practice and become active participants in their academic and professional growth (Davis, 2015; O'Keefe & Feinberg, 2013). Evidence has shown that service-learning increases critical thinking skills, promotes a deeper understanding of course concepts, enhances communication skills, and facilitates interpersonal development and career decision-making (Brand et al., 2019; Drinkard & Tontodonato, 2019). Moreover, Brand et al. (2019) found in their study that the service-learning component also transformed students into community advocates by showing them how they can be change agents within their communities. In fact, as Wade (2000) argued, "Service learning should be about social change, not just filling a gap in services. It should be about questioning the conditions in society that create the need for service in the first place and seeking to alter those conditions" (p. 6).

Going further, Mitchell (2008) advocated for a critical service-learning approach. A critical approach to service-learning requires intentional collaboration between the community partners and the academic community in which power and reciprocity are balanced among all involved. This balanced approach moves students away from *simply serving* communities to instead *working in collaboration with* community partners to dismantle systems of power and the inequalities that create and sustain them. Moreover, the critical service-learning framework requires a "justice-oriented" experience in which the work of service must make a positive impact within the community and the benefits must be truly beneficial for all involved (Shiller, 2022). As Mitchell (2007) explained,

> The distinction between service-learning and critical service-learning can be summarized in its attention to social change, its questioning of the distribution of power in society, and its focus on developing authentic relationships between higher education institutions and the community served. (p. 101)

In this study, we build on existing knowledge of critical service-learning in important ways and explore not only how a university service-learning program impacts students' understanding of a complex social issue, but also whether participation in the program impacts their understanding of advocacy and their continued engagement after the completion of the course project. First, this study explores how involvement in a university initiative—the Shelter Crew Program—impacts students' knowledge about housing insecurity and housing justice. The study builds on prior literature that has offered insights on how service-learning can change students' perceptions of housing insecurity and homelessness. Hocking and Lawrence (2000) found that students who had volunteered at a homeless shelter were more likely than students who had not volunteered to perceive the issue of homelessness as a serious social problem and less likely to place blame on individuals experiencing homelessness. Additional studies have found similar conclusions (see, e.g., Brown et al., 2006; Buch & Harden, 2011; Gardner & Emory, 2018), suggesting that these types of high-impact experiences are beneficial for reducing students' negative stereotypes about individuals experiencing homelessness and enhancing their understanding of issues related to housing insecurity.

The current study expands previous literature by broadening the reach beyond a specific academic program or discipline in which participating students often have similar academic orientations or backgrounds. For example, studies examining the impact of service-learning experiences often focus on one type of field or discipline (see, e.g., Davis, 2015; Gardner & Emory, 2018; McClam et al., 2008). We acknowledge the value of examining how these experiences impact students in a particular field; however, with this study, we have sought to expand current knowledge by exploring the impacts of a critical service-learning experience within a course involving students from varied academic backgrounds. The course used for the research setting in this study is a general education requirement in the university's core curriculum that is primarily for first-year students; therefore, students enrolled in the course are not yet fully engrossed within one specific major or one academic program. This method casts a wider net, which allows an examination of how involvement with the Shelter Crew Program impacts students with a multitude of academic perspectives.

The study also expands current knowledge by focusing on how a university program that encourages sustainable partnerships impacts students' intentions for continued participation in volunteerism and/or advocacy efforts beyond the course. A best practice of critical service-learning is moving beyond episodic engagement in which a student engages only once or twice with a community partner (Mitchell, 2008); episodic engagement fails to provide the in-depth experience required to thoroughly understand and effectively critique the structural issues creating the social problems that the organization is working to address in the community. Students should learn the importance of sustaining these partnerships and how they can be change agents who work to address issues within their communities; further, participation in such a program should serve as encouragement to continue their efforts even after the semester concludes.

In summary, this study contributes to the growing body of research on critical service-learning by examining not only the immediate educational outcomes of a university-led initiative but also its potential to inspire long-term civic engagement and drive systemic change. Specifically, it deepens our understanding of how participation in the Shelter Crew Program influences students' learning around complex social issues such as homelessness and housing justice, while also exploring how such involvement shapes their intentions for continued advocacy and meaningful community action beyond the classroom.

The Shelter Crew Program

Program Setting and Purpose

The Shelter Crew Program is facilitated through the Center for the Common Good at the University of St. Thomas. The University of St. Thomas is the largest private university in the state of Minnesota, with campuses in both St. Paul and Minneapolis. The university has eight schools and colleges, offering both undergraduate and graduate options; approximately 10,000 undergraduate and graduate students are enrolled each year. As a Catholic university, St. Thomas integrates Catholic teachings and values into its academic and campus life; however, the university welcomes students of all faiths and backgrounds.

The concept of the Center for the Common Good arose from the university's strategic planning process; the center was created in 2017 to further support volunteerism, academic community-engaged learning, and changemaking initiatives on campus. The center is responsible for connecting students, staff, and faculty to volunteer opportunities within the local community, for fostering collaborative partnerships between faculty and community organizations for academic course projects, and for providing cocurricular programming efforts around various issues such as voter engagement, food justice, and housing insecurity.

To address housing justice within the local community, the University of St. Thomas has a long-standing partnership with Catholic Charities of St. Paul and Minneapolis and engages with the nonprofit organization in a variety of ways; one is through the Shelter Crew Program offered through the Center for the Common Good. The Shelter Crew Program is a cocurricular volunteer and advocacy program that offers opportunities for the university community to collaborate with Catholic Charities with the goal of furthering the organization's mission to serve those most in need and to advocate for housing justice in the community. Shelter Crew participants, in collaboration with Catholic Charities, learn what it means to walk in solidarity with individuals most often marginalized within our society, learn about the various issues related to homelessness, and learn how to engage in advocacy related to housing justice.

The Shelter Crew Program first began in September 2018 to provide structured volunteer opportunities for the university community. Initially, the program was offered only to individuals or groups (e.g., a student club) to engage within the community in a meaningful way and to complete volunteer hours. In 2021, the Shelter Crew Program was also offered to faculty as an option for community-engaging their courses if it was deemed an appropriate supplement to the course curriculum, and by the end of the 2023–2024 academic year, 33 academic courses included the Shelter Crew Program as a component of the course curriculum. Between September 2018 and May 2024, students, faculty, and staff who engaged with the Shelter Crew Program contributed to the university's 14,371 volunteer hours at Catholic Charities; the program has grown dramatically, with 461 students volunteering close to 3,500 hours at Catholic Charities during the 2023–2024 academic year alone.

Program Structure

Through the Shelter Crew Program, individuals regularly volunteer at one of Catholic Charities' service locations. Catholic Charities has over 20 programs with more than 20 sites throughout the Twin Cities Metro area; their programs provide direct service to approximately 23,000 people each year, including children, adults, and families. The organization also maintains an advocacy agenda that focuses on addressing systemic inequities in the local community (further described at https://cctwincities.org). Through the Shelter Crew Program, volunteers may assist guests at the start of the day, or in the evening as guests enter the shelter for the night, distributing hygiene kits and other supplies. Volunteers may also engage during meal service—preparing food, serving meals, and assisting with cleanup. Students often volunteer with the Shelter Crew Program as individuals, with a student club, or through a course as a service-learning component. If not participating through a course, students may learn about the program through on-campus recruitment efforts; for example, they may hear about the program during Welcome Days as students arrive on campus, through a Community Partner and Volunteer Fair held at the start of each semester, or through various marketing materials shared on university digital platforms (see Figure 1 for an example).

A faculty member may hear about the Shelter Crew Program through directed communications from the Center for the Common Good, or they may see the same marketing materials on university digital platforms. If a faculty member chooses to incorporate the Shelter Crew Program within a course, the faculty member first registers their course with the Center for the Common Good. Through course registration, the center can track which courses across the university include a service-learning component and can offer support services to the students and faculty members who are engaging with a community partner. Support services generally include transportation assistance to travel to the community site (e.g., mileage or rideshare reimbursements or rental of university car), reimbursements for costs associated with the community-engagement project (e.g., printing costs for a final report), scheduling campus rooms (e.g., if space is needed for an end-of-semester presentation to the community partner), and, where appropriate, a nominal honorarium for the community partner to recognize their time and efforts during the collaboration. These support services are offered to all faculty and students, regardless of the community partner, if the course is registered as a community-engaged course through the Center for the Common Good.

In addition to the aforementioned support

Figure 1. Example of Digital Marketing for the Shelter Crew Program

services, the Shelter Crew Program offers further value-adds for faculty and students with the goal of offsetting any challenges that may arise as a result of the service-learning project. One such value-add is providing an orientation to the class at the start of the semester; during the orientation, a staff person or student crew leader (a student intern who is employed through the Center for the Common Good to assist with the facilitation of the Shelter Crew Program) introduces Catholic Charities and the organization's mission and work, provides a brief background of homelessness within the local community, discusses the Shelter Crew Program, and assists students with completing forms required by the university before engaging within the community (e.g., a liability and photo release form) and by Catholic Charities (e.g., a volunteer application).

Another value-add for students and faculty is the coordination of scheduling volunteer shifts, particularly for those students who sign up for group volunteer shifts. Once per week, students receive an email including a list of upcoming shifts that they can sign up for; these shifts are typically coordinated by the student crew leaders and offer students the opportunity to volunteer with their peers (classmates and other students) and be provided with transportation to and from the shelter facility. If students are unable to participate in the group volunteer shifts throughout the semester, they can sign up for shifts through the organization's volunteer portal when it is most convenient for their schedules.

For students who must use their own transportation to travel to and from the shelter facilities, the Shelter Crew Program provides students with mileage reimbursements. Staff communicate with students directly about this process and ensure students receive reimbursements. And finally, another value-add for the faculty member is that the staff provide a midsemester and a final report detailing students' completion of volunteer shifts; these reports enable faculty to keep track of which students may not have completed the volunteer shifts, which is particularly important information if the service-learning component is part of the final course assessment.

Table 1 provides an overview of the Shelter Crew Program structure and general timeline of activities during a regular semester.

Table 1. Shelter Crew Program Structure and Timeline During a Semester

Before semester begins	• Faculty member submits a registration form to the Center for the Common Good documenting involvement with the Shelter Crew Program for the upcoming semester.
Beginning of semester (typically within first 2 weeks of classes)	• Staff or student crew leaders provide the Shelter Crew Program orientation to the class. • Staff coordinate the completion of required forms and follow up with students through email as needed. • Staff ensure that students are registered with the Catholic Charities volunteer portal so they can sign up for shifts if volunteering on their own.
During semester	• Staff and student crew leaders email once per week about upcoming volunteer shifts that are organized as group opportunities. • Staff and student crew leaders provide transportation for students to/from shelter sites for group volunteer opportunities. • Staff provide a midsemester report to the faculty member detailing students' completed volunteer shifts. • Staff inform students and the faculty member about optional housing-justice-related educational/advocacy events on campus and invite students to attend.
Toward end of semester	• Staff follow up with students and the faculty member to ensure that final mileage reimbursement requests are submitted by those who use their own transportation. • Staff send an email to students requesting that they complete an end-of-semester survey to gather feedback about the program. • Staff provide the faculty member a final report of students' completed volunteer shifts.

Measuring Program Impact

To move beyond anecdotal assumptions of the success of the Shelter Crew Program, the first two authors applied for a small research grant through Uniservitate, an international organization that promotes service-learning experiences at Catholic higher education institutions, to study the impacts of the program in an academic course. Specifically, we hoped to learn whether the Shelter Crew Program impacted students' learning about homelessness and housing justice and whether the program impacted students' continued engagement after the completion of the course. The first two authors applied for and received funding through Uniservitate for this study.

The first two authors are both faculty members at the University of St. Thomas; both regularly incorporate community-engaged learning within their respective courses and are well-versed in the best practices of service-learning pedagogy. One is a faculty member in the Department of Theology and was the instructor of record for the course used for the study. This faculty member has incorporated the Shelter Crew Program within his courses multiple times and has taught community-engaged courses for three decades. The non-instructor of record is a faculty member in the Department of Justice and Society Studies; this faculty member included the Shelter Crew Program in one of her past courses and served as the inaugural faculty director of the Center for the Common Good for 5 years, though she was no longer in the role at the time of this study.

The project was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. The target population for the study were students at the University of St. Thomas who engaged with the Shelter Crew Program, and the research setting was an academic course that elected to incorporate the Shelter Crew Program within the course curriculum. The instructor deemed the Shelter Crew Program appropriate for the course, as the curriculum included a unit on theories of human dignity and human rights. Furthermore, this course was appropriate for the study because it typically fulfills a university core curriculum requirement, thus attracting enrollees from a variety of academic backgrounds, rather than from one major or disciplinary lens. The sample consisted of students enrolled in the lower level theology course during the Spring 2024 semester. A total of 19 students were included within the sample; all students were first-year students who had not previously engaged with the Shelter Crew Program.

Students were informed of the study procedure at the start of the semester to ensure full consent prior to participation in the research project. All students participating in the study were required to sign an informed consent form. The non-instructor of record facilitated the consent process to ensure students did not feel pressure to participate in the study (the course instructor was not present during this process). Regardless of involvement in the study, students were required to participate in the Shelter Crew Program throughout the entire semester as part of the course, and each student was required to volunteer with Catholic Charities a minimum of three times during the semester.

To explore the impact of the Shelter Crew Program, the study sought to answer the following six research questions:

1. How might students perceive the Shelter Crew Program—a housing justice and housing insecurity program at the University of St. Thomas in collaboration with Catholic Charities?
2. How might students perceive participating in the Shelter Crew Program as a required community-engagement project within their course?
3. How might participating in the Shelter Crew Program impact students' conceptualization of housing justice in their local community?
4. How might participating in the Shelter Crew Program impact students' perceptions of individuals experiencing homelessness?
5. How might involvement in the Shelter Crew Program impact their intention to continue volunteering beyond the course project?
6. How might involvement in the Shelter Crew Program impact their intention to engage in advocacy efforts related to housing justice beyond the course project?

Data Sources

Data for this study were obtained through a mixed-methods approach using two techniques: students' written reflections and students' participation in a focus group (see Table 2 for an overview of the assessment methods). Utilizing two different techniques allowed for a comparison of data to explore whether there were any noticeable discrepancies between what was shared in the individual written reflections and what was shared in the focus group discussion. Moreover, this approach allowed for individualized responses to key questions that may not have been obtained through the focus group approach and provided students an opportunity to offer more personal reflections than they may have offered during the group setting.

A best practice of the critical service-learning pedagogy is incorporating reflective practice within the community-engaged course. Critical reflection encourages students to draw connections between the community experience and the course content, provides an opportunity to challenge students' preconceived notions and negative stereotypes, and helps students make meaning of their experiences (Mitchell, 2007). Before engaging on site, students wrote a preengagement reflection on their understanding of homelessness and housing justice. Toward the end of the semester, students wrote a postengagement reflection about their experience and the knowledge gained from the semester. The written reflections were submitted to the instructor of the course as part of the course requirements; afterward, the reflections were deidentified by the noninstructor prior to data analysis. Nineteen students completed the preengagement written reflection, and 18 students completed the postengagement written reflection.

After completing the three volunteer shifts, students participated in a focus group where they reflected on their expectations in relation to their experiences. The noninstructor of the course conducted the focus group to ensure confidentiality of the students' responses during the discussion. Students were randomly separated by the noninstructor into two groups to allow for smaller group discussions, and a semistructured discussion guide was used to facilitate the conversation to provide consistency across the two groups. Students received a gift card for the campus bookstore after participating in the focus group. Seventeen students participated in the focus group discussion (i.e., two students did not show up for the focus group).

Data Analysis

This study utilized qualitative techniques to address the research questions. Qualitative techniques allow for an in-depth exploration of opinions, feelings, and perceptions of the research topic. All textual data derived from the focus group notes and the written reflections were entered into Atlas.ti, a data management program for the organization and analysis of textual data. The

Table 2. Assessment Methods of Student Perceptions and Experiences

Assessment	Purpose	Timing
Preengagement written reflection	The purpose of the preengagement written reflection was to encourage students to individually reflect on what they already know about homelessness and housing justice, and to reflect on how they feel about engaging with the Shelter Crew Program through the course.	Students submitted the preengagement written reflection by the third week of the course, prior to completing the first volunteer shift.
Focus group discussion	The purpose of the focus group discussion was to gain further insights from students about their experiences with the Shelter Crew Program, as focus groups allow students to hear about others' experiences and build on the comments of others.	Students participated in the focus group discussion toward the end of the semester after completion of the required volunteer shifts.
Postengagement written reflection	The purpose of the postengagement written reflection was to encourage students to individually reflect on their volunteer experiences, describing what they saw, how they felt, and what they learned through these experiences.	Students submitted the postengagement written reflection toward the end of the semester after completion of the required volunteer shifts.

data were analyzed using qualitative coding techniques; specifically, the data were coded using a constant comparative analytical technique and involved both deductive and inductive codes. The codes informed general themes, and themes were sought until data saturation was reached.

Findings

The findings are organized into two sections: (1) the preengagement reflections and (2) the postengagement reflections and focus group discussion.

Preengagement: Written Reflection Assignment

In the preengagement written reflection, the majority of students (16 out of 19) stated that they had not previously volunteered at a homeless shelter before their participation in the Shelter Crew Program. Of the three students who had previously volunteered at a homeless shelter, only one student said they had done it more than once, and it was with family because they knew "what it was like to be poor and not have much so [they] tried [their] best to give back to the community that [they] learned to thrive in."

When prompted to reflect on what they were thinking about and/or how they felt about the upcoming volunteer shifts, many students (10 out of 19) explicitly expressed excitement about the opportunity to engage with the community in this capacity. Others discussed how they were looking forward to providing a service within their community.

> "This is a new experience that I am venturing into. I feel a little excited to try out this new opportunity that will help others. I'm excited to gain this new experience as I may like this and want to volunteer at this more often in the future."

> "I am excited about the upcoming shift at Catholic Charities, I know it will be somewhat different than what I am used to but I am interested in the new experience. I know that I will feel good about myself for helping the community after the shift is over. Understanding that at the end of the day I might have impacted somebody's day for the better is a huge success."

> "I honestly am kind of excited to have the opportunity to work and give to those who are less fortunate because life can be really challenging and we are all in this together so why not show some love and respect to those who deserve it."

> "I think it is an amazing way to connect and appreciate the small things in life, and others realize that you have more than others and to be grateful for what you have in life."

> "I am looking forward to growing stronger relationships with my peers and understanding them better, while also getting to help those in need."

In the preengagement written reflections, many students (10 out of 19) stated that they had not heard of the term "housing justice" before. Some of the students (seven out of 19) who stated within their preengagement reflection that they had previously heard of the term "housing justice" discussed how they had learned of the term through previous educational experiences, and one student mentioned hearing about the topic through personal experiences.

> "I personally have not heard the term housing justice prior to this class, which is quite astonishing to me."

> "I have heard this term before as I am a Political Science major and have heard it come up in a couple of classes before."

> "My journey into getting involved with unhoused people and shelters started within my own life."

And finally, when students were prompted in the preengagement written reflection to share any questions and/or concerns about the upcoming volunteering experience, six of the 19 students expressed uncertainty about what to expect due to not having been at an emergency housing shelter before and/or because of common (mis)perceptions of individuals experiencing homelessness.

> "If I am being truly honest my only concerns going into this is how the homeless might treat us and how the smell is going to be within the place. . . ."

> "One concern I have about volunteering at the shelter is safety concerns and its surroundings. Would there be any type of security around the place?"

> "My main concern is my safety, both mentally and physically. I have witnessed some people experiencing homelessness act violently and disrespectfully towards others. To some extent, I sympathize with them and justify their reactions with their terribly difficult circumstances. On the other hand though, I cannot seem to fully understand why they would behave this way if they are receiving at least some type of help in regards to their situations."

With this same prompt, four students reflected early on how they recognized the importance of the upcoming volunteer experience for better understanding their role in addressing housing injustice within their local community and expressed interest in moving beyond a direct service role.

> "As I prepare to volunteer at the homeless shelter for the first time, I find myself grappling with a few questions and concerns. I wonder how I can best support and engage with individuals' circumstances in a respectful manner, considering the sensitivity of the topic. What vocabulary should I be using to communicate to those individuals in order to avoid coming off condescending/'pitying' them? Additionally, I am curious about the resources and support systems available to these individuals. I want to understand how I can contribute to ensuring their long-term stability and well-being beyond just providing immediate assistance during my volunteer shift."

> "I am curious about the long-term effectiveness of the services provided by the shelter and how I can contribute to broader systemic changes that address the root causes of homelessness in our community."

> "A question I have for working at a homeless shelter is how will I know I am making an impact? I want to show that I am there for a good reason, I do not want people to make me feel like or seem like I am there to make myself feel better, I want it to show that I am there for a good reason, and I genuinely want to help make a difference."

> "I don't necessarily have many questions or concerns, I'm more intrigued due to the fact that I've never been fully immersed in this kind of experience. But if I must have a question, I would ask what more could be done to help?"

Postengagement: Written Reflection Assignment and Focus Group Discussion

All 18 students who completed the postengagement written reflection stated that their involvement in the Shelter Crew Program was a valuable component of the course. They cited several reasons for thinking the Shelter Crew Program was a positive experience, reasons ranging from increased knowledge of issues related to homelessness to offering an opportunity for self-reflection and personal growth.

> "Participating in the Shelter Crew program has completely changed my perspective on homelessness and the importance of ensuring everyone has a place to call home. Initially, I approached volunteering with uncertainty, unsure of how much of a difference I could make. However, as I continued with the program, my outlook shifted. I became more eager to contribute, not just by providing assistance, but also by actively listening to and learning from the individuals we served. This change in approach also altered my understanding of volunteering itself. Before, I saw it as merely offering help, but now I realize it's about addressing larger issues."

> "The main thing that this experience made me realize is just how grateful I am. Not to sound rude in any way but I see these people and look at people like myself and say at any moment in life this could have been me too."

> "This experience not only deepened my understanding of homelessness but also instilled in me a profound sense of gratitude for the privileges I often take for granted. It reinforced the importance of empathy and compassion."

> "After this program I could not have been steered any closer to solidifying my major in Social Work. It ignited a sentiment to becoming a person who focuses on bettering the lives of those who are oppressed and not receiving the help that they require."

> "Overall, I am grateful that I took part in this program and for the lessons that it has taught me throughout the experience. I plan to carry what I have learned forward and to use it for the common good."

