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TABLE of CONTENTS

Journal of Higher Education Outreach & Engagement

From the Editor 1

Shannon O. Brooks

RESEARCH ARTICLES

Can Participation in a University Service-learning Course Increase Progress Towards Degree and Graduation Rates for Undergraduate Students? 3

Shelley A. Haddock, Samantha LeBouef, Megan J. Moran, Heather Novak, Jen Krafchick, Toni S. Zimmerman, and Lindsey M. Weiler

An Expectation of Care: Flexible Emergence of Students' Critical Consciousness in a Community-Based Writing Project27

Renea Frey, Jeffrey Gerding, Ethan Nichols, and Danielle Stone

PROJECTS WITH PROMISE

Neighborhood Revitalization Through Entrepreneurship Education: A "Small" Anchor Institution's Strategy and Impact41

Penelope J. Prenshaw, David H. Culpepper, Blakely F. Fender, and Paul S. Thomas

Strengthening and Expanding College and Career Pathways to Address Regional Needs Through Partnerships and Shared Commitments 67

Angela M. Coppola and Leah M. Nellis

Keeping Our Promise: Reenvisioning and Sustaining a 20-Year Service-Learning/Community Service Student Grant Program Action75

Lindsey Payne, Kayla Vasilko, Carly D. Evich, and Lisa L. Duncan

Promoting Health in the Hispanic Community: Evaluation of a Mentoring Program Between a School of Medicine and a Hispanic Community 85

Pallavi Kenkare, Elizabeth Seeley, Kimberly Anyadike, Mallory Peters, Helen Huetteman, and Claudio Cortes

TABLE of CONTENTS *(cont'd)*

Journal of Higher Education Outreach & Engagement

Exploring University Student Experiences with Community Engagement During the COVID-19 Pandemic 97

Michele Tyson and Bright Mleta

REFLECTIVE ESSAYS

Same Words, Different Worlds: Navigating Semantic Drift in Higher Education's Outreach and Community Engagement Discourse 113

David E. Meens

The Research 1 Community-Engaged Institution: Addressing Critical Community Needs 125

Henry R. Cunningham, Theodore R. Smith, and Baylee Pulliam

BOOK REVIEWS

Tryon, E. A., Madden, H. C., & Sprinkel, C. (2023). *Preparing Students to Engage in Equitable Community Partnerships: A Handbook*. Temple University Press. 242 pp. 137

Star Plaxton-Moore

Fisher-Livne, D., & May-Curry, M. (Eds.). (2024). *The Routledge Companion to Public Humanities Scholarship*. Routledge. 456 pp. 143

Lisa Dush

From the Editor...

Shannon O. Brooks



In a thought-provoking **Reflective Essay** featured in this issue of the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, David Meens examines the persistent tension between scholarly discourse around community engagement and the “semantic drift” that occurs as institutionalization takes hold. Meens addresses critiques that the Carnegie Foundation’s definition of community engagement fails to fully represent institutional reality, noting:

Simultaneously, institutional actors continue to expand the definition’s application to activities that stretch its conceptual boundaries, using engagement language to describe everything from economic development initiatives to marketing campaigns. This expansion reflects both the definition’s positive valence and its conceptual limitations in distinguishing between different types of university–community relationships. (p. 115)

Ultimately, Meens presents a “strategic adaptation” approach, encouraging us to remain active in institutional dialogues and embrace the evolving nature of our scholarly language through intentional practice. However, the tension he discusses resonates throughout this issue of JHEOE as contributors grapple with shifting terminology and institutional priorities in the featured articles.

In our **Research Articles** section, Haddock et al. address the ways in which universities are increasingly pressured to demonstrate value through student success metrics. By focusing on Community Connections (CC) courses at Colorado State University, the authors move beyond civic attitude surveys to examine the impact of service-learning on student success measures such as GPA and graduation rates. Utilizing propensity score matching, this study’s findings reveal that service-learning has a pronounced positive impact on underserved and first-generation

students, providing evidence that engagement can be a core strategy for promoting student success.

In comparison, Frey et al. turn their attention inward to the student’s developmental journey in “An Expectation of Care: Flexible Emergence of Students’ Critical Consciousness in a Community-Based Writing Project.” Recognizing concerns that service-learning can inadvertently reinforce charity mindsets, the authors track a 4-year project at a Jesuit university. Drawing on Cipolle’s (2010) stages of critical consciousness, they introduce “flexible emergence,” a framework that views social justice perspectives as a fluid, incremental process rather than a single-semester destination. Their work opens a sympathetic space for practitioners to support students through this journey, viewing it as a long-term developmental continuum rather than a linear process.

Our **Projects with Promise** section highlights innovative initiatives across diverse institution types. In Prenshaw et al., “Neighborhood Revitalization Through Entrepreneurship Education: A ‘Small’ Anchor Institution’s Strategy and Impact,” the authors examine Millsaps College’s ELSEWORKS initiative. This model demonstrates how a small anchor institution can have a large impact by utilizing student-led consultations to revitalize a local creative economy, while remaining sensitive to community displacement.

Two subsequent articles in this section focus on the transition from education to the workforce. Coppola and Nellis share findings from the Tomorrow’s Workforce project in Indiana, which created dual-enrollment and work-based learning pathways to address regional gaps. In the realm of health, Kenkare et al. evaluate a partnership between the Oakland University Beaumont School of Medicine and a Hispanic youth nonprofit, measuring the impact on mentees’ health-literacy and social outcomes.

Sustainability and resilience are also re-

curing themes in this section. Payne et al. reflect on a 20-year student grant program at Purdue University, illustrating how re-envisioning evaluation can enhance reciprocity and align with a land-grant mission. To round out this section, Tyson and Mleta provide a retrospective on the COVID-19 pandemic, examining a pilot tutoring program. They explore how this project also influenced the career trajectories of university students, offering lessons on crisis-driven engagement.

This issue also features an additional **Reflective Essay** contributed by Cunningham et al. which focuses on the unique responsibility of R1 universities. They present a model for how high-level research and engagement can intersect, offering a roadmap for evolving into “high-research, high-engagement” institutions.

To conclude, we feature two **Book Reviews** offering practical roadmaps for student

engagement and engaged scholarship. Plaxton-Moore reviews *Preparing Students to Engage in Equitable Community Partnerships: A Handbook* (Tryon et al., 2023), emphasizing scalable tools to help students navigate power dynamics and cultural humility. Dush examines *The Routledge Companion to Public Humanities Scholarship* (Fisher-Livne & May-Curry, 2024), which documents the “nuts and bolts” of sustaining public projects and broadening institutional definitions of scholarship. Together, these book reviews offer tangible strategies for fostering intentional, community-centered work.

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



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Can Participation in a University Service–Learning Course Increase Progress Toward Degree and Graduation Rates for Undergraduate Students?

Shelley A. Haddock, Samantha LeBouef, Megan J. Moran, Heather Novak, Jen Krafchick, Toni S. Zimmerman, and Lindsey M. Weiler

Abstract

As universities confront the reality that students are not equally served by higher education, they are increasingly incorporating evidence-based practices to support individuals facing systemic, institutional, and economic barriers. Service–learning courses support academic and socioemotional outcomes for university students; however, less is known about the degree to which they may improve attainment for historically underserved students. This study examined the association between participation in a service–learning course, Campus Connections (CC), and undergraduate student success. Propensity score matching was used to create relatively comparable groups of undergraduates who participated in the CC course and those who did not. Results indicated that CC participation was associated with higher levels of student success (e.g., GPA, degree progress) and suggested an even stronger association for structurally underserved student populations (i.e., students with first generation status, Pell grant status, and/or racially minoritized identity). Implications for service–learning and future research directions are considered.

Keywords: student success, service–learning, mentoring, campus belonging, underserved student populations



Students who leave college without an undergraduate degree earn less income, are less likely to be satisfied in their careers, and are less civically engaged than their counterparts who graduate (Baum et al., 2010; Hanson, 2022; Knox et al., 1993; Trostel, 2015). In addition, many of these students are left with significant amounts of debt without having realized the financial benefits of a degree (Gladieux & Perna, 2005). Students with identities that are structurally underserved by higher education (e.g., first generation, racially minoritized, or Pell grant recipients) have lower graduation and retention rates than their peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008). In response to this inequality, many universities are adopting evidence-based teaching practices to attempt to close equity gaps. Service-learning

is a high-impact practice (HIP) that is shown to increase college students' knowledge, academic engagement, interactions with faculty, and perceived support in the campus environment (Kuh, 2008; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2013). Service-learning has been associated with improvements in student GPA (Mungo, 2017), retention (Song et al., 2017), graduation rates (Mungo, 2017; Reed et al., 2015), access to social capital (D'Agostino, 2010), civic-related outcomes (Weiler et al., 2013), and professional development (Haddock et al., 2013).

Less is known, however, about the effectiveness of specific service–learning courses or experiences and their impact on subpopulations of students. For universities to effectively deploy resources, it is critical that

we assess the impact of service-learning courses and better understand for whom these courses are most effective. This study aimed to assess the associations between participating in a service-learning course and key indicators of student success (e.g., GPA, credits completed by the end of junior year, graduation rates) and investigate whether these associations were more pronounced for students who identify as members of groups historically underserved by higher education.

Academic Attainment in Higher Education

Recent data suggest that the 6-year completion rate for college students in the United States is around 64% and has hovered around that level for the past decade without improvement (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). However, graduation rates among Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous students are significantly lower: 40%, 54%, and 39%, respectively. Higher education attainment also varies significantly by socioeconomic status. Sixty percent of students from the highest income quartile obtain a bachelor's degree within 8 years of high school graduation, versus 15% of students from the lowest income quartile (Cahalan et al., 2021). Among students enrolled in postsecondary education, 69% of students from the highest income quartile obtain a degree, versus 26% of students from the lowest income quartile. First-generation college students, who often identify as students of color and have low income, also are more likely to drop out after their first year and graduate at lower rates than their continuing-generation peers (Choy, 2001).

Despite rising costs of higher education and slower wage growth in recent decades, most analyses indicate that the benefits of a college degree outweigh the costs (Abel & Deitz, 2014). Indeed, a college degree is associated with higher earning potential, greater job security, and expanded career opportunities, as well as greater likelihood of having health care coverage and engaging in healthy lifestyle behaviors (Baum et al., 2010; Witham et al., 2014). Given its association with key indicators of economic and physical well-being, equal access and opportunity to pursue a college degree is a prerequisite for a just society. Thus, higher education institutions have a responsibility to take action to address gaps in attainment for students of color, low-income students, and first-generation students. To guide institutions in how to do this, identifying

practices that are efficacious is a priority; however, few robust evaluations of specific programs exist.

Service-Learning, Academic Attainment, and Equity

One avenue that colleges and universities are pursuing to support student attainment is the adoption of high-impact practices (HIPs). HIPs are evidence-based teaching practices that have positive outcomes for many postsecondary students (Kuh, 2008; Kuh et al., 2013). Participation in these practices has been associated with increases in persistence from first to second year, STEM degree attainment, sense of belonging, satisfaction in relationships with faculty, self-reported personal and practical gains, and deep learning (Conefrey, 2021; Dinh & Zhang, 2021; Kuh, 2008; Ribera et al., 2017; Soria & Johnson, 2017). Importantly, some evidence suggests that certain HIPs and the timing of when these classes are taken (Do et al., 2024) are particularly supportive for students of color, first-generation students, and low-income students. For example, first-generation students who engaged in one or more HIPs during their first year in college (e.g., learning communities and writing-intensive courses) reported higher self-efficacy (Conefrey, 2021), which has been positively associated with academic performance among first-generation students (Majer, 2009). Additionally, Do et al. (2024) found that participation in a service-learning course during the first year of college benefited students' long-term academic outcomes, such as GPA and graduation within 4–6 years, among students underrepresented in higher education. Hufnagle et al. (2023) found similar positive associations between low-income first-generation students' enrollment in a service-learning course and retention and persistence.

Other research suggests that racial/ethnic identity moderates the association between participation in HIPs and indicators of academic success, with greater improvements in retention rates among Black students and in first-year GPA among Hispanic students, relative to White students (Finley & McNair, 2013). Service-learning, a HIP that requires students to apply knowledge from the classroom to real-world settings (Kuh, 2008), has been a common practice within higher education institutions for many years, and is associated with improvements in academic and psychosocial outcomes (Kuh, 2008;

Mungo, 2017; Song et al., 2017; Weiler et al., 2013). Moreover, certain features of service-learning may make it especially meaningful for students that have historically been underserved. In addition to emphasizing reflection and meaning making (Kuh, 2008), a core component of service-learning is social interaction, with both peers and the broader community (Wang & Calvano, 2018). Thus, one pathway by which service-learning may improve outcomes for postsecondary students is through increasing sense of belonging.

Belonging, in the college context, is a student's subjective experience of affiliation and identification with the college community (Hoffman et al., 2002). Multiple theoretical models of student persistence emphasize the role of belonging (e.g., Milem & Berger, 1997; Tinto, 1993), and evidence supports associations between belonging and student engagement and persistence among university students (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). Importantly, students who identify as racial-ethnic minorities or first generation tend to report lower sense of belonging than their peers. Thus, students who hold these identities and others traditionally underserved by higher education may benefit most from service-learning. Indeed, prior work indicates that service-learning has differential effects based on students' socioeconomic status, with students from lower/working-class backgrounds experiencing greater increases in sense of belonging than their middle/upper class peers (Soria et al., 2019). More research is needed to understand why these benefits may not appear for students with middle/upper class backgrounds. Some students may not have personal or lived experiences with certain systemic barriers, or they may already have established connections and networks across the university system. Without critical analysis, privileged students may not recognize how their own positionality shapes their understanding of systemic inequality and engagement with service-learning. Limited research has examined sociodemographic moderators of HIPs that, theoretically, may be more effective for underserved students, like service-learning. However, identifying which students may benefit most from these types of experiences is essential for optimizing funding for service-learning.

Service-learning, although beneficial in many ways, is not immune to systemic barriers that can hinder equitable access

and impact. One major critique of service-learning has been the economic burden placed on students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds (many of whom also identify as first generation), who may struggle to balance unpaid service-learning commitments with paid employment (Butin, 2006). Additional costs, such as transportation and materials, can further exacerbate these challenges (Eby, 1998). Moreover, service-learning courses often assume students have flexible schedules and the resources needed to fully engage, inadvertently excluding those with additional personal, family, or work obligations (Butin, 2006). Although efforts to reduce burdens to students, such as in the course examined in this study, are commendable, it is important to acknowledge and address the broader systemic issues in the field. Recognizing and mitigating these barriers requires ongoing critical reflection and structural reform, ensuring service-learning programs promote equitable participation and outcomes.

Critics also highlight that when service-learning partnerships are short term, they may harm the communities they are meant to serve. Short-term projects may fail to address long-term structural issues, leaving community members without sustained support and potentially creating feelings of abandonment or frustration when student volunteers leave at the end of the course (Eby, 1998; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009). To maximize its potential, service-learning must balance the benefits of experiential learning with a commitment to equity. This balance requires institutions and instructors to address the systemic issues inherent in service-learning—such as by providing stipends, transportation assistance, or alternative pathways for participation—and to foster authentic, reciprocal partnerships with communities. By integrating these structural reforms, service-learning can continue to advance equitable participation and outcomes.

Campus Connections: A Service-Learning Course

Campus Connections (CC) is a service-learning course developed at Colorado State University (CSU) in which undergraduate students serve as mentors to local youth (ages 10–18). The program was established as a response to the local community's call for additional and more effective services for youth and their families (see Haddock et al., 2013; Weiler et al., 2013, 2014). In

CC, mentors spend time building meaningful relationships with youth, providing academic support, engaging in prosocial activities (e.g., art, sports), showing youth the university campus, sharing a meal, and, if desired by the youth, engaging in dialogue and activities focused on social justice. This semester-long program brings youth to campus for weekly 4-hour sessions over the course of 12 weeks. Each session includes, on average, 24 one-on-one mentoring pairs (i.e., one youth mentee and one undergraduate student mentor). These pairs are grouped into small “Mentor Families,” each of which has a designated “Mentor Coach.” Throughout CC, students are supported by their Mentor Family peers, Mentor Coach, and on-site faculty members and graduate students in the Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) program (see Haddock et al., 2013; Weiler et al., 2014). Acting under the auspices of the Department of Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS), MFT trainees and faculty members guide undergraduate students in emotion coaching and deescalation strategies, redirection, relationship building, and help them to address any problems that arise during mentoring sessions. They also avoid overburdening mentors with youth concerns by providing clinical support to youth through brief therapy sessions, assessments, and interventions, as needed.

Consistent with the literature, CC is designed to foster students’ sense of belonging on campus through active and engaged learning (i.e., service-learning experiences, opportunities for small group learning in Mentor Families), engagement in social and leadership activities (e.g., building connections with fellow mentors, leading in the Mentor Coach role), seamless student experience (i.e., accessible service-learning on campus), inclusive learning environment (e.g., emphasis on social justice and inclusion), and faculty mentoring and support (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Dost & Mazzoli Smith, 2023; Goodenow, 1993; Tinto, 2012; Van Ryzin, 2011). The inherent relational nature of the CC experience provides ample opportunities for forging bonds with youth mentees, peers, graduate trainees, and faculty. Mentors have a network from whom they can seek assistance and support. Our previous research has shown that this mentoring community contributes to a felt sense of belonging among youth and student mentors in the program (Weiler et al., 2014).

Within the curriculum, students are engaged in ongoing team-building activities, celebrations of success, and opportunities to brainstorm solutions to challenges with their peers. Students are called upon to apply critical thinking skills, their own lived experiences, cultural knowledge, and classroom-based learning in supporting their mentees. CC enrolls a significant number of historically underserved students through partnerships with campus cultural resource centers and learning communities that primarily serve students of color and/or who identify as first generation to college. Not only are students trained in mentoring best practices, program logistics, and adolescent development, the curriculum facilitates a sense of belonging through an explicit focus on trauma-informed approaches and a social justice framework (e.g., impacts of racism, transphobia, lower income status, understanding and interrupting implicit bias, intersectionality) to support youth and mentor well-being. A trauma-informed lens helps students understand the potential impact of trauma on themselves and their mentees, providing tools for supporting participants’ emotional experiences to promote a sense of belonging in the program. Mentors also gain competencies to participate in social justice activities with their mentee, which promotes belonging by facilitating meaningful conversations about how identity shapes lived experiences and experiences of belonging. To solidify and extend their learning, students also engage in weekly reflective journaling, case documentation, activity planning, reading discussions, and other assignments (Haddock et al., 2013; Weiler et al., 2013).

Although participating in HIPs, including service-learning courses, offers many documented benefits for students underrepresented in higher education, there are potential costs, both tangible and intangible, as well. These costs can sometimes act as barriers to their full participation, potentially limiting the benefits they might otherwise gain from these experiences. For example, service-learning courses often require a significant time commitment outside regular class hours, which could potentially impact low-income and first-generation college students specifically, who may work full or part time to support themselves or their families. However, CC was designed to be an accessible service-learning course for students seeking this type of experience. CC occurs on the college campus, limiting

transportation barriers and associated costs; counts as an upper division elective; occurs exclusively during the semester weeks; values knowledge and expertise beyond that learned within the academy; and explicitly applies a social justice framework.

Prior evaluations of CC reflect the mutually beneficial nature of the mentoring relationship. Effects on youth are promising and include reductions in substance use and other behavioral problems, as well as improvements in sense of belonging (Haddock et al., 2020). Findings also suggest that youth who experience higher quality mentoring relationships and whose mentor is attuned (i.e., mentor's capacity to respond flexibly to youth's cues, needs, and desires) benefit more from CC (Weiler, Boat, & Haddock, 2019; Weiler, Chesmore, et al., 2019). Importantly, CC is similarly beneficial for undergraduate student mentors, the majority of whom participate in their first 3 years of college. Qualitative findings indicate that students experience significant personal growth and professional development through their participation in CC (Weiler et al., 2013). Quasi-experimental evaluations of CC also show that, compared to students who do not participate in CC, students in CC show greater increases in positive civic attitudes, community service self-efficacy, self-esteem, interpersonal and problem-solving skills, political awareness, civic action, and self-reported flourishing (Maples et al., in press; Weiler et al., 2013). Many of these outcomes are associated with academic achievement. To understand the full scope of benefits of CC to undergraduate students, a direct investigation of the association between CC and indicators of academic achievement is needed.

The Present Study

CC has demonstrated positive effects on civic attitudes and socioemotional outcomes for undergraduate student mentors (Haddock et al., 2013; Maples et al., in press; Weiler et al., 2013). As an extension of this prior work and with collaboration of the university's Institutional Research Office, the current study evaluated the impact of CC on students' academic achievement. We tested whether participation in CC was positively associated with key indicators of student success (GPA, completed credits at the end of the junior year, graduation rates) after controlling for the self-selection bias of choosing to enroll in service-learning coursework. Additionally, this study exam-

ined the relationship between participation in CC and student success for students structurally underserved by higher education. Three research questions guided this study:

1. After matching similar nonparticipating students, were there significant differences in GPA and credits completed at the end of junior year between those who do, and do not, participate in CC?
2. After matching similar nonparticipating students, were there significant differences in 4-, 5-, and 6-year graduation rates between those who do, and do not, participate in CC?
3. Do these associations between CC participation and student success differ for students who had at least two demographic attributes that were underserved by higher education?

Method

Data Source

The population used for this study includes all individuals who started as first-time undergraduate students at CSU in a summer or fall semester between 2007 and 2016 and persisted to the end of their third year. These data, which were compiled by the Institutional Research Office at CSU in February 2019, were sourced from the student information system and were Institutional Review Board exempt. Table 1 provides the student counts by cohort and group status (i.e., control and CC) as well as timing of treatment (first, second, or third undergraduate year). As shown below, most (approximately 90%) students take the course in their second year, but some do take the course in their first year.