When prompted within the postengagement written reflection to reflect on how the program impacted their perceptions of individuals experiencing homelessness or what they had learned about homelessness through their involvement in the Shelter Crew Program, six of the 18 students explicitly mentioned how they developed a deeper sense of empathy because of what they had learned through the experience.

> "Engaging with the Shelter Crew program significantly impacted how I view individuals experiencing homelessness. At first, I admit I held some stereotypes and misconceptions, thinking homelessness was solely due to personal failures. However, as I interacted directly with program participants, my perspective changed. I began to understand the complexity of their situations, seeing the systemic factors and personal circumstances at play. Each person I met had a unique story, and homelessness was just one part of it. This realization fostered a deeper sense of empathy and challenged me to confront my own biases."

> "Before joining the Shelter Crew program, my perceptions of homelessness were clouded by a plethora of misconceptions and unfounded fears. In my mind, homeless individuals were not only to be avoided but also regarded with a sense of fear, as if their circumstances somehow rendered them fundamentally different from myself and others. These beliefs were not inherent but rather shaped and reinforced by societal stereotypes that painted a simplistic and often dehumanizing picture of homelessness. Limited interactions with homeless individuals further contributed to the perpetuation of these misconceptions, as I lacked firsthand experience to challenge or contextualize the narratives I had been exposed to. As a result, my understanding of homelessness was rooted more in assumptions and prejudices than in empathy and understanding."

> "To me, my perspective was just the feeling of empathy towards the homeless. The fact that people despite what they are going through still have a strive and willpower to push through is amazing."

> "When approaching my last two shifts, I found myself embracing a newfound sense of empathy and understanding. The initial nerves were replaced with a genuine desire to connect with those in need and contribute in any way possible. Rather than focusing on my own discomfort, I shifted my focus to the needs of others and the opportunity to make a positive difference in their lives. It was a shift in mindset that allowed me to fully immerse myself in the volunteering experience and embrace the challenges and opportunities it presented."

Many students also reflected on how this experience demonstrated the resilience, kindness, and gratitude among the individuals they encountered through their volunteer shifts.

> "Another thing to note is the kindness of a lot of these people despite their situation. Even though they are in a bad spot instead of lashing out on others or being rude, they are thankful for anything they can receive which encourages me to do the same and puts a smile on my face."

> "As we turned into the street where the shelter was located, the sight of numerous homeless individuals, some looking sick and others sleeping on the sidewalk, made me acutely aware of the harsh realities faced by those experiencing homelessness. Yet, amidst the challenges, there was a sense of resilience and community spirit. I participated in tasks like preparing lunch, from cutting onions and potatoes, to serving food, offered a firsthand glimpse into the daily operations of the shelter and the dedication of its volunteers. Despite the hardships they faced, the individuals we served exhibited gratitude and appreciation for a hot meal. This experience not only deepened my understanding of homelessness but also instilled in me a profound sense of gratitude for the privileges I often take for granted. It reinforced the importance of empathy and compassion."

> "Volunteering with the Shelter Crew has been a transformative experience that has made me understand more about homelessness, and the reason why we should advocate for housing justice. Through this experience, I have gained an appreciation for the resilience and strength of individuals experiencing homelessness."

However, when prompted during the focus group discussions to discuss how involvement in the program specifically impacted their knowledge of housing justice and advocacy, not one of the students perceived the program to have had a direct impact on their understanding of the topic of housing justice nor on what it means to be an advocate within their community. In fact, many students during the focus group discussions expressed interest in having more in-depth learning opportunities to expand their knowledge about issues related to homelessness and to learn how to effectively be an advocate so they could extend their efforts beyond volunteering at the shelter.

> "I feel like we volunteered . . . put on our hairnets and served food . . . but me personally, I didn't feel like I learned much . . . didn't learn how to be an advocate."

> "It was very surface-level . . . I wish we had more opportunities for advocacy and to learn what we could do besides serving food or preparing food. . . ."

> "I wish it was more informational . . . I feel that if I wasn't asking the right questions, I wouldn't even know why I was doing this. I would've just done my [shift] and left."

> "In [other programs] they will give a presentation or give you materials about what the next steps are or where we go from here, but that's what I don't feel we got. . . ."

Finally, within the postengagement written reflection and during the focus group discussions, most of the students said that they would continue to participate in the Shelter Crew Program, even if it was not a required component of a course. For some, they appreciated how the program made volunteering accessible by providing transportation to and from facilities, and others appreciated how participating in the program offered opportunities to meet students within the university community that they may not have otherwise met. And for others, their involvement with the Shelter Crew Program provided a deeper understanding of the importance of volunteering within their community.

> "Looking ahead, I'm committed to continuing my involvement with the Shelter Crew program beyond this course. It's not just about completing a requirement; it's about being part of something meaningful. Volunteering has become a way for me to contribute to positive change in my community. I'm grateful for the opportunity to learn, grow, and make a difference through my involvement with the Shelter Crew program."

> "I viewed volunteering as a way to fulfill a sense of obligation or duty, rather than as an opportunity for personal growth or understanding. However, as I immersed myself in the program and engaged in preparing food in my first shift, my approach and thoughts about volunteering underwent a significant

> transformation, I began to recognize the profound impact that my actions could have."

> "Yes, I plan to continue volunteering with the Shelter Crew program after this course. The experience has been incredibly meaningful and rewarding, allowing me to directly contribute to helping people in need within the community. Volunteering with the program has provided me with a platform to make a tangible difference in the lives of individuals experiencing homelessness. The sense of fulfillment and purpose that comes from knowing I am helping to improve someone's day, even in a small way, is very meaningful to me. I am eager to continue volunteering with the Shelter Crew program after this course, as it aligns with my values and allows me to contribute meaningfully to others."

> "Volunteering is not just about the task that we do; it's about the relationship we built, the other side of stories that we will hear, and the people. By continuing volunteering, I can contribute to the ongoing efforts in addressing homelessness and hopefully I could help advocate for policies that promote housing equity. Additionally, volunteering offers personal growth opportunities and allows me to stay connected to a cause that will help many lives. Overall, I see it as a meaningful way to enact change and uphold the common good."

> "I plan on continuing to volunteer with the Shelter crew program based on my experience during these 3 shifts. In my opinion it came with a lot of benefits both for the community as well as personal ones. It was truly a learning experience. It taught me about perspective, about how much compassion we are missing as people, about the misunderstandings that create a division in our society, and lastly about how passionate I am about creating a difference in the community."

The few students who stated either during the focus group discussions or within the postengagement written reflection that they did not plan to engage with the Shelter Crew Program explained that it was primarily due to limited time or scheduling constraints. Even so, the few students who expressed not having the time to do so mentioned that they might participate again if required by another course or they could find other ways to engage with these issues.

> "I don't plan to continue to volunteer with the Shelter Crew unless I need a place to volunteer. I believe Catholic Charities is a perfect place to build your resume and help your community by making meals and serving them to individuals knowing they have a plate of food to eat. Trust me I love it, but I wouldn't do it because I don't have time for it, and scheduling is hard. Transportation could also be a problem. Finally, at the end of the day, I'm a student and education comes first for me."

> "Balancing academic duties, job responsibilities, and personal commitments is a huge issue, leaving me with limited time to volunteer. Though I may not be able to commit to regular volunteering at this time, I am still committed to advocating for housing justice and supporting efforts aimed at addressing homelessness in other ways, such as raising awareness, donating resources, or volunteering on occasion when time allows."

Overall, the data demonstrated that the students perceived the Shelter Crew Program to be of considerable value, and many planned to continue their involvement in the program even after the completion of the course. Students also indicated areas in which the program could be improved to further enhance their learning about housing injustice and opportunities for advocacy.

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

This study offers meaningful programmatic insights for educators and institutions, demonstrating that service-learning initiatives—especially when integrated into core curriculum requirements—can effectively foster critical thinking, civic responsibility, and a lasting commitment to social justice. More specifically, by involving students in the complexities of homelessness and housing instability, the study illustrates how critical service-learning opportunities can enhance students' understanding of structural inequality and inspire ongoing student advocacy.

We highlight the three most important lessons learned from this study:

1. students are willing to volunteer within the community and find value in the experience, even if their involvement is due to a requirement embedded within an academic course;
2. students are motivated to continue their volunteering efforts beyond the course project, particularly when provided coordinated opportunities and logistical support (e.g., scheduling and transportation assistance), as is provided through the Shelter Crew Program; and
3. students desire opportunities beyond direct service to further engage with these issues. Students recognize the importance of volunteering at shelters, as these efforts directly support individuals in need; however, they also want opportunities to expand their engagement by learning how to address complex systemic issues through advocacy.

For a program like the Shelter Crew Program to have the most impact on students' continued engagement beyond a course setting, the program must incorporate structured learning opportunities that offer students insights on how to further engage so they see a broader reach than what they can provide through volunteer shifts. Some faculty may build these learning opportunities into the course curriculum without prompting; however, to be most effective and consistent across all program participants, resources and activities beyond the volunteer shifts must also be included within the program's structure.

For example, the Shelter Crew Program could offer materials about homelessness and advocating for housing justice for inclusion within the course syllabi, such as readings, videos, and/or curated presentation slides. These materials could be provided through an online module within a course learning management system (e.g., the Blackboard or Canvas course site) and embedded within registered course sites prior to the start of the semester. The Shelter Crew Program staff or student crew leaders could also facilitate supplemental in-class discussions about housing justice and advocacy and/or coordinate guest speakers from the community. Although these additional learning opportunities could strengthen the program's impact, faculty might lack the willingness or the capacity to build these additional components into the course schedule. Moreover, program staffing resources to provide such components may not be available.

As with any study, there are limitations that could be addressed in future research to further our understanding of this program or other similar university programs. First, future research would benefit by expanding the study population to include more courses and, consequently, more students. In doing so, the results could be compared to this initial sample to explore whether students' experiences and perceptions show similarities or differences. A key reason this course was selected for the study is that it enrolled first-year students who had not yet officially declared a major and were taking the course to fulfill a university core curriculum requirement, thereby providing a diverse sample of students. Nevertheless, incorporating additional courses from other academic departments or programs—especially those that also fulfill general core requirements—would further enrich our understanding of these types of university initiatives, particularly by including students from a wider range of academic and personal backgrounds.

Second, future research would benefit by utilizing a quasi-experimental approach in which two groups engage with the program—one group receiving intentional learning opportunities about advocacy included within the program curriculum, and a control group that follows the same approach as in the current study (i.e., requires volunteer shifts only with no structured advocacy discussions). Such a study would allow a comparison between the two groups to see if engagement in the structured learning opportunities further impacted the students' perceptions and learning outcomes related to the topic of housing justice and advocacy efforts.

Finally, future research would benefit from incorporating individual interviews, pre- and postsurveys, or even an additional focus group discussion during the semester. Expanding the methodological approach would allow for a more nuanced understanding of students' perspectives, particularly in exploring potential racial and gender differences. As race and gender were neither explicitly mentioned in students' written reflections nor recorded during focus group discussions, this dimension of analysis remains absent from the current study.

Conclusion

The data from this study support the continued utilization of the Shelter Crew Program and programs like it at the university level. Students perceived the program to be a valuable component of their academic studies; they appreciated having the opportunity to volunteer within their community, and they appreciated the supports the program provided by offering transportation and scheduling assistance. Many students even planned to continue their volunteering efforts with the Shelter Crew Program as the result of this experience.

The data, however, also demonstrate the need for the program's curriculum to incorporate intentional learning opportunities into students' engagement experiences to expand their understanding of issues involving housing injustice and to promote advocacy efforts beyond the classroom. If the goal of a program like the Shelter Crew Program is to encourage student learning and engagement beyond direct service in the field, then these efforts need to also be included within the program's structure. Put simply, the program's curriculum needs to incorporate structured opportunities that explicitly teach students how to be advocates within their community and encourage these discussions within the course.

As emphasized by the critical service-learning framework and illustrated in this example, programs like the one discussed provide invaluable learning experiences for students. They promote engagement beyond the classroom and support a deeper understanding of complex social issues. These high-impact opportunities encourage students to collaborate with community organizations, offer meaningful service, and create positive change within their communities.

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Transformative Learning Through Sports Outreach: A Case Study for Sharing a University Student's Community-Engaged Learning Experience

Noah Kenneth Schaber and Jimmy Smith

Abstract

This article examines Noah, a sport management major and Honors student, who has worked in a supportive housing community for over 2 years. His journey started in a community-engaged learning (CEL) course and grew into an Honors project, focused on developing a sports outreach program to meet local needs. Using reflective practice and a case study approach, Noah's contributions to the community are demonstrated, and the transformative effects of CEL on his personal and professional growth are highlighted. The findings showcase the long-term impact of CEL on students and underscore the value of integrating such projects into academic programs for both student development and community benefit.

Keywords: case study, community-engaged learning, sports outreach, undergraduate

The popularity of community-engaged learning (CEL) in higher education has steadily increased over the past few decades (Berard & Ravelli, 2021). Of the 28 Jesuit colleges and universities in North America, 24 have offices dedicated to community engagement or service-learning, such as Creighton University's Office of Global Community-Engaged Learning. Schools without dedicated offices, like Le Moyne College, incorporate service-learning through first-year programs. All members of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities offer multiple CEL courses, and at Gonzaga University, the Center for Community Engagement (CCE) offers courses from 15 departments, including environmental studies, nursing, teacher education, sociology, special education, and sport management.

Although research documents CEL course outcomes and benefits (cf. Astin & Sax, 1998; Holtzman & Menning, 2015; Smith et al., 2024) and examines empirical settings in fields like sociology (Johnston, 2020) and education (Smith, 2018), less is known about how students apply the knowledge gained from these courses. This article explores the journey of a university student who, after completing a CEL course, used his experiences to develop an Honors project that fully encapsulated the community-engaged experience. This case study posed the following research question: "How do the individual experiences of one undergraduate student in a CEL course extend beyond the classroom?"

The case study is structured by first describing the physical setting in which it took place, followed by an exploration of relevant CEL literature. Next, the methods used to collect the student's CEL experiences are detailed, concluding with a reflection by the CEL instructor on the course and its importance for this type of research.

Noah's experience is uniquely detailed, beginning with the supportive housing community where the case study takes place. The literature review highlights existing

CEL research and the need for more focus on student perspectives. The following sections detail Noah's methodology and his insights from working in this setting, along with commentary from his faculty advisor. Noah reflects on his experience as a third-year undergraduate in a CEL course and how it shaped his decision to continue community engagement for his senior Honors project. Unless indicated otherwise, the thoughts and experiences in this article are Noah's. The article concludes with final reflections from both Noah and his faculty advisor.

Experiential Setting

Gonzaga Family Haven (GFH), part of Catholic Charities of Eastern Washington, is a supportive housing community in Spokane designed to assist families transitioning out of homelessness. GFH provides 74 apartment units and communal spaces, offering residents access to social services, job training, educational support, and counseling. This stable environment fosters community engagement and empowerment.

The mission of Catholic Charities—"Feed the Hungry, Heal the Hurting, Welcome the Stranger"—guides GFH's approach. Peggy Haun-McEwan, GFH's director of community, highlights that stable housing is essential for health and well-being. Homelessness is a health crisis, with individuals facing higher rates of illness and a life expectancy 12 years shorter than the general U.S. population (National Health Care for the Homeless Council, 2019). GFH provides secure housing and services to break this cycle, recognizing that housing is health care (P. Haun-McEwan, personal communication, September 5, 2024).

GFH's goals include offering permanent housing, supporting children's academic success, improving residents' wellness and stability, breaking intergenerational poverty, and transforming lives. Partnering with organizations like Gonzaga University, GFH provides youth mentoring, legal clinics, finance workshops, mental health counseling, and sports outreach (P. Haun-McEwan, personal communication, September 5, 2024).

Literature Review

CEL, which integrates hands-on community involvement into coursework, is rooted in the civic missions of universities. This pedagogical approach traces back to the 19th century, with institutions like Oberlin and Antioch Colleges pioneering community involvement in education (Stanton et al., 1999). The Morrill Act of 1862 further expanded CEL through land-grant universities, which focused on practical education and community support, particularly in fields like agriculture and public service (Peters et al., 2005). Influenced by educators like John Dewey, who emphasized experiential learning, CEL evolved in the 20th century, with the term "service-learning" coined in 1969 by Robert Sigmon and William Ramsey (Stanton et al., 1999). By the 1980s and 1990s, service-learning became institutionalized, and by the late 1990s, it was widely integrated into university curricula (Jacoby, 2014).

CEL has continued to evolve throughout higher education, with increasing emphasis on topics such as equity (Wallerstein et al., 2020) and sustainability (Deale, 2009; Soyer et al., 2023) in community partnerships. Traditionally, CEL courses have been a natural fit in arts and sciences disciplines like sociology and philosophy. However, the expansion of CEL courses has reached diverse academic fields, including accounting and finance (Poston & Smith, 2015), engineering (Goggins & Hajdukiewicz, 2022), geology (Chaumba & Chaumba, 2022), and sport management (Smith, 2018; Smith et al., 2024).

Much of the CEL literature noted above provides understanding and introspection on instructors' and students' experiences in the classroom or out in the community. For example, Goggins and Hajdukiewicz (2022) examined over 300 community-engaged engineering projects, drawing on their 12 years of experience leading these initiatives within a community-based inquiry framework. This engaging and collaborative framework incorporates "teacher's presence, cognitive presence, and social presence to ensure that students discover, discuss and reflect upon their new learning" (Goggins & Hajdukiewicz, 2022, p. 4). With a holistic approach to incorporating CEL into the engineering program they described, Goggins and Hajdukiewicz found that students were much more motivated and encouraged when they could collaborate with the instructor and community members, witnessing the positive impact of their efforts in making a meaningful contribution to the community.

Informing university students about CEL

can take many forms, whether through fieldwork or conceptual in nature. Soyer et al. (2023) employed a conceptual approach to introduce their students to a CEL topic of sustainability in a university course titled Methods of Social Research. Students received the necessary research methods curriculum followed by a series of guest speakers from the community offering multiple levels of sustainability challenges. Twenty-six students then chose one of six sustainability research projects (e.g., Parental Perceptions of Air Quality, Student Perceptions of Renewable Energy). Several deliverables were required of the students, including the submission of a research proposal, a grant application that would aid in the research for the given sustainability topic, a written paper, and a class presentation of the paper. The overarching lesson of CEL was integrated as the foundation of each project. Although the project the students completed was a simulation, and no hands-on work in the community came of it during the semester, an analysis of student experiential responses in the course found that "using CEL to teach about sustainability fostered a better understanding of the sustainability issues . . . students also displayed their ability to develop solutions based on these problems" (Soyer et al., 2023, p. 156).

Understanding the impact of CEL for university students in a classroom setting is a larger theme of much of the existing literature. Research from individual classes from authors such as Soyer et al. (2023) and CEL sustainability projects with students over several years (Goggins & Hajdukiewicz, 2022) represent two ways CEL research is evident. Smith et al. (2024) utilized a word cloud course assessment to understand if CEL course objectives were being met. Students in the course were asked to provide a final written reflection representing their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual experiences based on their hands-on CEL sports outreach coursework. The research found that not only were course outcomes being met, but the personal impact of the CEL course was evident in participants' reflections, such as this one:

> I found myself enjoying the work I did but looking for a greater sense of purpose. I wanted to do something that positively affected people in the community. This course validated the importance of providing social contributions in the community and that this can be done through sport. This class helped me confirm that I want to work in community relations or another service-focused job, which eased a lot of uncertainty and worry in my life. (Smith et al., 2024, p. 26)

As opportunities for college students to engage in CEL courses continue to expand, and as research on CEL experiences grows, limited research has explored the specific, individualized experiences of students participating in these courses. Berard and Ravelli (2021) used a fourth-year sociology course semester-long project and a reflective journal method for their students to engage and reflect in CEL. These authors, along with other members of the research team, conducted an in-depth analysis of these journals using a three-phase thematic analysis to explore students' firsthand experiences in applying sociological skills within community settings. The researchers found three main themes from student journal entries, (a) the undergraduate experience, (b) imposter syndrome and positionality, and (c) the power of community. Regarding the undergraduate experience, students expressed their frustrations that this CEL course was available only as an upper level course. Previous courses had asked them to learn sociological theories, methodologies, and statistics, but they had never been asked to apply them until the CEL course. This feeling led directly to the imposter syndrome and positionality theme. Students continued to comment on their lack of preparedness, skills, and abilities in working in the community. Finally, the power of community theme identified that students had an overwhelming feeling and deeper appreciation for their work, individually and collectively, in their community.

Previous research on CEL has provided valuable insights through both quantitative and qualitative analyses, uncovering key themes and significantly enhancing our understanding of CEL as an educational practice. However, the distinct dimensions of individual student engagement can become obscured when generalized into broader thematic frameworks, even in a course with 20 students. Focusing on one student's involvement offers a deeper, more nuanced perspective, revealing subtle aspects of learning and transformation that broader studies may overlook. This approach enriches the existing CEL literature and fosters a comprehensive understanding of how students' experiences are shaped by CEL courses.

By examining the intricacies of an individual's journey, this research fills gaps in current scholarship, providing fresh insights into the personal and contextual factors that influence student engagement. It also enhances our ability to design more inclusive and responsive CEL programs that cater to diverse student needs and experiences, strengthening the effectiveness and reach of CEL across academia.

The ongoing advancement of CEL practices and research is both important and timely. Even as Berard and Ravelli (2021) explored their students' voices, they acknowledged a gap in the literature focusing on the individual experiences of CEL students. The present research addresses that gap by examining one student's CEL experience and its impact beyond the classroom through a case study approach.

Methods

Qualitative research focuses on discovering meaning in diverse experiences, making it suited for exploring the nuances of individual engagement. This case study employed a narrative approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) to understand the meaning-making processes in CEL. Specifically, it uses a case study method to investigate an undergraduate student's experiences in a CEL course during his third year and how those experiences informed his Honors project at the same location in his fourth year. Building on the work of Berard and Ravelli (2021), this research addresses gaps in the literature regarding college student experiences in CEL courses.

Case study research examines one or more cases to investigate issues within predetermined boundaries over time using detailed data collection methods (Creswell, 2016). Merriam (1998) reiterated, "The case itself is important for what it reveals about the phenomenon and for what it might represent" (p. 29). Similarly, Yin (2009) emphasized exploring the lesser known through the case study research method: "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly defined" (p. 18).

This case study takes an exploratory approach. Yin (2009) suggested this approach when assessing situations (i.e., life experiences) without a clear set of results. Priya (2021) expanded on Yin's methodology by stating exploratory case study research aims to "study a phenomenon with the intention of exploring or identifying fresh research questions which can be used in subsequent studies" (p. 96).