Operational Definitions of Study Outcomes

For the purpose of this study, student success was operationalized as (1) degree progress at the end of the student's third spring semester (junior year) and (2) graduation rates. Degree progress was measured by a 4-point-scale cumulative grade point average (GPA) and cumulative completed credits at the end of the student's third spring semester. Graduation rates were measured after 4, 5, and 6 years of enrollment and evaluated whether a student graduates by the end of the specified summer. For instance, 4-year graduation was measured at the end of summer 2018 among students

Table 1. Sample Size by Cohort Year and Participation Status

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Control	3,642	3,614	3,610	3,709	3,789	3,842	3,784	3,725	4,117	4,141
CC	73	121	127	185	198	189	170	166	168	160
CC in First Year	0	0	1	3	24	19	17	30	35	25
CC in Second Year	0	3	28	66	98	101	63	83	104	90
CC in Third Year	73	118	98	116	76	69	90	53	29	45
Total	3,715	3,735	3,737	3,894	3,987	4,031	3,954	3,891	4,285	4,301

who started in either the fall or summer semester of 2014.

Data Analysis Plan

As described above, these data come from the CSU system of record as of February 2019, and outcomes were limited by this timepoint. Therefore, four outcome groups were matched using the described analysis:

1. 6-year graduation includes the 2007–2013 cohorts
2. 5-year graduation includes the 2007–2014 cohorts
3. 4-year graduation includes the 2007–2015 cohorts
4. Junior year degree progression outcomes includes the 2007–2016 cohorts

To utilize the propensity score process across these four outcomes groups as well as the full population and the structurally underserved population, there are eight logistic regressions, and matching was performed for each of these eight groups.

Propensity Score Models

Propensity score matching was the primary inferential analysis technique utilized in this study. Propensity score matching allows for a comparison of statistically similar groups (participants/nonparticipants) with the goal of understanding what the outcome would have been for a participant if they had not participated (Maruyama et al., 2023; Murnane & Willet, 2011; Reynolds & DesJardins, 2009; Rosenbaum & Rubin, 1985). Matching was based on the probability obtained by a logistic regression model with the treatment as an outcome. The treatment (participating in CC) and control (not participating) groups were created by matching students with similar propensities using the probability that was created by the logistic regression model. This process

was intended to approximate random assignment in order to understand what the outcomes would have been for CC participants if they had not had the opportunity to participate.

The third research question was addressed by utilizing this process only among students who had two or more of the following attributes: first generation, racially minoritized, or Pell grant recipient. Students with two or more of these identities are referred to as structurally underserved populations throughout this article. The premise for this third research question was grounded in the belief that data should be disaggregated to most effectively support equity (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020). The intent of running the analysis among structurally underserved students was to allow the impact of CC to vary (disaggregate the treatment effect) for students with identities that were underserved. Disaggregating the regression results in this manner was an attempt to explore the interaction between structurally underserved students within higher education and the impact of CC on student success. This exploration of an interaction effect does not account for micro and macro structural systems that first-generation students, students of color, or Pell grant recipients must overcome to participate in the CC program (Harris & Patton, 2019) but still informs our knowledge of the effect of HIPs on students with these identities.

Matching Process

Logistic regressions were used to predict participation in CC among each outcome group. The probability of participating in CC (output from propensity score models) was used to statistically match one non-participant to one CC participant. The matching was performed using one-to-one nearest neighbor without replacement with Stata18's `psmatch2`. An area of common support was defined by a caliper equal to

one fourth of a standard deviation of each outcome group's propensity score. Defining the common support area enhances the quality of the one-to-one matching process (Baser, 2006). The intent of the analysis was that after matching, any differences in outcomes would be correlated with the treatment effect of participating in CC. However, the ability to match nonparticipants to the participant group based on the likelihood of participating in CC (the logistic regression prediction) is only as strong as the model that is predicting participation (Baser, 2006).

Propensity Score Predictor Variables

The propensity score predictor variables selected for this study were associated with either the treatment condition (participating in CC) or the outcome variable of degree progress (i.e., GPA and credits completed by end of junior year) or graduation (Guo & Fraser, 2010; Reynolds & DesJardins, 2009) and available in the institution's student information system. The student-level variables used in this study were organized into two primary categories: demographic characteristics (gender, racial minority status, Pell recipient status, first-generation status, high school performance metric) and academic major. All of the variables were categorical except high school academic preparation, which was measured using the Colorado Commission of Higher Education's Index score (Colorado Department of Higher Education, n.d.). It was a composite score derived from high school GPA or high school rank and overall ACT or SAT test scores.

Treatment Variable

Participation in CC was defined as enrollment in the credit-bearing course at any point during a student's first 3 years at the university, since the majority (over 75%) of students who participate in CC do so by their third year.

Average Treatment Effect of the Treated

The primary statistic used to determine the magnitude of the association between participation and student success was the average treatment effect among the treated (ATT; Austin, 2011; Medaglio et al., 2022). Notably, a variety of matching techniques (beyond nearest neighbor) are available, and results may be sensitive to the matching technique. This study did not evaluate alternative matching techniques because nearest neighbor matching is widely used and ap-

propriate when there is a large overlap in the probability of selecting the treatment (propensity score) across both the treatment and control groups (Baser, 2006; Zhao et al., 2021). Within this study nearly all of the CC students were matched with a non-CC student using the recommended caliper. This procedure resulted in a small change in the treated group's sample size between the unadjusted and adjusted headcounts from Tables 5–8 in the Results section.

Substantively, the ATT was the percentage point difference in graduation rates or GPA/completed credits difference between CC participants and nonparticipants after the nonparticipants had been adjusted by matching. If the propensity model assumptions were completely satisfied, these differences would approximate the magnitude of the impact of CC on student progress and completion. However, the variables included in the propensity score models were limited to what was available within the institution's system of record. Missing variable bias was certainly a factor since these general variables do not account for all the reasons a student would choose to participate in CC.

Probability of Participating in CC

The propensity scores were calculated for each outcome group overall and among structurally underserved populations. Table 2 shows the logistic regression coefficients and model fit statistics for the models that predicted CC participation for each outcome group among the full population, and Table 3 shows the same information among the structurally underserved populations.

Propensity score models should include all covariates that have a theoretical relationship (supported by prior research) with either the treatment or the ATT outcome (Baser, 2006). As displayed in Table 2 and Table 3, the majority of the predictor variables were significantly associated with participating in CC, and those that were not (e.g., residency for tuition purposes, first-generation status, racially minoritized status) were known from prior research to be significantly associated with graduation rates at the university (Institutional Research, Planning and Effectiveness, 2017).

Quality of Matching

The purpose of this section is to review how these eight logistic regression models' output (the predicted probability of CC

Table 2. Logistic Regression Coefficients, Propensity to Participate, Overall Population

	3rd spring GPA/ Completed credits	4-year graduation	5-year graduation	6-year graduation
Preparation index	-0.049 (0.023)*	-0.054 (0.025)*	-0.078 (0.026)*	-0.065 (0.029)*
Preparation index squared	0.000 (0.000)*	0.000 (0.000)*	0.000 (0.000)*	0.000 (0.000)*
Nonresident (tuition purposes)	-0.011 (0.039)	0.013 (0.042)	-0.008 (0.046)	0.010 (0.050)
Pell recipient	0.043 (0.041)	0.044 (0.043)	0.055 (0.046)	0.064 (0.050)
Female	0.423 (0.041)*	0.429 (0.043)*	0.411 (0.046)*	0.454 (0.051)*
First generation	0.085 (0.038)*	0.090 (0.040)*	0.066 (0.043)	0.077 (0.047)
Racially minoritized	0.058 (0.041)	0.049 (0.044)	0.073 (0.047)	0.116 (0.051)*
Major				
HDFS majors	1.584 (0.049)*	1.543 (0.052)*	1.533 (0.057)*	1.550 (0.062)*
Other majors in CC college	0.462 (0.051)*	0.433 (0.054)*	0.400 (0.058)*	0.442 (0.064)*
Psychology majors	1.135 (0.054)*	1.135 (0.057)*	1.120 (0.061)*	1.135 (0.068)*
Majors in the College of Liberal Arts	0.383 (0.047)*	0.371 (0.049)*	0.380 (0.052)*	0.424 (0.057)*
Constant	-0.727 (1.354)	-0.447 (1.436)	0.917 (1.530)	-0.035 (1.683)
N	32,620	29,117	25,650	22,432
Likelihood ratio chi-square	1,878	1,604.08	1,350	1,171.32
Degrees freedom	11	11	11	11
Pseudo R²	0.204	0.197	0.193	0.197

Note. Cells display the regression coefficient with its standard error.

* $p < .05$.

participation for each outcome group) was used to create control groups that were statistically similar to the CC participants for each outcome group. It was critical to assess the quality of the match because validity of the ATT statistics (the focus of the subsequent Results section) was dependent on how well the control group represents the treatment group across all eight matching processes.

Kernel density plots were used to review the sample balance after matching (Medaglio et al., 2022). Appendix A graphs the density of students across their probability of participating in CC by participation status across all four outcome groups among all students, and Appendix B displays the same information for the samples that were limited to structurally underserved students.

Appendix A and Appendix B display dramatically different distributions in the

probability of selecting the treatment before matching and identical distributions after matching. In other words, prior to matching, the probability distribution of non-participants was strongly skewed toward the right tail; however, after matching, the lines overlap. Although the matching does not control for all the self-selection biases in our ATT statistic (we know there are limitations in the data available to measure the likelihood of participation in CC), there were observable differences among probability of self-selecting into the treatment (CC course participation) that were eliminated once the matching was used.

Appendix A and Appendix B also show very similar probability distributions across the four outcome groups. This similarity was due to the outcome groups being highly overlapped and interdependent. For instance, all the students in the 6-year graduation group were included in all the

Table 3. Logistic Regression Coefficients, Propensity to Participate, Structurally Underserved Populations

	3rd spring GPA/ Completed credits	4-year graduation	5-year graduation	6-year graduation
Preparation index	-0.068 (0.056)	-0.077 (0.060)	-0.087 (0.064)	-0.083 (0.070)
Preparation index squared	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Nonresident (tuition purposes)	-0.281 (0.135)*	-0.195 (0.138)	-0.222 (0.154)	-0.333 (0.180)
Pell recipient	-0.089 (0.098)	-0.067 (0.107)	-0.067 (0.116)	-0.060 (0.127)
Female	0.420 (0.094)*	0.440 (0.103)*	0.453 (0.112)*	0.534 (0.126)*
First generation	0.054 (0.113)	0.108 (0.125)	0.080 (0.131)	0.098 (0.143)
Racially minoritized	0.124 (0.095)	0.131 (0.100)	0.179 (0.110)	0.221 (0.119)
Major				
HDFS majors	0.916 (0.113)*	0.922 (0.124)*	1.019 (0.139)*	1.084 (0.152)*
Other majors in CC college	0.586 (0.120)*	0.523 (0.132)*	0.397 (0.144)*	0.386 (0.159)*
Psychology majors	1.103 (0.132)*	1.130 (0.140)*	1.022 (0.151)*	0.977 (0.169)*
Majors in the College of Liberal Arts	0.476 (0.113)*	0.495 (0.120)*	0.475 (0.125)*	0.524 (0.136)*
Constant	0.263 (3.147)	0.735 (3.393)	1.374 (3.614)	0.907 (3.926)
N	4,782	4,210	3,627	3,139
Likelihood ratio chi-square	285	238.57	202	187.97
Degrees freedom	11	11	11	11
Pseudo R²	0.170	0.165	0.163	0.177

Note. Cells display the regression coefficient with its standard error.

* $p < .05$.

other outcome groups. Timing of data collection allowed students who started at the institution 2007–2016 to have had all the outcome measures included in the analysis, but students who started in 2017 only have up to the 5-year graduation (not 6-year graduation).

Therefore, the findings from these kernel density plots indicate that the matching created equivalent distributions in the probability to receive treatment; however, these plots are difficult to interpret in terms of describing matching. Another approach, describing the changes between groups before and after matching using averages and *t*-tests, was useful to describe how matching changed the control group demographics. This descriptive analysis was completed only for the third fall outcome group (rather than all four groups) because the kernel density plots indicated the similarity between outcome groups. Table 4 shows the

proportional representation and the results of a *t*-test that evaluates whether the representation was equal between groups (CC and control).

Prior to matching there were statistically significant differences in the representation of students by demographic attribute and major, but after matching those differences were negligible. For instance, 28% of CC participants were first generation, compared to only 22% of nonparticipants; after matching, first-generation students comprised 28% of both groups. The differences in academic major were particularly pronounced. Forty percent of CC participants majored in the Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS) department compared to 5% of nonparticipants; after matching, HDFS majors comprised approximately 40% of each group. As in the previous analysis, there were meaningful differences prior to matching, and the

Table 4. Propensity Model Balance Assessment

	Unmatched			Matched		
	CC participants	Nonparticipant	t-statistic	CC participants	Nonparticipant	t-statistic
Academic preparation index	116.78	115.67	3.04*	116.64	116.73	-0.16
Non-Colorado resident (tuition purposes)	19%	23%	-2.71*	19%	19%	-0.07
Pell recipient	23%	19%	3.60*	23%	23%	-0.18
Female	88%	55%	21.47*	88%	88%	-0.18
First generation	28%	22%	4.00*	28%	28%	-0.14
Racially minoritized	21%	18%	2.66*	21%	22%	-0.16
Human Development and Family Studies majors	40%	5%	50.83*	40%	41%	-0.21
Other majors in College of Health and Human Sciences	13%	16%	-2.71*	13%	13%	0.11
Psychology majors	17%	4%	18.53*	17%	17%	0.02
Majors in the College of Liberal Arts	16%	24%	-5.83*	16%	16%	0.10
Any other major	14%	51%	-23.89*	14%	14%	0.08

Note. Percentages do not total 100 due to rounding.

* $p < .01$.

groups were demographically comparable once matching was completed.

Results

Degree Progress

CC students had higher levels of degree progress at the end of their junior year compared to nonparticipants (Table 5). The adjusted columns display the data after the samples were balanced, and the unadjusted column shows the results prior to utilizing the propensity score. For instance, there were nearly 32,000 nonparticipants prior to using propensity scores to adjust the nonparticipant sample down to 1,031. Not all of the CC participants were included for the ATT. The unadjusted comparisons included 1,038 participants, but only 1,031 appeared in the adjusted comparisons; that is, seven of the CC participants had a probability to participate that was not similar enough (matches could differ by no more than a quarter of a standard deviation) to any nonparticipant, so they were excluded.

The success outcomes in the unadjusted column represent a bivariate comparison by CC status, and the adjusted column displays the ATT. This comparison estimates the difference in success after accounting for the demographic and major differences that exist by CC participation.

Degree progress differences were reduced by the propensity score adjustment. For instance, CC students earned an average of 89.3 credits by the end of their third spring semester, which is about 3.7 credits higher than nonparticipants who were statistically similar to CC students, but over 5.1 credits higher than all nonparticipants. The 3.7 credit difference more accurately reflects the effect of CC participation because it accounts for differences in demographics. These results indicated that CC participation was associated with students completing approximately one more course by the end of the junior year compared to similar students who did not participate in CC. Similarly, CC participation was associated

Table 5. Overall Unadjusted and Propensity-Score-Adjusted Junior Year Degree Progress, Campus Connections Participants Versus Nonparticipants

	3rd spring GPA		3rd spring completed credits	
	Unadjusted	Adjusted	Unadjusted	Adjusted
CC participants	3.39	3.39	89.3	89.3
Nonparticipants	3.06	3.19	84.1	85.6
GPA/Credit difference^a	0.33 (.017)*	0.20 (.021)*	5.2 (.389)*	3.7 (.484)*
N for nonparticipants / participants	31,582 / 1,038	1,031 / 1,031	31,582 / 1,038	1,031 / 1,031

^aAmong the adjusted data this is the average treatment effect among the treated, with standard error in parentheses.

**p* < .05.

Table 6. Underserved Populations' Unadjusted and Propensity-Score-Adjusted Junior Year Degree Progress, Campus Connections Participants Versus Nonparticipants

	3rd spring GPA		3rd spring completed credits	
	Unadjusted	Adjusted	Unadjusted	Adjusted
CC participants	3.25	3.25	87.7	87.8
Nonparticipants	2.90	2.95	82.0	82.1
GPA/Credit difference^a	0.35 (.039)*	0.30 (.050)*	5.7 (.894)*	5.7 (1.001)*
N for nonparticipants / participants	4,579 / 203	202 / 202	4,579 / 203	202 / 202

^aAmong the adjusted data this is the average treatment effect among the treated, with standard error in parentheses.

**p* < .05.

with a third-year spring GPA that was about 0.2 of a grade point higher.

This study also sought to understand whether the positive association between CC participation and degree progress was differentially positive for students underserved by higher education institutions. Results showed that CC participation was positively associated with degree progress for students underserved by higher education and, descriptively, the positive association was stronger for these students (Table 6). Among underserved students, CC participation was associated with a GPA that was 0.3 points higher and 5.7 completed credits more than nonparticipants. These ATT results had a larger magnitude than the overall results reviewed in Table 5 (0.2 grade points compared to 0.3 grade points and 3.7 credits compared to 5.8 credits).

Degree Completion

The second set of student success outcomes was degree completion across three time points. Overall, data indicated that CC students graduated at higher rates than nonparticipants (Table 7). Similar to the degree progress metrics, these differences were reduced once demographic attributes and major were accounted for with the matching process. About 81% of CC students graduated within 4 years compared to only 68% of nonparticipants, and about 96% of CC students graduated within 6 years compared to 92% of nonparticipants. These differences were statistically significant and had a substantively important magnitude, represented by the large percentage point differences (12.6 and 4.6). Even at the smallest effect size (4.6), these differences have practical significance to the institution, which shows relatively stable graduation rates.

Table 7. Overall Unadjusted and Propensity–Score–Adjusted Graduation Rate Comparisons, Campus Connections Participants Versus Nonparticipants

	4-year graduation		5-year graduation		6-year graduation	
	Unadjusted	Adjusted	Unadjusted	Adjusted	Unadjusted	Adjusted
CC participants	80.9%	80.9%	95.1%	95.1%	96.1%	96.2%
Nonparticipants	56.8%	68.3%	85.5%	88.7%	90.0%	91.5%
GPA/Credit difference^a	24.1 (.017)*	12.6 (.020)*	9.6 (.013)*	6.4 (.014)*	6.1 (.012)*	4.7 (.013)*
N for nonparticipants / participants	28,203 / 914	904 / 904	24,870 / 780	772 / 772	21,773 / 659	650 / 650

^aAmong the adjusted data this is the average treatment effect among the treated, with standard error in parentheses.

* $p < .05$.

Table 8. Underserved Populations' Unadjusted and Propensity–Score–Adjusted Graduation Rate Comparisons, Campus Connections Participants Versus Nonparticipants

	4-year graduation		5-year graduation		6-year graduation	
	Unadjusted	Adjusted	Unadjusted	Adjusted	Unadjusted	Adjusted
CC participants	72.4%	72.8%	92.6%	92.5%	92.9%	92.7%
Nonparticipants	49.4%	54.3%	79.3%	84.9%	85.1%	87.9%
GPA/Credit difference^a	23.0 (.039)*	18.5 (.051)*	13.3 (.034)*	7.6 (.037)*	7.8 (.032)*	4.8 (.038)*
N for nonparticipants / participants	4,036 / 174	173 / 173	3,479 / 148	146 / 146	3,012 / 127	124 / 124

^aAmong the adjusted data this is the average treatment effect among the treated, with standard error in parentheses.

* $p < .05$.

Among underserved populations, graduation rates were higher for CC participants compared to nonparticipants (Table 8). Again, this association tended to be stronger in magnitude among the underserved population of students except for the 6-year graduation rate. At the 6-year graduation point the CC students graduated at a rate of 93%, which was 4.8 percentage points higher than underserved nonparticipants; however, in contrast to the difference in the overall population, this difference was not statistically significant.

Discussion and Implications

The goal of this study was to determine whether participation in the CC service-learning course was positively associated with student success, particularly for students with structurally underserved identities (i.e., first-generation students,

racially minoritized students, and Pell grant recipients). Results indicated that participation in CC was positively correlated to student success. Compared to undergraduate students who did not participate in CC, CC students had significantly higher GPAs, more credits completed by their junior year, and higher rates of graduation at 4, 5, and 6 years. These positive associations were even stronger for students from structurally underserved populations (i.e., students with two or more of the following attributes: first generation, racially minoritized, or Pell grant recipients). These findings align with prior research on the value of service-learning for student outcomes (Do et al., 2024; Haddock et al., 2013; Hufnagle et al., 2023; Kuh, 2008; Mungo, 2017; Song et al., 2017). Critically, results provide evidence that CC could be one way to bridge the gap in positive outcomes seen between underserved populations and other student populations.

When students take longer to complete their degree, they incur direct costs (e.g., tuition) as well as opportunity costs (e.g., lost income). Student progression-to-degree is influenced by institutional policies and practices (Scott-Clayton, 2015; Shapiro et al., 2016), and these factors may be particularly important during the early part of students' higher education trajectories (Do et al., 2024). It takes time to familiarize oneself with resources available on campus and to establish a sense of connection to the institution. Thus, intervening early with practices that increase students' access to resources may be one way to support students both during this transition and toward timely degree completion. The majority of CC students participate before their junior year; thus, the timing of CC may partially account for its effect on degree progress. It may be important that service-learning courses are publicized to first-year students and that these students are encouraged to participate.