The case study approach I took when working at GFH involved a comprehensive research phase conducted during the summer before implementation. The overall aim of this case study was to bridge the gap in research related to student experiences in a CEL setting. Therefore, the study addressed this research question: "How do the individual experiences of one undergraduate student in a CEL course extend beyond the classroom?"

Working with my faculty advisor, we developed a research plan rooted in scholarly articles and books, forming the program's framework. An annotated bibliography captured critical learning outcomes and their relevance to the sports outreach CEL course and future projects.

My initial reading highlighted leadership theories and management perspectives, particularly the need for a trauma-informed approach when working with children affected by homelessness. This case study centered on the course EDPE 307 Foundations in Sports Outreach, exploring its origins, managerial strategies, and evaluation methods. Training and leadership development provided by the CCE shaped programming policies and procedures. Continuous research, meetings, and training ensured the program's development remained aligned with the expectations of CCE and GFH.

Process

After completing the Foundations in Sports Outreach course and conducting months of investigation and literature review related to sports outreach, community engagement, and service-learning, I officially began leading the sports outreach program at GFH during the fall semester of my senior year. In this role, I served as the student leader under the direct supervision of on-site CCE staff. Through a case study procedure, I explore the program's dynamic nature, documenting how adjustments were made in response to participant needs and evolving knowledge.

Data Collection

For this case study, I employed a range of qualitative techniques that enabled deep, reflective engagement with my experiences at GFH. One of the primary methods was keeping a detailed personal journal throughout the program. This journal allowed me to capture daily observations, emotions, challenges, and successes, offering a space for ongoing self-reflection. Journaling followed each session, and it played a significant role in tracking my personal growth and leadership development, as well as my evolving understanding of trauma-informed practices. The end product was a reflective log, which provided rich, qualitative data that aligned with the case study approach by offering insights into my role within the program and its impact on participants.

In addition, I made extensive use of field notes to document real-time insights during program activities. These notes were taken during or immediately after each session to capture specific interactions, environmental factors, and spontaneous reflections that might otherwise have been overlooked. The immediacy of this method ensured that I could record details accurately, which contributed to a more authentic understanding of the dynamics at play. These field notes served an essential function in the case study by offering a grounded, observational layer to the analysis of program implementation and effectiveness.

Finally, I engaged in informal yet reflective conversations with my supervisors and volunteers to gain a wider perspective on the program's impact. These discussions varied in length, ranging from brief exchanges to more in-depth talks, averaging around 15–30 minutes. Conversations were conducted with a diverse group, including volunteers and staff, in order to understand multiple viewpoints and gather a holistic picture of the program's outcomes. The inclusion of these conversations in the case study provided a diverse set of data points, enriching my analysis of the program's effectiveness and impact on both participants and facilitators.

This article discusses how I adapted activities based on participant behaviors and refined program policies using insights from sports outreach management literature. These adjustments highlight the significance of continuous research, training, and collaboration with community partners, which are essential for ensuring the success, ethicality, and sustainability of the sports outreach program.

I employed a case study approach to examine the operations and outcomes of the sports outreach program in depth. By systematically collecting observational data and field notes during each session, I closely monitored participants' behavior and their responses to various activities. This real-time analysis uncovered key patterns in group dynamics and individual development, informing my adjustments to activities to better meet participants' needs. These insights also led to important refinements in program policies, ensuring that the activities fostered personal growth, social cohesion, and inclusivity.

Collaboration with community partners was also pivotal to the program's success. Engaging with stakeholders from GFH, CCE, and sports outreach program volunteers allowed me to incorporate diverse feedback, ultimately strengthening the program's ethical framework and ensuring its long-term sustainability. This adaptive and holistic approach highlights the importance of continuous research, reflective practice, and collaboration in managing a successful, ethical, and enduring sports outreach initiative. By adopting this methodology, the program became more attuned to the participants' needs while aligning more closely with established best practices in the field.

Reflections From Noah's Faculty Advisor

Noah's experiences reflect a broader effort rooted in sports outreach, also known as sports ministry. This concept traces back to the 1700s with the emergence of "Muscular Christianity" (Mathisen, 1990; Smith, 2018). Sports outreach takes many forms (cf. Coakley, 2020; Connor, 2003). Smith (2018) described its essence as "combining faith communities with character-building aspects through sport participation . . . to produce confident youth and adults who will contribute to their communities" (p. 276). The goal is to foster a positive relationship with God through biblical and sportsmanship foundations.

I have been involved in sports outreach since 2012 through research, board membership, and developing the university course EDPE 307 Foundations in Sports Outreach. This course, after peer review, became CEL-designated and focused on "providing safe sporting opportunities for youth, embodying Catholic values of Mind, Body, and Spirit" (Smith, 2023). It helps students understand and practice sports outreach.

Noah, one of my students in EDPE 307, showed a passion for working with underserved youth. His journey from taking the CEL course to pursuing his Honors project at GFH demonstrates his growth and commitment to outreach. It's always encouraging to see students apply their learning in real-world settings, as Noah did.

Noah's Inspiration

When my family moved from the suburbs of Minneapolis, Minnesota, to a rural town, my mother insisted that my sister and I join a sport or extracurricular activity to help us adjust. I loved watching the Minnesota Vikings, so I asked to join the local youth football league. However, my mother's initial reaction was fear—not because of the injury risk, but due to the financial strain it would place on our single-parent household. The cost of equipment made football seem nearly impossible for us. To lower expenses, my mother bought preowned gear and sought financial assistance from the local community education center. Just as she was considering asking me to choose a more affordable sport, I received a scholarship based on our family's financial status, allowing me to play football for 9 years. This experience inspired my desire to give back later in life.

Before moving to attend my first year at university, I contacted a former football coach for advice on how to become involved within a new community when relocating across the country. My coach shared how his own similar experience of relocating as an adult was aided by his decision to become a volunteer youth football coach. In his experience, he benefited from meeting other people within the local community who were interested in helping youth populations experience the positive aspects of youth sports participation. Seeing the similarities to my situation and personal interest in making youth sports more accessible for all children, I began searching for volunteering opportunities once I arrived on campus as a university student.

In my first weeks of university, I volunteered with two separate organizations in the area, one that focused on serving individuals who experienced homelessness and the other an organization that provided sporting opportunities for physically disabled individuals. These experiences highlighted the benefits of connecting with the local community through volunteering.

As I evolved as a university student, factors such as location, transportation, and schedule became important. My experiences at both organizations were tremendous, helping me grow personally and professionally. I wanted to make a deeper impact within my community that would last beyond my time at university. So, aware of my continued interest in volunteering with youth sports, I decided to search for other service opportunities within my community.

As I was preparing my course schedule as a third-year university student, I received an email regarding a new course, EDPE 307 Foundations in Sports Outreach. The course was structured using university core integration of social justice and writing enrichment as well as offering a CEL designation within a sports outreach setting. The learning opportunities of this course would fill gaps from my previous volunteering experiences in an educational and professional capacity, all while allowing me to inspire youth populations to engage in sports and recreational activities.

The challenges I face as a liberal arts student, particularly with written reflection, stem from the emphasis on critical thinking, self-awareness, and integrating diverse perspectives. I'm not just expected to grasp the material but also to reflect deeply on my learning process, articulating my insights, challenges, and growth. This process requires both introspection and the clear expression of complex ideas, which demands ongoing practice as I continually evaluate academic content and personal experiences. These reflective exercises fostered personal and academic growth, forming the foundation for my multidisciplinary Honors senior project at Gonzaga University. Built on research into youth sports accessibility, the project evolved into a biweekly sports outreach program at GFH, a rehousing initiative in Spokane, Washington. This initiative became a key part of my personal and academic journey, intersecting with my volunteer work, leadership, and sports involvement. This article highlights the ethnographic foundation of the EDPE 307 Foundations in Sports Outreach course, which shaped my project to lead a sports outreach program for children impacted by homelessness and housing insecurity. As the student leader of the sports outreach program, I collaborated with the CCE to establish a foundation for sustainable programming. Responsibilities included creating activity outlines, weekly thematic planning, volunteer coordination, and direct leadership during program activities. The structure aimed at fostering a consistent and wholesome experience, encompassing healthy snacks, warm-ups, main physical activities, and reflections. Continuous engagement with participants and volunteers sought to empower program beneficiaries, emphasizing the importance of their feedback in shaping future activities.

The case study underpinning of the project echoes the principles of the Honors program as the author reflects on the mission of fostering an intellectual environment, nurturing students for lives of meaning, service, and leadership. The project aligns with the Honors program's values by providing innovative and immersive educational experiences, enhancing leadership skills, and embodying the commitment to service. The requirement for community service within the Honors program is mirrored in the project's primary objective of serving the local community at GFH.

Results

EDPE 307 Foundations in Sports Outreach Reflections

The process of implementing and leading the sports outreach program at GFH proved to be a transformative and enriching experience, characterized by a series of challenges, personal and professional growth, and the development of meaningful connections. The initial phases of this course underscored the foundational principles of leadership and adaptability, drawing on the theoretical frameworks presented in Sports Ministry That Wins (Smith & English, 2018) and their practical application within the facility.

Becoming acutely aware of the potential impact on the children and the broader community at GFH instilled in me a deep sense of responsibility and motivation. Although I initially felt uncertain and apprehensive, the early stages of the semester reassured me that meaningful change was possible in the lives of these children. Transitioning to on-site work came with both expected and unexpected challenges, requiring me to be adaptable. The fluctuating number of participants and unpredictable weather conditions forced me to adjust plans, underscoring the importance of being responsive to the evolving nature of the program.

Reflecting on this transition revealed significant personal growth, as I navigated challenges and witnessed the profound impact of engaging with the GFH community. Overcoming my fears about using public transportation added another layer to this growth, challenging preconceived notions and broadening my perspective. These experiences not only pushed me out of my comfort zone but also deepened my commitment to the program and the community.

I chose to incorporate insights from my course textbook (Smith & English, 2018) that emphasized the connection between ministry, evangelism, and the Christian obligation to serve others. The principles of love, joy, and inclusivity provided valuable guidance for maintaining a positive and impactful sports ministry program. Further, Burke-Harris's (2014) TED Talk on adverse childhood experiences brought a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by the children at GFH. Her insights on creating a safe and supportive environment resonated with the need to prioritize the well-being of participants, considering their unique backgrounds.

The journey, marked by challenges and successes, highlights the significance of continuous self-improvement and empathy in community engagement. The sports outreach program at GFH was not just a series of physical and recreational activities; it became a transformative platform for both my personal growth and the collective development of everyone involved. Through my experiences, I saw how the program fostered not only physical well-being but also emotional and social growth among the children. It provided a structured yet flexible environment where participants could push their limits, build confidence, and develop resilience through sports and play.

The lessons I learned during my time in the EDPE 307 CEL course went beyond the immediate context of the course, offering valuable insights into the dynamics of community engagement and the importance of intentional, compassionate leadership. The connections I forged with the participants were deep and meaningful, built on mutual respect and a shared commitment to growth. These relationships became a source of support and encouragement, reinforcing my belief that true community engagement requires not just participation, but a genuine investment in the well-being of others.

The positive impact I witnessed in the lives of the participants served as a solid foundation for my future endeavors in community outreach. The success of this program has shown me the importance of designing activities that resonate with the needs and aspirations of the participants. As I move forward, the principles and practices that guided me at GFH will continue to shape and inspire my future initiatives, ensuring that the legacy of growth, connection, and positive change endures in the community.

Honors Project Reflections

The program, shaped by the intersection of personal experience and academic pursuits, draws inspiration from my own financial challenges faced during my childhood when I participated in youth sports. Recognizing the privilege associated with participation in youth sports, my Honors project aimed to bridge gaps for children facing financial constraints. It explored the missed opportunities for physical development, holistic maturation, and relationship building that arise from the unmet need for sports participation. Furthermore, the project delves into the influence of academic disciplines, specifically religious studies and sport management, in shaping its interdisciplinary approach. The connection between personal faith, leadership, and service is explored, alongside the impact of sport management education on program development.

The beginning of the semester was marked by a mix of excitement and apprehension, as the responsibility of being the student leader came with heightened expectations and pressure. My anxiety increased with the abrupt departure of three scheduled volunteers just before the start of the program, but I quickly learned the importance of adaptability. This situation taught me to focus on the positive—namely, the willingness of new volunteers to step up and help.

In the initial stages of the program, I faced a unique set of challenges, ranging from unexpected encounters during bus rides to managing larger-than-anticipated groups. One memorable experience involved a child expressing agitation over a traumatic event, which served as a reminder of the diverse backgrounds of the participants and underscored the necessity for trauma-informed programming. As the semester progressed, I experienced both successes and setbacks. Positive moments, such as participants enjoying the scheduled activities and volunteers rising to the occasion, were balanced by difficulties. At one point, unstructured play led to feelings of failure, revealing my vulnerabilities and highlighting the need for self-reflection.

A turning point occurred during conversations with my supervisors from the CCE, whose insights were invaluable in addressing miscommunications and challenges with participants. By embracing their feedback, I focused on improving communication with volunteers and implementing strategies to enhance the program's effectiveness. Despite personal health challenges, I made progress, evident in the participants' improvement in soccer drills and the success of the "Shark Tank" game, both of which demonstrated the program's positive impact. However, I also had to address negative comments, underscoring the ongoing learning curve in managing group dynamics.

A significant challenge arose when a participant's disruptive behavior required tough decisions, including the emotional task of sending the participant home. Seeking advice from my supervisors and developing strategies for future interactions became essential for my growth as a leader. As the program continued, I gained momentum, achieving several successful sessions that received positive feedback from academic tutors and participants alike. These successes were a testament to collective growth—not just in the effectiveness of the programming but also in the relationships formed between volunteers and participants. Fostering collaboration, teamwork, and opportunities for self-expression became key priorities, exemplified by activities like Lego tower-building, which highlighted the program's positive environment.

As the semester drew to a close, I focused on ensuring proper closure and reflection. Clearly communicating changes in volunteer staff to the participants became a crucial skill. Activities like making friendship bracelets and engaging in creative projects provided a meaningful conclusion to the semester. Reflecting on this journey, I recognize that the sports outreach program has been transformative. The challenges, setbacks, and successes have collectively shaped my understanding of leadership, adaptability, and the profound impact that sports and organized activities can have on individuals in need.

After completing the program, I felt immense gratitude for the support from the CCE, GFH staff, and the volunteers who contributed to its success. This experience has deepened my commitment to community engagement and reinforced the importance of resilience, empathy, and continuous self-improvement in leadership roles. As I anticipate the next steps in this journey, I carry forward the lessons learned and the connections forged. The sports outreach program at GFH has been more than a series of activities; it has served as a platform for growth, learning, and making a positive impact on the lives of these children.

Conclusion

Reflecting on my time at GFH, I recognized a transformative journey that shaped my personal and professional growth. Initially, I faced anxiety and uncertainty, but these challenges taught me key lessons. One important takeaway was the need for adaptability and flexibility in dynamic environments. Managing fluctuating participant numbers and unforeseen challenges, like weather, required me to adjust plans quickly. Additionally, the experience underscored the necessity of trauma-informed programming, emphasizing empathy when working with children from diverse backgrounds.

Compassionate leadership emerged as another vital lesson. The relationships I built with participants were rooted in mutual respect and investment in their well-being, fostering a positive atmosphere essential to the program's success. Self-reflection and guidance from supervisors were crucial in addressing challenges like disruptive behavior.

This case study offers insights into community engagement, leadership, and trauma-informed care. It highlights how sports and organized activities serve as tools for social and emotional development, especially for children from challenging backgrounds. The lessons learned can benefit educators and organizations by providing strategies for adaptability and meaningful connections. Further exploration of undergraduate experiences in CEL settings is essential to develop a framework for fostering effective, empathetic leaders who can make a lasting difference in their communities.

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The Symbiotic Relationship Between Grant Writing and Community-Engaged Scholarship

Marina Denny, Maureen Bonnefin, and Eric Wayne Dickey

Abstract

When integrated effectively, community engagement principles can enhance capacity and broaden impacts for community-engaged scholars seeking and writing grants. Viewed through the lens of a participatory framework that emphasizes the importance of mutual recognition, humility, and relationship-building in community-driven work, a grant development process that advocates for early and intentional community partner engagement, highlighting the benefits of cocreating solutions and building trust, begins to address concerns of historically extractive research and resulting mistrust toward higher education institutions, particularly among vulnerable communities. Although this approach requires greater intentionality, time, and even systemic changes at the institutional level, the authors propose that community-engaged grant writing can be ethical, beneficial, and conducive to genuine community impact, challenging traditional academic structures and promoting collaborative, reciprocal relationships between scholars, practitioners, and community partners.

Keywords: community engagement, grant writing, grant funding, participatory action, engaged scholarship

For community-engaged scholars and practitioners, strengthening and investing in the communities they serve is a priority. It is well understood that simply disseminating evidence-based information is not enough; the critical services most needed by communities must also have robust and sustainable funding. It's no surprise, then, that many of these professionals have to develop—concurrently—skills in public engagement and grant writing. However, these competencies are not typically learned in an integrated and complementary fashion. Below we suggest opportunities for effective integration.

Grant writing and public engagement—also known as community engagement—share overlapping principles and processes that can help enhance capacity and broaden impacts. Additionally, effective grant writing and proposal development are often bolstered through effective community engagement practices, and vice versa. This article compares grant writing and public engagement approaches, outlines the benefits of each, and makes the case for the integration of concepts into everyday approaches for boundary spanners and other change agents.

Community Engagement

Community and public engagement trace their roots to several well-known theories from psychology and the social sciences, including Kurt Lewin's (1943) approach to social and behavioral change via field theory. Lewin (1942) stressed the importance of starting "with a characterization of the situation as a whole" (p. 63), rather than cherry-picking isolated elements that paint only a limited picture.

Lewin's original work paved the way for the development of action research (Lewin, 1944/1999), which is based on the voluntary and equitable participation of all stakeholders using an iterative and democratic decision-making process and highlights the importance of elevating community voices (Louder et al., 2023). Of note is the cyclical nature of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting that establishes a reciprocal environment for both learning and knowledge generation among university and community partners, shared ownership of the research, and cocreated and jointly implemented locally based solutions to real-world problems (Call-Cummings et al., 2023; Glassman et al., 2013; Kemmis, 2011).

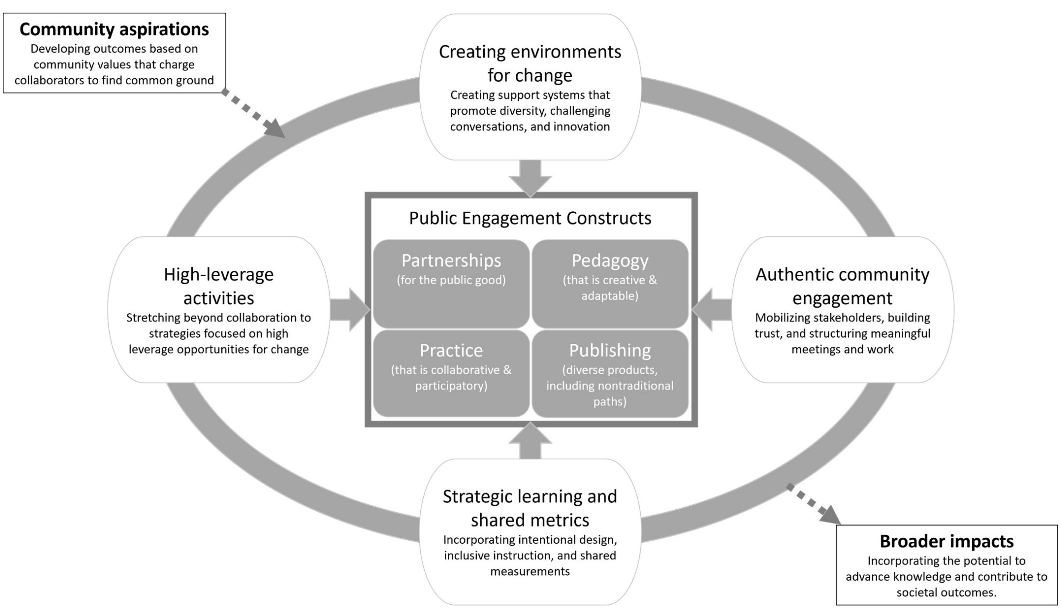
Evolving from action research are community-based participatory research (Hacker, 2013) and critical participatory inquiry (Call-Cummings et al., 2023), which challenge researchers to approach their community-driven work from a lens of mutual recognition and humility that is relationship driven, fosters collaborative and equitable partnerships, empowers and shares power, and builds capacity for all. Building upon these foundational principles, engaging the public for the respectful and meaningful integration of community needs into scholarly activities has many common elements, such as the following:

- Intentional integration of community values, concerns, and assets when identifying the problem to solve and research questions to ask (Doberneck et al., 2010);
- Expertise and learning processes shared in formal and informal settings to identify problems and develop solutions (Vines, 2018);
- Attention to appropriate research design, evidence-based methodology, and relevant translation and application of knowledge (Doberneck et al., 2010);
- Commitment that all aspects of the process are for the public good (Call-Cummings et al., 2023).

A recent framework (Denny, 2024) developed for Oregon State University illustrates the complex nature of public engagement that accounts for and integrates the needs of community partners into the process of community-engaged scholarship (Figure 1).

It is important to note that engagement of the public in community-engaged scholarship occurs on a continuum, from simple and transactional to complex and highly involved. The type and degree of engagement depends on several variables, including the range of community and institutional values

Figure 1. Framework for the Scholarship of Public Engagement, Showing the Integration of Community Partner Needs With Community-Engaged Scholarship



Note. From *OSU Public Engagement Framework* by M. D. Denny, 2024, Oregon State University (https://engagement.oregonstate.edu/osu-public-engagement-framework).

that need to be understood and respected. Understanding this continuum and approaching each community from a place of understanding and respect increases the likelihood of success when working with external partners (London et al., 2020).

A history of extractive or exploitative research (Gaudry, 2011; Kouritzin & Nakagawa, 2018) undertaken by universities, coupled with deep sociopolitical divides, has resulted in a negative reputation for place-based research among communities. Action-oriented projects that adopt appropriately defined research ethics and are tailored to the target communities, however, have successfully engaged communities (Kouritzin & Nakagawa, 2018). This participatory approach to cocreating solutions places value on the process as much as the outcomes, and in doing so it empowers communities and builds capacity.

Effective engagement processes enhance community members' abilities to mediate conflicts, represent their interests, manage resources sustainably, and build community assets (Menzies & Butler, 2021). Unfortunately, most researchers fail to engage participants beyond data collection (Vacchelli, 2021). Applying an engagement framework and ethical research best practices as early as the research ideation and grant-writing stage has the potential to establish creative participatory approaches where participants are coproducers of knowledge, ensuring trust and safe spaces for sharing experiences.

This approach is supported by federal funders such as the National Science Foundation, who recently sponsored a series of virtual workshops to equip principal investigators of research teams with the mindsets, tools, and techniques that will give them the skills and abilities needed to lead large-scale scientific enterprises that address critical questions (Leap to Large, 2021). In one workshop, presenters encouraged scholars to use a stakeholder alignment model that emphasizes demonstrating empathy with their community partners to build trust and understand their needs, concerns, and assets. Working from a place of empathy allows all partners to develop a shared understanding of the issue, the confounding variables, and even a common language and shared measures of success. When everyone is on the same page, codeveloping value propositions, shared aspirations, and shared goals for the project will be easier. Higher education and community partners need not share identical goals, values, and aspirations; community engagement can occur as long as they are not in direct competition.

Grant Development Best Practices

The process of developing grant proposals has a lot in common with community-engaged scholarship. In recent years, sponsors have increased their focus on the need to solve society's grand problems. In doing so they have emphasized the importance of projects that meaningfully engage communities and positively impact society. Recently this concern has been reinforced by the 2024 revision to the Federal Uniform Guidance, which "encourage(s) applicants to engage, when practicable, during the design phase, members of the community that will benefit from or be impacted by a program" (Guidance for Federal Financial Assistance, 2024). To address this increased emphasis on meaningful community engagement, grant applicants need to work with community partners at the ideation stage to identify community-driven needs prior to proposal preparation. Like communities themselves, grant-funding opportunities are unique, each one requiring many considerations and multifaceted care. We suggest that utilizing the public engagement framework (Denny, 2024) and ethical research practices in the development and execution of a grant's life cycle will result in the outcomes sought by funders and enhance a community's agency to create sustainable change.

The grant life cycle starts with ideation, teaming, and the identification of a funding opportunity, leading to the development of a draft project or program idea. Through the proposal preparation and submission process, this idea is refined into one that is capable of being executed and evaluated. If funded, the project moves into the award and management stages during which the project is refined and carried out through the collection and evaluation of data, and/or through the delivery and evaluation of a program. Upon project completion the grant award is closed out and project results are disseminated (Flannigan-Lewis, 2019; Hacker, 2013). The grant life cycle requires perseverance and dedication. Like community engagement, the execution of this cycle demonstrates "the project's intention to survive and succeed" (Carroll et al., 2003, para. 5). A well-executed grant project should lead to continued collaborations and sustainable contributions for both the scholar and the community partners.

Taking a deeper look at this process, one of the best practices of grant writing is starting early. Grant deadlines can be imposing and applications are often rushed, so the best proposal development happens when teams start early in the process. Often grant seekers submit proposals as a reaction to a specific funding opportunity. However, a more effective approach is to identify a project first and then look for appropriate funding sources (Carroll et al., 2003). Project leaders need to anticipate many components when conducting grant writing for community-engaged scholarship, including

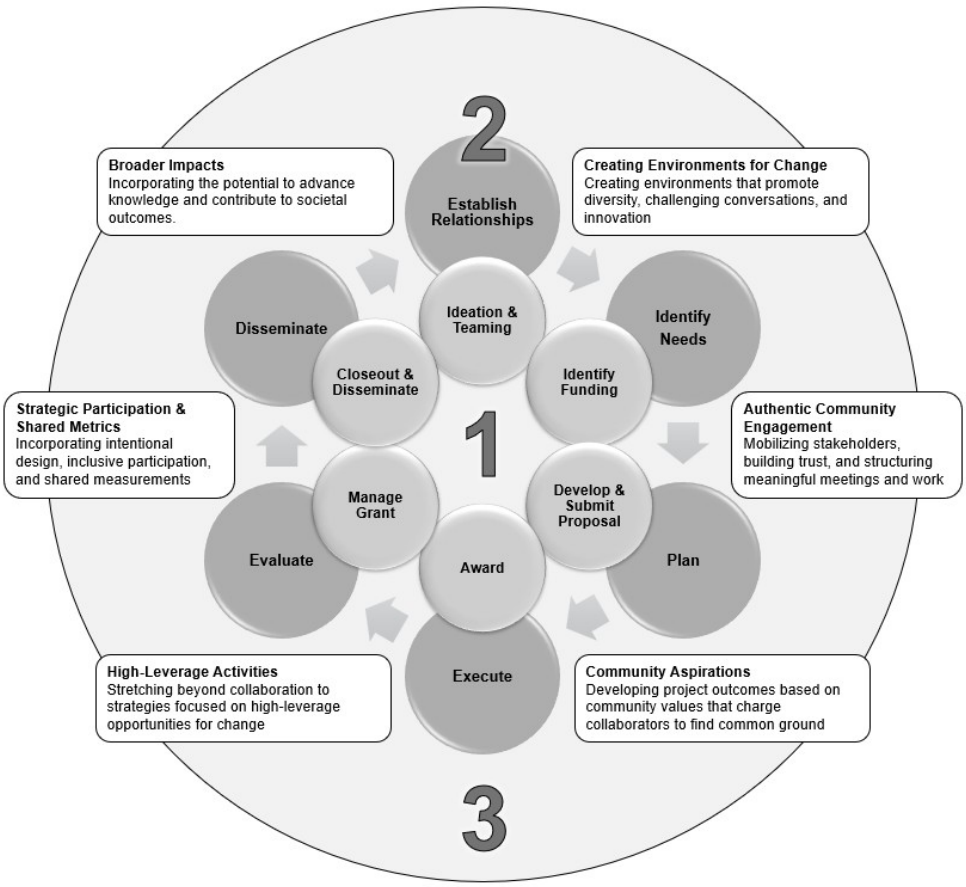
- What community will be impacted by this work?
- Who are your collaborators and community partners?
- Who within the community can help you build relationships and establish trust?
- How will the community be ethically engaged to identify a community-driven need that aligns with the scholarly work and the funder's goals? (Hacker, 2013).

Once a funding opportunity is identified, the project lead also needs to consider the opening and closing dates of the opportunity and who will help with putting together the application. Merging the community engagement and grant-writing processes takes time and a team. Engaging with your communities and grant-writing teams early will ensure they are ready to go when you request their contributions (Carroll et al., 2003). Developing processes based on the integrated framework (Figure 2) will help your team members, whether the grant-writing team or the community partners, identify their aspirations and values and establish common ground early in the process. We suggest the best time to begin this process is before the funding opportunity is announced. Providing forums for community input early will help create a sustainable system of support and provide team members the opportunity to give input throughout and beyond the life cycle of the grant.

One example is a tool developed by Purdue University and adopted by Oregon State University, the proposal enhancement process (Angima et al., 2014). This model provides early identification of community needs through pre- and postassessment actions that can help grant writers write strong proposals relevant to their communities. This process also empowers the community to assess the risks and benefits of the proposed scholarly activity and allows scholars to incorporate community-driven insights and concerns into the project plan (Call-Cummings et al., 2023; Hacker, 2013). Using this process to collaboratively set expectations early will lead the way to authentic engagement throughout the life of the project and for future partnerships with the community. The intentional sharing of power between community partners and scholars will help all partners feel empowered to cocreate new knowledge and meaningful long-term change for the community (Call-Cummings et al., 2023).

How do grant seekers apply such a process to ensure fit between the funder's goals, the project idea, and the needs of a community? Write a summary of the project early in the process based on the information gathered using the proposal enhancement process (Angima et al., 2014). Even a short paragraph about the proposal concept will help you communicate with your team, interested parties from the community, and your leadership. A short summary will be easily digestible and will open up conversations that lead to colearning, open dialogue, and equal involvement across all partners in the project. As you share your summary, ask your team, leadership, and other interested parties for input. Getting their input will help assure all partners on the project that their voices are being heard early in the process and that their interests will be met as you move forward. This input can be gained through conversations with individuals, small groups, or open community forums. This process will help you establish authentic community engagement and cocreate trust. Fostering these conversations will also help the project lead understand the relevance of their work to the community (Hughes & Ledbetter, 2009). Presenting this relevancy in the proposal will demonstrate to grant reviewers that your project is mutually beneficial to both the scholarship and community needs. Incorporating community input will provide opportunities for colearning and cocreation and allow grant-writing teams and community partners to intentionally design projects with shared metrics benefiting all parties.

Figure 2. A Public Engagement Framework Incorporating the Grant Life Cycle and Community-Engaged Scholarship Life Cycle



Note. (1) The grant life cycle (Flannigan-Lewis, 2019). (2) The life cycle of community-engaged scholarship (Call-Cummings et al., 2023; Glassman et al., 2013; Hacker, 2013; Kemmis, 2011; Vines, 2018). (3) A public engagement framework supporting and enhancing these processes (Denny, 2024).

The next steps in the grant development cycle will further community engagement. A team of scholars and their community partners can begin by reviewing grant proposal guidelines to determine how their project's goals will align with the funder's goals. Through this process, they will identify documents that need to be completed and develop a timeline with benchmarks and allocated responsibilities for the development of the grant proposal. This cocreation of a set of shared metrics for the completion of the grant application will help everyone on the team recognize that all involved bring knowledge and value (Call-Cummings et al., 2023; Marshall et al., 2006). As the next step, collaboratively setting recurring meetings will combine opportunities for iterative feedback, promoting shared ownership and empowering everyone on the team to mutual accountability and a high level of caring (Eigenbrode et al., 2017).

Building mutual recognition can be furthered through the collaborative development of grant documents that promote conversations about each team member's roles, responsibilities, values, and principles. Some critical documents to this conversation are the grant budget, letters of commitment, project plans, management plans, and memorandums of understanding (MOUs; Eigenbrode et al., 2017; Hacker, 2013). A precise and reasonable budget will help build credibility into your proposal (Marshall et al., 2006) and will help your collaborators see themselves in the proposed project by recognizing the skills and expertise that they bring. Securing letters of support and/or MOUs formalizes agreements and creates transparent communication about expectations (Hacker, 2013). Working together to determine project tasks and evaluation methods will help your community partners see how their values are recognized by the project and how the results of the project will be given back to the community to help implement meaningful change (Call-Cummings et al., 2023; Hacker, 2013). Finally, a management plan will help create methods for establishing a team culture that reflects mutual values and principles while defining each team member's roles and responsibilities (Eigenbrode et al., 2017).

The process of collaboratively submitting a grant proposal can enhance capacity and broaden impacts for change agent practitioners from academia and community organizations. By using the above methods to collaboratively create a grant proposal, change agents can bolster effective community engagement practices and actively avoid harm to vulnerable individuals within the community. These steps ensure that whether or not the grant is funded, strong collaborations are built, leading to meaningful future work that respects and benefits all with a vested interest in the community.

To ensure sustained community change, closing the grant cycle loop does not mean researchers should cease engaging with communities. A single, positive engagement experience between universities and communities can strengthen trust and confidence, but it is only the beginning. Subsequent meaningful engagements, through continued networking and maintained relationships, can help both communities and researchers build capacity and foster opportunities for continued collaboration by identifying new needs, embarking on new projects, and pursuing more grant funding and other mechanisms for sustainability (Vines, 2018). Consider involving key community leaders on advisory boards or project workgroups as a way to maintain connection, solicit feedback for continuous improvement, and stay grounded in the criticality of community-driven, community-engaged scholarship.

Conclusion

Gaudry (2011) described the "extraction model of research" as a process whereby scholars enter marginalized communities to gather information and report back to institutions, often without involving the communities in the research process or following up with them. When this happens, communities have no role in shaping the project's scope or validating the findings (Corntassel & Gaudry, 2014). Additionally, it overlooks local knowledge and cultural protocols, leading to a lack of commitment to the communities affected by the research; it also results in skepticism and barriers to future engagement. This extraction model of research sees the community as subjects. However, ethical community-engaged scholarship must go a step further and see the community as people with their own values and knowledge to contribute.

The extractive approach can also infect the grant development process, which is why integrating community engagement best practices throughout the entire grant life cycle is critical. For grant writing to be ethical and beneficial, communities should have ample opportunities to provide consent and be involved throughout the process, not simply during the implementation and/or evaluation phases of the project. True consent requires trust-building, empowering the community with ownership of the decision-making process, and revisiting the community participants' understanding and consent throughout the scholarship process. Thorough engagement for the community includes contributing to the project analysis and outcomes and ensuring that the results lead to tangible benefits for the community. Community members should contribute ideas and engage in analysis through community reflection, providing input into how the request for consent is developed and implemented. Privacy, confidentiality, and protection of vulnerable groups must be carefully considered and discussed with the community. They should have an equal say in how data is created; who controls and owns it; and how, when, and whether it is translated, shared, and used. All steps of the data process should be transparent and allow the community to be involved in discussions on how this process evolves (Call-Cummings et al., 2023; Hacker, 2013). The community also should be given the chance to use the data to make decisions that will create meaningful change for the vulnerable populations they may represent. The collaborative development of a grant application provides one method through which community-engaged scholars can facilitate these transparent trust-building conversations.

Those of us in higher education who are involved in community-engaged work are referred to as change agents or boundary spanners, and we pride ourselves on working collaboratively with communities outside academia on issues relevant to their interests and well-being. Yet more often than not, there is a misalignment between academic structures and the creation of true community impact. Constraints such as time and promotion criteria—in particular for early-career faculty—can stifle the community engagement cycle. So, at the end of the day, are we genuinely engaging communities when writing grants for community-engaged projects, or are we simply taking the path of least resistance?

In the context of an increasing expectation for grant awardees to engage with the community at the design phase of a project and demonstrate broader societal impacts for funded projects, there is clear alignment of principles between public engagement and the grant-writing process. Scholars, practitioners, and community partners must work together to create collaborative, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial projects. Applying an engagement framework to ethical research best practices at the point of ideation and grant writing will ensure that participants are coproducers of knowledge, creating trust and safe spaces for sharing experiences and implementing meaningful social change.

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Embodying PAR: A Reflection on Building Trust Across Institutional Hierarchies

Anita Chikkatur and Emily Oliver

Abstract

In this cowritten reflection, two co-principal investigators of a federally funded participatory action research (PAR) project that involved a university–community collaboration discuss how they built a relationship of trust through a deep shared belief in PAR ethics and ethos and through what they learned together from their collaboration with community researchers about the importance of building relationships and solidarity across differences. They argue that building ethical, reciprocal relationships between faculty and staff within universities, especially in the context of collaborations with communities outside the university, is a worthwhile and necessary component of living out the ethics of a participatory framework.

Keywords: bridging institutional status differences, participatory action research framework, solidarity across differences in higher education institutions

In this article, we examine the complex dynamics of our relationship as the co-principal investigators (co-PIs) of a federally funded participatory action research (PAR) collaboration between an elite predominantly White liberal arts college and a working-class racially diverse rural town in Minnesota. We explore how our shared institutional space (Carleton College) interacted with our identities and positionalities and with the PAR framework. Given that identities are always multiple and ever evolving, we focus mainly on our racial, class, and professional identities during our collaboration: Anita is an Asian American professor who comes from a middle-class background, and Emily is a White American staff member from a middle-class background. We discuss the myriad structural barriers created by our institution's understanding of our work with community researchers and of our partnership across faculty–staff positions. We also delineate how we were able to build a reciprocal and trustful relationship, despite these barriers, mainly through our deep shared belief in the ethics and ethos of the PAR framework and through what we learned together from our collaboration with community researchers about the importance of building relationships of solidarity.

As co-PIs, we witnessed and experienced the power of relationship among the community researchers as they shared stories of racist experiences and engaged in collective action to change the existing dynamics in their community. PAR is

> a framework for conducting research and generating knowledge centered on the belief that those who are most impacted by research should be the ones taking the lead in framing the questions, the design, methods, and the modes of analysis of such research projects. (Participatory Action Research, 2025b)

One important PAR tenet that was especially relevant to our experience as co-PIs and this analysis of our relationship is the importance of acknowledging and honoring different kinds of experiences and expertise. The kind of vulnerability and honesty that we saw among the community research teams gave us a framework to push back against the norms of higher education that rarely allow for the development of truly reciprocal relationships between faculty and staff and for staff members to have agency in shaping their work. In particular, having the project focus on processes and relationships, and not on "products," gave the two of us ample opportunities for ongoing and honest conversations about power dynamics; about how to "center" the community partners in our work, especially the Latine and Somali parent and youth researchers; and about strategically using our positionality within our institution to support each other and our community partners. Although we learned powerful lessons about the possibilities and limitations of our power, ultimately these lessons led Emily to leave the institution because it could not support her vision for what reciprocal, ethical relationships should look like between universities and communities, a vision forged through being a co-PI on the PAR project.

We address our analysis mostly to our university colleagues—staff and faculty—who are engaging in or want to engage in transformative projects with communities who have not only been historically excluded from universities but have often been harmed by universities through deficit-framed research (Mitchell & Chavous, 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2014). We argue that building ethical, reciprocal relationships between faculty and staff within universities, especially in the context of collaborations with communities outside the university, is a worthwhile and necessary component of living out the ethics of a participatory framework. Although we cannot individually or even in small groups fully transform university structures that limit the space available for the messy, iterative work of building relationships within and outside institutions necessary for PAR and other types of community-based projects, we can better account for our own positionality and power within institutions. For example, a faculty person may commit to rigorous contemplation of the community–faculty relationship and endeavor to respect and honor community expertise and goals, but ethical shortcomings will remain if they then turn around and uncritically take advantage of the labor of graduate students, staff members, junior faculty, or anyone else involved who has less power and prestige in an institutional context. We realize it may seem unusual for a reflective piece involving PAR to focus so little on community voices; however, we want to keep this essay's focus on academia's own structures of power.

As Lake and Wendland (2018) noted, community-engaged work can broadly "benefit from PAR's commitment to a more careful and explicit analysis of power" (p. 22), and we would posit that these analyses are necessary for examining relationships within higher education institutions as well as between institutions and communities. Writing this piece together has been one way to honor our collaboration and relationship, even as our institutional relationship with each other came to an end. We start with a description of our shared institutional context as co-PIs before delving into individual stories of our experiences during the first few months of the project, the barriers we faced, and the factors that made it possible for us to truly become partners in this work.

Our Shared Institutional Context

When we first became involved with the grant-funded PAR project in spring 2018 (Participatory Action Research, 2025a), we both worked at Carleton College, a small elite liberal arts undergraduate college in Northfield, Minnesota. Anita was a tenured professor in the Department of Educational Studies and had begun her career at Carleton in 2008. Emily began working at Carleton in 2017, first as the interim and then the associate director for academic civic engagement and scholarship at the Center for Community and Civic Engagement (CCCE). Carleton College enrolls approximately 2,000 students and, as of 2024, had an endowment of $1.26 billion (Carleton College Investment Office, 2024). In the 2018–2019 school year, when we started the PAR project, approximately 60% of the students were identified as White; 8% as Hispanic/Latino; 8% as Asian; 5% as Black/African American; and 11% as international students (Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2024). During Anita's time at the college, the student body's racial and ethnic diversity had increased more rapidly than that of faculty and staff. A consulting firm's report in June 2021 revealed that compared to 25 peer schools nationally, Carleton had the second highest percentage of White faculty (Cambridge Hill Partners, personal communication, June 3, 2021). In 2021, when Anita was an associate professor, the mean percentage of White associate professors for the 25 schools was 70%; at Carleton, 85% of associate professors were White. The racial diversity among staff was even lower: Emily was classified as "exempt staff," a category that was approximately 91% White.

In 2018, the CCCE had recently undergone a turnover of the entire staff after the college had merged cocurricular student engagement activities and academic civic engagement into one campus center. The influx of new personnel resulted in a lack of deep institutional knowledge alongside an undercurrent of pressure on the Center to prove its worth and expertise to the college. Carleton is a place with a keen sense of itself; many staff and faculty are college alumni themselves. Emily learned quickly when she joined the CCCE that instead of being interested in cocreating projects with the newly appointed staff, a certain contingent of veteran faculty wanted to conserve the norms and history of community engagement on campus and maintain the Center's previous focus. For example, faculty with longstanding involvement in projects in the Northfield schools showed marked resistance to the new director, who had previous professional experience with international human rights work. They felt the new staff was pushing an agenda around "global" engagement and issues of racial and social justice that deemphasized their work.

The institutional culture promoted a prevailing sense of overwork and time scarcity for faculty and staff. "Even Faribault," a faculty person once told Emily to emphasize this point, "is going to be too far for many faculty." This faculty member was referring to the 15-minute drive from campus, but the observation implied other types of distance as well: economic, racial, refugee/immigration status, and so forth. Faribault is adjacent to Northfield, the town where the college is located, and is more diverse across multiple factors. For example, in the 2018–2019 school year when we started the PAR work in Faribault, 55% of students in the Faribault School District but only 25% of students in the Northfield School District were identified as students of color (Minnesota Report Card, n.d.). The CCCE's new approach to community-engaged work and the focus on Faribault might have been seen as an implicit critique of some faculty members' previous work. And to some degree, there had been a shift in public consciousness and the Center's thinking about the often extractive relationships between institutions of higher learning and communities, where faculty's academic freedom in designing projects and student learning outcomes were often the primary focuses, rather than impact on and outcomes for community partners. Whose knowledge is valuable and who gets to direct the production of that knowledge are topics reflected in evolving practice, scholarship, and training. For example, leading higher education and community engagement scholar John Saltmarsh (2020) noted,

> Equity, in this context, refers to efforts to resist systemic forms of oppression and cultivate a more equitable world—one that centers democracy as a primary core value and in which everyone has equal opportunity to thrive regardless of their backgrounds and situations. . . Regarding scholarship (like community engaged scholarship), enacting epistemic equity would mean 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. (p. 153)

The emphasis of the grant that we applied for on participatory projects also speaks to this issue. The PAR framework explicitly names not only the importance but also the necessity of collaboration across differences—including academic, experiential, and community-based knowledge systems—for "good" research.

Our Stories

Anita

Looking back at some of the reflective memos I wrote during the first few months of the grant work (December 2018 to May 2019), I realize that I have clearly forgotten some of the specific things I was stressed about! Although we encountered difficulties while working with our community partners (mainly navigating through different understandings about how we were going to recruit members for the community research teams and language differences), the main theme in my reflections was my frustration about the lack of clear communication from the CCCE, which was my main partner at the institution, and my uncertainties around how to navigate power dynamics among staff members as a faculty member, especially as a faculty member of color.