In addition to quantifying the association between specific service-learning opportunities, like CC, and academic outcomes, it will be important for universities to understand the optimal duration of involvement in such opportunities for students. Although only undergraduates who took the CC course for one semester were included in this study, it is possible that continued involvement would amplify positive associations with attainment outcomes. Indeed, students who took the CC course frequently reported finding meaning and purpose in the experience of mentoring and expressed a desire to stay involved with CC after the semester-long course ended. To address this demand for continued involvement, a "leadership track" was developed to allow students to enroll in additional course credits and stay involved in a variety of leadership roles, including serving as a Mentor Coach to a small group of first-time mentors, a lead Mentor Coach, which is an assistant to the course instructor, and/or join the CC research team. This leadership track has been so popular that, beginning in 2021, students now can earn a Certificate in Campus Connections Youth Mentoring (9 credits) to recognize this leadership and deep involvement. Future studies examining the cumulative effects of extended involvement will provide pragmatic insights for universities wishing to implement CC regarding optimal program structure and "dosage."

Notably, the effect of CC on educational attainment is more pronounced for students from underserved groups. Prior research has found similar differential effects of service-learning on sense of belonging, based on student income level. Specifically, students with low income who participated in service-learning experiences reported greater increases in sense of belonging, relative to higher income students (Soria et al., 2019). Our results align with these findings and provide further evidence that sociodemographic characteristics may moderate the effect of service-learning on academic outcomes. One possible explanation for this pattern of findings is that CC increases students' sense of belonging. Sense of belonging on college campuses plays a central role in persistence, engagement, motivation, and well-being (Azmitia et al., 2018; Gillen-O'Neel, 2021; Pratt et al., 2019). However, university students who hold underserved identities report lower sense of belonging (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). Service-learning opportunities such as CC may promote underserved students' educational success through allowing them to connect with diverse communities and address societal issues that matter to them (Song et al., 2017). Further, such opportunities may afford these students, who may enter college feeling a lack of belonging, a critical opportunity for connecting with peers and faculty (Hurst, 2010; Soria & Johnson, 2017).

CC is uniquely designed to facilitate increased sense of belonging through activities that promote relationship building, sense of community, and self-affiliation with the college campus (e.g., touring campus with mentees; utilizing campus recreation fields). Additionally, CC provides the participating college students with a network of support systems both in and out of the classroom. Alternatively, service-learning has also been shown to operate through increasing academic engagement and self-efficacy (Kendrick, 1996; Schmidt et al., 2004). More work is needed to understand the mechanisms of the effects of service-learning on academic outcomes. Future research should directly investigate sense of belonging and other psychological processes as potential mediators of the effects of service-learning on academic outcomes.

Service-learning also emphasizes the value of alternative forms of knowledge, skills that are different from those traditionally

highlighted in the classroom, but which may be aligned with the lived experiences of students from underserved backgrounds. First-generation students, who are disproportionately low-income and students of color, often report finding little connection between classroom curricula and their own lives, which can lead these students to question whether they belong in higher education (Jehangir, 2010). This belonging uncertainty presents a barrier to persistence. Service-learning, which centers students' lived experiences and utilizes nontraditional models of learning and assessment, may foster a more inclusive academic environment where first-generation students' cultural wealth and knowledge can be integrated, thus allaying some of the belonging uncertainty these students may experience (Bueno et al., 2022; Jehangir, 2010). Additionally, mentors from minoritized communities may make meaning (Kuh, 2008) that is highly personal by giving back to mentees from similar communities. Future work should incorporate robust qualitative data collection and analysis to investigate which features of the service-learning course were most meaningful for students, and whether these perceptions varied by sociodemographic characteristics. Additionally, the fact that service-learning courses benefit underrepresented students can also call into question why they do not benefit privileged students in the same way. We speculate there could be numerous reasons for this discrepancy, one of which may be power dynamics. Students from privileged backgrounds may be entering into service-learning courses with a vision of helping others rather than engaging in a mutually beneficial learning experience. Future research should continue to explore these differences. Furthermore, service-learning and other HIP courses may benefit from introducing more reflective approaches to challenge students to think about social inequalities, privilege, and power dynamics. For example, incorporating these topics into the curriculum could ensure that all students engage more meaningfully with and gain deeper insights into their experiences.

Disparities across college campuses in terms of retention and graduation rates, especially among minoritized students, are a cause for concern. As universities commit to implementing strategies to increase diversity, access, and inclusion of all students, supporting programs that can demonstrate fostering success for

underserved students is critical. Yet, there is a dearth of systematic evaluations of specific evidence-demonstrated courses and programs. Through examining the association between participation in CC and key indicators of academic achievement, this study demonstrates the value of a service-learning course for undergraduate students, particularly those traditionally underserved in higher education. Our results suggest service-learning opportunities like CC as one avenue universities may pursue to close attainment gaps and contribute to a more just higher education system. Finally, as mentioned, CC was designed to eliminate some of the traditional burdens associated with service-learning courses by arranging for the course to occur on the college campus, count as an upper division elective, and occur exclusively during the semester weeks. Systemic changes such as encouraging more widespread adoption of flexible service-learning models, integrating service-learning with work-study programs, or increasing funding or scholarships for students participating in service-learning could address the potential costs for underrepresented students. Researchers should continue working to understand specific barriers faced by students in these contexts and to develop best practices for reducing these burdens across different types of institutions and programs.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations must be considered in the interpretation of these results. First, the intent of the analysis is to describe the multivariate association between CC and student success; therefore, determination of causality was threatened by external validity. Alternative matching processes, beyond nearest neighbor, could have been utilized, particularly with the incorporation of additional variables collected from the institution. Second, this study was conducted at one institution. In order to truly examine the implications of a service-learning experience like CC on student success, especially among students from structurally underserved populations, it is imperative that studies like this one are replicated at other universities and colleges. Third, because CC is housed in the Department of HDFS, CC participants were disproportionately likely to be HDFS majors. Additionally, timing of CC completion could be associated with the correlations between completion and student success. Most students, but not all,

take the course their second year in school. However, this analysis does not account for timing: Students were included in the treatment if they took the course during Years 1 through 3. Future research should examine the impact of CC and similar programs on students across majors as well as the timing of course completion. The experience might have differential impacts based on student major as well as course timing.

Finally, with regard to examining the association of CC and student success for underserved students, this was an exploratory study. Future work should explore, through in-depth qualitative interviews, the nuanced experience of participating in CC for students of varying intersecting identities and

the differences between them (e.g., students who are White and low income compared to students who are Black and low income). Such work may help clarify the influence of the systemic racist structures within higher education (Harris & Patton, 2019). Moreover, the CC service-learning course is now licensed and offered at other universities. Future studies can examine whether similar results for minoritized students are replicated on other campuses. This study serves as an initial step in understanding the effects of curricular and programming choices universities make, and how those choices may support them in upholding their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.



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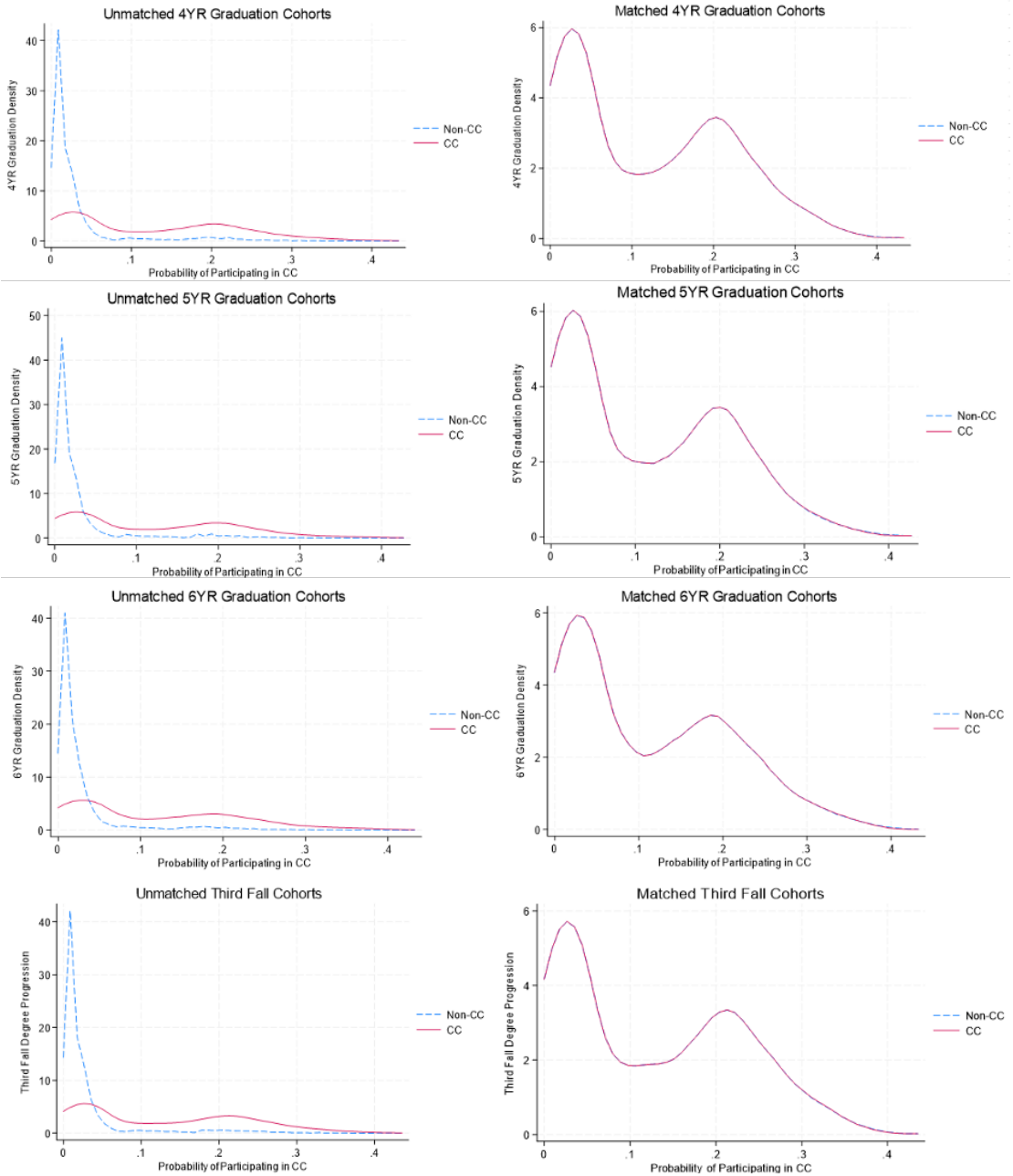
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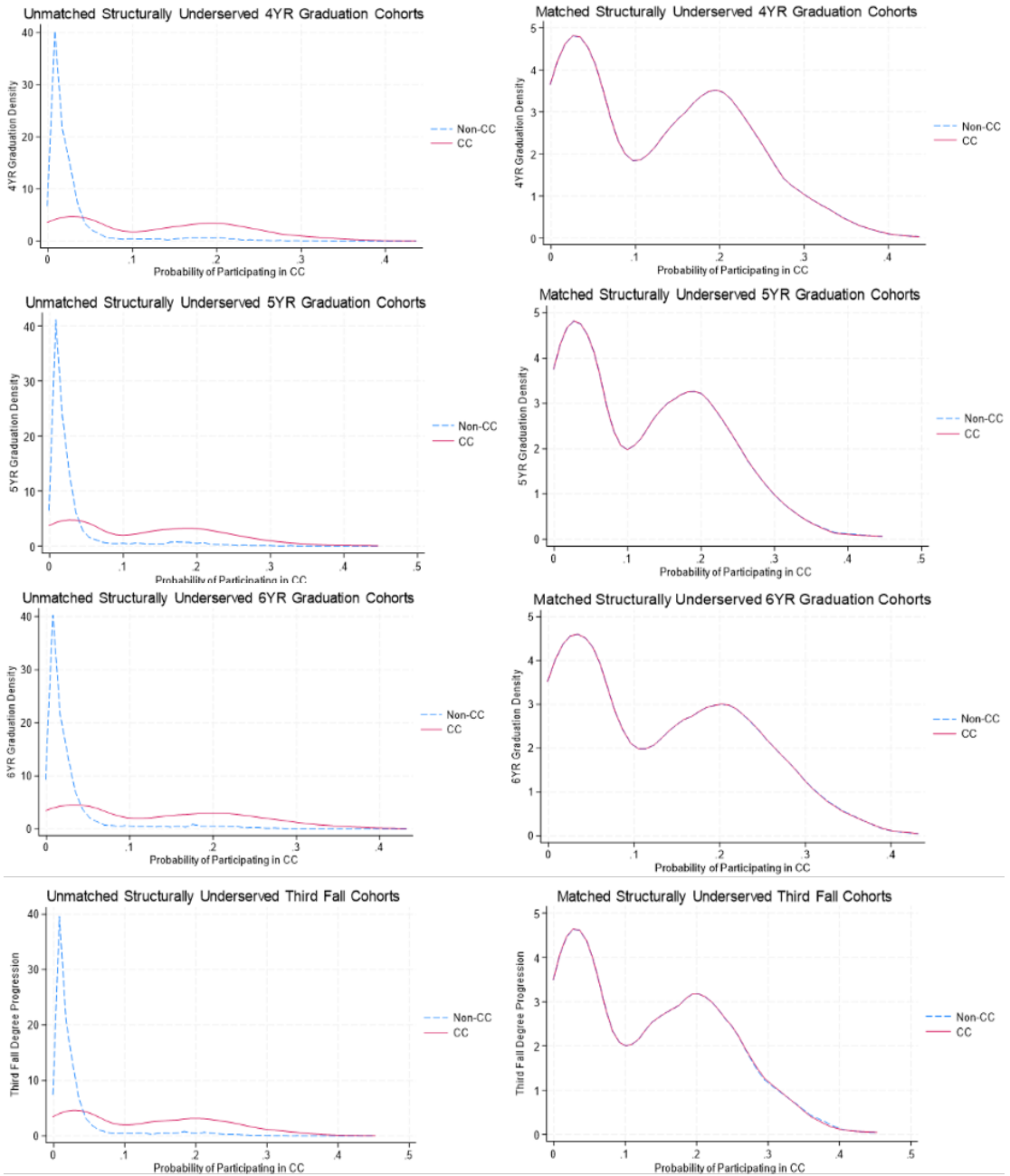
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Appendix A: Kernel Density Plot for Treatment Probability by Treatment Status Among Full Population Samples



Appendix B: Kernel Density Plot for Treatment Probability by Treatment Status Among Structurally Underserved Samples



An Expectation of Care: Flexible Emergence of Students' Critical Consciousness in a Community-Based Writing Project

Renea Frey, Jeffrey Gerding, Ethan Nichols, and Danielle Stone

Abstract

This study examines the development of critical consciousness in service-learning students at an institution emphasizing solidarity, kinship, and social justice. Building on Cipolle's (2010) framework, which describes a progression from charity to caring to critical consciousness, we explore how students often embody multiple stages simultaneously. Our findings reveal that students express both charity and solidarity in the same reflections, indicating that the shift to critical consciousness is not linear. We propose the concept of *flexible emergence*, suggesting that students transition in and out of critical perspectives as they navigate prior experiences and biases. Rather than expecting students to fully abandon a charity mindset within a semester, we argue for an approach that acknowledges the fluidity of their development. By adopting this perspective, educators can better support students' evolving understanding of service-learning as a tool for social justice, rather than viewing progress as a rigid or binary process.

Keywords: critical service-learning, flexible emergence, critical consciousness, charity vs. solidarity, social justice education



Students participating in service-learning projects often view their role as simply “helping” others or gaining “real-world skills” through community engagement. However, shifting their perspective toward service-learning as an act of justice, solidarity, or dismantling systemic inequities presents a greater challenge (Allahwala et al., 2013; Butin, 2015; Cippole, 2010; Clark-Taylor, 2017; Clifford, 2017; Coffey & Arnold, 2022; Endres & Gould, 2009). Like many teacher-researchers who emphasize the value of critical service-learning, we hoped to promote “a social change orientation, working to redistribute power, and developing authentic relationships” (Mitchell, 2008, p. 50) as the foundation for our approach. However, like most critically focused service-learning advocates, we found that our students did not always fully grasp or meet this goal, or did so in uneven or contradictory ways. To explain this phenomenon, we

propose examining student mindsets toward service-learning from the perspective of flexible emergence of critical consciousness that is in the process of development. This model expands upon previous research and provides a nuanced understanding of how critical consciousness emerges in uneven, surprising, or even contradictory ways.

This 4-year project was conducted through a Professional Writing course at a Jesuit university with a social justice-based mission, working with MORTAR, a community partner whose mission focused on supporting and promoting minority entrepreneurs, conditions we hoped would encourage students to view their service-learning work as solidarity rather than charity. Although we had hoped that anchoring our work in the values expressed by our institutional mission statements and overarching shared principles would support these goals, the results were more complicated and less straightforward, creating a tension between

a desire for care and solidarity on one hand, and reinforcing preconceptions about charity on the other.

In our work, we show how a more fluid approach to developing critical consciousness may both complicate and augment assessments of students' attitudes toward service-learning as social justice. The work of Cipolle (2010) focused on developing critical consciousness on a continuum that often begins with a charity mindset, then moves toward caring, before developing a critical perspective focused on social justice. We build upon that work and examine our findings through a lens of flexible emergence, showing how even the same individual may display attitudes of all three stages at once, complicating the idea that for critical service-learning to "succeed" students must move beyond one stage—for instance, letting go of preexisting ideas of the value of charity—before being able to experience genuine care or solidarity with others.

Cipolle (2010) noted that a stage of critical consciousness develops over time and is not a place one "arrives at" and then is perfectly there, done, and developed, so by reframing the goals of critical service-learning through flexible emergence, we may be better equipped to guide students and mediate expectations. Instead of trying to move students to a place where no one completely arrives anyway—which is almost too much to ask over the course of a single semester, especially among the competing goals of course learning outcomes and students' other responsibilities—we instead support observing emergent states of care as students move toward "solidarity with," seeing these fluid changes in a more charitable light while still pushing and complicating students' underlying assumptions about power relations. This shift in perspective requires us, as teachers and researchers, to apply the same lens of care and solidarity toward our students that we hope they develop in relation to their community partners, offering our students a model for how care and solidarity might manifest. Viewing this process of development as a fluid continuum allows individual students to embody multiple stages at once, an outcome we saw repeatedly in our research. By acknowledging that the development of critical consciousness does not occur in discrete stages, we may be better equipped to recognize the natural emergence of charity as it moves through

care to promote ideals of social justice, solidarity, and political activism.

Literature Review

This project is informed by previous research into critical service-learning, and thus carries some of the concerns, limitations, and aspirations of community-engaged learning that tends toward "justice learning" rather than traditional notions of service (Butin, 2007). Further, our community partner also has a mission underscored by "a social change orientation, working to redistribute power, and developing authentic relationships . . . to deconstruct systems of power so the need for service and the inequalities that create and sustain them are dismantled" (Mitchell, 2008, pp. 52, 50), a goal that was shared by the researchers and community partner, and which we sought to measure within our students. As noted in other studies, White students are the most likely to participate in service-learning programs (Mitchell et al., 2012; Shiller, 2022), and although we promoted an "assets-based perspective" regarding the site community and attempted to create a mutually beneficial partnership with the community members with whom we worked, like Shiller, we observed mixed results when our (predominantly) White students ventured into communities of color, from raising racial consciousness and promoting solidarity, to reinforcing stereotypes and charity-based mindsets. We were also conscious of the pitfalls of this type of dynamic as potentially replicating conditions of White supremacy, such as identifying certain communities as underprivileged or "at risk" and reinforcing the assumption that White students are or should be in a position to provide service to those communities. Additionally, we were aware that students may focus on individual rather than structural forces when they encounter privilege disparity, including how systemic racial issues often underlie disproportionate poverty levels. Without wider context, students in some service-learning situations may "blame" individual communities for that inequity, rather than larger social forces that lead to poverty (Houshmand et al., 2014).

Furthermore, we understood the potential limitations to developing critical consciousness across racial lines for our students and the challenges they would likely bring to their service-learning projects. Taking the

cautionary advice of Mitchell et al. (2012), we were mindful that

service learning projects based on a pedagogy of whiteness have minimal impact on the community and result in mis-educative experiences for students, such as unchallenged racism for White students and isolating experiences for students of color, and missed opportunities for educators to make their own instruction more transformative. (p. 613)

Given the current product-based neoliberal climate in much of education that privileges the professionalization of students over social justice initiatives, even seemingly benign concepts like reciprocity can be “code for an exchange of goods and services that reinforces unequal practices” rather than a genuine investment in, and solidarity with, an extended community (Clifford, 2017, p. 12). Despite these challenges, like many other researchers who endeavor to support critical service-learning projects, we believed that the potential benefits to both students and our local community outweighed the myriad obstacles we were likely to encounter during this 4-year project.

In addition to situating our research within the context of critical service-learning, we also wanted to measure how student perception might be shaped by institutional mission and a recognition of this work as an extension of their educational goals and values more broadly. Sapp and Crabtree (2002) argued that service-learning projects in professional writing courses are “a worthwhile component in serving many universities’ missions to prepare students to be responsible community members” (pp. 411–412). Unlike those at many campuses, students at Xavier and other Jesuit institutions are generally very aware of campus mission statements, and courses regularly cite those values as integral to course content and teaching approaches.

Jesuit institutions share similar specialized language in many of their mission statements, and previous research has demonstrated that students’ experience with service-learning at Jesuit institutions is strongly influenced by adherence to attitudes expressed in these statements. These values include solidarity and a recognition of “unearned racial and economic

privilege” (McCunney, 2017, p. 65), working in the community to disrupt racial and socioeconomic disadvantage (Houtz & Kosoko-Lasaki, 2006), men and women for and with others, contemplatives in action, unity of heart and mind (Streetman, 2015, p. 36), and magis (interpreted as working for the greater good and striving toward excellence), *cura personalis* (a term that means care of the whole person, an ethic that is extended to all members of the community), and a commitment to diversity (Gross & Maloney, 2012). Additionally, when students internalize the mission and consider themselves part of the campus community, a state Torres-Harding et al. (2015) termed a psychological sense of community (PSOC), then these students may be even “more likely to agree with the university’s social justice-related mission statement” and see service-learning as an extension of that mission (p. 89). Furthermore, students with a strong sense of community based upon sharing a set of perceived values with the institution’s social justice mission may be more likely to engage in ongoing social activism as the result of service-learning, more so than from taking traditional or diversity-related courses without a service component (Torres-Harding et al., 2015).