The work on the grant began in March 2018, when Emily contacted me to ask whether I would be interested in being a co-PI for a federal grant focused on PAR with the CCCE director, who was Emily's supervisor at that time. Although I had initially sent information about the grant to the CCCE, I had no plans to be a co-PI because the project did not need to be focused on education, my area of expertise. I was thrilled when Emily emailed me back to ask if I wanted to be a part of the grant. The PAR framework aligned with where I was arriving as a scholar and researcher. The writing of the grant itself is a bit of a blur—I remember meeting with the three community partners in Faribault who would be a part of the grant, doing a lot of work in shared Google Docs, and then waiting to hear back from the granting agency. We were, of course, successful (otherwise we wouldn't be writing this article!), and the first community research teams were in place by January 2019.

> There's also some tension within the CCCE staff about who's doing what. So far, it seems like everyone's doing everything in some ways! Everyone wants to be included in all meetings, which maybe is the way they have decided to do [this work] . . . it's not really clear to me who's taking on what role. So far, it's been fine. But it would be helpful to know who's planning on doing what. At some point, there does need to be delegation of tasks. It's not like we're all going to be calling the interpreters or the restaurants or whatever. (Chikkatur, Reflective memo, January 9, 2019)

Although the CCCE director was my co-PI and it was 20% of her time that was written into the grant as an "in-kind" contribution from the college, how this work was actually distributed among three of the center's main staff members was much more complicated. Reflecting on these early days together with Emily during the writing process for this article, she was surprised that I was so aware of these dynamics so early on. We both now wish that we had thought to spend time—perhaps even while we were waiting to hear back about the grant—to start to build a more robust relationship between the CCCE staff and me. I also realize now that I might have misunderstood the depth of relationships that the director had with some of our community partners, which was something I was counting on as a base for building robust, reciprocal relationships for the PAR project.

> Honestly, this project would have totally fallen apart if it weren't for Emily, who's been amazing. . . it seems like it falls on Emily a lot to pick up the slack when [others don't] do what they are supposed to do. (Chikkatur, Reflective memo, March 27, 2019)

I absolutely noticed that it was Emily who showed up. She came to most meetings with the student and parent community researchers. She picked up the donuts for our 7 a.m. before-school meetings and the snacks for our after-school meetings. We developed agendas for these meetings together and reflected on how things were going during our commutes to the project site. I came to trust her commitment through her presence and through her determination to ensure that the community researchers had what they needed to do their work. I began to see that, like me, she believed deeply in the central premise of PAR: that those who are most impacted by a problem should be the ones to investigate the problem and generate solutions collectively (Torre, 2009). I started to trust that she was committed to not only supporting the working-class communities of color we were collaborating with but also supporting me as a faculty member of color at a predominantly White institution.

Emily

I recall the exact day I began to feel I could be honest with and trust Anita about the work dynamics of the project. We were in her Honda Fit, late spring of the first year of the project, maybe June, outside a cupcake shop on one of Faribault's broad main drags. We were carpooling after a meeting that had gone well, and there was a feeling of optimism after the messy and confusing first 6 months of the project. The streets there are similar to those of many rural Midwestern mill towns, open and largely empty, save the sparse dots of pickup trucks or people. I told her a story about, when I was relatively new on campus, a large meeting the library had organized to discuss how they could better support faculty public scholarship. In response to a comment I made about collaborating with the CCCE office, a faculty person had snapped, "I don't work for you, you work for me." Many of the other staff who had been in that meeting sent me an email after or stopped me in the hallway to say they were sorry about how rude and dismissive the faculty person had been in a public forum. Although it felt representative of my early experiences on campus, I had infrequently discussed this moment with other faculty.

After Anita had sent us the grant proposal, I advocated to my supervisor, the CCCE director, that we should suggest to her that she and our office should jointly pursue it. The Center's director and I were united in the belief that, in order to advance our stated mission and values, we needed to support and showcase robust examples of activist scholarship and teaching that addressed structural and system-level issues, rather than episodic and often surface-level civic engagement embedded in courses. We also wanted to build deeper ties in the Faribault community. I was eager to work with Anita because, although we had not significantly collaborated in the past, I deeply admired her perspective, teaching, and scholarship. It echoed the type of activism I had been involved in outside work. Prior to the grant's approval, our office had already been experiencing time scarcity and balancing too many priorities. Despite this reality, I anticipated (naively in retrospect) that acquiring a major federal grant with a faculty person would give our office more license, in the eyes of college administrators, to center our work time on building deeper relationships with communities in Faribault. In fact, the grant application noted that although existing programs through the CCCE and faculty-initiated projects in Faribault "are effective in reducing ongoing educational outcome disparities, they . . . have not yet included the depth of authentic community participation and holistic-need-identification that PAR could help bring about." This framing in the grant, I believed, was a way to legitimize a shift toward fewer but more substantial and longer term community-engagement projects with faculty.

Although college leadership seemed delighted by our successful grant application, there was no discussion about altering faculty expectations on campus for support from our office so that we could successfully focus on this work, which would take vastly more of our time than supporting one-off community-engaged projects in courses. Additionally, because the director—the project's actual co-PI—was drawn away from different responsibilities because of her own complex and contested staff role at the college, I attended nearly all the community meetings in Faribault on her behalf. That first spring, I was mired in confusion about the nature of my responsibilities on the project. Of course, my workload was not reassigned to accommodate this responsibility. Critically, I also did not ask for alterations to my workload because I was afraid I might be taken off the project, which, even in the logistical confusion of the first 6 months, felt starkly different and more meaningful to me than the other work in which our center was engaged. This workload was unsustainable and left me feeling like I was constantly coming up short, which increased my anxiety around Anita and hurt our ability to communicate openly.

The strained working condition of our office was rooted in larger systemic issues of how community engagement offices are positioned on campuses, which we will address in more depth later. But because it was such an important early and lasting lesson of the project for me, I want to note how this project showcased how self-advocacy is an essential skill of ethical PAR and of working across different levels of institutional power or status in general. During the first 6 months of the project, I did resent, as I could tell Anita did, that our office made a commitment to this project, which I saw as so vital, but did not insist on making appropriate space for the work it required. Multiple staff members were working piecemeal on a project that involved deep community building with working-class communities of color who had not previously worked with our college. It felt like trust was at stake. Entering the PAR research team meetings in Faribault, I simultaneously navigated the parallel experiences of internal confusion about my place as a White person in these Somali and Latine community meetings as well as the murky power dynamics between Anita as a faculty member and co-PI and me as a staff person vaguely assigned to support the project.

My commitments to the project were professional and political but also personal. I never experienced the profound weight of daily racism in school that many of the community researchers recounted. But I had been held back a year because of a learning disability and felt marked by failure and shame throughout my public school education. Hearing the community groups, and Anita, envision how educational spaces could support whole students, whole families, and whole communities, was incredibly powerful to me and deepened my sense of dedication to the project's aims. I did what obviously needed doing: the logistical and administrative work. I took notes, I organized student workers to help out, I did all the paperwork. I came to the meetings with the snacks and materials, ready to help as tasks arose. Handling logistics and consistently participating as a team member, I felt grateful to be able to contribute to the infrastructure needed for the community teams to perform the intellectual labor envisioned by the project, and to listen to the teams' stories and growing agency. In retrospect, hanging back gave both Anita and the research teams time to get to know me. By the time, after the first 6 months of the project, I became the co-PI with Anita (as well as interim director of CCCE), I began to contribute more actively because I felt the community researchers and I had developed relationships. Like the community researchers, I had gained deeper knowledge and practice around participatory action research. Lastly, I came to trust Anita through watching how she lived out the ethos of PAR in practice during the community meetings.

Institutional/Structural Constraints

As we thought about how we wanted to approach this discussion of our partnership as co-PIs on this grant, we both concluded that we were interested and invested in analyzing what got in our way from an institutional and structural perspective. We are cognizant that our shared institutional context is a small college, and it's difficult not to mention some details about individuals. Although we will not name anyone in this essay, people in the context might be able to identify themselves or others. We do want to note that many of the individuals we worked with are no longer in the same positions or at the institution. Nonetheless, as Anita has noted about the experience of writing about her experiences at the institution as a faculty member of color on a co-authored public blog, "Based on principles of anti-racist activism and intergroup dialogue, we were careful to frame our analysis of the interaction as a critique of behavior, discourse, and institutional norms, and not of a person. And yet, our critique was 'heard as personal attacks on reputation' (Ahmed, 2012, p. 50)" (Chikkatur, 2019, p. 73). This essay may yield similar readings and reactions. However, we believe that the lessons we've learned from our partnership about ourselves and our institution are worthwhile enough to share publicly, despite that risk.

Faculty–Staff Relationships

In interactions with faculty members, the power dynamics already established within academic institutions can pose a challenge for staff (Bernhagen & Gravett, 2022; Bessette, 2022; Pollock, 2022; Rosenberg, 2022; Sharpe & Born, 2022; Syno et al., 2019; Verjee, 2012). Administrators often prioritize faculty needs and demands for resource allocation because teaching and research are seen as central to the mission of the college, and staff roles in teaching and research are often neglected. Kuh and Banta (2000) wrote that faculty are often recognized as "first-class" members of universities because they "focus on the core academic tasks of the universities" (p. 5). Although individual faculty members may understand their role differently (and of course, there are hierarchies within faculty based on tenure status, social identities, and other factors), the end result is that faculty are often viewed by administrators and view themselves as the center of the institutional enterprise (Krebs, 2003). Based on this hierarchy, staff members are often exploited at academic institutions in both material ways (e.g., lower pay, different benefits, ability to set work priorities) and affective ways (e.g., staff often have to cater to faculty demands and timelines; staff are expected to perform emotional labor; Bernhagen & Gravett, 2022; Bessette, 2022; Pollock, 2022; Rosenberg, 2022; Sharpe & Born, 2022). These kinds of tensions between staff and faculty are certainly present at Carleton. For example, the results of a 2022 staff survey shared at a faculty meeting included comments from staff who noted concerns about how faculty treated them (A. Chikkatur, personal communication, November 7, 2022); similar concerns have surfaced in every staff survey Anita has been aware of furing her time at Carleton.

Carleton's CCCE had explicit social justice frameworks that supposedly undergirded our work, and we had experienced staff, credentialed in academia. However, for Emily, as the person most directly working with faculty, it was often very unclear if and when she (or even her supervisor, the director) had agency over what projects to focus on and whether it was possible to say no to faculty. The attitude Emily most often encountered from College administrators was that all staff offices needed to both advance their larger goals and mission (i.e., collaboratively seek major grants alongside faculty and serve in key support roles on big campus initiatives) and be available for whatever project or support any faculty person brought to staff at any time. The roles in CCCE were generally ill defined, oscillating based on the whims of faculty, the CCCE director, and college leadership.

When I (Emily) came into my job as the associate director for "academic civic engagement and scholarship," I was very surprised by the level of skepticism I faced from some faculty, especially in my first year on campus. At the time, I attributed this attitude primarily to the fact that my predecessor had developed the position after a visiting teaching stint in an academic department and had served in it for a decade. She was also an alumna of the college. I, on the other hand, had been initially hired in an interim capacity, was relatively young (29), and had earned my terminal degree in poetry. My supervisor, who hired me, had also been a controversial, external hire herself. In retrospect, however, we would argue that what Emily encountered was not personal but fairly representative of the often fraught power dynamics between faculty and staff at the institution. It is also typical of the kind of conflict experienced by "boundary-spanning" staff at universities in such positions. As Gauntner and Hansman (2017) noted, full-time staff who are employed to develop and manage university–community partnerships often experience role conflict as they have to "deal with potential conflicts between the individual, professional, and institutional agendas of university participants and the community objectives of obtaining and leveraging resources, accessing networks, and increasing perceived legitimacy" (p. 106). Emily worked doggedly to prove herself worthy and capable of upholding the oft-cited culture of rigorous standards at the college, which often involved extraordinarily long weeks.

This difference in status between faculty and staff was also built into the structure of the grant. Anita's time on the project was clearly defined and accounted for in the funding—she was going to teach one fewer course—but staff time on the project was less clearly defined. The grant included an "in-kind" contribution from the college, dedicating 20% of the director's time to the project. However, there were no discussions about what tasks would be removed from the list of the director's responsibilities to make available that kind of time. It also became clear that, in practical terms, the project responsibilities would fall on three staff members, including Emily, and there were few discussions among the staff about how those responsibilities would be distributed. To reiterate our point, there were no discussions at any point while writing the grant or after we got the grant concerning how to reallocate time and responsibilities so staff could spend the necessary time on the grant project. The structuring of this grant makes "sense" in the kind of institutional logic that expects staff to "figure it out" and encourages faculty "to see workers around [them] as there to make [faculty] jobs easier, rather than as fellow employees of a nonprofit corporation with its own corporate culture" (Krebs, 2003, para. 2). There was no priority placed on having honest, hard conversations among the CCCE staff and between Anita and the staff about how to make this partnership work equitably. Much of the literature on faculty–staff relationships, especially when community engagement is also involved, points to the necessity of clear communication around shared goals as well as delineation of roles and responsibilities (Florenthal & Tolstikov-Mast, 2012; Kirschner et al., 1996; Syno et al., 2019; Wangelin, 2019). Although having these discussions would not have erased institutional hierarchies, the PAR framework might have shifted our perspective—and therefore potentially our practices—around power. For example, because PAR "values the power within connections" rather than power over people, these conversations could have helped "rework the boundaries" of our relationships in service of the community researchers and their needs and goals (Lake & Wendland, 2018, p. 22). We do not mean to suggest that this kind of delineation of roles should be dictated or micromanaged by higher level administrators; rather, faculty and staff should be encouraged and provided time to have ongoing conversations about their work together.

Structure of the Community Engagement Center and Its Position Within Institutional Hierarchy

The professionalization of the community engagement field has had particular consequences for the role that staff in community engagement centers often play on campus (Dostilio, 2017). These staff, especially at the leadership level, are often well-credentialed and bring a wealth of experience and expertise to their jobs. As Pollock (2022) noted about "alt-ac" professionals, "We are awkwardly located at the edges of a rigid status hierarchy, which is itself situated within the larger corporate bureaucratic enterprise that is the contemporary university" (p. 52). Bethman and Longstreet (2013) defined "alt-ac" as

> an umbrella term to refer to full-time non-teaching and non-research positions within higher education. These can be staff or administrative positions, and these positions may (and often do) include teaching and/or research duties, but teaching and research are not the primary focus of the position. (para. 3)

The staff at a community engagement center have more direct interactions and deeper collaborations with faculty than staff in custodial or student residential services. Therefore, the friction of status inequity is more palpable and frequent within these relationships. These professionalized staff also are positioned higher within the hierarchy of staff structures on campus. For example, at Carleton, until fall 2022, hourly paid staff members were not eligible for tuition benefits for their children, whereas faculty and salaried staff were. There is then a kind of "awkwardness," as Pollock (2022) noted, that the salaried staff, especially those who work closely with faculty, have to navigate "in relation to [their] own marginalization and privilege, both within the institution and in our relationships with each other" (p. 68). Emily's role on campus was to direct the portfolio of community-engaged courses and public scholarship and to support and enhance Carleton's faculty community-engaged teaching and research. This work included collaborating with faculty to incorporate community-engaged pedagogy into a class; facilitating meetings between faculty and relevant community partners; designing and implementing regular training around best practices for community-engaged work; visiting classes to set norms with students around ethical community engagement expectations; and helping faculty submit community engagement grants or conference proposals. Before the professionalization of community engagement work at Carleton (and as it still is at other institutions), sustaining or heightening the profile of campus–community engagement might be something an interested faculty person would be provided time to do.

In most fields, people implementing programming or projects often have to follow the dictates of managers or supervisors who have less familiarity with the daily realities of their work. Even when Emily eventually became interim director of the CCCE for 10 months, she was expected to simultaneously maintain her entire associate director portfolio. Because College leadership's experiences were so abstracted from the day-to-day running of the CCCE office and even more so from the deep relational work of the PAR project, their suggestion to provide some relief was to hire a just-graduated fellow who, though extremely bright, was brand new to the workforce. The College included the PAR project in public announcements but continued to press staff labor as a means of maintaining a corporate culture of constant "innovation" and manufactured urgency. This conflict is one of the reasons Emily left her role.

Additionally, there is often a gap in terms of worker agency in higher education institutions, as noted by many researchers (Bernhagen & Gravett, 2022; Bessette, 2022; Pollock, 2022; Rosenberg, 2022; Sharpe & Born, 2022; Syno et al., 2019; Verjee, 2012). At Carleton, for example, one class of workers—faculty and administrators—has a great deal of agency over what projects they choose to take on and their role in them. Their choices may include projects that involve collaboration with another class of workers—staff members who are "alt-ac" professionals—who have limited say over their work portfolio. This gap in agency also made clear to us that Anita, as a tenured faculty member, had more power to shape her work life according to her values, including those embedded in a PAR framework. However, for us to participate in this work together in an ethical way, we both needed some amount of agency. For Anita, having this external grant provided not only material resources but also legitimacy as a scholar that allowed her to make choices about how to spend her time at the institution.

Although the PAR project was a resounding success for the CCCE and the College and their goal of expanding their relationships and connections in Faribault, it did not give Emily even a fractional amount of leverage to shape her work life, compared to Anita. Several other faculty members, besides Anita, ended up collaborating with community researchers on several separate projects. Community researchers also became involved in CCCE student worker orientations and participated in a regional summit touted as steering Carleton's future community engagement. When negotiating her contract to continue in her position as associate director of the CCCE, Emily asked explicitly to be able to reorganize a minor percentage of her work priorities to focus on fewer and deeper projects with more long-term impact. However, she was told that projects, such as the PAR project, were not part of the role's core responsibilities. In addition to believing that all workers across sectors and roles deserve more agency in determining the boundaries of their evolving work, we think it particularly possible at a small liberal arts college with a billion-dollar endowment to provide more space to staff supporting projects that administrators publicly claim as successes.

Emily's experiences also speak to the deeply horizontal nature of alt-ac positions. In many cases, a staff person in a community engagement role (through collaborative course design, project implementation, conference presentations, grant writing, or cowritten papers) is materially supporting the career advancement of faculty at that institution. However, beyond some increased internal clout and very limited pay raises, few mechanisms within a higher education institution offer the potential to reward staff for their work. In the corporate university, the individual career advancement of tenure-track and tenured faculty members is a central focus of the organization (Krebs, 2003; Kuh & Banta, 2000), and their needs and wants are prioritized. Beside them, however, there are a huge number of academic workers—renewable lecturers, adjuncts, and many alt-ac staff—whose static roles, job precarity, and lack of agency over their workload are positioned in the very same workplace as normal and unchangeable. For these roles, most meaningful professional advancement, such as shifting work responsibilities, is considered outside their relationship with their employer.

In our case, college administrative leadership supported the endeavor to apply jointly to the grant across faculty-staff lines. However, in retrospect, even in these initial phases of planning and approval, our faculty-staff team encountered the incongruities in college administrators' and even grant makers' perceptions of staff labor, which is regarded as both an afterthought and an ever expanding resource to support faculty and college achievement. The limitations of this approach were made clear in the challenges Emily faced in being able to find the time and capacity to work on the PAR project in a thoughtful and meaningful way, without constantly working during evenings and weekends.

Challenging Positional Hierarchies

Most importantly, for this article, one of the norms that got challenged by our work was our relationship as co-PIs across faculty-staff lines. Although the framing of community-college relationships as one where the college "helps" the community was one that impacted the project generally, Anita's involvement with the project was legitimized institutionally in ways that Emily's involvement was not. For example, the grant-funded project was included in a dossier given to potential candidates during the search for the president of the College in 2021; however, it was included in a section that touted the research profile of the college faculty. The prestige of the grant did not matter when Emily tried to negotiate more time in her position for such projects. Throughout our work together, Emily was often positioned by administrators as "helping" Anita, the faculty member, on Anita's project, which was not how we envisioned our partnership (and of course, it also wasn't Anita's research project but that of the community). Gauntner and Hansman (2017) noted that many institutions often employ boundary-spanning staff members to develop and manage community partnerships; these staff often are in the position of having to connect faculty to community partners and to manage potential conflicts between the interests of faculty and the institution and those of community partners. However, in our work, both of us were developing these relationships with community researchers directly, and we both approached the work knowing that we wanted to prioritize community partners' interests and needs.

Conversations around staff agency (and other within-institution power dynamics) are essential to ethical PAR work because the dynamics of the "professional" team impact the overall project. We cannot build transformative research models by exploiting the labor of staff who are exhausted, overworked, and afraid to speak up about their needs. Obviously, there is the practical reality that staff people will eventually reach their capacity, regardless of how committed they are to the aims of a project. But, more centrally, it is simply not easy for faculty or staff to move between a rigidly hierarchical workplace and a community-based setting where everyone's knowledge is valued. In order to fully commit to the latter, we have to sincerely question and work around the former. Once Emily was able to approach Anita honestly about these dynamics and we could talk frankly about them, she was able to see how staking out her own professional agency (within the constraints of an at-will employee position) furthered her ability to be of service to the project, philosophically and materially. It also made Emily believe in Anita's commitments in a new way that engendered more trust and comradeship, more evidence of how a PAR framework can facilitate change across power differences, even with the "awkwardness" of such hierarchies (Pollock, 2022).

The status of staff as subordinate to faculty impacted the project in multiple ways. It hampered honest dialogue at the onset of the project about how the center staff and Anita would share the responsibilities of collaborating with community researchers. The "awkward" positioning of the staff among themselves—and the complicated interplay of race and gender especially—as well as the position of the director, a woman of color, within the institution, made these relationships difficult to navigate on multiple levels.

Challenging the Norms of Institutional Operations

The few faculty and staff working on community-based research projects at our institution have found humor where we can to relieve the stress. For a time, one of us could say to another, "Gift cards," and both of us would burst out laughing. This phrase had become a shorthand for describing the many challenges we encountered while trying to compensate community researchers and knowledge holders for their work. Until recently, the college did not allow the purchase of gift cards even if external grants permitted it. Many community researchers that we worked with in Faribault lacked bank accounts and email addresses—conveniences preferred by the college's business office. The complex online forms that were required to set up electronic payments were beyond the abilities of some Latine and Somali parent researchers who were not fluent in English.

Although outside the norm in academic settings, these realities are not unusual in communities of color and working-class communities. A recent news article, for example, noted, "According to the F.D.I.C., one in 19 U.S. households had no bank account in 2019, amounting to more than seven million families. Compared with white families, Black and Hispanic families were nearly five times as likely to lack a bank account" (Desmond, 2023, para. 35). The grant specified that the bulk of the funding should be for the community, and we both valued that aspect of its structure, but it took work to ensure that existing institutional processes and practices supported that focus. Emily bore the brunt of the extensive institutional and logistical work necessary to ensure that, for example, all community researchers got paid. We both decided that this division of labor would ensure that the people of color working on the grant, which included nearly all of the community researchers and Anita, had the time and space to focus on the work on research and advocacy. We also were very aware of the power hierarchy between faculty and staff, so we decided to have Emily field those interstaff conversations initially as one way to acknowledge and not exacerbate such power differentials. We do not attribute the difficulties we encountered in carrying out the goals of the grant to college staff's resistance to working more effectively with working-class communities of color. Instead, we see them as stemming from these staff being overworked and overwhelmed themselves, without having clear directives about how to do their work differently to account for class, language, and cultural differences.

Although receiving large external grants adds to the prestige of the institution, it is unclear to us how these grants are used to increase staff capacity, especially among hourly paid staff who work 9-to-5 jobs on campus. College administrators at the highest levels follow a career path from faculty roles; consequently, we wonder if they fully understand the dynamics and structure of hourly staff positions. The difficulties we encountered also arose from a lack of understanding on campus about the principles and ethics of PAR projects. For example, in the first year of the grant, we were told to classify the community researchers as "independent contractors" for the college. This classification both violated the principles of PAR—these researchers were not doing work for the college—and required onerous amounts of paperwork. At the end of the first year, we met with the relevant offices and came to an agreement that the community researchers would be paid honorariums instead—akin to how guest speakers or external tenure reviewers get paid on campus—which both came closer to the spirit of the grant and meant less paperwork. However, these kinds of negotiations are ongoing because of a lack of larger structural changes to core institutional operating processes.

Why We Could Build a More Robust Relationship of Trust Despite These Constraints

To sincerely believe in the principles of PAR and in its power as a framework means that collaborators should not begin when experiencing strain, exhaustion, and confusion. It is a disservice to the slow, messy, and iterative nature of this type of work, which centers building relationships with people with honesty and presence. Building trust requires not only time but headspace. On that day, in Anita's car, Emily reflected on this notion and shared her frustration about how unclear her role was on the project. Emily and Anita had already been friendly, but it was on these grounds—of this shared commitment to this project and to a PAR ethos—that their work relationship became more open and deeper. As time went on, we were able to enact more explicitly these principles between ourselves. This deeper understanding, of course, served the project as well.

For us, the framework of PAR became a shared guide not only for our work with our community partners but also between the two of us. It gave us a concrete set of values to try and live out in our work together; as noted earlier, it is vital that faculty and staff discuss and develop shared values for on-campus and community collaborations (Bryant & Craft, 2010; Syno et al., 2019; Task Force on Faculty/Staff Partnership, 1999). We believed in making space for community researchers by prioritizing support for them, which was what kept us going, especially in those first few months of high uncertainty and tension among the CCCE staff and between Anita and the Center staff. We both shared a vision of what reciprocal community-college relationships could look like while being realistic about the limitations of our institutional context. We agree wholeheartedly with K. Kim Holder's characterization of academia:

> The reality is that you cannot look to an institution that is based in the capitalist system and expect it to work towards [its] destruction. . . Let's not fool ourselves . . . I do not speak for the masses. I try to provide material and avenues for them to be heard . . . and we do have tools that we can bring back to the community, but what it doesn't address is that the community has the answers a lot better than academia has the answers. And what they need is the space and some of the tools we have in order to do that. What they have . . . is the culture of resistance. (Briond & Ware, 2023, 29:05–31:06)

When we applied for the grant, we did not know how much time it would take to work with four different community research teams, and we on the Carleton team did not know each other that well either. I (Anita) knew the director the best among the CCCE staff, but we had not collaborated on a project. I did not know her working style, she didn't know mine, and the same was true with Emily and the other CCCE staff members. Emily and I were so focused on ensuring that we were doing "right" by the community researchers that we perhaps neglected being just as purposeful about building our relationships with each other on the Carleton end. However, as the two of us watched the community research teams build on each other's strengths and stories, we came to see the value of spending some of our meeting times building a relationship with each other, which allowed us to be more honest with each other about the experiences we had at our institution. This kind of relationship building also was made easier the second year when Emily became the official co-PI for the grant.

Additionally, as the community research teams in Faribault began to assert their own power and agency in situations where they faced conditions of far greater disempowerment and alienation and higher stakes, Emily could not help but feel that her own hesitancy around advocating for herself at the institution was increasingly ridiculous. In retrospect, she wonders if she could have better used the vagaries of her position and office to take more time on the project and create a reasonable workload for herself sooner. College administrators are rarely going to actively make space for a staff person to embark on projects that are countercultural to the institution. Eventually, Emily took the time the project needed (while still being careful to make sure all other operational duties were covered). It is hard to determine whether the changes around this time were primarily rooted in this philosophical revelation or an actual (though limited) change in her structural power at the College because the project's other co-PI unexpectedly left the College, and Emily became both project co-PI and interim director of the Center. But once in that position, she did, for example, limit the additional faculty activities the office supported and tried to maintain somewhat reasonable work hours. Having the community as our main concern helped both of us shift our priorities and, importantly, these shifts helped make our jobs more fulfilling, joyful, and meaningful.

Part of this joy and meaning came from our deepening relationship with each other. We learned that we had things in common other than our shared institutional context, including being involved in racial justice organizing projects outside our jobs. And we want to make it clear that although we do enjoy each other's company as friends, our working relationship was primarily built on our shared principles and commitment to the work we were doing and wanted to do with our community partners. In her discussion about mutual comradeship, Burden-Stelly (2018) echoed our experience: It was our shared expectations for each other about the kind of values and priorities we wanted to embody in the grant project and our shared political vision around community self-determination and resource redistribution that solidified our relationship. This kind of relationship building also allowed us to become allies for each other in the institutional context: Anita felt she could share more openly about her experiences as a woman of color on campus with Emily, and Emily felt she could share more openly her experiences as a staff member with Anita. Anita's experiences as a faculty member of color at Carleton had led her to have a skeptical view of the institution, which meant that she was open to the critiques that Emily offered from a staff perspective and to using her power as a tenured faculty member when she could to support Emily at the institution. We learned to be more comfortable with the messiness and uncertainties of what it means to do work with/in communities and with each other. We understand that it may seem like it was yet another burden for Anita as a faculty member of color to spend time supporting a White staff member, but our immersion within the PAR framework helped us understand the complicated way that institutional power intersects with social identities and positionality. For Anita, her relationship with Emily only deepened her knowledge and commitment to questioning hierarchies within and between institutions, and she remains grateful for what she learned from Emily and their collaboration. Additionally, as Anita has noted elsewhere in more detail (Chikkatur, 2022), the collaboration with community researchers of color was so important to her own sense of well-being and purpose as a woman of color in a predominantly White institution, and this work would have been impossible without Emily's commitments and contributions.

We want to emphasize that building this relationship across differences does not mean that we are always perfect allies or even that we are now always able to see beyond our perspectives. In fact, a recent conversation with a friend, who is a staff member at a different institution in a position similar to Emily's, made this point abundantly clear to Anita. The friend and Anita had both recently read Community as Rebellion, a book written by a Latinx studies professor about her experiences being denied tenure at Harvard (García Peña, 2022). When discussing this book, the friend pointed out that the faculty member did not mention much about the professional staff of color at Harvard; the absence of this perspective never even occurred to Anita as she was reading it! But what this interaction reiterated for Anita is the importance of building relationships across differences within and outside institutions so that we can have honest conversations and become aware of our limited perspectives.

Lessons Learned

In this final section, we want to explicate some of the lessons we learned in working together as well as in our ongoing reflections on this work during and after the official period of being co-PIs that we believe will be useful for other faculty and staff in higher education institutions wanting to collaborate on community-centered work.

Putting Aside Our Egos and Insecurities

Working with community researchers within a PAR framework meant that those of us from Carleton—regardless of our personal, social identities—needed to approach the work from a perspective that understood our limitations in this context. Although we did have tools and resources available to support the work of the community researchers, they were the experts in their local context. This acknowledgment of community expertise sometimes means literally stepping back and not taking up space within meetings with community partners, a move that can be particularly difficult for faculty or staff, who may not be as fully acknowledged or respected for their expertise and experiences in their campus contexts because of their race, gender, sexuality, or job status. For example, in a discussion of how critical race feminism can support a more transformative vision for community engagement, Verjee (2012) wrote, "The day-to-day reality for women of colour in the academy involves overcoming hurdles, constantly having to negotiate the institutional landscape, mediating confrontations, and fighting to survive a relentless onslaught of racialized microaggressions" (p. 59). Even as the two of us acknowledged and understood that we were not always accorded the respect or recognition we expected and that our institutional experiences often fed into our insecurities, we both believed in the necessity of setting aside our egos and institutional traumas to center community needs and expertise in our work on this project.

We need to be pretty secure in our identities and positionalities to perform this work. The principles of PAR let us create a new imaginative space with each other, despite the power dynamics, because we would lay bare these dynamics. The community research teams were a quicker study in how to accomplish this work because they had each other and the collective thinking of their group. It took us longer to subvert the expectations we had inherited from our institutional context. Witnessing the belief in the power of community among the parent and student researchers in Faribault led us to understand that we need to build community and solidarity between the two of us across institutional hierarchies.

Learning Together to Be Allies for Each Other Across Differences

The difference in structural power between Anita and Emily was made clear over and over in their dealings with institutional actors at Carleton College on behalf of the project. For example, Emily would ask several times about a matter with the administrative office processing the paychecks for community researchers and get noncommittal answers. When Anita intervened, because of her faculty role, there was often at least the appearance of urgency through the arrangement of meetings with departmental leaders and so forth. Staff across the institution were aware that if they were not seen as responsive to faculty requests, they could face negative consequences or reprimand.

However, as she became more versed in the PAR frameworks of the project, Emily uncovered another type of power that involved invoking interstaff solidarity. Sometimes, Emily was able to get actual traction on a project task by first acknowledging shared conditions. She would start by saying something like, "From my work in the CCCE, I know how hard it is to manage complex requests from faculty that are outside your typical job description and how totally understaffed all our offices are in general." Although this move positioned Anita as yet another faculty person making a difficult request without appreciating the constraints on office workers, Emily could sometimes successfully navigate the interpersonal, institutional space of Carleton using this tactic. This tactic had practical utility but also helped Emily bring back a small fragment of the ethos of PAR to their hierarchical work context. In the same way, as Emily reflected earlier, that it was initially hard to shake off the power dynamics of faculty and staff even in the community research space, as the project progressed, the inverse was also true. As Anita and Emily's relationship became more authentic and open and rooted in mutual comradeship, it illuminated what was possible interpersonally between colleagues, despite institutional norms. This realization bled into Emily's relationships with other faculty at the college and allowed her to approach her position with less apprehension. This change continued to be fostered by the ongoing dialogue and conversation about both the project and the power dynamics at Carleton. Emily experienced the space we made for her reflections and realities as an impactful act of solidarity by Anita. It was an example of taking PAR ethos to heart to embody holistic project leadership, even though it took time and energy.

We want to end here because this point is an especially important reflection for those with structural power in higher education engaging in community-based work, including PAR projects, and especially when such work involves deep collaboration between faculty and staff. The two of us certainly did not figure it all out, and we did not do everything perfectly. We did try our best together to make a bit more space in our work with each other to accommodate the messiness and unpredictability of community-based work, especially when approached from a PAR perspective, by trying to pay attention to power and to build relationships from a position of solidarity. Making space for all parties involved in a project to reflect on their work experience and relational power is fundamental to honoring the ethics and ethos of PAR, one that institutions of higher education, funders, and tenured faculty must take seriously in the kinds of structures we create for equitable, reciprocal university–community partnerships.

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Challenges and Opportunities in University Collaborations With Public and Private Sectors

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Abstract

Drawing on the author's experiences in public and private sector needs assessment; university, government, and industry partnerships; and resourcing such partnerships, this article highlights some of the challenges and opportunities facing university-based boundary units and faculty operating in the domains of public policy, business strategy, and economic development. It compares the characteristics and behavior of universities to those of the private and public sectors; presents seven case studies to highlight useful processes and outcomes; and summarizes key lessons that may help guide activities beyond the traditional walls of higher education in building mutually beneficial partnerships. The article concludes with recommendations in such areas as leadership, reward strategies, team building, funding, value creation, communication, and enterprise sustainability.

Keywords: public-private partnerships (PPPs), university collaborations, private sector, public policy, economic development

Universities continue to explore options for more direct contributions to society through strategic collaborations that leverage faculty expertise and broader institutional capacities (Lundy & Ladd, 2020; Tumuti et al., 2013). Many universities prioritize such collaborations (Frølund et al., 2018; Parson, 2013), as potential benefits include additional streams of external funding, enhanced opportunities for professors and graduate students to work on groundbreaking research, vital inputs to keep teaching and learning on the cutting edge, delivering real solutions to global challenges, enhancing public perception that universities are relevant, and justifying public expenditures on universities (Edmondson et al., 2012; Gavazzi & Gee, 2018; Jessani et al., 2020). With the growing competition for students and downward pressures on student enrollment, these collaborations can be a selling point in recruiting students. Similarly, these collaborations can help build public confidence in universities (Gavazzi & Gee, 2018). More specific benefits to faculty may include improved academic, managerial, and leadership skills; sense of community responsibility; and faculty self-confidence and communication skills (Suresan et al., 2019). Furthermore, society often sees universities as ideal providers of knowledge, guidance, technologies, patents, analysis, and ideas that can make a difference in achieving their policy or business objectives (Tumuti et al., 2013).

However, collaborations are not always simple (Edmondson et al., 2012; Lundy & Ladd, 2020). As the cultures, values, processes, accountability principles, and reward systems of universities often differ from those of government and industry, there are potential stumbling blocks to mutually beneficial collaborations (Schoppe & Chylla, 2016). For example, effective collaborations require some degree of prior interaction, dialogue, needs assessment, and joint program development efforts, which are not always a priority for many faculty. Universities also have other compelling objectives (e.g., excellence in other mission areas) that need to be balanced against collaborative exploits (Shogo et al., 2022). Indeed, some stakeholders see the technical services of public universities as free public goods, especially policymakers, smaller firms, start-up firms, trade associations, industry groups, and others that may lack financial means to support engagement costs (Cuthill et al., 2014; Hazelkorn & Gibson, 2017; MacFarlane, 2019; Marginson, 2011; Nixon, 2020). Finally, faculty members may not always understand the underlying motivations and interests of university administrators in collaboration, as these are not always well expressed (Wuttaphan, 2020).

Henry Etzkowitz popularized the triple helix model of collaboration, which theoretically highlights the systematic economic and social benefits that could emerge from synergies between universities, governments, and the private sector (Etzkowitz, 1999; Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1997). He assumed three silos, the interaction between which can better foster innovation and economic development. More recent practice-related literature on collaborations has identified university and faculty motivations, as well as obstacles and opportunities. However, often missing in the literature are illustrative examples that highlight engaged partners, processes leading to collaboration, potential landmines, and beneficial outcomes. It is important for scholars, universities, and their partners to better understand the context and etiology of actual partnerships. As successful collaborations require the engagement of the public in well-informed ways, deeper clarification of the institutional differences between universities and their partners is important.

Drawing on the author's unique experiences in leading university partnerships, the objective of this article is to fill some of the knowledge gaps in how scholars may engage in public-private partnerships (PPPs), particularly in areas such as public policy, business strategy, and industry development. The next section identifies and compares key characteristics of governments, industry, and universities that may constrain or enhance meaningful PPPs. The article then presents seven case studies from one university to highlight beneficial processes, valuable outcomes and impacts, and key lessons learned to guide academics desiring to venture beyond the traditional walls of higher education and explore PPPs. These case studies offer the basis for recommendations in areas such as leadership, team building, collaboration incentives, resource mobilization, value creation, communication, and enterprise sustainability. Conclusions and recommendations follow.

Characteristics of Governments, Industry, and Universities

The nonacademic world involves cultures and values that may differ from those of academics (Borrell-Damian et al., 2014). Hence, this section highlights some of these differences.

Government (Public Sector)

A key role of government is to manage the delivery of public goods and services to citizens and businesses (see Anomaly, 2015, among others). Unlike private goods and services, public goods and services are not subject to individual ownership or exclusion principles (Drahos, 2004). Typical goods and services that governments deliver include public safety and security, economic stability, political stability, economic progress, and effective policies and programs that promote equity and accountability. Government officials seek to retain their political influence, which, in a democracy, accrues through votes. Resource allocation to public goods and services is decided by representatives elected through an electoral process (votes), which requires free and fair elections (Lindberg, 2004). Given the trust inherent in this arrangement, governments have a duty to ensure public accountability and transparency (Shkabatur, 2013). Ideally, access to public goods and services should reflect the collective will of citizens (Friehe & Baumann, 2021; Gruber, 2010). In a democracy, when this arrangement is not working, the voting process acts as prices do in the product market to facilitate a switch from a nonperforming government or politician to more promising ones. Votes are the primary signaling factor for public goods and services (Besley & Ghatak, 2003), and tax revenues serve as the key financing mechanism (Huber et al., 2011). Success comes when quality performance and delivery reach the largest number of voting citizens.

For a university-government relationship to work, it should make political, economic, efficiency, and effectiveness sense to the government and optimize public interest. The mantra of government is "citizen sovereignty." The operating principles of governments include equity, justice, and fairness. A government tends to demand information that is relevant to its choices or helps to justify its action. Change is typically slow in government (Schoppe & Chylla, 2016) but can be fast in times of political or economic problems. The processes of governments can be just as rigid as those of universities.

Industry (Private Sector)

The primary role of the private sector is to provide private goods and services to society. Typical private goods and services include food, consumer products, shelter, information, technology services, banking, private education, infrastructure, defense, security, and transportation, with the last three often procured by government (Gruber, 2010). Private goods are divisible, can be owned and enjoyed individually or by groups (Gruber, 2010), are sold in physical and nonphysical markets, and must meet the needs of target groups of consumers to be acceptable and appropriately priced. Quality also matters to the private sector. Whereas votes guide the allocative process in the political arena, in the free-market system, prices send signals to producers about consumer needs or preferences and optimal production and input use. The market system relies on free enterprise and competition. When widely seen as unnecessary and inappropriate, government interventions may be undesirable to the private sector. The private sector tends to value efficiency and productivity, the lack of which implies a risky businesses environment that discourages private sector investments.

In the absence of competitive behavior (e.g., with monopoly or oligopoly power), governments regulate industry behavior, pricing, and product quality. As citizens make their choices, the market's invisible hands operate. Buyers switch from a substandard product to others, driving down the price of the former. The private sector is primarily driven by profits (Holcombe, 1999), but efficiency, productivity, self-interest, lowest possible cost, and consumer acceptance also drive business choices. A key requirement of the private sector in a successful university partnership is that faculty are relevant, competent, efficient, and focused (Borrell-Damian et al., 2014; Schoppe & Chylla, 2016). The private sector's behavior and processes are also well defined. The primary signal comes from prices, which optimize product and input market allocations. Regulators help guide markets, but the market mechanism is typically self-adjusting (invisible hand), guided by principles of efficiency and profits. Change is typically faster in the private sector than in the government and in universities (Schoppe & Chylla, 2016).

"Real world" problems are complex and multifaceted. Therefore, single-discipline research approaches are often not capable of defining or addressing such problems. These problems cannot be fully viewed under a narrow disciplinary lens, as resulting research will provide only snippets of a solution, thereby imposing burdens on stakeholders to synthesize and build linkages among sometimes disparate disciplinary perspectives and research outputs. That is, for businesses to obtain relevant information, real-world problems are better addressed through interdisciplinary insights, not the highly discipline-oriented information typically available from academics. Industry values teamwork, customer relations, professional integrity, trust, and individual recognition (Edmondson et al., 2012).

Universities (Knowledge Sector)

A key role of the university in society is to manage the delivery of knowledge products and services, including undergraduate and graduate education, science and research, and technologies and innovations (Borrell-Damian et al., 2014; Tumuti et al., 2013). Consequently, the products of universities are private and public goods that are often inputs into the private and public sector delivery and performance processes. Universities act like the private sector by providing private goods and services (through prices), students (through tuition), and discovery (through gifts, contracts, and grants), but because innovation and education are high-level objectives of government, universities are also government-like. Governments have created some incentives, processes, and formal structures to tease out relevant products from universities. For example, they fund universities through appropriations (systematic relationship) and grants (transactional relationship). To the private sector, the university is a source of trained personnel (former fee-paying students) and discovery (contracts and grants).

In essence, universities are self-governing private enterprises that are rewarded through tuition, fees, grants, gifts, contracts, intellectual property revenue, and so on (Fuller, 2014; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2012). Universities have evolved internal management standards and processes that match their clientele, products, and interests. Professors are evaluated through teaching evaluations, peer-reviewed publications (for research and contributions to knowledge), and grants and contracts (for research and scientific contributions to government, industry, and society). That universities increasingly view external grants as components of scholarship may imply that they increasingly see contributions to government and industry as on par with traditional scholarship. By and large, good universities are chosen by students and granting agencies based on academic rankings and faculty expertise, which act like product prices in industry or votes in government. However, appropriations and grants to universities to produce public goods may convolute the signaling mechanism or incentive structure since the reward system is still largely based on teaching evaluations and peer-reviewed publications. A public university delivers a complex range of products, including outstanding undergraduate, graduate, and professional education (to society); research, innovation, and technology (to industry); and policy insights (to government). This complexity warrants careful evaluation by scholars considering boundary work. Henceforth in this article, the term "boundary" is used to describe research and engagement activities at the nexus between universities and the public or private sector.

Key Gaps, Challenges, Opportunities, and Boundary Considerations

Table 1 summarizes the critical differences and potential conflicts discussed above. For example, whereas universities may value freedom of expression and excellent scholarship, government and industry tend to value political and market effectiveness.