Although there are many advantages to working in a service-learning course with students who are familiar with service, support social justice, and expect their education to contain both, there are potential drawbacks as well. Because students who attend a Jesuit institution are often previously acquainted with the idea of “service,” it can be problematic to decouple the idea of service-learning from charity, or as Gabor (2005) described it, to move from “volunteerism” to more transformative learning. Preconceived ideas about service based upon past experience can lead students to approach service-learning as acts of goodwill or charity, which can become narcissistic and self-serving for the person performing the service, either to “feel good about themselves” or to achieve a certain grade, but not with a genuine investment in righting wrongs in the world (Seethaler, 2014). Seethaler noted, too, that the narrative of White people of privilege “saving” people of color is one that often underlies, consciously or unconsciously, service-learning programs, instead of using service-learning to actually change and challenge systems of oppression. This observation is echoed in Green’s (2016) research, where she asserts

that students may also lack the critical awareness of their own racial identities and privilege to address systemic oppression, as well as the vocabulary and awareness to view their community partners in light of systemic injustice so that they are unable to deploy the language of advocacy and solidarity (pp. 361–362). Additionally, students may fail to see the writing that they perform as part of their service-learning as a political act or as political engagement, even when that writing is direct advocacy with and for community partners (Gabor, 2012).

With this background and potential student expectations in mind, we took a multi-pronged approach to challenging student beliefs about service-learning as charity, a mindset that many students had upon entering the course based in previous experiences with service. Like Gabor (2005), we “front loaded” our courses with readings and terminology addressing ethical concepts in order for students to grasp the deeper implications of service-learning, as well as practiced cross-cultural communication skills prior to meeting with clients. We also encouraged “language for reflection and discernment” (Green, 2016, pp. 361–362) for students to explore and challenge their ideas of service as charity and to focus on systemic issues of inequality in the communities they visited. Although our data suggests that student attitudes about service-learning did alter over the course of the semester and that they were able to see the university’s social justice mission carried out through their work with MORTAR, an area that we could have explored more was to embed a critical feminist lens within the course (Clark-Taylor, 2017; Seethaler, 2014) so that students might have been better equipped to understand the roots of systemic injustice they encountered in the lives and challenges of their clients. Offering students this perceptual lens may have allowed them to ground their classroom studies prior to the community-based portion of the course in critical theories of Whiteness to avoid the propensity of students to “rehearse and affirm White privilege” noted by Endres and Gould (2009, p. 418).

Our goals for this research were to ascertain whether combining what was known about critical service-learning and applying it in a location with a strong focus on a justice-based mission would lead to greater levels of solidarity from our students. Results from this endeavor were predictably mixed.

Additionally, we hope to contribute to the conversation around service-learning by suggesting a model of flexible emergence as students begin to develop critical consciousness while still attempting to situate new understanding and solidarity alongside previous experiences, expectations, and biases.

Organizational Mission(s) and Project Background

This study was conducted in a required Professional Writing course for our English majors with a Writing Concentration that is also open to all students at Xavier. A major component of this course is a long-term collaboration with a community partner, a startup for historically marginalized entrepreneurs in Cincinnati, Ohio. For the assignment sequence in our course, alumni of an entrepreneurial academy are the clients for student teams who work to identify a “writing need” for their business.

Our approach to developing this assignment was guided by three principles: First, we wanted whatever our students created to be immediately useful for clients; second, we wanted to build in as much flexibility as possible to match student strengths and interests with client needs; and third, we wanted to create a sustainable model for community engagement that could be revisited every time one of us taught the course. For this project sequence, groups of students are assigned to work with individual entrepreneurs to identify a writing need and develop materials from a set of 20+ possible options broken into five categories: website design and content creation, marketing materials, branding materials, documentation, and social media presence. Deliverables range from web editing and usability testing to press releases, brochures, business cards, grant/proposal writing, and social media plans, depending on the client’s goals and existing infrastructure. Importantly, our community partner has an explicit social justice mission to help historically marginalized entrepreneurs start and run successful businesses. As outlined on their website: “MORTAR aims to create diverse communities by enabling historically marginalized entrepreneurs to access the resources needed to start & run successful businesses” (MORTAR, 2022, para. 1). Like most large cities in the Midwest, Cincinnati has a long legacy of gentrification, and many of the businesses in popular neighborhoods

are not owned by the people who live in those same neighborhoods, a condition that MORTAR works to counteract.

A primary challenge of this project, then, is balancing two competing goals: (1) to have our students deliver a writing-based product that our community partner(s) will be able to use in their business, while also (2) engaging students in the social justice mission that drives our community partner. We hoped to achieve these goals within the tradition of critical service-learning, which focuses on "a social change orientation, working to redistribute power, and developing authentic relationships" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 50), goals that are likewise congruent with MORTAR's mission.

The social justice focus of MORTAR and the tenets of critical service-learning align with Xavier's mission and center the importance of social justice as a goal for engaging students with a community partner. Through this project, students were aware of the larger goals of MORTAR as well as the link between those goals and the institutional mission of Xavier. Many service-learning projects arise from campus prerogatives and a desire to challenge systemic inequalities; however, Jesuit institutions have a particularly strong historical alignment with the goals of service-learning (Fleming, 1999; Gross & Maloney, 2012; McCunney, 2017; Streetman, 2015), and students often arrive on campus with an expectation of community-based service as part of their educational experience. This expectation presents advantages for enlisting enthusiastic students with prior experience in service projects as well as challenges in expanding their view of community-based learning beyond a charity mindset (Green, 2016; Seethaler, 2014).

Our work in the classroom sought to promote justice, solidarity, cross-cultural communication, and reciprocity with community partners, rather than approaching client work as either charity-focused (primarily for the partner's benefit) on one hand, or professionalization-focused (primarily for the student's benefit) on the other, with an attempt to disrupt a product-based, transactional model for one focused on process and solidarity (Clifford, 2017). Our goal with this study was to ascertain student perceptions of service-learning at the beginning of the course and then again after completing projects with the community partners at the end of the course. We were curious how student attitudes might

shift as a result of this work and whether the shared institutional mission might influence student perceptions.

Methods

Methodology

This study employs a modified grounded theory approach using the methods described by Charmaz (2006) and Stern and Porr (2011) as its foundation. This methodology allowed the data collected through our study to guide the direction of the research and to expand our study based upon iterations of the course as it was taught over multiple semesters. In addition, the coding procedure was supplemented with the process described by Saldaña (2021) where open-ended survey responses and focus group transcripts were examined by multiple researchers to find patterns and themes that indicated mindsets we sought to examine.

Grounded theory was selected for several reasons: First and foremost, the iterative and ongoing nature of grounded theory fit well with our multiyear study and gave us "consistent yet flexible guidelines" for data collection where findings were "'grounded' in the data themselves" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 2). We knew that one of the primary researchers for this project would be teaching this class every year due to curricular requirements, which made it easy to collect data over an extended period and allowed us to adapt our questions and methods as the data suggested. Second, we also knew we wanted to make changes to the assignment sequence between semesters when it was taught as we sought to improve assignments and the learning outcomes of the course. The iterative nature of data collection and analysis in grounded theory worked well with our goal of revisiting the project, making revisions to how it was taught, and using what we learned from the study to make improvements. Finally, we conducted this study as a research team with the help of two undergraduate research assistants and found that the methods of grounded theory proved especially effective for collaborative research. Members of the research team completed coding of transcript and survey data and wrote analytical memos separately; then, as a team, we came together for collaborative coding sessions where we went through each transcript and survey question by question, compared our codes

and memos, and recorded patterns, outliers, questions, and concerns. This process proved to be extremely fruitful and allowed for multiple perspectives to be included in our research process.

Approval

All procedures in this study were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards set by the Xavier University Institutional Review Board (IRB), and approval was granted under IRB Protocol #19-011. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Recruitment

Participants for this study were recruited using purposive sampling, with all students enrolled in the course invited to participate. Students were recruited by email and invited to fill out the consent form and complete the precourse survey within the first 2 weeks of the semester. Recruitment for the postcourse survey began during the final weeks of the semester and was again open to all students enrolled in the course; participation in the precourse survey was not required to complete the postcourse survey. Recruitment for the interviews was conducted in person during the final two weeks of the semester by a member of the research team who was not also the professor for the course. In total, 50 students were recruited to complete the precourse survey, 20 were recruited for the postcourse survey, and seven were recruited for the interviews.

Data Collection

We collected survey data from two survey instruments: a precourse survey conducted at the beginning of the semester and a postcourse survey conducted at the end of the semester. The precourse survey included 15 questions: seven open-ended questions, three follow-up questions using branching logic, three Likert-scale, one multiple choice, and one ranked choice. The postcourse survey had 13 questions: seven open-ended questions, one closed-ended, three Likert-scale, one multiple choice, and one ranked choice. Though direct comparison of individual participants' results between the pre- and postcourse surveys was not possible due to the data being anonymized, broader comparisons between results of the pre- and postcourse surveys were useful for making observations about changes in student attitudes, perceptions, and experiences. Toward this end, the following six questions

from the precourse survey were asked again in the postcourse survey:

1. What is your current attitude toward service-learning?
2. How important do you think that the service-learning experience you had in ENGL 305 will be to your own educational experience and learning?
3. How important do you think that service-learning projects are to the communities they serve?
4. In service-learning projects, whom do you think benefits most from the interaction and why?
5. When you think about service-learning, what are the most important ideas, attributes, or concepts that come to mind?
6. In your view, how do you think that a service-learning course aligns with Jesuit values or the mission of Xavier University?

Semistructured interviews were conducted at the end of the semester after students completed the service-learning project. Participants were not required to have completed either survey in order to participate in the interview. All interviews were conducted by a researcher who was not also the teacher of record to reduce bias and ensure students felt their participation would not affect their grade in the course. Interviews were completed in person during the first round of data collection; due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in subsequent rounds of data collection participants were given the option to complete interviews either in person or remotely via Zoom.

Prior to beginning the interview, students were asked to read and sign a consent form; interviews were halted if students decided not to consent. One participant who filled out the consent form for the precourse survey declined to give consent for the project and was not included in the study. Interviewers worked from predetermined questions but asked follow-up questions when appropriate. In total, one group interview and four individual interviews were conducted for this study. Individual or group interviews were chosen based on the number of participants who signed up for an interview slot. Audio recordings of all five interviews were transcribed by undergraduate research assistants, all identifying information was

removed, and transcripts were prepped for analysis.

Analysis

Survey data were analyzed in spring 2022. Presurvey ($n = 49$) and postsurvey ($n = 20$) data reports for all three rounds of data collection were compiled through Qualtrics. Analysis of survey data began after the third round of data collection.

Interview data analysis began after the completion of the first interview in early 2020. This first recording (of the only group interview in the data set) was transcribed by hand, and an initial round of open coding was conducted to identify general concepts that emerged and to sort these concepts into broad categories. A second round of interview data analysis was conducted in summer 2022 by a team of three researchers. The transcript of the first interview was analyzed again, and codes and categories were compared across an analysis from all four researchers in order to generate a list of common concepts and categories from the first transcript. All three researchers completed theoretical memos after their individual analysis and again after the group discussion. This second round of analysis then informed the approach to coding the remaining interview transcripts, which proceeded in the same order: All three researchers separately coded the transcripts; wrote theoretical memos to capture individual thoughts and perceptions of the data; met to compare, contrast, and discuss the codes, concepts, and categories generated; and wrote a second set of theoretical memos based on this discussion.

Once this process was completed for all four transcripts, the team of three researchers met again to (1) compile a master list of concepts and categories that emerged during analysis, (2) complete axial coding based on this master list and the collected theoretical memos, and (3) generate another round of theoretical memos based on discussion of the initial and refined categories. A final research meeting was held to discuss the axial coding process and begin selective coding.

Analysis proceeded after the initial data collection phase in fall 2019 and again after the second and third phases in 2022 and the fourth phase in 2023. After the first phase, a transcript was produced of the first group interview and an initial round of open coding was completed. After the

second phase of data collection, three additional transcripts were created based on individual interviews, and a second round of open coding proceeded from where the first round left off. A fifth and final interview was conducted after the fourth phase of data collection in 2023. Once open coding had been completed for all five transcripts, a round of theoretical coding was completed to weave together all of the codes and reduce categories. At this point we also began comparing coding from the interview data with coding from the survey data.

Results

Although we had hoped that leveraging and referring to the university's mission would be one way that students could access a more justice-based mindset, our precourse survey captured the polyvalent meanings that students took from that mission. Where some students focused on concepts such as *cura personalis*, solidarity, and service rooted in justice and love, others interpreted the mission in more charity-based terms, with a few respondents demonstrating both interpretations of the mission in the same statement. Many students (38%) mentioned some type of "helping" in their statements, phrasing it as "doing good," "service," "charity," "selfless," "beneficial to others," and "giv[ing] back" to others in their response to a question about how service-learning aligned with Jesuit values or the mission of the university. More students (60%) identified broader, justice-based parts of the mission and used the specific terminology from that mission to describe this relationship, noting concepts like "magis," "cura personalis," "being in solidarity for and with others," "service rooted in justice," and "being men and women for others." A subset of the justice-based responses may not have used the specific wording from the mission statement but used descriptions indicating those ideas, such as "to take care of the person as a whole," "go out into the world and promote the common good," "work all together for one common good," and "understanding and kinship." Somewhat surprisingly, by the end of the semester in the postcourse survey, fewer students were able to specifically articulate wording from the mission, with only 20% mentioning "magis," "justice," "standing for and with others," or "solidarity." Although there were still answers indicating a charity mindset (25%) and helping as the outcome,

most responses were vague and contained no concrete concepts from the mission at all; answers like “it just does” and “it aligns well with Jesuit values” were common on this question after the course concluded. We noted that we had fewer respondents in the postsurvey than in the presurvey; we also postulate that when we were recruiting at the end of the semester, students were less likely to respond during a time when they were studying for multiple exams and/or finishing major projects. This circumstance may account for both our lower response rate and the vague generalities occurring more frequently on this question about the relationship between the university’s mission and student service-learning projects.

We were curious, too, about students’ perceptions of which party benefits most from a service-learning relationship—the community partner, the student, or both equally—and whether experience with community partners would shift that perception in any way. Given our students’ past experiences with “service” as volunteerism or charity (85% of students in the precourse survey indicated past experience with service as charity), it is not surprising that before the course began students were fairly divided in thinking that the community partner (24%) or the student (31%) benefited most, with nearly half of students (45%) already believing that the relationship was mutually beneficial to both parties. However, the biggest shift we saw was a move away from viewing the community partner as the primary beneficiary, so that by the end of the course, only 11% of students still selected that option, whereas nearly two thirds (63%) believed that both parties benefited equally.

Responses to the “why” part of this question yielded interesting perspectives from students: Some optimistically focused on social justice, whereas others were still very much steeped in a charity mindset. For instance, on the precourse survey, one student believed that students benefited the most from these interactions, specifically because working with a community partner could help that student figure out ways to learn more about social justice with the goal of intervening in meaningful ways. This student wrote,

I think that the people who serve benefit the most from learning from community members because

they better understand social justice issues facing members of the community and how they can apply their own skillsets or professional experiences to benefit and positively impact the community.

This response still contains elements of a “professionalism in exchange for real-world experience” mindset; however, it also acknowledges the expertise of community members to better educate students about how to effectively engage social action at a community level.

This response can be contrasted to students who, even in the postcourse survey, were still clearly in a charity-based mindset. One respondent (one of two who believed that community partners benefited most in the postsurvey) said, “Those being served because sometimes others cannot help themselves as best as you could,” which demonstrates the complications of students who come from a place of privilege seeing themselves as those “who were providing charity, instead of acting as students and allies” (Endres & Gould, 2009, p. 419). Another student who thought students benefited most expressed the importance of professionalization as part of the student learning aspect of service, saying, “I think in this case, students benefited more. For a lot of students [this] was their first time working for a client and meeting deadlines outside of a classroom.” This same student then followed up with a statement indicating that the service experience may not have coincided with the student’s expectation of the role of “helping others” through service-learning by saying, “However, I feel like some clients may not need our help very much.” This complex response illuminates the way that a charity in exchange for professionalization mindset can commodify reciprocity (Clifford, 2017) but with a type of disappointment that community members did not “need help” as much as the student might have expected.

Comparing the pre- and postcourse surveys on questions about how much each party (students and community partners) benefits, students perceived strong value for both parties, though they consistently rated the impact for community partners slightly higher than the impact on their own learning. In the precourse survey ($n = 45$), students rated the importance of service-learning projects to their own educational

experience/learning relatively high ($M = 7.76$, $SD = 1.80$, 1–10 scale: 1 = *not at all important*; 10 = *very important*; observed range = 3–10) and rated the importance to the communities they serve slightly higher ($M = 8.16$, $SD = 1.56$, observed range = 5–10). In the postcourse survey ($n = 20$), students again rated the importance to their educational experience/learning as high ($M = 7.55$, $SD = 1.75$, observed range = 3–10), while ratings of importance to the communities served remained slightly higher overall ($M = 8.25$, $SD = 1.64$, observed range = 3–10).

In both cases (pre- and postsurvey) students rated the benefit to the communities served slightly higher than their own benefit. Notably, in the presurvey all students rated the benefit to the community as at least moderately high (range = 5–10), whereas in the postsurvey there was a wider range (3–10), indicating that students had less certainty about the benefits to the community by the end of the semester than they did at the beginning. Although students rated the perceived benefit to both parties fairly high (all means were above 7.5 out of 10), their ratings nonetheless indicated that they believed community members accrue at least marginally more benefit in service-learning projects. However, the increased number of responses toward the lower end of the scale indicates that optimism about community benefits declined during the semester. This change in perception may reflect the individual experiences of the students who rated the benefit to the community as potentially lower than they had believed at the beginning of the term, perhaps because their particular project did not go according to expectations or because they found that the “need” of their community partner was not as great as they had anticipated, as evidenced in student comments below.

Students were also asked what they hoped to get out of the service-learning portion of the class and then, once the course was complete, to articulate the most valuable aspect of the service experience. Because students sometimes named multiple hopes or takeaways in a single response, these open-ended responses were coded into overlapping categories rather than mutually exclusive ones. In the precourse survey, responses clustered across four primary categories—charity, solidarity/community, political activism, and professional skills—with political activism

appearing only rarely and the other three categories occurring in roughly similar proportions. In the postcourse survey, however, responses concentrated almost entirely in two categories: professional skills (approximately 75% of responses) and solidarity/community (approximately 25%), with charity not appearing at all and political activism likewise absent.

In these results, we can still see some of the tensions between professionalization on one hand and solidarity or community on the other. A representative example of this tension comes from one precourse survey respondent who hoped to gain “a better understanding of the world and local communities along with real world experience to strengthen my knowledge,” showing how an interest in both community-building and solidarity might coexist with the expectation of also gaining professional skills. One of the interesting outcomes from comparing these two surveys is that at the beginning of the course more students expected that the benefits they would gain would have to do with charity and “helping people who need it” or would “broaden my view of what it means to serve others and how I can be a better servant in the future,” whereas charity is not mentioned once in the postcourse survey. Instead, by the end of the course, students mostly noted the professional skills (~75%) they had gained, although some (~25%) focused on community and relationships. Although many respondents before the course hoped to develop deeper connections with, and understanding of, the community they were entering, only one expressed an expectation of service as a way to gain “a better understanding of systematic injustice.” It is unfortunate that we have no way of following up with that particular student, or even knowing which student it was, as it would be interesting to know how that expectation developed prior to the class and/or if that benefit was realized as part of the service interactions.

Conclusion

In much of the literature, the goal of service-learning is to develop critical consciousness and shift students away from either a charity or a transactional mindset, and it is often considered a failure if students are not able to step beyond charity through these projects. Although solidarity and critical consciousness are certainly noble goals, we also wonder if we are asking too much of

our students in a short amount of time, as well as questioning whether it should be considered a “failure” to inspire students to care or want to help others. Cipolle (2010) posited movement in the stages of critical consciousness that occurs over time and where one never fully “arrives” once and for all. Critical consciousness begins with a desire to help people, after which loftier goals built in critical awareness of systemic injustice and privilege can take place. This shift in perspective requires considerable reflection on positionality, power, and privilege on the part of the student, as well as knowledge of systemic injustice, work that takes more than a semester to enact. Although our study is limited to the sample population we surveyed and interviewed, it is clear from other research in this area that failing to meet the goals of critical service-learning in terms of shifting student perceptions is an issue for many studies. Even though our students were “primed” by our institutional mission to seek solidarity with others and driven by a desire to enact social justice, they, like so many other students involved in service-learning projects, often do not shift fully away from a charity-based mindset into caring, and ultimately critical consciousness, during the course of a semester.

In our studies of student perceptions in service-learning over the years, we posit that the desire to help and care is an important starting point, rather than a failure, on the part of our students, and that what we see in the sometimes-contradictory responses of our students is the flexible emergence of this critical consciousness. As researchers, we also turned this question back upon ourselves and asked: If we are expecting our students to reframe how they look at the systems that lead to inequality, shouldn't we also have that same kind of growth mindset in how we perceive our students' attitudes? Meaning, as instructors, perhaps we should understand our own positions of privilege in relation to our students and avoid directing a “charity mindset” toward their efforts not only to expand their communication and writing skills in an arguably challenging environment, but also to simultaneously uproot and transform their ideas about power, systemic injustice, privilege, and their own complicity. For us, too, this attitude emerged in a recursive, flexible way over the course of this study, pushing us to ask deeper questions about our own position relative to our students, community

members, and the research itself.