Table 1. Appraisal of Scales Measuring Outcomes, Benefits, and Management in Service-Learning

	Characteristic	University	Government (policy)	Industry (market)
1	Vision	Intellectual success	Political success	Profitability success
2	Mission	Knowledge, ranking	Policy, votes	Market, profit
3	Product, coproduct	Students (public/ private), knowledge	Public goods and services	Private goods and services
4	Process/roles	Knowledge/intellectual	Democratic/political	Exchange/market
5	Recognition	Academic excellence	Performance	Profit
6	Value system	Scientific, scholarship	Political	Economic
7	Interest	Public, private	Public	Self
8	Framework	Self-governance	Visible hand	Invisible hand
9	Sovereignty	Faculty sovereignty	Citizen sovereignty	Consumer sovereignty
10	Reward	Tenure, grades	Power	Profit
11	Guiding principles	Peer review	Equity, justice, & fairness	Efficiency, productivity, & growth
12	Exchange process	Slow	Slow to fast	Fast
13	Timeframe	Immediate & forward-thinking (Discipline)	Immediate & forward-thinking (Policy)	Immediate & forward-thinking (Market)
14	Information	Highly informed on specific topic areas	Adequately informed on relevant topics	Highly informed on relevant markets
15	Research & knowledge	Discipline, students	Constituents, policy	Consumers, market
16	Financing or funding	Public—appropriations & grants Market—tuitions & gifts	Public—taxes, fees, & fines	Markets—sales & profit

Another key difference is the nature of the organization (disciplinary vs. service units). Other areas of difference include information needs, success factors, processes, funding, operating frameworks, and reward system.

Academics cannot afford to gloss over the key issues that emerge from these differences. First, industry and government may prefer to receive comprehensive solutions, but academia is organized around specific disciplines. Societal problems do not always come in neat disciplinary packages, which is how universities often provide information. The government prefers information that is relevant to policy, whereas the private sector is generally inclined toward being well informed on relevant markets, products, and services. Academics may find it difficult to generate integrated information from multiple disciplines without interdisciplinary efforts to integrate disciplinary information (Borrell-Damian et al., 2014). This mismatch could be frustrating for all (academics, industry, and government). Although the public and private sectors may appreciate subject matter expertise and intellectualism, they may also have difficulty understanding universities' inability to provide relevant information fast.

Second, universities seem much slower than government or industry (Edmondson et al., 2012; Schoppe & Chylla, 2016). Demanding quick solutions to their problems, stakeholders may not appreciate the more rigid guidelines and bottlenecks in universities. Third, although the typical academic approach (ivory tower reputation) can call for respect as a cultural norm, it may cause discomfort in other sectors. Industry and government officials may expect universities to change their normal modes of action but may see little need to adjust their own behavior. Fourth, government and industry may have limited appreciation of how universities operate. For example, the reward systems of universities are often viewed as internal processes defined by academics, but public and private sector officials do not understand the workings of these systems. Fifth, although universities tend to be forward-thinking in their disciplines, government and industry often have shorter planning horizons, depending on the policy or market issue in question. Reconciling these differences can be difficult. Sixth, although citizen and consumer sovereignty are concepts that governments and industry easily understand, faculty sovereignty may be viewed skeptically, especially since it may connote self-serving behavior and an uncommon sovereignty principle. These concerns, however, should not necessarily be obstacles to collaboration if the university is well structured and deliberate about its boundary activities.

Case Studies

Seven case studies from Rutgers University (RU) in New Jersey (NJ) are chronologically presented to highlight opportunities and challenges faced in establishing university collaborations. For each, the initiative and the motivating problems and needs are defined, followed by early strategies to co-create the initiative, stakeholders and beneficiaries, processes utilized, and the established entity involved. The goals, structure, involved departments, external partners, funding sources, governance structure, and leveraged resources are also discussed, followed by key challenges, influencers, and success factors. Each case study ends with a discussion of outputs and products (academic and public/private), impacts, key sustainability elements, and key lessons learned.

Agricultural Policy Research Group

The Agricultural Policy Research Group (APRG) emerged from persistent rumblings in NJ by stakeholders who complained that RU's Cook College (later College of Agriculture and Natural Resources), which housed the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station, including Rutgers Cooperative Research and Rutgers Cooperative Extension, was not performing effectively regarding public policy research and outreach to support the development of agriculture, natural resources, and the food industry. The viability of agriculture had been threatened by droughts, unfavorable prices, and the stringent regulatory environment at the urban fringe. Unfortunately, the stakeholders tended to complain about problems and symptoms, rather than articulate specific policy-related needs. Also, there was limited opportunity for stakeholders to engage academics and articulate policy needs.

In response, the author conducted a survey of the expertise of relevant university researchers and approached the Cook College executive dean and the NJ secretary of agriculture to discuss possible synergies with the government and agriculture-related industries. In this interaction, key challenges and opportunities were identified. He then held faculty roundtables to translate these challenges into research and outreach opportunities. He implemented two multidisciplinary studies to further assess the agricultural, food, and rural economies; evaluate key challenges and opportunities; and recommend alternatives for consideration by the state. A brief internal grant proposal for $47,000, titled "Sub-sectoral Analysis of the Structure and Performance of New Jersey Agriculture," was expeditiously funded to provide college and experiment station resources. The APRG was created to house the project.

Although the primary client for these products was the NJ Department of Agriculture (NJDA), the project caught the attention of the governor, the NJ Legislature, and the agricultural community, while making the university more relevant. The key units involved (the departments of Human Ecology and Agricultural, Food, and Resource Economics) partnered with administrators with policy interest and experience. The key output, a report titled New Jersey Agriculture: Strategies to Deal With Current Critical Problems, recommended that a "Future of Agriculture: Resources, Missions & Strategies" (FARMS) Commission be established to develop strategies for the future. The resulting commission was a joint venture between the college, the NJ State Board of Agriculture, and the NJDA. The process itself yielded a strategic planning grant, "Research to Support Agricultural Planning and Consensus Building for the Economic Viability and Sustainability of New Jersey Agriculture," the results of which recommended the adoption of an Agricultural Economic Recovery and Development Initiative (AERDI) to revitalize NJ's agricultural and rural economies.

The executive dean deployed an associate dean to assist in coordinating the efforts of the study team, sending a clear signal that this initiative was a high priority. Involved directors of the NJDA met regularly with the university team, which realized early that the initiative should be the start of a more structured university-led partnership, with the public sector involved only in an advisory capacity. The governance structure was simple: As APRG director, the author managed the research and outreach processes while the senior administrator managed the accountability and deliverable process. Invested funds were used to leverage university support via a 20/80 university/government match. To ensure quality but relevant research, the project was designed to allow involved faculty to see strong avenues for publishable work. Project outcomes included over 15 scholarly articles, six research reports, and several presentations to farm and food sector audiences, the state legislature, the State Agricultural Development Committee, and the governor's office. Governor Christine Todd Whitman took personal interest, as the project showed how the university could strengthen state-level policy development.

An outcome of this project was AERDI, through which the NJ Legislature appropriated over $40 million to jump-start the agricultural economy. Recognizing the need for further policy research to guide public decision making about the state's future, over $2 million of the total appropriated funds were slated for continued policy research at the university. In summary, the primary impact was policy change. The primary products were a series of academic journal articles and policy reports addressing areas that the usual academic process would not have covered in the past. The sustainability aspect involved creating the next enterprise, which provided funding for expanded research. A final benefit was the establishment of a multidisciplinary research team that could work in an integrated way to take on other projects.

Key lessons from the APRG experience include the following:

1. Universities should probably pay more attention to issues that are critical to policymakers and industry and seek the concurrence of internal and external leadership on needed work.

2. Key to effective programming is successful translation of stakeholder needs into actionable needs, researchable problems, strategic projects, and specific policy deliverables.

3. University-based policy research units may be easier to establish when the following exist: clear problems, strong needs, organizing leaders, few or no alternatives to the contribution of a university, and the availability of external funders.

4. When these conditions exist, universities are well served to create fertile ground for collaborative and interdisciplinary

research by empowering motivated and capable academics as project leaders.

5. Nonfaculty research staff are critical to the completion of complex public policy projects.
6. To reduce uncertainty and future disappointments, a clear exit strategy is needed from the outset.
7. The potential impact of well-executed boundary activities on the university's reputation as a doer can be immense, if an established policy research unit is well groomed and managed.

Rutgers Ecopolicy Center

Rutgers Ecopolicy Center (Ecopolicy) emerged naturally from the APRG, as it provided policy options on pressing challenges in the agrifood sector and worked with the FARMS Commission to design programs to jump-start the agricultural and rural economies through AERDI. AERDI included the Production of Efficiency Grants, Program Incentive Grants, NJ Farm Training Management Program, and NJ Farm Computerization Program, which needed faculty teams to conduct training, perform program monitoring and evaluation, and explore further ideas for repositioning the rural economy and address agricultural, food industry, and environmental issues. AERDI also funded research to uncover new policy innovations.

Timing can be everything. Before the Ecopolicy Center emerged, an energetic, visionary, entrepreneurial, and innovative new dean/director of research had joined Cook College administration. He understood the work of every faculty, saw the connections between research and industry/government successes, and between the silos within which various disciplines worked, and he understood that faculty, regardless of their status, field, or interest, could be encouraged and empowered to be bold and passionate about their work. He asked the author to develop a concept to boost the inclusion of the social sciences through a new multidisciplinary center and serve as director. The concept of Ecopolicy was developed, with the term "Eco" connoting economy, ecology, ecosystems, and other concepts related to the word "eco."

Working with NJ's secretary of agriculture, his division directors, and prominent stakeholders, the new dean coordinated the identification of several multidisciplinary projects to be addressed by faculty teams. Ecopolicy served as an organizing, coordinating, and empowering unit to promote and support interdisciplinary teams working on these studies. New studies emerged: (a) A Legal and Institutional Review of the "Right to Farm" Act; (b) Economics of the Farmland Assessment Program; (c) Analysis of the Effects of Jersey Fresh Promotion Program Spendings on Revenues and Profits From Fruits and Vegetables; (d) Effectiveness of NJ's Farmland Preservation Program; (e) Analysis of Alternative Income Opportunities for Farmers; (f) Status and Conditions of the Food Manufacturing, Wholesale, Retail and Service Industries; (g) Shellfish and Finfish Industries and Policy Innovation to Spur Economic Development; (h) Technical Assistance to the NJDA in Economic Analysis; and (i) Capacity Building in the NJDA in these areas. The goal was for research to undergird new policy instruments to shape the future of the state's agricultural, food, fisheries, and natural resource industries. Stakeholders had now been expanded to include the presidents of key companies in food manufacturing, wholesale, retail, and service; key commodity groups; the NJ Farm Bureau (NJFB); the State Agricultural Development Committee; and others.

No new funds were needed, as approximately \$2 million was available through AERDI. The university turned an old carriage house into Ecopolicy offices. Grant funds supported faculty summer salaries, the recruitment of supporting research fellows, and the salary of a new administrative director who complemented the author's work as research director. Ecopolicy maintained a schedule of regular policy briefings to policymakers and came to be relied on as a go-to place for innovative ideas about future public policies in the green sector of the state.

As the research director, the author oversaw other faculty who managed specific projects while directly managing those in his areas of expertise. The dean deployed staff from his office to assist in managing the Ecopolicy Center. An oversight committee comprising key government officials; policy experts; and executives from the agricultural, food, environmental, natural resources, and fisheries sectors was then assembled. An internal research advisory committee ensured the application of rigorous science. To reduce transaction costs for faculty and support the missions of academic departments without building a hard-walled center, critical investments were made in nonfaculty staff to support communications, public relations, writing, report and journal article editing, team building, and competitive grant regeneration. Like the APRG, Ecopolicy was designed to be nonpermanent, to exist until it solved the problems it was designed for.

Ecopolicy essentially leveraged a $2 million grant into a collaboratory that delivered much-needed policy reports while creating a fertile ground for a funded data-gathering, integration, management, and analysis hub where faculty could easily set up a workspace to generate academic outputs. Many faculty leveraged Ecopolicy to conduct basic research, as they enjoyed the slate of technical support from Ecopolicy. Over 25 refereed journal articles and 20 reports emerged from Ecopolicy within 3 years. With these, the foundation was already established for the Food Industry Partnership (FIP), which in turn laid the foundation for a more permanent Food Policy Institute. Transferring this capacity to departments to aid their potential for collaboration had been the plan all along, so the end of Ecopolicy came when its projects were completed. By then, Ecopolicy had become knowledgeable concerning the food industry and fisheries industry, as well as in environmental, land use, and growth management, and the university's credibility in these areas was already well-established.

Key lessons from the Ecopolicy Center include the following:

1. Critical functions of interdisciplinary policy centers include coordinating, organizing, and empowering faculty.
2. Space, administrative support, and visionary leadership are critical to the success of boundary research programs, especially when the funding potential is large.
3. Universities need not build formal hard-walled centers to respond to emerging opportunities. They can build programs around the efforts of strong and entrepreneurial faculty. Hence, successful academic entrepreneurs should not be starved of university resources, as such resources can generate excellent returns on investment.
4. Because successful engagements provide learning opportunities for all partners, a successful PPP is a good leverage point for future projects.
5. University talents can be leveraged without compromising academic rigor.
6. Universities should not put their scholarly mission in the background but should also not lose sight of the relevant and valuable outputs that can come from engaged scholars.
7. The problems of the world do not come in neat disciplinary packages. Therefore, efforts are needed in universities to translate disciplinary efforts into societal impacts.

The next two case studies involve private sector partnerships in the field of nutraceuticals.

MenuDirect

In 1997, the MenuDirect Corporation was formed by several food industry executives to develop medical foods for patients with metabolic disorders such as celiac sprue, dysphagia, phenylketonuria (PKU), irritable bowel disease, urea cycle disorder, and maple syrup urine disorder. The science behind medical foods was sound, but research to support market development was limited. Absent significant marketing, most medical food sales were direct to consumer. Medical food costs were high for these communities, but some qualified for medical insurance reimbursement, depending on their state. State adoption of medical food insurance reimbursement policy that put these products on the drug reimbursement list was a game changer in market development. Potential moral hazards associated with university involvement in solving this problem were mitigated by Food and Drug Administration (FDA) support for state legislative adoption, but few states had such legislation.

Faculty saw the research opportunities at the boundaries between agriculture, food, and nutrition, but the broader area of health and wellness seemed fuzzy. Led by Cook College, Rutgers therefore advanced its research presence in nutraceuticals, functional foods, and botanicals/medicinals. Seeing the gap in the areas of policy, marketing, and business development, the author approached the MenuDirect Corporation to jointly fashion a special research course that would allow undergraduate students to build their knowledge base for business and market development in this new and obscure area of the food industry. Future employment opportunities in this emerging area, along with U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and FDA research funding, were key motivations.

The author developed a semester-long course involving 15 students, to develop intelligence needed for companies like MenuDirect. Guided by the author, students researched medical foods reimbursement legislation across all 50 U.S. states, gathered data on the legislative adoption process and on state characteristics, researched the demand for medical foods and the population of the afflicted community, conducted price sensitivity and affordability analysis, and made several presentations to MenuDirect executives and other companies. MenuDirect executives participated as instructors. A unique win-win opportunity existed to train students in market development while benefiting a company that agreed to a public release of the final research product. Course participants met weekly, with assignments meted out at the end of each week so students could conduct necessary research in preparation for the next week. In one semester, the students gained skills in market research and developing business reports and presentations. Participating students reported that the project opened their eyes and improved their job opportunities. One student continued on in graduate school and used the data obtained from this project to develop a thesis on the roles of causal factors in the endogenous adoption of medical foods legislation. The resulting report showed the efficiency of investing in public education and promoting legislative adoption. Some lawmakers later reported that the project alerted them to the needs of the afflicted community. One of the few existing scholarly publications to date on legislative adoption of insurance reimbursement laws in the United States came out of this project.

Key lessons from this win-win project include the following:

1. Special research partnership courses involving the private sector can be good foundations for new research. These courses can bring industry knowledge into the university learning environment and improve students' job market preparedness.
2. Entrepreneurial faculty should be encouraged to explore private sector needs if doing so complements teaching and scholarship and can lead to future win-win opportunities.
3. Collaborations do not have to involve direct monies or grants, as other benefits may be foundational to future grants.

Jersey Blues

The MenuDirect partnership led to other integrated research-teaching partnerships with Parmalat Inc. (innovative ways to market milk products), Welsh Farms Inc. (home food delivery business opportunities), the food industry (forecast the future of the food market), university administrators (alternative funding mechanisms for university research and extension), and farmers (Jersey Blues blueberry market development project). The latter provided a great opportunity for students and faculty to work on an integrative project where previous knowledge did not exist.

The Jersey Blues partnership was sparked by the product glut in the blueberry market in 1997 and 1998 and the resulting decline in blueberry prices. NJ was one of a few states growing blueberries. RU had become highly successful in delivering research and technology to expand crop yields, durability, disease resistance, and variety, all of which resulted in a more rapidly growing supply of blueberries vis-à-vis demand. NJ's blueberry growers also had strong monopoly-like power through the structure they used to market their products. With falling prices, the president of the North Atlantic Blueberry Association turned to the author with the question "What do we do, as growers are hurting?" It was difficult to convince growers who historically swore by yield-expanding research that excessive yield growth was their problem.

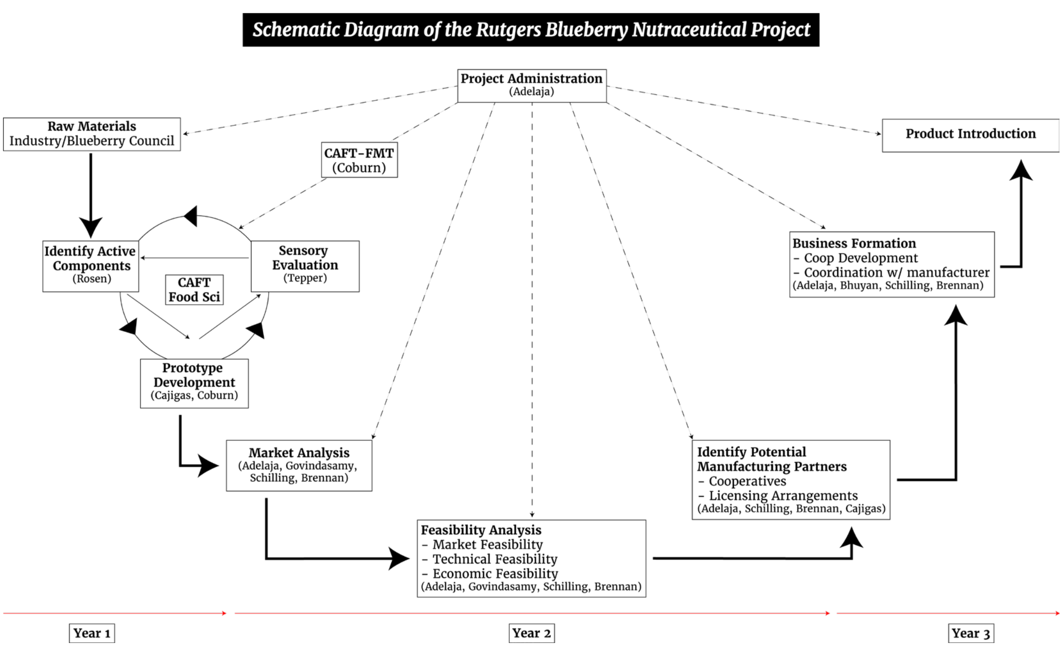
Convinced that the problem was a supply-demand mismatch, the author concluded that research to expand demand was needed, including (a) understanding the nutritional and health prospects of blueberries (nutraceuticals value) through research, and translating research into new products (e.g., albino berries to be marketed as blond-berries); (b) developing new products based on expertise from departments such as Food Science; Nutritional Science; Agricultural, Food, and Resource Economics; the Food Manufacturing Technology (FMT) Facility; Extension specialists and Extension agents; (c) developing market channels and strategies for the new products; (d) engaging the industry in transferring capabilities developed; (e) protecting developed intellectual property and business practices and licensing them to the industry; and (f) leveraging university resources against government and industry grants to deliver the proposed project.

The author assembled a team to develop grant proposals for a variety of potential funders. As a result, the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service provided two tranches of funding through its Food Systems Marketing Innovation Program ($50,000 and $55,000), the USDA Rural Business-Cooperative Service provided $95,000, NJ Pinelands Commission provided $30,000, NJ Blueberry Council provided $5,000, and NJ Farm Bureau provided $6,000; further, the research dean and the broader university provided $30,000, for a total of $271,000.

Four research tracks were developed, with the author serving as coordinator and lead: product development (Team A); sensory evaluation (Team B); packaging, manufacturing, and process development (Team C); and branding, marketing, business development, and spinoff (Team D). Team A developed several products in partnership with Team B (blueberry iced tea, juice, and pomace [jam]). Team B involved hundreds of consumers in sensory evaluation and provided consumer preference information on Likert scales (for taste, smoothness, sweetness, flavor, etc.). Team C developed packaging and manufacturing processes for the products, including installing a nutraceutical bottling component to the existing bottling assembly line at the FMT Facility. Team D focused on branding, marketing, and getting the products on supermarket shelves, farm stands, and farmer's markets across the state (see Figure 1 for the structure of the Blueberry Nutraceutical initiative). Blueberry Health Inc. was founded, with the ownership held by the university, associated departments, blueberry growers, and specific investors. A marketing company was hired to manage Blueberry Health Inc. since farmers were not ready to manage this complex entity and the university was still learning how to treat such boundary enterprises.

The benefits of this collaboration are as follows. The university developed a product that helped advance the economic opportunities facing an industry group (i.e., blueberry growers and their processing and marketing cooperative). The industry group received a new product, with patents to protect the technology (i.e., extraction

Figure 1. Rutgers Blueberry Research and Marketing Initiative



technique for protecting nutraceutical properties while processing blueberries). Grant funds were generated to support research and the expansion of sensory evaluation and food processing facilities. Students gained firsthand experiences and were paid for creating and nurturing a start-up company. Faculty from basic science departments were engaged in branding, marketing, and product promotion, which broadened their horizons. Pathbreaking publications were generated in a newly emerging area. The university built new expertise in nutraceutical product development to supplement ongoing scientific work. The endeavor was eventually expanded with new hires in nonthermal processing, natural products chemistry, and nutraceutical market development, boosting the university's reputation as a problem solver.

Key lessons from the Jersey Blues project include the following:

1. The more complex a problem is, the more critical it is to build a multidisciplinary team to address it, especially when funding is available.
2. When the need arises and opportunities exist, the university may need to designate and support a contact faculty person with the interest and ability to put a complex team together.
3. Projects that jointly identify and are responsive to industry needs are more likely to attract industry funding.
4. A structure of subgroups is important to implement complex multidisciplinary projects.
5. Small or start-up companies do not often have one-stop-shopping go-to places to access university expertise. Universities interested in economic development may consider providing such access points or promoting the work of faculty who can.

NJ Food Industry Partnership

The transition between the APRG and Ecopolicy, especially the funding from the NJDA, helped create strong working relationships between the university and the food industry. With departments covering areas such as food packaging, manufacturing, marketing, distribution, and services, it was clear that the university could be a treasure trove of policy innovation and advisory services to government, but industry players and the university needed to be more organized. Working with the research reports from AERDI, which included four status and conditions reports on food manufacturing, wholesale, retail, and service (available at https://foodpolicy.rutgers.edu/research.php?id=2.), the stage was set for harmonizing the needs of these sectors so that they could speak with one voice, not work against each other.

In these status and conditions research projects, which involved focus groups of subsector leaders, practitioners, regulators, and academics, each subsector was asked to rank the challenges facing it. A subsequent report that compared these rankings revealed that the problems facing each subgroup were essentially the same, but the rankings were slightly different. The author's efforts to harmonize industry thinking resulted in the NJ Food Industry Summit, where over 400 industry and government experts met to review the rankings; agree on harmonizing priorities; and brainstorm on what the industry, government, and the university could jointly do to advance their mutual interests. Industry had money, government had regulatory and policymaking capacity, and the university had strong research ability. So, there was agreement that a system which synergized university research around priority policy topics in industry development, state environmental integrity, sustainability, partnership, university advancement, and protection of its commitment to excellence would have a strong chance to attract funding and support from formerly disparate partners to develop a new learning organization. That was the foundation for the Food Policy Institute (FPI).

The NJ Food Industry Partnership and Summit had already created a consortium. To make it more impactful and broadly accepted, it was agreed to expand the concept to the entire U.S. Northeast region. As leader of the initiative, the author challenged the university to commit to funding the FPI if funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation could be secured to create a Mid-Atlantic Regional Institute devoted to food sector policy development. The university committed $892,000, which included release time for the author, support for an administrative assistant, space, and furniture acquisition. The NJDA committed $66,000 for foundational studies. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation Food System Professional Education

Initiative provided $10,000 for planning and later $432,000 for early-stage implementation. Several food companies provided seed funding, including Parmalat, Welsh Farms, and Ocean Spray, as well as the NJ Food Council, the NJ Restaurants Association, and Pathmark. The consortium found a recently built but abandoned building owned by a bankrupt company at the boundary of the university and negotiated to acquire it to serve as the home of this new consortium and other university units.

Key lessons learned from the NJ Food Industry Partnership include the following:

1. The university can be a powerful force in catalyzing a consortium of interested stakeholders by focusing their efforts through research to harmonize their interests.
2. Private sector entities are more likely to invest in university-led partnerships when deliverables and benefits are clearly articulated and the added value is evident.
3. Building a permanent institute or center at the nexus between the university, government, and industry requires foundational, strategic, and catalyzing research and outreach.
4. Industry and government can buy into the university's commitment to excellence and be made interested in promoting scholarship.
5. Partners do not always talk to each other. But when the university can serve as the catalyst for dialogue, it can earn respect, support, and even external funding.
6. By harmonizing government and industry interests, universities can leverage major grants to support institution building.

Food Policy Institute

The FPI was uniquely designed to be "all things to all people": a place where (a) academics from multiple units can dock, liaise with industry leaders, and access support for research and grants; (b) students can be engaged in policy, market, and industry research; gain valuable experience; and meet prospective employers; (c) meaningful indirect costs can be generated for the university and associated colleges; (d) faculty from other institutions can collaborate to design and implement funded projects; (e) industry and government leaders can meet, dialogue, and engage with academics; (f) pathbreaking basic research can be conducted on emerging issues in food policy and market development; (g) faculty can be recognized for their boundary activities; and (h) the multiple missions of the university do not necessarily conflict. A "business plan" was developed to achieve these varied objectives, with clear revenue, product, and impact projections. This bold approach, though unusual, excited many stakeholders.

Critical features incorporated into FPI's design included (a) the author, as director, with an industry leader as associate director; (b) a representative advisory board comprised of relevant stakeholders; (c) a scientific advisory board to guide scientific rigor in projects; (d) associated and affiliated faculty and flexible offices for them to dock and get their work done; (e) visiting industry executive in residence and policymaker in residence positions supported by industry and government; (f) visiting scholar positions for faculty from other universities; (g) funding for graduate students and postdoctoral scholars; (h) a communications and marketing team; (i) a finance and administration unit; (j) technical support in grant writing and manuscript preparation; (k) support for report and presentation preparation; and (l) a telecommunication and information technology platform.

The consortium negotiated enhanced indirect cost return, which increased FPI's retention from incoming grant funds by 400%. The argument to the university was that the grant earnings from the FPI would not come anyway without the unique and powerful network it committed to building. To prove the concept, a $2.5 million grant proposal was submitted to the USDA's Initiative for the Future of Agriculture for a comprehensive project on the timely issue of consumer perceptions of biotechnology-derived foods. The FPI consortium and concept were so uniquely powerful that the proposal was able to convey the need for several activities that typical federal grant-providing agencies did not usually fund in research-type projects. The grant was approved. It funded the bells and whistles that the FPI needed, but also the science and analysis needed to help reposition the thinking of U.S. scholars and policymakers about how consumers viewed genetically modified products and in which areas market expansion will be easy. The grant supported a consumer survey that was foundational to many reports and journal articles. Some 50+ journal articles and reports emanated from this project, and the enhanced indirect cost return helped generate funding from other sources. A communications budget in the grant helped fund FPI's ambitious communication strategy. These actions set the stage for recruiting a leading scholar from Canada to lead the FPI, allowing the author to step down from the director position and focus on other things. The university would not have been able to attract this leading scholar if it had not developed a strong reputation in food policy research.

Key lessons from the FPI experiences are as follows:

1. It is possible and easy to build, out of synergies (not out of compromises), a boundary research unit to deliver impactful products across all the mission areas of the university.
2. University and industry/government interests should not always be seen as a tradeoff.
3. Boundary units that are flexible are more likely to attract external funding.
4. The teaching, research, and outreach missions of the university can be achieved in a win–win fashion through boundary institutes.
5. Special infrastructure is needed by boundary entities to deliver across their missions.

The Food Innovation Center

The Food Innovation Center (FIC) was a natural extension of the FPI and other prior initiatives. The FPI set the stage for a more technology-based university partnership with both farmers and the food industry that would address their technical and market needs beyond their policy interests. Key to the FIC's development were the disparate needs of farmers and the postharvest food industry. Through various state government and university outreach efforts, these partners (farmers and food industry) were already used to working together and trusting each other, rather than the traditional adversarial positions found in many states. Already, the university had demonstrated its leadership and could be trusted to solve more serious problems. The Jersey Blues initiative had already demonstrated the possible cross-departmental integration to achieve meaningful products for farmers and processors. The FPI had demonstrated that despite the disparate disciplinary foci of academic departments, they could be organized around real-life problems and solutions. Stakeholders had become bolder, not only in expectations of impacts, but also in what was possible if all worked together.

As a lesson from previous projects, we knew that to build a resilient PPP between the university and industry, significant problems or needs and strong solution designs need to exist, with the university seen as the prime solution provider. A tipping point that crystallized the FIC was the closure of several food processing plants in southern NJ, including Campbell Soup and Sechler Foods, brought about because the dynamics of food manufacturing and distribution had changed due to changing transportation and distribution economics, as well as the regulatory environment. New transportation economics favored more distant location of food processing plants from high-consumption urban areas, in this case the New York, NJ, and Philadelphia food shed.

The regulatory environment for farmers and processors had become stringent at the urban fringe. The resulting closure of key plants that had employed tens of thousands of employees and sustained NJ agriculture meant that farmers lost large shares of their markets, especially for fruits; vegetables; and cattle, calf, and dairy products. While farmers of agricultural ornamental and nonfood horticultural products thrived due to the growing demand for trees, shrubbery, flowers, and landscape plants at the urban fringe, traditional fruit and vegetable farmers were languishing. Much of the rural economy of South Jersey had therefore nearly collapsed, except for places very near Atlantic City. In Bridgeton and Vineland, as the economy dwindled, swaths of properties were abandoned, leading to depressed real estate values and local tax revenues. The solution the author proposed was to channel the economic, technical, and market development expertise of the university to build an enabling environment in South Jersey. This was the concept behind the Food Innovation Research & Extension (FIRE) Center, a unit of RU and the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station, which was later renamed the Food Innovation Center (FIC). Like the FPI, FIRE needed to serve the needs of faculty, university, farmers, food firms, and, in this case, community economic developers. The FIC was designed to be an incubator where entrepreneurial farmers, small-scale entrepreneurs, and small food companies could access product and process development, processing, market development, and entrepreneurial solutions of the university. Land was needed, as well as a building to house flexible manufacturing equipment, with offices, classrooms, and interactive technology connectivity to the main campus. Bringing the FIC to fruition required a partnership between the state (governor and legislature), the farm community (including farmers, leaders, and farm organizations), the food industry (processors, wholesalers, retailers, and restaurants), the economic development community, and the local community.

The cities of Bridgeton and Vineland were potential candidates for siting the facility. The choice of Bridgeton was essentially based on the mayor's reception to the idea. He basically said, "What do I need to do?" One of the author's mentors on this project was a local farmer, now the late Ray Blew. Although a very successful horticultural farmer who had nothing to gain from the proposed center, he embraced the idea and helped promote it to skeptics in the farm community, who believed that what farmers needed was more research on new plant varieties and were concerned that a new center would take resources away from ongoing programs.

The mayor of Bridgeton provided seed funds and a large tract of land to the FIC. Working together, the county community college was approached, and a partnership was negotiated whereby their faculty could work alongside RU experts in offering assistance to budding entrepreneurs. Farm and food industry leaders lobbied the state legislature and governor's office. The regional economic development community joined the initiative. This initiative was unique in that the vision was not just of university presence through a new generation research and extension station; it was a vision of regional economic transformation based on real needs and a comprehensive design. The university invested in a business plan for the facility since it needed to be operated sustainably. In the end, the FIC became a compelling joint vision of the university, farmers, state policymakers, the food industry, and economic developers.

A strategic and productive move made by the author was to convince a former Campbell Soup executive and later a food industry company founder and president to hand over his company to someone else and join the FIC initiative as director. One of the author's associates, someone with expertise in building initiatives, became the codirector. With support from the city and some stakeholders, stakes were put in the ground by renting a building in downtown Bridgeton. Used furniture gathered from various places on campus was deployed to furnish the building. Necessary equipment—telephones, projectors, printers, and more—came from excess and used properties of campus-based units. Food companies donated equipment too. The opening ceremony was well covered by the media as an occasion that demonstrated the university's commitment to economic development. Months after this opening, the NJ Legislature appropriated major funds to the development of the FIC. The Casino Development and Redevelopment Authority, which was convinced that the entrepreneurial activities of the center would serve their interests 50 miles away, also approved major funds to the FIC. This was how the funding crystallized to build what is now considered the foremost food industry incubator in the nation.

When a grant program was approved by the U.S. Congress to fund food innovation centers nationwide, the FIC took full advantage and applied for a grant. Later, the USDA Rural Development Agency selected the FIC as its partner of the year. Subsequently, the FIC's preeminent position was further solidified when it was named the "Incubator of the Year" by the National Business Incubation Association, which represents an estimated 7,000 business incubator programs worldwide. In 2013, the FIC earned the distinctive designation of a Soft Landings Food Business Incubator for nondomestic companies from the International Business Innovation Association.

Today, 25 years later, the 23,000-square-foot FIC is the model for food business incubation-based economic development. Entrepreneurs and farmers from distant states have looked to the FIC to assist them in developing financing, marketing, site selection, and process support for their businesses, in fields that include the emerging prepared foods and nutraceuticals industry (see http://foodinnovation.rutgers.edu/). As of last observation, the FIC had assisted over

2,000 companies from every county of New Jersey and companies in several surrounding states, as well as international businesses looking to establish facilities in the United States, by supporting them with customized business and technical mentoring and educational training programs. Through the FIC, the university gained a reputation and presence in South Jersey as a leader in economic development, as well as obtaining major funding support for its core mission and boundary missions. Faculty from fields including nutritional science, food science, and economics routinely work on market development projects. The FIC has also been involved in international projects to build similar capacities overseas.

Again, the FIC was managed by a former food industry executive who also had an eye for the importance of teaching and research. The board, like those of FPI and Ecopolicy, reflected joint and active leadership from the university, farm community, food community, and economic development community. But the FIC started with a bold vision of economic development, which leveraged the needs and aspirations of all stakeholders.

Some of the key lessons from the FIC experience are as follows:

1. Economic development is a natural point of expression for university expertise when technology is key to development, as universities will be better leaders in this space.
2. The collective voices of stakeholders can be leveraged in mobilizing new resources.
3. Prior planning prevents poor performance (5 Ps).
4. The key missions of the university can be realized in new ways when creativity is applied in extending such missions to communities.
5. The boundary environment is quite different from the ivory tower. However, the university can maintain its culture if it is tolerant of alternative views and carefully expresses its leadership role.

Suggested Principles of Collaboration

Key lessons, with implications for collaborations that apply to the space of public policy, economic development, and business strategy, are summarized in this section.

1. The benefits from university engagement include opportunities for (a) external funding that could be substantial; (b) professors and graduate students to work on groundbreaking research; (c) undergraduates to expand their horizons, interact with policymakers and private sector executives, and position themselves better for employment; (d) vital inputs to keep teaching and learning on the cutting edge of disciplines; (e) stronger contributions to society by universities; and (f) greater faculty visibility.
2. Because university culture is unique, scholars need to better understand how difficult it is for potential public and private sector partners to engage academics.
3. Universities should encourage collaboration, but institutionalized collaborations should be built around scholars who are interested in, have expertise in, and understand the space.
4. Universities should encourage listening to external stakeholders to discover their problems and needs in order to cocreate mutually beneficial solutions. It is vitally important to precede major collaborative activities with strong needs assessment and the translation of needs into programs that interest the faculty; indeed, universities need stronger infrastructure for hearing external stakeholders and assessing the needs that may underlie collaboration. When the needs are significant, the university is best served by building around key faculty who are proven leaders and can help design a strong program.
5. Strong internal capabilities assessments are recommended for universities so that administrators are better able to match university expertise with public and private sector needs. Accurate assessment of institutional capabilities can help minimize transaction costs, false leads, and the time and effort required to mount successful ventures with external partners.
6. Faculty are at their best when they do what they are good at and love. Asking them to pursue what they are not interested in (or good at) will probably not yield robust impacts. Faculty whose interests cannot accommodate strong external partnership should probably

limit their involvement but can participate alongside others with more relevant interests.

7. When significant opportunity for well-funded and better structured programs is clearly discernible, it is important for administrators to signal strong support for such collaborative efforts.

8. Preliminary grants are useful levers in facilitating team building, proof of concept studies, and the preparation of formidable research responses. Universities are encouraged to consider such grants as building blocks for more comprehensive programing.

9. The university should become formally engaged only when a boundary activity is important for and needed by government or industry. A clear funding source or revenue strategy should also be in place. Any activity that receives no remuneration can be considered as pure outreach, and should probably occur at the discretion of the faculty member, with little or no university support.

10. University support and contributions may be needed to signal university commitment to large programmatic collaborations that bring external funding.

11. Universities should encourage the formation of multidisciplinary teams to address important areas of policy research. The adoption of an enhanced indirect cost return structure will send a strong signal about university interest in collaborative engagements.

12. Nonfaculty research staff (or program associates) are essential interdisciplinary collaborators to address policy and industry problems. Universities need to streamline the process for engaging such staff and design appropriate frameworks for rewarding them.

13. Faculty involved in collaborative research should be encouraged to avoid areas where their fundamental responsibilities are compromised in favor of collaboration. Incorporating effort replacement funds in grants and contracts may enable faculty to do more with more.

14. Faculty should be encouraged to seek opportunities to leverage funded early-career research and outreach into future programs.

15. An exit strategy should probably be developed for every structured collaboration so that partners are clear about the conditions and processes for exit.

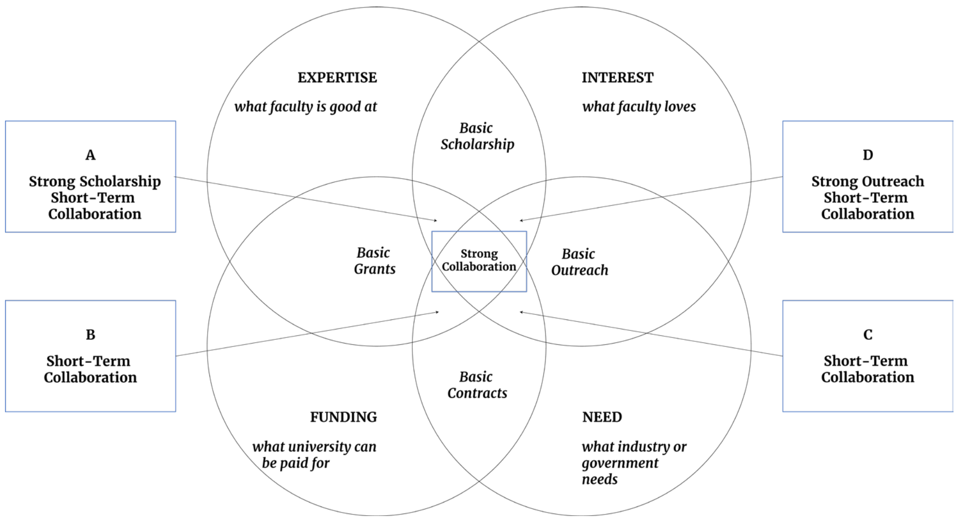
16. Universities can help motivate PPPs by reforming the promotion and tenure processes to be more flexible, providing seed funds and summer salary for pilot projects with strong promise, and encouraging stronger and more impactful classroom instruction.

17. In some cases, university processes are too rigid to allow the flexibilities that are needed for success in collaborative programs with public and private sector stakeholders. Each university is encouraged to establish a task force to review existing processes and recommend revised frameworks to support collaborative work.

Figure 2 provides a typology of possible areas of collaboration to highlight areas with particularly encouraging outlooks for structured long-term sustainable programs. The projects that engender the most collegial relationship with a university and are the most exciting for faculty involve areas faculty are good at (expertise) and love (interest). This space encourages strong scholarship, which is often a necessary condition for strong collaboration with industry or government. When funding exists from a funding agency, but industry or government stakeholders do not perceive a need (e.g., Segment A), short-term collaboration is recommended, which is what a typical large grant would fund. However, when little funding exists, but there is a strong need (e.g., Segment C), short-term service-oriented collaboration is warranted, which is what most traditional outreach and engagement programs do.

The opportunity sweet spot is the center of Figure 2, where expertise, interest, funding, and needs align (i.e., faculty know and love the work, and government and/or industry have an urgent need and are eager to fund the work). Long-term sustainable programs are best deployed when this space exists. The more indispensable the university is, the more it can garner sustainable funding. Operating in this space may require deep insights, prior feasibility analysis, partnership development activities, some rules bending, and accommodating of partners.

Figure 2. Opportunities for Cooperation and Collaboration



Long-term initiatives are built on this type of foundation, and this space warrants strong consideration of structured collaboration, infrastructure investment, and long-term partnerships. At this sweet spot, everybody benefits, and stakeholders understand the need to resource the university to deliver on a joint agenda. Special efforts are needed to nurture such relationships, as the university becomes a strong partner, not a driver.

Summary and Conclusions

The key takeaways from the author's various involvements are that, despite numerous associated challenges, university leadership should enable boundary agents, programs, and units that meet certain criteria to pursue collaborative boundary opportunities, for many reasons. First, if well executed, these opportunities can enhance the relevance and impact of the university while helping to facilitate the development of entrepreneurial culture in higher education. Second, boundary activities can help the university better devote available intellectual prowess toward society's pressing needs while helping attract new resources to the university. Third, boundary entities can leverage the expertise of government and the private sector to enhance university teaching and research programs by bringing real-world expertise into classrooms and laboratories. Fourth, for state-funded universities, boundary entities can help boost the evidence of university contributions to state economic and other development. Fifth, these entities can be effective platforms for building deeper interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary capacity of the university. Sixth, these entities can provide a more effective framework for the spin-off of new ideas, innovations, and technologies that can enhance university resources. Finally, collaborative units can be training grounds for future university leaders who have broader worldviews of the future challenges that will face higher education. To realize these opportunities, universities must, however, be careful to protect their reputation and integrity.

Before institutional assets are deployed to collaborative activities, university assessment of benefits and costs should probably consider the four factors of expertise, interest, fundability, and needs. A promising framework is one where the university builds around personalities who are more amenable to government and industry processes but are guided by relevant university values and principles. An exception is when collaboration is highly technical, the university is strongly needed for scientific or technical expertise, and there are few questions about the potential payoffs. Collaborations based on clear win-win opportunities (with respect to products, revenues, and values) will tend to be more successful. However, this type of collaboration will require personalities that can easily straddle multiple cultures but are grounded in university values. Such personalities are rare in higher education, so it is important to nurture the few that exist. It makes sense for the university to be deliberate in its collaborative efforts by selecting areas that are predetermined to offer win–win opportunities and building infrastructure based on key university values and people and that can prosecute such opportunities. It is therefore useful for universities to conduct routine opportunity and talent assessment so they can take advantage of such opportunities.

Industry and government agendas change more frequently than university interests. Universities must therefore be willing to tolerate short-term policy and market engagements with the public and private sectors and be ready to discard those structures when they are no longer relevant. Because of the personality differences, long-term alliances are difficult and are most impactful in areas of huge gaps. The absence of university-based knowledge can be costly to the public and the private sectors, so universities need to be strategic in picking areas of intervention where opportunities to contribute to society are strong. In operating in the boundary, universities may need to implement new processes to accommodate special boundary projects. For example, some approval processes that are standard in universities can be cumbersome to partners who are used to faster action. Finally, where payoffs are imminent, universities may need to establish multidisciplinary teams to explore them, but based on thorough needs and return assessment.

In order not to consume more journal space, this article does not specifically address the personality differences between land-grant universities (who already promote boundary work) and non-land-grants. The former, especially their agricultural research and extension programs, receive supplemental appropriations to deliver more direct programs to their constituents.

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