To help students shift into critical consciousness, we have to make them aware of what we are trying to get them to understand in order to develop critical civic empathy through recursive reflection (Coffey & Arnold, 2022). Perhaps if we describe the tension between various mindsets to students and are more transparent in those goals, we can engage in metacognitive reflection with our students to help them recognize the false binary between professionalism and caring or justice. A justice-oriented professionalism is not going to be developed instantly, or even by the end of the academic semester; but by introducing this concept, we may enable it to take root in some small way that will grow and nurture in the future. This flexible emergence of critical consciousness is a more achievable goal and one that, rather than being a failure, indicates steps toward a more justice-oriented future for our students and communities.

One of the most instructive outcomes from this project is that students' reflections did not become uniformly “more critical” in a straightforward or linear way; instead, they became more grounded in the lived realities of partnership work, revealing how professionalism, care, and solidarity can emerge unevenly over time. Rather than reading these patterns as evidence that critical service-learning was unsuccessful, we interpret them as evidence of flexible emergence where students move recursively among orientations—care, professionalism, solidarity, and, for some, activism—depending on context, constraints, and their developing sense of accountability to a real partner. Pedagogically, this framework encourages instructors to treat early expressions of charity or professional motivation not as endpoints or missed opportunities, but as openings for more sustained reflection and learning, especially because students may reject charity language in one context while still relying upon it in another, as evidenced in the contradictory responses in two different parts of our postcourse survey. Although charity largely disappeared from students' postcourse accounts of what they found most valuable in the service experience, it persisted in some postcourse explanations of who benefits most and why, an unevenness that underscores how students can hold competing orientations toward reciprocity, impact, and need at the same time.

As researchers and instructors, we know that we can integrate critical service-learning concepts into the classroom more effectively when we resist expecting immediate or total transformation within a single semester, especially since our previous efforts did not lead to consistent outcomes of solidarity and critical awareness for our students. One pedagogical insight from this 4-year grounded theory study has been to acknowledge the flexible emergence of critical consciousness we've observed, resulting in the slow accumulation of better ways to teach the course with that iterative process in mind. Today we more clearly articulate the goals of solidarity, justice, and critical consciousness to our students and name the common tensions students experience between charity, professionalism, and justice-oriented commitments. Rather than hoping students will navigate these tensions and arrive at a state of critical consciousness on their own, we make those goals explicit by asking students to connect their rhetorical choices to questions of power, positionality, and community expertise. The tools of critical service-learning that we have encountered during this project give us a better framework for helping students achieve a justice-oriented professionalism, a mindset that they will hopefully take into the workforce as they leave the university.

We have also had to recognize that students' past experiences will inevitably shape how they approach service-learning, as well as their broader ideas of "service." We often ask our students to think about how lived experiences impact their clients, and we should also be asking students to reflect upon how their own experiences shape their perceptions of "service" as well. Our students do not see themselves as part of the system that creates oppression in the first place, but rather as people who are fighting against oppression. Although this sentiment isn't wholly incorrect, these students are largely unaware of how they contribute to reproducing those systems of inequality by being (predominantly) White students at an expensive private liberal arts college "serving" a community that traditionally has access to fewer resources. Nevertheless, through working with and alongside com-

munity members, students create deeper bonds of genuine caring for their neighbors, a broadened perspective that allows for the flexible emergence of a more critically honed consciousness.

We also postulate that we could frame our work in Professional Writing in a more overtly subversive way, meaning that part of our goal is to share the fruits of a privileged educational space with community members who are otherwise kept outside our institution. As educators, we need to guide students in more productive ways to confront their own privilege in these situations, and we need to find strategies that include students in creative subversions of traditional power structures. In a community-based project that includes both professional writing and a service-learning component, part of what we are doing is sharing the knowledge of how to navigate linguistic systems of power (e.g., "professional writing") with community members who may have been denied access to those tools. What students need to understand is that we aren't doing this "for" the community, but with and alongside them, passing on and sharing tools freely so that our neighbors in the community can use them for their own benefit once the course has ended.

By making this subversive purpose more explicit and inviting students to reflect on how professional writing can function as a shared tool rather than privileged credential, we have found it easier to guide students toward solidarity without dismissing their desire to build skills. In this sense, flexible emergence becomes not only an analytic framework but also a pedagogical orientation where students are supported in starting where they are, often motivated by professionalism or a desire to help, and moving unevenly but meaningfully toward reciprocity, accountability, and justice. Perhaps if students can view what they do as subverting the traditional exclusions of power and understand their writing as a shared tool that challenges these systems, they may be more prepared to sustain solidarity as an ongoing commitment beyond the semester and into their future professional and civic lives.



About the Authors

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Neighborhood Revitalization Through Entrepreneurship Education: A “Small” Anchor Institution’s Strategy and Impact

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Abstract

This study investigates the impacts of a small anchor institution, Millsaps College, on the revitalization of an inner-city, socioeconomically challenged community in Jackson, Mississippi. The motivation for this effort was both altruistic and academic: Both the desire to help an underserved community adjacent to campus, and the goal of providing students with valuable and meaningful entrepreneurial learning opportunities, compelled this work. The strategic approach was community centered, with a focus on partnerships to leverage creative assets for economic development. This work has yielded both quantitative and qualitative impacts, having supported improved physical characteristics in the neighborhood and business environment and elicited positive responses from the residents. This approach serves as a model for smaller anchor institutions to both foster creative entrepreneurship in their communities and provide a vehicle for students to gain valuable business experience.

Keywords: entrepreneurship education, creative economy, anchor institution, underserved community, urban revitalization, higher education, business education



This study examines the impacts of entrepreneurial activity by the Millsaps College Else School of Management in its neighboring community, Midtown, in Jackson, Mississippi. The work is supported by Millsaps students, faculty, and community partners and focused primarily in the creative economy to support neighborhood revitalization and economic development in an urban community. Much has been written about anchor institutions’ role in economic development and urban revitalization (Ehlrenz, 2018; Spirou, 2021; Stone & Stoker, 2015). However, few studies have focused on anchor strategies that promote entrepreneurship initiatives targeting residents and businesses in underserved communities (O’Brien et al., 2019; Wang, 2021). Similarly, much has been written about creative industries’ contribution to urban development (Florida, 2002). The creative economy en-

compasses economic activities related to the visual and performing arts, design, film, video and media, literary and publishing, culinary arts, and museums and heritage industries—which together leverage creativity and culture to generate economic value and community vitality (Mississippi Arts Commission, 2011). However, few studies have examined creative industries’ contribution to revitalization in socioeconomically challenged, urban communities (Wang et al., 2021). This study examines the replicable strategies of a small anchor institution—defined as a place-based college or university whose relative economic and social impact is significant within a smaller or less-resourced community—an area that has received less scholarly attention than strategies of large, urban anchor institutions (Dache & Catone, 2022; Spirou, 2021). Further, this study outlines the impacts of the small anchor strategy following a 10-

year investment in the community—addressing the need for empirical assessment of anchor strategy outcomes (Ehlenz, 2018).

This article will first provide the context for Millsaps College’s work as an anchor institution by reviewing higher education’s third mission, community development, as opposed to its teaching and research missions, and will then describe the role of an anchor institution’s neighborhood revitalization. In describing the college’s role in this work, we will then examine the entrepreneurial approach focused on creative industries to spur economic growth. We then detail this replicable example of an anchor institution’s strategy to support neighborhood revitalization while providing experiential learning for students, utilizing project teams made up of faculty and students. Subsequently, a socioeconomic impact study is discussed, and the outcomes show positive, striking changes in the targeted community without the displacement that often comes with revitalization strategies. Finally, the article ends with a discussion and conclusion.

Context for Our Work: Higher Education’s Third Mission in Civic and Economic Development

For over two decades, institutions of higher education have been called upon to do more to contribute to the civic (social and communal) and economic development of their regional (or local) areas (Audretsch & Belitski, 2021; Chatterton & Goddard, 2000; Pugh et al., 2016). This expectation is sometimes referred to as the university’s “third mission” along with teaching and research. It is not our intention to provide a history of higher education’s third mission activities; however, a brief description is provided to give context for the unique case study that follows.

Early third mission efforts in higher education were primarily social and civic related; they were the domain of students and academic affairs focused on community outreach and service-learning (e.g., volunteering, mentoring). Beyond these efforts at community engagement, universities primarily promoted their role as major employers and purchasers in impacting the local economy (Netter Center for Community Partnerships, 2008; Sladek, 2017; Wittman, 2012). The next stage of community engagement by colleges and universities was applied research, driven primarily by

higher education’s financial needs; in part because of shrinking state appropriations, colleges and universities began focusing on applied research with efforts to become more entrepreneurial. Also referred to as the triple-helix model of university–industry–government collaborations, especially in high tech, this model was the next path to economic development and wealth creation (Audretsch & Belitski, 2021; Nelles & Vorley, 2010; Schaeffer & Matt, 2016; Smith & Bagchi-Sen, 2012). This “academic entrepreneurship” approach to economic development was executed at two levels. First, external centers based primarily in science and technology departments supported business innovation, technology transfer, and commercialization—patenting, licensing, and spin-offs of research (Nelles & Vorley, 2010). Second, in campus-based business schools, internal entrepreneurship programs were developed with incubators to support student start-up ventures (Jones & Hegarty, 2011; Smith & Bagchi-Sen, 2012). What was increasingly disconnected from this entrepreneurial approach by the university was any direct involvement with the local economy. In fact, the more successful the knowledge transfer (i.e., academic output of the university) and the more globally oriented the university, the more disconnected the university became with its local economy (Fernández-Esquinas & Pinto, 2014). Certainly, the university’s stronger reputation earned with these academic successes can increase enrollment, which in turn affects the local economy, but the university’s motivation appeared to be primarily self-serving.

The Role of the College or University as an Anchor Institution

Beyond these self-serving entrepreneurial efforts in higher education, some institutions of higher education have begun to take seriously their roles as anchor institutions in their communities. Anchor institutions are defined as having a large physical presence in a community, located next to an urban, often distressed neighborhood (Ehlenz, 2018). According to estimates, urban-serving institutions—which are frequently described as anchor institutions—represent approximately two thirds of all institutions of higher education in the United States (Why Public, n.d). Third mission activities among higher education anchors, particularly their economic development strategies, have focused on revitalization efforts

in neighboring communities. Early research on the role of urban universities as neighborhood anchors supporting revitalization efforts was case-based and mostly descriptive, with little empirical assessment of outcomes. See, for example, university efforts at the University of Pennsylvania (Rodin, 2005), Ohio’s public universities (Bromley & Kent, 2006; Sterrett, 2009), Portland State University (Bunnell & Lawson, 2006), and Wayne State University (Briller & Sankar, 2013). Among these anchor institutions, the revitalization investments in the adjacent neighborhoods primarily targeted the university community with new university facilities. Further, these anchor revitalization efforts were described as resulting from the campus communities’ engagement and/or partnerships, with little evidence of neighborhood residential involvement, input, or benefit. Broader initiatives like Johns Hopkins University’s support of the Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses program aimed to bolster citywide economic development, but these efforts also excluded direct residential participation or neighborhood-based planning in their design (Hub Staff, 2017).

The literature on colleges and universities working in neighborhood revitalization has evolved over time from early ideas of thinking about neighborhoods adjacent to institutions of higher education, to understanding a “shared value” approach, to cultivating social entrepreneurship, to, finally, fostering creative economies.

From Downtown to Neighborhoods

In their book *Urban Neighborhoods in a New Era: Revitalization Politics in the Postindustrial City*, Stone and Stoker (2015) identified university anchors as key players in urban revitalization and as more effective advocates for residents in the neighborhood than local officials. In their book, comprised of six case studies, five from the United States and one from Canada, Stone and Stoker described a promising shift in urban renewal policy from a singular focus on downtown and business areas to one that includes neighborhoods. However, tensions exist between residents and those “elite actors” (local government and business leaders) concerning what should be the focus of neighborhood revitalization efforts. Residents want priority given to services—for example, better schools and job training—rather than infrastructural improvements. These case studies proposed

that university anchors located next to economically challenged neighborhoods may be in a better position than “elite policy actors” to connect with the people in the neighborhood and effect neighborhood improvement. Higher education anchor institutions offer a potentially more successful path to urban renewal through their longer term presence and more open, flexible, and shared-value approach.

Efforts by anchor institutions to engage in neighboring communities must not only include residents but also must avoid displacement and gentrification. Research in this area must analyze the measurable impact of the work by anchor institutions. For example, Ehlenz (2016) evaluated the University of Pennsylvania’s revitalization efforts in neighboring University City. Employing census data (population, poverty, median household incomes, and residential vacancy and tenure), University City, relative to the larger West Philadelphia neighborhood, showed only modest improvement. Further, a subarea in the neighborhood that received significant investment, including access to enrollment in the Penn-sponsored public school, accounted for most of the positive changes, and in turn resulted in significant gentrification. Again, little detail was provided regarding the influence and involvement of residents in the revitalization process.

Further, research on the impact of anchor institutions on surrounding areas has begun to consider the development of conceptual frameworks to analyze anchor universities’ strategies and associated impacts on revitalization efforts. Fernández-Esquinas and Pinto (2014) detailed the potential contributions of universities to urban regeneration across four dimensions: physical infrastructure, human resources, economic development, and civic engagement. They made explicit the need to connect university third mission activities to the local community level, and, in so doing, incorporated the previously disconnected stream of research in urban studies.

Shared Value Approach

Employing two contemporary frameworks describing a shared value approach to revitalization efforts, Ehlenz (2018) empirically assessed the revitalization strategies of 22 anchors. Ehlenz found a significant disconnect between what anchors should do and what they are doing. First, “local” was a

relative term, with few anchors identifying a specific neighborhood focus. The geographic target was typically much more regional. Second, there was little evidence of a shared value approach to socioeconomic initiatives, resulting in economic activities that were primarily focused on local hiring and procurement, policies that had been ongoing and not a response to community needs. Similarly, the social and civic engagement was more traditional community outreach and not part of an economic revitalization effort. Finally, what was most prevalent was the emphasis on physical revitalization and investment in commercial and residential development targeting the university population. All in all, these physical renewal strategies align with the research highlighting universities' place-based investments that lead to rising housing costs and gentrification (Ehlentz, 2016; Spirou, 2021). Ehlentz (2018) found that university-reported revitalization efforts have not resulted in mutually beneficial outcomes, but in results primarily motivated by anchor self-interest, not neighborhood concerns.

Recently higher education anchor institutions have attempted to merge urban revitalization efforts with academic entrepreneurialism to create innovation clusters to spur economic growth in adjacent neighborhoods while also achieving institutional growth. In his book *Anchoring Innovation Districts: The Entrepreneurial University and Urban Change*, Spirou (2021) investigated six universities' anchor strategies to drive urban economic development via the technology commercialization process. The six anchors were Georgia Institute of Technology, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, University of Pennsylvania, Arizona State, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, and University of West Florida. Among the six anchors, Tech Square at Georgia Tech and Kendall Square at MIT were the most advanced districts, moving beyond supporting faculty and student research, commercialization, and business creation to attracting corporate innovation centers and headquarters surrounded by retail and residential infrastructure. Also present, however, were significant housing affordability issues, displacement, and gentrification. Three others, Schuylkill Yards at Drexel, developed in partnership with the University of Pennsylvania, PHX Core at Arizona State, and the Chattanooga Innovation District at UT Chattanooga all saw progress with commercial and residential development to

support a developing innovation ecosystem, and all three had considerable displacement and gentrification in their adjacent neighborhoods. Efforts by the University of West Florida and their Innovation Institute in downtown Pensacola saw less of a negative impact on the community due to the smaller residential population of the downtown area. Overall, Spirou surmised, after his study of the six university anchor strategies, "economic development does not necessarily translate to community development" (p. 202). For broader discussion on the disconnect between economic development and economic inclusion, see also the New Growth Innovation Network (n.d.) and High Road Strategy Center (n.d.).

Social Entrepreneurship

As evidenced above, universities' entrepreneurial efforts have been impactful for the university but often disconnected from, if not harmful to, the economy of the local community. Even anchor universities that focus on economic development near campuses have primarily advanced the interests of the university and not the local neighborhood. Furthermore, even as some revitalization impacts, like beautification, safety enhancement, and public infrastructure improvements, are important to residents and existing businesses, negative impacts such as displacement and gentrification have also resulted. What has been largely missing in all these local civic and economic development efforts by institutions of higher education has been a focus on entrepreneurial education targeting residents and businesses as entrepreneurs and owners. To date, only one case study, Morris et al. (2011), has detailed a university-based entrepreneurship program and its impact on a local challenged, inner-city neighborhood. Their approach focused on community-based entrepreneurship and multifaceted partnerships, with a goal of fostering 100 startups over 5 years. Program components included training programs, courses and consulting services, a micro-credit fund, an entrepreneur's association, a community board, an incubator facility, and a test kitchen. A number of quantitative outcome metrics were provided, including the number of students and faculty engaged, loans, workshops, attendees, new ventures, and new jobs. Interestingly, Morris et al. described the progress as complex and disjointed. Overall, the initiative supported the launch of 48 ventures; however,

these ventures were primarily businesses in competitive, low-growth markets. What was not evident, the authors concluded, was the development of entrepreneurial talent launching innovative startups.

More recently, Wang (2021) described university-based efforts to foster entrepreneurialism within their local “underserved communities” as nascent but encouraging. Wang’s study sampled 24 universities attending a national conference organized by the University of Washington that has been leading efforts to develop a network of entrepreneurial centers focused on local underserved communities. This network has since evolved into Ascend, a program in 15 cities to drive small business growth and job opportunities in underserved communities (GLY Partners, 2025). In Wang’s interviews with 18 entrepreneurship programs focusing on underserved neighborhoods, he found both direct and indirect impacts. These impacts, however, were primarily qualitative in nature and centered around three common themes. First, programs provide entrepreneurial training to build human capital and professional knowledge to grow women- and minority-owned business, delivered via classes, workshops, coaching, consulting services, and networking events. Second, these entrepreneurship programs promote economic development in disadvantaged neighborhoods, resulting in job creation and revenue generation. The author provided evidence from three universities detailing the number of jobs created and revenue generated. Third, these programs targeting underserved communities foster an inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem, in particular social entrepreneurial efforts that strengthen the community.

Creative Economies

The idea that a creative economy can be an important catalyst for economic development and urban renewal is not new. Richard Florida’s (2002) creative class theory of economic development argues that the key to economic development and urban revitalization is attracting the “creative class.” In his theory, urban success revolves around attracting creatives, such as artists, scientists, and architects. Florida argued that creative people are more tolerant, open, and inclusive, and in turn attract more people in creative-related occupations, which then powers economic growth in the area.

This creative economy revitalization model

has had successes; however, it does not necessarily target residents and businesses in the neighborhood but rather seeks to attract others from outside the neighborhood, which has resulted in displacement, gentrification, and socioeconomic inequality (Spirou, 2021; Wang, 2021). See, for example, the studies of Scranton (Rich, 2013), Knoxville (Markley & Sharma, 2016), Baltimore (Rich & Tsitsos, 2016), and Portland (Redaelli, 2018). More research is needed regarding creative entrepreneurship and, in particular, creative entrepreneurship targeting underserved communities (Chang & Wyszomirski, 2015; Wang, 2021; Wang et al., 2021; Welter et al., 2016). To our knowledge, only one study, Wang et al. (2021), has investigated an approach that focused on promoting creative entrepreneurship among local, underserved residents and businesses. We are aware of no university-based entrepreneurship programs promoting the creative economy to their local community to encourage economic growth and revitalization.

A Small Anchor’s Strategy for Urban Growth: Millsaps College’s ELSEWORKS

Millsaps College, a small liberal arts college in Jackson, Mississippi, serves as an anchor institution in its urban community. The college’s entrepreneurship program, ELSEWORKS, was established in 2010 and demonstrates that a “small” anchor can foster economic growth in a challenged neighborhood adjacent to campus. The program is built on a community-centered model for urban renewal: It functions like a business consultancy where project teams (led by faculty, staff, and industry experts) guide student analysts in providing local entrepreneurs and organizations with a wide range of business services. In essence, Millsaps College, through ELSEWORKS, leverages academic resources to spur creative economy development in the nearby Midtown neighborhood while simultaneously providing experiential learning opportunities for students through real-world engagement.

The ELSEWORKS Model and Mission

The mission of ELSEWORKS emphasizes student-led collaboration with resilient communities to foster economic impact and cultivate the entrepreneurial spirit in underserved neighborhoods. This mission highlights the dual focus on student development

and community impact. Recognizing the central role of students in achieving its mission, the program has defined clear student learning goals for participating “student analysts.” These learning objectives ensure that the educational outcomes for students align with the program’s community engagement strategy. Specifically, students participating in ELSEWORKS are expected to achieve the following:

- Develop entrepreneurial knowledge and practical business skills.
- Increase their confidence in successfully performing challenging, real-world business tasks.
- Gain an appreciation for the important role and function of entrepreneurs in society.

Together, the mission and learning goals underpin a model in which student learning goes hand-in-hand with community revitalization. Guided by this mission-driven approach, ELSEWORKS immerses students in hands-on consulting projects that both build their competencies and address genuine needs in the neighborhood’s economy.

A Community-Centered Shared Value Approach

Building on its mission, the ELSEWORKS program adopts a community-centered shared value approach to neighborhood revitalization. Recent literature on anchor institutions emphasizes the need for strategies that create shared value—yielding socioeconomic benefits for the local community—rather than traditional “place-based” investments that primarily benefit the institution itself. As a small college with relatively limited resources, Millsaps designed ELSEWORKS to leverage what it does have, engaged faculty and talented students, in combination with the community’s own assets. This approach has allowed the program to positively impact both the surrounding Midtown community and the students involved, illustrating a mutually beneficial model of engagement.

Crucially, the ELSEWORKS strategy is grounded in partnership and responsiveness. The program has made a patient investment in building trustful relationships with community leaders and organizations, and it actively involves neighborhood stakeholders in identifying needs and shaping initiatives. Rather than imposing

a top-down plan, ELSEWORKS works with the community: Its efforts are intentionally directed by local input and aligned with the neighborhood’s vision for itself. Over time, this patient, collaborative approach has enabled the college to go beyond the typical anchor institution tactic of using its procurement or real-estate projects to spur growth. Instead, Millsaps’s focus has been on fostering creative entrepreneurship and grassroots urban growth in Midtown, driven by the community’s own creative economy and vision for renewal.

In practice, the program’s strategy can be summarized by three key tactics that operationalize the shared value approach:

1. Leverage the college’s key assets: Deploy faculty expertise and business-trained students to offer local businesses and entrepreneurs professional-quality consulting services (comparable to those of top firms). By acting as pro bono business consultants, the college teams provide support in areas such as business planning, financial forecasting, market research, and marketing strategy—services that small enterprises in the neighborhood might not otherwise afford.
2. Leverage the community’s creative assets: Identify and bolster the creative economy assets already present in the community. This means supporting local entrepreneurs, artists, and makers and helping transform their creativity into sustainable ventures. ELSEWORKS intentionally builds upon Midtown’s existing strengths (e.g., artisan businesses, cultural initiatives) to catalyze growth from within the neighborhood’s own talent base.
3. Engage in deep, sustained collaboration: Form long-term partnerships with key community organizations through sustained relationship-building with neighborhood stakeholders and leaders. Rather than one-off projects, ELSEWORKS commits to ongoing collaboration—meeting regularly with community partners, remaining present over years, and adapting to evolving needs. This deep engagement builds trust and local capacity, making the college a reliable partner in the neighborhood’s development.

One particularly impactful partnership illustrating this third tactic is the collaboration with Midtown Partners, Inc., the

nonprofit community advocacy organization for the Midtown neighborhood. From the early stages of ELSEWORKS, faculty and staff worked hand-in-hand with Midtown Partners on economic development and neighborhood revitalization efforts. A faculty member even serves on the Midtown Partners Board of Directors, ensuring close alignment and communication. This close alliance proved critical in enabling ELSEWORKS student teams and faculty to engage at the grassroots level—an engagement that would have been far more difficult to establish independently. Through Midtown Partners and similar partners (such as the local business association and neighborhood coalition), ELSEWORKS gained the community insight and trust needed to implement projects effectively on the ground. The result has been a stronger, more authentic campus–community partnership where both sides contribute and benefit: Local businesses receive high-quality consulting help, and students gain immersive experience and the reward of seeing their work fuel real community progress.

The Midtown Neighborhood

Midtown is a majority Black, low-income neighborhood located just north of downtown Jackson, Mississippi, encompassing approximately 215 acres of residential, commercial, and light industrial space. It is home to the Midtown Arts District, a nascent artist community of welders, carpenters, painters, sculptors, glass artists, seamstresses, designers, and chefs. The neighborhood includes roughly 900 housing units, primarily single-family homes, and a population of more than 2,000 residents, 89% of whom are Black and 7% White. Like many older urban neighborhoods, Midtown has long faced challenges associated with blight, disinvestment, and population decline. However, committed businesses, residents, and partners have worked together to promote its revitalization. Leading these efforts is Midtown Partners, which was established in 1995 to advance Midtown's social and economic renewal. In 2010, Midtown Partners led a community-based planning process that produced the Midtown master plan, a comprehensive strategy addressing housing, economic development, health, safety, and sustainability. Developed collaboratively with residents, businesses, and stakeholders, the plan aimed to improve quality of life for Midtown residents

and highlighted business planning and entrepreneurship assistance as key priorities: 39% of surveyed residents expressed interest in starting or improving a business, and a 2011 survey found that 93% of existing businesses were interested in receiving assistance or training.

The Entrepreneurship Program

The ELSEWORKS entrepreneurship program was launched in 2010 by a team of four faculty members from accounting, economics, management, and marketing, supported by a newly created staff position, the director of entrepreneurial development. Three of the authors of this article were not outside observers but rather among the founding faculty who conceived, developed, and led the ELSEWORKS program over the entire period described below. Our account of the four phases of the program is therefore drawn from our direct observations and involvement, rather than formal surveys or third-party data collection. This practitioner perspective provides an insider view of the model's evolution, outcomes, and challenges.

Also in 2010, the Mississippi Arts Commission (MAC) and the Mississippi Development Authority (MDA), recognizing the state's rich artistic and literary heritage, commissioned a study of Mississippi's creative economy. The study concluded that these distinctive creative assets could serve as a catalyst for job creation and economic growth across communities and aligned with the Mississippi Economic Council's Blueprint Mississippi, which called for leveraging the state's creative strengths for development. In response, the program's faculty, together with the executive director of Midtown Partners, proposed that Midtown serve as the first pilot site for implementing these recommendations, building on the neighborhood's long-standing ties to the arts and demonstrating a model of creative economy-driven revitalization. The proposal was accepted, and ELSEWORKS's focus was established: to foster growth in Midtown's creative economy. Funding was secured from the Robert M. Hearin Support Foundation, a Mississippi charitable trust dedicated to advancing the state's economic development through grants to higher education. Modest stipends were provided to faculty; however, most grant funding supported graduate scholarships and the director position to coordinate day-to-day work with student analysts.

Each summer, ELSEWORKS recruits student analysts through a rigorous process: Students apply and submit a letter of interest, and select candidates are invited for an interview. Ultimately, we typically select between 10 and 20 students to serve as analysts for the year. Nearly all ELSEWORKS student analysts have degrees in business-related fields, including economics, accounting, business administration, or an MBA, with only a few exceptions from fields such as communications. At the start of each semester, we poll our student analysts about their skills, strengths, and interests to inform project assignments. Students most often work on multiple projects simultaneously, allowing them to gain diverse, hands-on experience while contributing meaningfully to the program's initiatives.

Our Long-Term Commitment: The Four Phases of the ELSEWORKS–Midtown Partnership

The following section highlights the essential work in each of the four phases of the program's evolving strategy in Midtown. For more detailed description of the work in the four phases of the Midtown Project, see the Appendix.

Phase 1, 2012–2015

In Phase 1 of our partnership, we focused on two main initiatives:

- Developing two creative business incubators to provide business assistance to new and existing businesses in Midtown. In addition to acquiring, renovating, and opening these centers, one 20,000 square feet and the other 11,000 square feet, the ELSEWORKS students developed a brand strategy for businesses to be included in these two spaces, “The Hatch” and “The Hangar.”
- Developing community gathering spaces as requested by residents in the Midtown neighborhood.

While this development was happening, the ELSEWORKS students were meeting with existing and potential businesses to support their entrepreneurial efforts, putting into practice what they had been learning in the Millsaps Else School classrooms. Equally important, the partnership between Midtown and Millsaps grew. For example, ELSEWORKS and Midtown Partners partnered in successfully recruiting Lucky Town

Brewing, Jackson's first microbrewery, to Midtown. Additionally, the faculty chair of ELSEWORKS joined the board of Midtown Partners.

Phase 2, 2015–2018

In Phase 2, many of the goals established in Phase 1 were operationalized:

- “The Hub Midtown,” which included the Hatch and the Hangar, became fully operational.
- A wave of businesses moved into these and other spaces, with 21 new businesses opening in Midtown. The Hatch was organically developing into a culinary incubator, with various food- and beverage-related businesses, while the Hangar had a range of creative entrepreneurs, including a video production company, an architectural salvage business, and a fashion designer.
- Grant funding was secured to further support ELSEWORKS consulting work.
- ELSEWORKS faculty and students began working with the Business Association of Midtown (BAM) to collaborate on its first business plan; two faculty members joined the BAM board.
- Planning for the community gathering spaces proceeded.
- Midtown opened the state's first K–12 community charter school, and ELSEWORKS offered an after-school E-Club (E for entrepreneurship) to fifth and sixth grade students. In collaboration with neighborhood artists, these students developed a comic book that featured a superhero drone, Midbot.
- The Else School Business Advantage Program (BAP), a 15-week business essentials certificate program (spearheaded by an ELSEWORKS faculty member), included five Midtown artists and eight participants from Midtown nonprofits.

Phase 3, 2018–2021

As work continued into Phase 3, several significant goals were met:

- A community gathering space,

- Coffee Prose, opened as a coffee shop and bookstore. The presence of Coffee Prose marked significant progress and brought about optimism for other Midtown businesses and residents.
- A second community gathering space, the Midtown Depot Art Park and Beer Garden, an outdoor venue, began with a soft opening, hosting events.
 - ELSEWORKS faculty and staff continued to work with Midtown businesses, including a cold drip coffee and tea company that successfully expanded its sales footprint to the East Coast, a video production company, and a security company operated by a Midtown resident.
 - Student analysts assisted Red Squared Productions, a tenant in the Hangar building, with developing a financial model and helped secure a loan for purchase of the building. This new owner was a resident of Midtown and continues to operate his business as well as provide incubator space to other businesses.
 - Three Midtown artists received full scholarships to the BAP, and 14 participants from nonprofits that provide services to the Midtown community received partial scholarships.

Phase 4, 2021–2024

Phase 4 has allowed for still further fulfillment of the ELSEWORKS and Midtown collaborative efforts, including the following:

- The video production company mentioned earlier grew into Mississippi’s first industry standard soundstage for film and television.
- A modular housing startup added to the existing businesses in the Hangar.
- Additional businesses moved into Midtown, including a coffee roaster and a proposed rum distillery.
- More traditional funding sources became available for Midtown businesses in light of the growth and increased stability of the neighborhood.

- The Midtown branding project concluded, with successful rebranding of the neighborhood and its businesses.
- Also during this phase, three Midtown artists received full scholarships to the BAP, and 14 participants from nonprofits that provide services to the Midtown community received partial scholarships.

Impact Across Four Phases

The program’s phased implementation provides clear evidence of the efficacy of its three key tactics. Across all four phases of the initiative (2012–2024), the college consistently leveraged its own key assets—namely, faculty expertise and student talent—to deliver extensive pro bono business support to Midtown. In each phase, faculty-led student teams served as consultants to local entrepreneurs and small businesses, providing high-quality services in business planning, market research, financial modeling, and marketing that these ventures would otherwise struggle to afford. This sustained infusion of the college’s resources is reflected in tangible outcomes: Over the decade, roughly 160 students gained direct experience as business analysts, and dozens of courses (seven graduate and 35 undergraduate classes) incorporated experiential projects assisting Midtown enterprises. Equally important, the phased initiatives leveraged the community’s creative assets at every step. The program deliberately nurtured Midtown’s existing talent and cultural strengths by establishing creative business incubators (the Hatch and the Hangar) that offered affordable space and mentorship to local makers and artists, supporting established creative enterprises (for example, helping an artisan glass studio expand its product line and facilitating the opening of the city’s first craft brewery in Midtown), and launching new community-driven ventures like a combined café and bookstore (Coffee Prose) and an arts-centered public space (the Midtown Depot Art Park and Beer Garden). By building on the neighborhood’s artistic and creative base throughout Phases 1–4, the program catalyzed homegrown entrepreneurship and grassroots urban growth, validating the strategy of spurring renewal from within the community’s own creative economy.

Furthermore, the four phases underscore the

pivotal role of engaging in deep, sustained collaboration—the third key tactic—in achieving these outcomes. From the outset, the college nurtured long-term partnerships with Midtown stakeholders and actively involved community leaders in decision making. This commitment to deep, sustained collaboration is evident throughout the phases: The entrepreneurship program worked together with Midtown Partners (the neighborhood’s lead advocacy organization, with a faculty member even serving on its board) and helped establish and support the Business Association of Midtown, ensuring local businesses had a continual voice and ally. Collaborative planning with residents shaped major projects (for instance, neighborhood listening sessions guided the design of the Midtown Depot concept after community members toured a similar successful space in another city), and the program cosponsored regular Beer and Business workshops for BAM members and even ran youth entrepreneurship clubs at the local charter school—all of which cemented trust and alignment between the college and the community. Over more than a decade, this patient, relationship-driven approach built significant local capacity and buy-in, allowing the program to adapt to Midtown’s evolving needs and to coordinate efforts with broader community initiatives (such as housing renovations that prevented displacement of residents during revitalization). By Phase 4, the college had become an integral, trusted partner in Midtown’s revitalization ecosystem rather than a transient contributor. In sum, the evidence from Phases 1–4 demonstrates that by leveraging institutional and community assets through sustained, collaborative engagement, the program realized a true shared value approach: The Midtown neighborhood experienced tangible socioeconomic gains—from new business launches and expansions to enriched cultural amenities—while the college advanced its educational mission, giving students immersive real-world learning experiences that fueled genuine community progress.

Measuring Midtown’s Progress

The preceding section documents ELSEWORKS’s direct work with individual businesses and entrepreneurs in Midtown, highlighting our support of local enterprises and the number of students who gained valuable business experience through this work. In this section, we step back to present

broader statistics on the revitalization of the neighborhood itself. Although ELSEWORKS cannot claim sole credit for these improvements, we are confident that our long-term presence, partnerships, and interventions have played an influential role in catalyzing aspects of this progress.

Measuring socioeconomic development at the neighborhood scale presents unique challenges, as reliable data are often unavailable at such a granular level (Alghumgham, 2017; Trullén & Galletto, 2018). In their study of neighborhood quality, Cohen and Pettit (2019) identified key indicators, including resident demographics, housing conditions, property vacancy and blight, economic activity, and crime. For this study, we were fortunate that Midtown Partners had commissioned a comprehensive neighborhood analysis in 2010, resulting in a master plan that established a valuable baseline. That plan aimed to identify opportunities and challenges and recommend priority actions for revitalization, drawing on data from resident surveys, a building inventory, and the 2010 Decennial Census.

Data Sources and Collection

For this study, ELSEWORKS collected new data on building conditions to enable direct comparison with the 2010 Midtown master plan. A resident survey was also conducted in 2022, allowing limited comparison with select findings from 2010. In addition, ELSEWORKS compared socioeconomic characteristics from the 2020 Decennial Census to those from 2010. Finally, ELSEWORKS conducted the first comprehensive survey of Midtown businesses. Although no comparable business survey was conducted in 2010, our survey provides a useful baseline for future tracking.

Building Conditions

The 2010 Midtown master plan provided maps that identified the building conditions of all buildings in the neighborhood. This information was converted to a database using information from the Hinds County land roll. The land roll provided information on parcel number, address, listed owner, type of property (commercial, residents, warehouse, etc.), and appraised value. To replicate the building condition information in 2022, the Hinds County tax assessor land roll was used in conjunction with street-level videos. Using a phone camera mounted on a gimbal, videos were filmed

of every street in the neighborhood and included a voice-over for each address, with a description of the building condition.

Buildings in the 2010 master plan were classified as being in one of four categories: in standard or in good condition, in need of minor repair (i.e., cosmetic repairs), in need of major repair (i.e., structural damage or other major damage), or dilapidated or in severe condition. Beyond these labels, however, the 2010 master plan provided no guidance for classifying buildings. Thus, a local architect was consulted for the present study to provide additional description to each category. In addition, two other categories were used, “under construction” and “under renovation.” These descriptions are listed in Table 1, and each building in the database was categorized accordingly in 2022.

Resident Survey

The resident survey was conducted in 2022 with data collected in two waves. First, a neighborhood event organized by Midtown Partners and ELSEWORKS was held in the summer and included free food and vendors to incentivize resident attendance. ELSEWORKS students asked residents to complete the survey both at this event and in a second wave, including door-to-door campaigning. Whereas the 2010 resident survey focused primarily on the attributes of housing units, the 2022 questionnaire focused primarily on resident sentiment about the neighborhood.

Census Bureau Data

Statistics were collected from the 2020 Decennial Census for comparison to similar statistics in 2010. These statistics were collected using specific blocks that define the Midtown area, and information was gathered regarding Midtown’s population, households, and housing units.

Business Survey

A survey of all businesses in Midtown was conducted during winter 2021 through spring 2022. Businesses were defined as all nonhouseholds in the neighborhood, including all for-profit businesses, not-for-profit businesses, and artists. Employing the business directory published by the Business Association of Midtown, efforts were made to contact all 81 establishments either by phone, email, or in person. In this initial contact, the purpose of the survey, as well as a raffle incentive, was described. Following this contact, the questionnaire was emailed, mailed, and/or delivered in person.

Results

Building Conditions

Table 2 compares building conditions from the 2010 master plan to those recorded in 2022, showing clear signs of improvement. The number of dilapidated parcels declined by 73% (from 192 to 52), largely reflecting the removal of blighted, substandard structures. Parcels needing major repairs fell by 66% (from 247 to 84), most of them

Table 1. Building Condition Classification

Classification	Description
Standard	Structures with no visible cosmetic issues, roofing damage, foundation damage, or obvious disrepair
Minor repair	Structures in need of only cosmetic repair and with no visible structural damage such as roofing or foundation issues
Major repair	Structures with obvious roofing damage or foundation issues or structures that appear to be in a general state of disrepair
Dilapidated	Structures that appear to be uninhabitable, such as structures with broken windows, boarded entryways, collapsed roofs, fire damage, or overtaken by vegetation
Under construction	Structures being demolished for a new structure or empty lots being newly developed
Under renovation	Structures under renovation

Table 2. Building Condition Comparison

Building condition	2010 (number)	2022 (number)	% change
Dilapidated	192	52	-73
Major repair	247	84	-66
Minor repair	212	245	+16
Standard	238	491	+106
Under construction	N/A	6	N/A
Under renovation	N/A	37	N/A

Note. In 2010, 889 parcels were identified in Midtown. The total number of parcels identified in 2022 was 915. The increase in number of parcels is the result of some lots being split into two.

Table 3. Resident Survey Sentiment Analysis (Percent Responding)

	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
Neighborhood	16.39	36.07	22.95	16.39	8.20
Sidewalks	15.00	31.67	23.33	23.33	6.67
Streets	6.56	18.03	21.31	18.03	36.07
Livingston Park ^a	9.84	19.67	44.26	13.11	13.11
Grocery stores ^a	14.75	37.70	27.87	13.11	6.56
“Things to do”	11.48	19.67	26.23	24.59	18.03
Safety	9.84	24.59	27.87	16.39	21.31

^aPercentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

residential properties, indicating significant investment in the neighborhood’s housing stock. Parcels requiring only minor repairs rose modestly by 16%, suggesting many structures are transitioning toward better condition. Notably, parcels in standard condition more than doubled, increasing by 106% (from 238 to 491). Collectively, these changes represent substantial progress in improving Midtown’s physical environment—a key indicator of revitalization.

Resident Sentiment

As noted above, resident surveys were conducted in both 2010 and 2022. The 2010 survey focused primarily on household characteristics such as the number of bedrooms, bathrooms, and vehicles, whereas the 2022 survey emphasized resident sentiment about the neighborhood. As a result, this section

primarily presents findings from the 2022 survey, with limited comparisons to 2010 where relevant.

According to the 2020 Census, Midtown included 696 households. The 2022 resident survey received responses from 64 households, yielding an estimated 9.2% response rate. Among respondents, 76% were female and 95% identified as African American, with an average age of 60 (ranging from 22 to 97). Homeownership was reported by 61% of respondents, and 85% indicated plans to remain in Midtown over the next 3 years. Just over half (54%) were employed, and of those, 81% commuted to jobs outside Midtown, though typically within 15 miles.

The 2022 survey included questions about residents’ perceptions of Midtown, summarized in Table 3. Overall, 52% of respondents

reported being very satisfied or satisfied with the neighborhood, 23% were neutral, and 25% were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. Sidewalks received relatively positive ratings, with 47% satisfied or very satisfied, whereas streets drew more concern, with 54% dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. Perceptions of safety were mixed, with 38% expressing dissatisfaction. A majority (52%) were satisfied or very satisfied with the selection of local grocery stores, though interpretations of “local” varied—many respondents mentioned shopping at Corner Market, located just outside Midtown’s boundaries. On recreational opportunities, 26% were neutral and 43% were dissatisfied with the availability of “things to do” in Midtown. When asked for suggestions to improve the neighborhood, the top priorities cited were safety, crime reduction, street conditions, and beautification.

Many of the concerns expressed in 2022 also appeared in the 2010 resident survey, though the earlier survey collected responses through an open-ended question rather than a 5-point Likert scale. In 2010, when asked, “How would you like your neighborhood to be improved?” residents most frequently cited improved streets (24.8%), enhanced safety (22.8%), and more stores, parks, or community activities (24.8%).

Demographic Trends

Table 4 presents Midtown neighborhood statistics from the 2010 and 2020 Decennial Census. Midtown’s population declined by 371 individuals (19.05%), a steeper drop than Jackson’s overall 12.01% decline during the same period (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Despite this decrease, the neighborhood’s demographic composition remained relatively stable: The Black or African American population declined from 93.74% to 88.52% (a reduction of approximately 430 individuals), while the White population increased from 5.08% to 7.42% (a gain of 18 individuals). There was also a slight increase in residents categorized as “other,” primarily reflecting growth in multiracial residents. Overall, these changes show that while Midtown experienced population loss, its racial composition remained largely unchanged.

Since 2010, there has been a very slight uptick in the percentage of the Midtown population that is female, from 50.56% in 2010 to 52.38% in 2020. Additionally, the neighborhood’s age distribution has shifted

slightly, with a lower percentage of individuals in 2020 who are under 21 (27.58%) relative to 2010 (32.80%). The number of residents in the 40- to 64-year-old age range increased by 1.33 percentage points, and there was a larger gain of 3.92 percentage points in the 65 and older category.

In terms of total households, the Census Bureau data indicates there were 26 fewer households in Midtown in 2020 than in 2010. Additionally, there were more 1-person households in 2020 (45.40%) compared to 2010 (37.53%), with corresponding decreases in households with two or more individuals (62.47% in 2010 and 54.60% in 2020). The number of housing units has increased slightly, with a drop of 5.05 percentage points in owner-occupied housing, a gain of 1.35 percentage points in rental-occupied housing, and an uptick of 3.71 percentage points in vacant housing.

Business Sentiment

Of the 81 Midtown businesses, 30 unique businesses participated in the survey, for a response rate of 37.01%. The sample was comprised of the following types of businesses: 10 services, seven artistic, six manufacturing, six retail, four nonprofits, two churches, two restaurants, and two auto/car related. Because some respondents checked more than one category, the total summed to more than 30. The oldest business that responded to the survey was founded in 1909, with the newest founded in 2021. Thirteen percent were founded before 1950, and 63% indicated that their business was founded after 2000. Forty-three percent were founded in the last 10 years, indicating that Midtown has seen substantial development in its business environment.

Regarding property ownership, 57% of respondents indicated they owned their property, and 43% reported renting their space. Regarding business investments, 79% reported investments into property, plant, and equipment (PPE) since founding. The average investment in PPE was \$204,000, with the median investment at \$50,000. One business reported investments that were double the next-highest investment, upwardly skewing the average investment. However, a median investment of \$50,000 represents substantial investments into property, plant, and equipment, especially given the diverse mix of businesses in the neighborhood and that almost half rent space. Further, 69% reported undertak-

Table 4. Population, Household, and Housing Unit Statistics

Population	2010		2020	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total	1,948	100.00	1,577	100.00
White	99	5.08	117	7.42
Black	1,826	93.74	1,396	88.52
Other	23	1.18	64	4.06
Male	963	49.44	751	47.62
Female	985	50.56	826	52.38
0–20 years	639	32.80	435	27.58
21–39 years	512	26.28	414	26.25
40–64 years	651	33.42	548	34.75
65 or older	146	7.49	180	11.41
Households				
Total	722	100.00	696	100.00
1 person	271	37.53	316	45.40
2 or more	451	62.47	380	54.60
Average family size	2.35		2.03	
Housing units^a				
Total	872	100.00	880	100.00
Owner occupied	270	30.96	228	25.91
Rental occupied	452	51.83	468	53.18
Vacant	150	17.20	184	20.91

^aIncludes apartments.

ing renovations since founding. The average renovation was \$103,000, whereas the median investment was \$75,000. These investments represent substantial improvements to the physical location and offerings of the businesses in Midtown. Also indicative of progress, respondents indicated increases in both full- and part-time labor, and one third of respondents thought they would outgrow their space in the next 3 years. Seventy-six percent of businesses reported revenue growth since establishment, as opposed to 24% reporting no revenue growth. Excluding nonprofits and churches, however, over 80% of businesses reported revenue growth since establishment. Of the businesses that reported no revenue growth, two of them were founded in the last year. Fifty-two percent of businesses reported

breakeven-level profits, 31% reported positive profit levels, and 17% reported negative profit levels. Excluding nonprofits and churches, however, the number of businesses reporting negative profit levels decreased to 13%. Several businesses reported that positive profit levels were negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Last, 79% of businesses reported that business was better than around the time of founding. The remaining businesses reported that business was “about the same” as the time of founding. No business reported that business was worse than around the time of founding.

Business sentiment analysis, reported in Table 5, indicated positive trends about the future direction of businesses and the

Table 5. Business Survey Sentiment Analysis (Percent Responding)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I am optimistic about the future of my business ^a	58.33	33.33	8.33	0.00	0.00
I am satisfied with the current business climate in Midtown ^a	29.17	25.00	37.50	8.33	0.00
Over the next 3 years, I am optimistic about the business climate in Midtown ^a	29.17	50.00	16.67	4.17	0.00
I am satisfied with the location of my business	34.48	41.38	17.24	3.45	3.45
My coworkers and I feel safe working in Midtown	13.79	41.38	27.59	17.24	0.00
I think my customers feel safe shopping in Midtown [if applicable]	3.85	11.54	57.69	15.38	11.45
Crime in the neighborhood has affected my business	3.45	27.59	31.03	20.69	17.24

^aPercentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

neighborhood. Fifty-eight percent strongly agreed, and 33% agreed that they were optimistic about the future of their business. Satisfaction with the current business climate in Midtown, however, received slightly lower ratings, with 54% either strongly agreeing or agreeing and 46% either neutral or disagreeing when asked, “Currently I am satisfied with the business climate in Midtown.” Regarding the future, nearly 80% of businesses indicated that they either strongly agreed or agreed when asked, “Over the next three years, I am optimistic about the business climate in Midtown.” Only one business signaled pessimism about the future of the business climate in Midtown. Perceptions were somewhat concerning related to safety and crime but were no surprise, given the crime issues Jackson has experienced, particularly during the pandemic. When asked whether coworkers felt safe working in Midtown, 55.17% either strongly agreed or agreed, yet 44.83% were

either neutral or disagreed. Concerns were even greater when asked about customer safety, with 58% neutral and 27% either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement “I think my customers feel safe shopping in Midtown.” Nearly a third of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that crime has affected their business. Yet another 31% were neutral, and 38% did not agree that crime had affected their business. The most common examples of crime given were break-ins and theft of equipment.

Finally, businesses were asked about neighborhood improvements and business needs. When asked, “Name three things you would like to be improved in Midtown,” 30% indicated roads and streets in Midtown, and 26% listed crime. The next most common response was more businesses in the neighborhood (19%), a stronger police presence (19%), and water and sewer improvements (15%). These responses mirror concerns with infrastructure issues at the city level.

Together, these findings reflect meaningful progress in Midtown over the past decade, consistent with the kinds of improvements our anchor strategy aimed at encouraging. Although many forces have shaped the neighborhood's trajectory, and ELSEWORKS does not claim sole credit, the results align with the goals of our three key tactics: leveraging the college's assets, supporting the community's creative strengths, and fostering sustained collaboration. Just as important, this analysis now establishes a baseline for tracking Midtown's future progress. Moving forward, ELSEWORKS's contribution will extend beyond direct engagement to include leading efforts to monitor and report on key indicators of neighborhood health. Revitalization depends not only on partnerships and action but also on knowing where things stand and how they are changing over time.

Discussion

ELSEWORKS demonstrates a coherent model of entrepreneurship-driven community revitalization that holds promise for other institutions. This shared value model offers a potential blueprint for replication by other colleges and universities—especially smaller institutions—located near under-resourced neighborhoods. As outlined in the preceding Impact Across Four Phases section, the program achieved meaningful impact through three key best practices: (1) leveraging college assets, including faculty expertise and student talent, to deliver pro bono business services; (2) fostering entrepreneurship rooted in the neighborhood's existing creative economy; and (3) cultivating deep, sustained collaboration with community leaders and organizations.

The result of this multiphase approach has been measurable growth in Midtown's creative economy, including new businesses, business expansions, physical improvements to the neighborhood, and enhanced cultural amenities—all while avoiding displacement or significant demographic shifts. Local entrepreneurs and organizations in Midtown have gained business knowledge, resources, and momentum that might otherwise have been out of reach, contributing to gradual economic revitalization of the area. Simultaneously, Millsaps students have acquired invaluable hands-on experience, increased confidence, and a deeper understanding of social entrepreneurship—outcomes directly tied to the

program's learning goals. In essence, the college and community are creating shared value: The neighborhood experiences renewed economic activity and hope, and the institution fulfills its educational mission in a way that also advances the public good.

ELSEWORKS has offered a viable framework for replication; however, several lessons pointing to room for improvement have emerged. The program's organic evolution meant that measurement practices were not consistently rigorous during early phases. We lacked regular data collection intervals and did not measure student attitudes toward entrepreneurship in a pre-post design with a control group. We now seek to correct these critical shortcomings: The program is instituting annual monitoring protocols, as well as repeat resident and business surveys at 5-year intervals, and implementing a pre-post assessment of student learning outcomes. Together, these enhancements will strengthen the model's evaluability and provide a clearer framework for adaptation by other institutions.

In summary, the ELSEWORKS program at Millsaps College represents a "project with promise" in the realm of university-community engagement. It provides a viable and transferable model for how a small anchor institution can catalyze neighborhood revitalization through entrepreneurship education. By aligning its mission and student learning objectives with community-defined goals, and by employing strategic tactics grounded in collaboration and mutual benefit, the program charts a path that other institutions can adapt to their own settings. This case demonstrates that even with limited resources, an anchor institution can strategically deploy its human capital and knowledge to foster inclusive economic growth—offering lessons and inspiration for any college or university seeking to make a meaningful impact in its community.

Limitations and Future Plans

This study acknowledges limitations related to data collection, specifically with the resident and business surveys. Regarding the resident survey, only 64 residents from a population of 696 (or 9.2%) responded. The small sample size limitation is further compounded by the fact that many of the residents responded to the survey at a neighborhood event rather than having been selected through random sampling techniques. Thus, any interpretation of the

findings must recognize that the resident survey was largely derived from a convenience sample. It is also important to note that the 2010 resident survey focused primarily on physical aspects of homes rather than sentiment related to the neighborhood. These differences in the instruments limit comparisons. Because no business survey was conducted in 2010, there is no comparison of business sentiment across the 10-year period. In the future, both the resident and business surveys will be conducted in 5-year increments and will include questions from the previous surveys.

Assessment of student impact was through participation in the entrepreneurship program, thus it was not possible to glean whether the program developed student skills or impacted student attitudes. Future plans include a pre- and postassessment of student attitudes toward entrepreneurship as well pre- and postassessment of the development of key skills, such as communication and collaboration.

Conclusion

In partnership with residents, community stakeholders, business leaders, and industry experts, the Millsaps entrepreneurship program has provided an increasingly deep level of support to an increasingly wide number of projects—including the recruitment and cultivation of new businesses and entrepreneurs—all while shaping students as they acquire real-world business experience and learn how to impact their surrounding communities. A socioeconomic impact study documented positive changes to the Midtown community, including its physical attributes, business sentiment, and resident sentiment over the period of a decade. As one example, the number of assets in the

neighborhood, consisting of houses, businesses, and properties in habitable condition, increased by 74% over a 10-year time frame. Midtown is now experiencing business creation and improvement in the community’s housing stock—while avoiding displacement—with improvements occurring such that conventional investment is beginning to resurface.

In addition to positively impacting the community around it, the entrepreneurship program has also provided an experiential opportunity for its students to work with faculty, alumni, and other experts the way they might in a prestigious consultancy firm. Student analysts assist in the planning, development, implementation, and management of businesses as a part of a larger project to grow the creative economy in Jackson’s Midtown neighborhood. The students are intimately involved with and witness firsthand the successes and failures of businesses. In the process, students learn not only leadership, collaboration, and reasoning skills, but also entrepreneurial expertise, including the linkage between economic development and community engagement at a grassroots level. Because we believe in placing students in a position to have meaningful input into high-level decisions that have very real and potentially transformative impact, they learn to embrace diversity, risk, and challenges: In short, they learn how to be leaders. In conclusion, this shared value model utilized by a small anchor institution with limited resources has achieved, with its partners, significant socioeconomic outcomes for the adjacent local community. Further, this model not only achieves this socioeconomic impact, but positively impacts students as well.



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Appendix: Detailed Narration of the Four Phases of the Midtown Project

The following is a detailed description of the four phases of the ELSEWORKS Midtown project.

Phase 1, 2012–2015

The goals for “Building the Creative Economy in Midtown” focused on two central initiatives. First, attention was directed to the development of a creative business incubator and development center providing business assistance to new and existing businesses. Named the Hatch, this 11,000-square-foot warehouse, located within the heart of the Midtown Arts District, had been vacant and dilapidated but was acquired by Midtown Partners, which then renovated it for its current use. While business planning and renovations were ongoing for the Hatch, Midtown Partners acquired a second facility. Named the Hangar, this facility required only minor renovations and consisted of 20,000 square feet of warehouse space and 3,000 square feet of office space. The Hangar opened in 2013 and was soon fully occupied with eight budding businesses, all with access to consultation from ELSEWORKS. Tenants included a center for book and paper arts, along with a graphic designer, a community-engaged artist and writer, and even an entrepreneur who recycled shipping pallets into home furniture, to name a few.

As plans continued for the buildout of the Hatch, a significant amount of knowledge and experience was gained from operating the Hangar, including confirmation of demand, as it served as an important beta site. The buildout of the Hatch was phased in with a gallery space opening first in summer 2014. The gallery space was partially funded by a crowdfunding campaign, which gave students their first opportunity to raise funds in this manner.

As part of the business planning for these creative incubators, a branding strategy was developed that consisted of an umbrella brand, the Hub Midtown, to identify the cluster of creative businesses that included the two subbrands, the Hatch and the Hangar. Brand elements were chosen to be descriptive of both location and purpose. The colors were chosen to reflect the industrial history of the neighborhood. Similarly, the overall design, including style and font, supported an industrial appeal. The two slogans, “Where Creatives Connect”

and “Work, Share, Teach, Show and Live,” further reflected the mission of the Hub Midtown.

The second piece of Phase 1 was development of community gathering spaces. This need was supported by 80% of the residents during the master planning process. A feasibility study was completed and a building with potential identified, despite being vacant for many decades. A local chain of coffee shops and other similar businesses expressed interest; however, two concerns were voiced. One was the state of the adjacent buildings, which were dilapidated, mostly vacant, and in need of major repair. The second was access to Millsaps College, which was surrounded by fencing with no pedestrian or vehicle access from campus. Progress was made on both fronts. Midtown Partners and Gulf Coast Housing Corporation were awarded \$7 million in LIHTC (low-income housing tax credits) to fund renovations of 20 properties surrounding the potential location. Importantly, these LIHTC housing developments, along with the many new Habitat for Humanity houses, are income capped, which played a key role in avoiding displacement. In addition, plans for connecting the college’s western border and Midtown were incorporated into the college’s campus master plan.

Concurrent with the creative business incubator and community gathering space developments, various business assistance activities were implemented. First, a series of workshops was offered to residents and businesses, with participation totaling 58. Eight workshop participants continued engagement with one-on-one consulting with faculty and student analysts. Once the Hatch was completed, ELSEWORKS began holding office hours to provide business assistance, not only for incubator tenants, but for residents and existing businesses. In 2012, the Business Association of Midtown (BAM) was formed, and ELSEWORKS began working closely with its membership. Transitioning from workshops to quarterly presentations to community members, Beer and Business is sponsored by both ELSEWORKS and BAM. The membership is surveyed to identify topics of interest. These presentations are provided by local experts and include, for example, topics such as Taxes and Your Business; Licenses, Permits, and Zoning; and Finding Sources of Capital. Lastly, a 15-week certificate program offered by

Millsaps College’s business school, which teaches the essentials of business, provided nine Midtown artists full scholarships and nine other participants—from nonprofits that provide services to the Midtown community—partial scholarships.

Although the incubators were important for new startups, ELSEWORKS’s efforts also targeted existing creative businesses and attracted new developments. The oldest artistic business in Midtown, Pearl River Glass Studio, has been in existence since 1976, which preceded much of the decline and migration out of the community in the late 1980s and 1990s. The program assisted the owner and designer with business planning that resulted in a \$1 million expansion from boutique stained-glass windows to a wider range of consumer specialty glass products. Explained the owner,

My craft is a thousand years old, but when I needed to develop new methods to address market challenges, I turned to ELSEWORKS. The market was tough; there was not a lot of work. We had to survive, and we had to move forward. The business plan I had at the time was not going to do that. We had to think strategically; ELSEWORKS was helpful, including in fostering connections with local funders. They helped me move professionally and quickly through the planning process.

In terms of attracting new business, ELSEWORKS was actively involved in recruiting Lucky Town Brewing to Midtown. ELSEWORKS assisted Jackson’s first craft microbrewery with site selection, intern assistance, and securing bank financing. Additionally, the ELSEWORKS Entrepreneurial Investment Fund invested in Lucky Town.

In 2012, the faculty chair of ELSEWORKS joined the board of Midtown Partners, and in 2013, the director of entrepreneurial development joined the BAM board as vice president. In 2012, Millsaps College’s strategic plan prioritized programs that engage students in the broader Jackson community and invest resources in growing community partnerships. ELSEWORKS’s partnership with the Midtown community thus became an essential part of the college’s identity.

Phase 2, 2015–2018

The Hub Midtown, composed of the two buildings the Hatch and the Hangar, offering affordable space, customized business consultation, opportunities for outreach, and exposure to creative entrepreneurs, became operational. In May 2015, the first tenant in the Hatch, a coffee and tea company, began operations. With funding having been renewed by the Hearin Foundation, the primary focus of Phase 2 was to increase tenant occupancy at the Hub Midtown and new startups in Midtown and to build community ownership and pride by supporting the development of gathering spaces. The number of graduate student scholarships was expanded, and an undergraduate creative economy internship program was started.

With full occupancy in the Hangar and a steady stream of inquiries about space in the Hatch, the creative economy in Midtown was growing. Plans for community gathering spaces were also moving forward. What began as a sketch by an analyst in the first cohort was gaining momentum; the concept was finalized for an art park, beer garden, outdoor retail, and music space known collectively as the Depot to be located next to Lucky Town Brewery. Members of the neighborhood association joined staff from Midtown Partners to tour a similar business in Memphis, Tennessee. Upon returning, the program conducted a listening session, which found significant support from the residents for such a facility in Midtown. With the rehabilitation of surrounding properties and movement on campus for better access to the Midtown community, a second initiative—composed of a coffee shop, used bookstore, and studio loft complex—was also progressing.

During this phase, faculty and analysts began working more closely with BAM. The program assisted BAM with producing its first business plan in 2016 and implementing that plan in 2017. Two faculty joined and continue to serve on the board. An analyst team created the first BAM business directory, listing all 67 artists, businesses, and nonprofits in the neighborhood. The team also revamped the BAM website, adding a “Featured BAM Member” section with analysts conducting the interviews for content. A student team continues to maintain the website, and ELSEWORKS continues to host Beer and Business sessions.

During this phase, and after many years of concerns and struggles with its K-12 education opportunities, the first community charter school in the state opened in Midtown. In spring 2016, and for the next 2 years, ELSEWORKS participated in the after-school programs of Midtown Public Charter School by offering an E-Club (E for entrepreneurship) to fifth- and sixth-grade students. In the first club, E-Club students, in addition to touring and meeting entrepreneurs from the neighborhood, developed a comic book that featured a superhero drone, Midbot. Students celebrated with a launch party at a Midtown business selling graphic novels, comics, and records. Two more E-Clubs were offered in 2017 and 2018, but these followed a more Shark Tank-like model, with student teams pitching their ideas to local celebrities.

ELSEWORKS contributed to a wave of business expansion in Midtown—both directly, supporting nine businesses housed in the Hub Midtown, and indirectly, with support for an additional 21 new businesses that opened in Midtown. Interestingly, whereas the Hangar had a range of creative entrepreneurs, including a video production company, an architectural salvage business, and a fashion designer, the Hatch was organically developing into a culinary incubator. Joining the coffee and tea company was a gourmet food delivery business, a fermented food and beverage business, and a specialty tea business. Attendance in the 15-week business essentials certificate program included five Midtown artists receiving full scholarships and eight participants from nonprofits that provide services to the Midtown community receiving partial scholarships.

Phase 3, 2018–2021

Phase 3 of building Midtown's creative economy centered on community gathering, and one project with this focus came to fruition. Coffee Prose, a coffee shop and used bookstore, opened in 2018 across the street from Millsaps College. A team of analysts researched the viability of and worked with community members in support of the launch of Coffee Prose and assisted with its ramp-up. The development and opening dovetailed with the college's fundraising campaign in which proceeds totaled over \$20 million. This campaign served to reclaim the campus's west-facing entrance as the primary entrance to the college and thereby open Millsaps's symbolic front door

to the Midtown community, creating ease of access for pedestrian traffic to and from campus. The other major community gathering project was the Midtown Depot Art Park and Beer Garden. Having received the endorsement of the neighborhood, development and construction moved forward, with the Depot hosting soft events in 2021.

While significant effort was dedicated to the two new gathering places, work also included continued business assistance to existing and newly recruited Midtown businesses. Analysts worked with the owner of Red Squared Productions, a tenant in the Hub Midtown Hangar building, to develop a financial model that helped secure a loan for purchase of the building, as well as serving as a template for financing future buildout of the space. It is noteworthy that this new owner was also a resident of the community. Located in the Hub Midtown Hatch building, Mississippi Cold Drip Coffee & Tea Co. received support to expand to a larger space in the Hatch. Business analysts provided research that led to a supply chain management plan recommendation. As a result, Cold Drip expanded sales into Louisiana, as well as the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida. One undergraduate student served as an intern with the company, continued working while pursuing his MBA, and became a partner in the business upon graduation. Two more businesses in the Hatch, the gourmet food delivery business and a new tenant, a baker, were both provided with digital marketing plans, including video production and website development.

On the nonprofit side, analysts assisted the owner of Pearl River Glass Studio in executing his vision of an educational foundation centered around glass, clay, and the arts. These efforts included research to establish a 501(c)(3) organization and fundraising with the creation of a GoFundMe campaign. Perhaps the most meaningful project for the team was their role in establishing a new business in Midtown—Nearview Security. The owner grew up in Midtown and serves on the security staff at the College. The analyst team's work resulted in a business plan and agreement for Nearview to provide a patrol and other security services in Midtown. When patrolling began, it soon became apparent that use of the owner's personal car was not suitable. Analysts pivoted to the successful execution of a GoFundMe campaign to raise money for a patrol truck.

Throughout this phase, ELSEWORKS continued ongoing service to BAM, which included an updated digital and printed business directory. Support also continued for Beer and Business, with presentations from the City of Jackson’s Community Improvement Department, Community Bank on small business loans, and a local accountant talking about nonprofit status, to name a few. As with other colleges and universities, the pandemic caused Millsaps College to go remote after spring break in 2020, and project work went virtual. Although pivoted, project work was not significantly delayed. Campus reopened in fall 2020, and all projects were back up and moving forward, albeit with masks and physical distancing. During this phase, stakeholders in Midtown continued to participate in the 15-week business essentials certificate program. Three Midtown artists received full scholarships, and 14 participants from nonprofits that provide services to the Midtown community received partial scholarships.

Phase 4, 2021–2024

Helping to position the Hub Midtown as the state’s premier creative center, the Hangar’s former tenant, now owner, Red Squared Productions is developing Mississippi’s first industry standard soundstage for film and TV production. With growing demand for high-quality, affordable creative infrastructure, the Hangar will also offer equipment rentals, music, podcast and photography studios, and coworking offices. Analysts have researched and developed the business plan and associated pitch deck for investors and other stakeholders. A new Hangar tenant, Butterfly Dwellings, is a modular housing startup that has created a foldable, stackable, and shippable modular home that can be used for single-family homes or apartments and hotels. A project team worked with the owners to create an industry database for investors and clients, a pitch deck for the company, marketing videos, and naming and branding concepts.

The Hub Midtown expanded with the sale of a 10,000-square-foot building to Northshore Specialty Coffee. Located next to the Hatch, this building has been vacant and is now renovated and housing a coffee-roasting operation, linking with the culinary focus of its neighbor. A project team is helping with the next phase for this space, Jackson’s first craft rum distillery, named BRIX. In addition, ELSEWORKS is supporting

Northshore Specialty Coffee with the beta test on campus of a robotic coffee machine. The building that was purchased by Northshore Specialty Coffee was owned by Midtown Partners, who originally had plans to develop a nonprofit culinary center in the space, named Preserve. In fact, a project team was responsible for research and development of the business plan that, along with initial proformas and associated presentation material, secured a \$100,000 grant to be used as seed capital for leveraging other funding opportunities. Preserve has now pivoted to Farm 2 Community (F2C), which has a narrower mission to transform vacant lots into learning gardens and community farms across the Midtown neighborhood. And ELSEWORKS is on the front line participating in visioning charrettes and currently serving as point on development of the art park and skate garden piece of this F2C initiative.

The loss of Jackson’s first craft brewery, located in Midtown, was jolting for the newly opened Midtown Depot, which was next door. Excitement, however, is back with the F2C initiative. As noted above, ELSEWORKS is lead on the art park and skate garden development, which will be located two blocks from the Midtown Depot. This new development, a community space blending public art, recreation, and green design, will play well with the Depot—both spaces integrate art installations and green spaces, promote active lifestyles, and support creative expression. Lastly, a chief aim of Phase 4 is the development of a branding strategy for the Midtown neighborhood. This branding project kicked off when a graduate brand management class conducted a neighborhood audit that produced an initial round of brand concepts that were presented to members of the community. Feedback from this initial set of concepts is being assessed, with a final brand concept to be developed, along with brand elements including colors, style, and fonts. Once finalized, a brand concept will be presented to the Midtown community.

On campus, completion of a new west-facing gate and the location of a new Visual Arts Center at this new college entrance opens the door to our Midtown neighbors across the street—a clear operationalization of the college’s strategic plan. Now students can walk to Coffee Prose, and the Midtown Depot and Midtown residents can walk across the street to college events. A

project team continues to support Coffee Prose, having completed a competitive report that recommended a strategy shift. Recommendations being implemented include website redesign and increased digital presences, price increases, and, most significantly, a café featuring breakfast and lunch cuisine. During this phase in the 15-week business essentials certificate program, three Midtown artists received full scholarships, and 14 participants from nonprofits that provide services to the Midtown community received partial scholarships and completed the program.



Strengthening and Expanding College and Career Pathways to Address Regional Needs Through Partnerships and Shared Commitments

Angela M. Coppola and Leah M. Nellis

Abstract

There is value in strengthening the transition from high school to college and careers for all students in the state of Indiana. Local school districts, Indiana University Kokomo partners, and regional agencies worked together on the Department of Education “Explore, Engage, and Experience” (3E) Grant to enhance career exploration and pathway engagement for P-12 students in north central Indiana. This work was informed by the “grow your own” approach, which leverages both college and high school capacity and staffing to create new opportunities for high school students through dual enrollment or dual credit courses, intentional college advising, career development and professional networking, and work-based learning. We share our process of planning and implementing the program. Our goals of increasing career exploration engagement, work-based learning, and credentialing activities were met. We evaluate the outcomes, sustainability, and future practices or considerations for these kinds of programs.

Keywords: higher education, high school, career exploration, work-based learning, credentialing, school partnerships, college and career pathways



Recognizing the inherent value and contribution of community partners in higher education, we worked with local school districts to equitably address career exploration and college readiness in schools as well as labor market needs in north central Indiana through a grant project. Several high school to college pathways were created and are currently being implemented. The Tomorrow’s Workforce: Partnerships for Broadening College and Career Pathways (Tomorrow’s Workforce) project brought together individuals from multiple areas—P-12 education, higher education, economic development—to solve local challenges and strengthen local communities and the region of north central Indiana. Specifically, the project focused on both career exploration and pathway engagement for P-12 students in north central Indiana and was informed by statewide initiatives focused on high school redesign, career coaching, and youth

apprenticeship. We conclude by offering recommendations for building partnerships in this context, such as leveraging state-level mandates and roles of pathway specialists to ensure mutually beneficial outcomes.

The “Explore, Engage, and Experience” (3E) Grant Program

These established relationships are leveraged to (1) support a substantial expansion of pathway opportunities for high school students and (2) introduce career exploration and engagement curriculum in grades K-12. The project was funded through a multiyear grant from the Indiana Department of Education called the “Explore, Engage, and Experience” Grant, or 3E Grant, that facilitates career exploration and hands-on experiences designed to help prepare P-12 students for future careers and postsecondary education opportunities. One outcome of the

grant program is to increase the number of students completing a Next Level Program of Study (NLPS)/Career Technical Education (CTE) pathway or earning a high-value postsecondary credential (e.g., the Indiana College Core [ICC]). Another outcome is to increase P-12 student involvement in innovative career exploration and engagement opportunities in elementary and middle school.

Grant Program Planning

In preparation for the 3E Grant proposal, an initial local education agency (LEA) needs assessment indicated the lack of LEA capacity to meet some or all requirements (e.g., capstone courses) for specific NLPS pathways and that a partnership to address these gaps would be extremely valuable. In addition, LEAs expressed concern that, although certain in-demand jobs are of high interest to students, career pathways are not currently accessible in their district (e.g., health care, health sciences, business management, humanities, and computer science). These pathways align with the focus of the North Central Indiana Regional Economic Acceleration and Development Initiative (READI) and the 21st Century Talent Region, both of which contain strategies and action steps designed to support career pathway initiatives, postsecondary educational and credential attainment, and economic development. Additionally, the needs assessment identified LEA interest in partnering with Indiana University (IU) Kokomo to provide career exploration and development experiences to their P-12 students through campus visits, advising, career coaching, presentations from IU Kokomo staff and faculty, career fairs, and information about the level and type of postsecondary education needed for various careers and college readiness.

Partners included IU Kokomo, local school corporations, and the North Central Indiana Regional Planning Council (NCIRPC). NCIRPC served as the technical partner for this project, in coordination with the Region 4 Workforce Board, to provide targeted local expertise in community and economic development. IU Kokomo is one of five regional campuses in the IU system. Located 50 miles north of Indianapolis in Kokomo, Indiana, IU Kokomo is committed to student success and community engagement. This university serves approximately 3,100 students from a 14-county area in north central Indiana. Four local school corporations are community partners. These four LEAs are

active partners with IU Kokomo and have long-standing working relationships with the campus for various initiatives (Power Up for College for middle and high school students, primary partner for the ICC, Teacher Residency, grow-your-own programs, and dual credit course enrollment). These LEAs are also members of the IU Kokomo School of Education's Center for Educational Partnership (CEP), a formal network of more than 35 member school corporations in the region, which convenes regularly to serve in an advisory capacity to IU Kokomo and to pursue educational goals.

To plan and implement the Tomorrow's Workforce project through the 3E Grant, all partners participated in a College and Career Pathways Council (CCPC) that met monthly during the academic years. The CCPC determined action steps and assessed progress toward the goals of pathway expansion and implementation of career exploration curriculum in the four partner school districts. Additional stakeholders, such as the local economic development organizations and chambers of commerce, inform the work of the CCPC, provide input and feedback, and serve as partners in career pathway implementation. The mission of the CCPC is to identify ways in which IU Kokomo and regional employers can partner to support CTE pathway offerings, dual credit courses, and high-value credentials in local school corporations as well as strengthen the breadth and depth of career exploration opportunities for P-12 students. The CCPC shared information about successful practices and strategies achieved through this project with LEAs, organizations, and employers in the region through boards and advisory groups, such as the IU Kokomo Chancellor's Advisory Board, county advisory boards, and the School of Education's CEP.

The CCPC utilized multiple sources of data to inform decisions about which careers and pathways would be a focus of the project. NCIRPC and the Region 4 Workforce Board provided data regarding employment and labor market needs in the region. The Indiana Business Research Center conducted an analysis of the local labor market needs, both current and forecasted, and the availability of four-year college degree programs in the region for the high-demand career fields. Based on that analysis and taking into consideration which pathway opportunities LEAs were already providing to students, the CCPC decided to focus on expanding or

developing pathways in education/teaching, health care, health sciences, business, and computer science. These areas align well with IU Kokomo's expertise and degree programs. Also, the pathways align with forecasted employment needs and market demand in the region. The region has and is currently experiencing significant labor market challenges, with too few employees educated and trained for open positions and low rates of college attendance and completion. Addressing these challenges collaboratively leverages each institution's resources and elevates the potential impact.

3E Grant Approach: Grow Your Own

The project utilizes a grow-your-own (GYO) approach to build a pipeline of future employees for these professions and disciplines. GYO approaches implemented through P-12 and university partnerships leverage both institutions' capacity and staffing to create new opportunities for high school students through dual enrollment or dual credit courses, intentional college advising, career development and professional networking, and work-based learning. P-12 learners are engaged in career exploration, college advising, dual enrollment courses, work-based learning, and mentoring over multiple years with the intent of developing a sense of agency and self-direction, discipline-specific knowledge and skills, and personal networks to facilitate college success and subsequent employment. High school students in partner schools can earn college credit and complete credentials within specific degree or program areas that will benefit them in employment or pursuit of postsecondary education. These outcomes are important for all youth but are particularly essential for those who are traditionally underrepresented in college enrollment and certain professions.

The opportunity to earn college credit during high school through dual enrollment, concurrent enrollment, or dual credit programs, has been shown to have positive impact on both high school and college outcomes (An & Taylor, 2019) and is often seen as a cost-effective approach that provides expanded college access. Studies also suggest that dual enrollment has a positive impact on students' motivation and can help to promote the transition from high school to college (Dare et al., 2017). However, researchers have identified the inequitable nature of dual enrollment access for specific student subgroups, including low-income students,

lower achieving students, students of color, and English language learners (Taylor et al., 2022). The Tomorrow's Workforce program seeks to eliminate these disparities by addressing Patrick's (2019) equity-related considerations through program design, delivery, and improvement, which is a shared responsibility of IU Kokomo and partner K-12 school districts. Project partners are committed to engaging diverse P-12 students, and their families, in the opportunities the project offers and connecting them to additional IU Kokomo programs and resources designed to foster student success and belonging.

The grant project supported new career exploration and pathway specialist positions in each partner school district and at IU Kokomo to support P-12 student engagement in career exploration experiences and high school students' enrollment and success in college-to-career pathways. The support of additional staff within both the P-12 and university setting was critical to ensure the necessary personnel resources to work collaboratively with colleagues and across the P-12-university partnership and to provide career exploration and college advising services to P-12 students. Various academic units at IU Kokomo lead the development and implementation of the college-to-career pathway within their discipline. For example, the School of Nursing and Allied Health Professions leads the health care pathway.

3E Grant Partnership Outcomes

Measurements of impact are guided by the mandatory grant program outcomes. We tracked how many students from K-12 across the districts were engaged in career exploration activities, including exposure to pathways, opportunities, and skill sets, such as financial literacy and self-awareness. Such career exploration could also include activities that involve gaining insight into potential careers and researching the viability of pathways, career exploration and engagement, career through academics, and work-ready skills. Additionally, exploration included experiential instruction that supports the development of skills and knowledge, career mastery, postsecondary planning, and career experience.

Work-based learning was tracked like any career exploration internship, capstone in an academic or CTE pathway, preapprenticeship, or work-based learning experience with

an organization that is a federal Department of Labor program or registered apprenticeship or modern youth program. Additionally, enrollment, employment, and enlistment activities, such as learning about or engaging in these opportunities, were tracked. Specifically, enrollment was defined as any access to and enrollment in NLPS/CTE, ICC, or graduate pathway high-value credential. Employment was access to and/or engagement in career-level employment. Access to or enlistment in service, such as military service, was also recorded as enlistment. Different types of credentialing program engagement and completion were also tracked. Examples of credentialing programs include Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA), Welding, Construction, and Cosmetology.

Our goals for the grant program are outlined below:

1. Increase exploration engagement in K-12 to greater than 95% in Year 1 and Year 2
2. Increase work-based learning and credentialing activities by at least 50% from Baseline to Year 2

The rationale for the first outcome is to understand whether districts were able to ensure access to exploration to all students regardless of status (e.g., privileged). The rationale for the second outcome is to understand whether districts were able to increase access to these opportunities while maintaining realistic expectations about how many students these would relevantly apply to, hence the goal of 50% instead of at least 95%. We submitted this project to the Indiana University Institutional Review Board (Protocol #23886), and it was classified as not human subjects research.

More than 95% (Y1 = 100%; Y2 = 98%) of

K-12 students across the four school districts participated in activities designed to increase their understanding of careers, their own skills and interests, and local pathway opportunities in an age-appropriate and developmental manner (see Table 1). Additionally, the goals were met for work-based learning (Baseline = 457; Y2 = 903; 98% increase) and credentialing activities (Baseline = 26; Y2 = 69; 165% increase). Activities led by district pathway specialists and the IU Kokomo pathway specialist are reflected in these numbers and the increase, although it is important to note that the school districts were also implementing other initiatives and partnerships that would have impacted the data. Our district partners discussed that the mandates at the state level for college and career exploration made them focus on developing their own activities and partnerships with postsecondary institutions, which included IU Kokomo, to prepare career exploration materials and implement these kinds of activities. The IU Kokomo pathway specialist engaged in these activities with students in the districts. They also shared that the numbers reflected IU Kokomo's assistance with developing and implementing more NLPS dual credit classes. Although we do not attribute the results chiefly to the grant program activities, the overall increased focus on work-based learning and career exploration supported by our grant and other initiatives within the school districts collectively made a positive impact on career readiness.

Sustainable Programming

Our work with pathway development and implementation is continuing between the districts and IU Kokomo. For example, a pathway has been developed for Exercise and Sport Science across two regional campuses, IU Kokomo and IU South Bend. A Business Administration pathway was articulated,

Table 1. Numbers and Percentages of Students Who Engaged in Career Exploration, Work-Based Learning, and Credentialing at Baseline, Year 1, and Year 2

Outcome	Baseline	Y1	Y2	Status
Exploration	2,528	6,628 (100%)	6,964 (98%)	Goal met
Work-based learning	457	692 (9.1%)	903 (11.4%)	Goal met
Credentialing	26	43 (3.7%)	69 (5.8%)	Goal met

with high school students having access to courses that are not available in their school. A Computer Science pathway is still being finalized across campuses, and IU Kokomo has begun a pilot with one high school for the 2024–2025 academic year. The Tomorrow’s Healthcare Professionals pathway began during the 2023–2024 academic year, and the Tomorrow’s Teachers in Education started their seventh cohort for the 2024–2025 academic year.

Evaluating Practices and Planning for the Future

We explored successes and challenges as perceived by grant program partners. LEA partners noted several successes. First, increased availability of college course offerings for high school students was developed. We made strides in developing new pathways and recruiting students for the pathways for fall 2023. As noted above, these pathways were scaled across other IU campuses, enabling academic programs to synchronize course transfer requests between campuses. For example, programs would identify which courses cover NLPs course objectives. The courses that were identified helped program coordinators understand similarities in course outcomes, which in turn facilitated an understanding of how those courses could transfer to other campus programs in the same area. This potential coordination was an unexpected benefit at the university level.

In collaboration with P-12 educators, career exploration and development activities were developed and compiled for grade P-12 staff and IU Kokomo staff to use when facilitating classwide, small group, or individual lessons to increase awareness of careers and students’ developing interests, aptitudes, and values related to future careers and post-secondary education. A career and college framework aligned to the state framework was used to guide the programming offered jointly by IU Kokomo and LEAs. The framework was developed and used to promote career exploration and college pathway exploration that satisfied state mandates and grant project requirements. Development of the framework is attributed to the support from pathway specialists at both IU Kokomo and the partner school corporations. The role of the pathway specialists was to create, implement, and support career exploration materials and activities, and create a smooth transition from high school career-based experiences or dual credits to college.

Having a pathway specialist at both sites ensured efficient, equitable, and relevant information for students in all grades, and services to high school students preparing to transition to college or careers.

Completing the contract with grant funders and the disbursement of the funds were significant challenges to overcome during Year 1. Furthermore, navigating a new partnership, learning new content, and identifying the scope of the project was time-consuming. For example, the principal investigator and project manager worked to understand how often the CCPC needed to meet and when. During these meetings, we ensured that time was used efficiently by identifying next steps, informational items, and discussion items to help with decision-making. Related to the development of pathways, identifying times and strategies for scheduling to offer college courses was challenging for high school partners. The school partners also had challenges finding high school students for the pathways because some students were already in pathways or there was not enough interest from students eligible for the pathways.

The partnership will continue to serve as an informational resource to other P-12 school districts in north central Indiana. The Tomorrow’s Workforce CCPC program has been presented at the state and local level to other superintendents, school counselors, and school board associations, and will continue to share lessons learned and best practices to promote similar programs and initiatives across the region. The CCPC will also engage in future collaborative endeavors with regional employers, educational institutions, chambers of commerce, and economic development groups. Given the changing landscape of high school education and higher education, it will be important to critically explore how pathways could serve as preapprenticeships. The partnership has been meeting with districts and intermediaries that have an existing pre-apprenticeship model to understand how to best integrate the approach. Apprenticeship models are mutually beneficial partnerships between local employers and school associations that allow students to split their time between the classroom and workplace, allowing them to earn a wage, build skills, earn an industry certification, build a professional network, and earn debt-free college credit (CareerWise Elkhart County, n.d.). An important next step is to

understand and take stock of employer or organizational engagement and availability in these preapprenticeship tracks. Such approaches increase access and opportunity for traditionally underserved students (Patrick, 2019) and have the potential to contribute to local and regional workforce and youth talent development in positive and meaningful ways. Our program design, delivery, and improvement strategies are ensuring equitable opportunities for students in the participating districts.

Partnership Recommendations

We recommend focusing on equitable relationship-building as an underlying value of the partnership. To do this, we recommend leveraging state-level mandates and roles of high school and college staff to create accessible pathways for high school students and K-12 career exploration programs in a manner that is beneficial for all partners. High school and college pathway specialists

can facilitate engagement of diverse P-12 students and their families and connect them to college and career programs and resources that foster student success and belonging. One way to ensure the program and roles are supported is to create frequent engagement opportunities to discuss goals, activities, and needs to bring ideas to action. We recommend making decisions about pathways and programs based on regional data and setting goals based on grant outcomes. When managing the program, it may be important to ensure necessary education about the grant process and outcomes for all partners, and explore the strengths and challenges of pathway and preapprenticeship programs. The implementation of the program can lead to unexpected benefits and issues at the high school and college level, so it is important to note them to celebrate successes or troubleshoot problems throughout the partnership.



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Keeping Our Promise: Reenvisioning and Sustaining a 20-Year Service-Learning/Community Service Student Grant Program

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Abstract

As the higher education landscape in the United States continues to be redefined (Boggs et al., 2021; Post et al., 2023), it is crucial that community-engaged professionals critically examine strategies in supporting community-campus partnerships to maximize engagement and positive impact. Since its founding in 2003, little has been done to assess programmatic outcomes and strategically align the Purdue Office of Engagement's student community service/service-learning grant program with efforts to enhance and normalize engagement across the university. This article details how staff reenvisioned the grant program based on the evaluation results and are working to strategically integrate increased knowledge and awareness of engagement and its linkage to the university's land-grant mission for students into revised grant programming. Revisions include intentional reporting opportunities for impact metrics, collaborating with a course in data science to create a new grant submission and application review database, and future plans to strategically evaluate community impacts.

Keywords: service-learning, engagement, community partnerships, grant program, program evaluation



In the wake of societal and economic issues exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education is facing unprecedented challenges such as budget cuts, declining enrollment, and challenges to the value of a college degree, among others (e.g., Belkin, 2023; Boggs et al., 2021; Harvey, 2021; Walsh, 2020). These challenges have necessitated mergers of institutions and consolidations of programs, requiring decision makers to focus on maximizing efficiency and flexibility toward ensuring long-lasting resilience. To complement the push for efficiency and flexibility, there is an opportunity to increase the impact of programming, specifically service-learning and engagement programs that can strengthen an institution's ability to create meaningful, career-ready learning opportunities for students and beneficial outcomes for communities.

Programs of service-learning that prioritize learning gains such as "community impact," "knowledge," "civic engagement,"

"experience with analysis, synthesis, and application," "discipline-specific skills," and/or "problem-solving skills" are highly valuable, as they support students in learning how to use skills that they develop in the classroom to address systemic challenges in communities, skills that are also universally applicable to cross-discipline community and professional spheres postgraduation (Astin & Sax, 1998; Berry & Workman, 2007; Blewitt et al., 2018; Brandes & Randall, 2011; Celio et al., 2011; Culcasi et al., 2022; Fairfield, 2010; Mitchell, 2008; Omar et al., 2022; Post et al., 2023; van Laar et al., 2017). Service-learning can also strengthen a student's sense of belonging. A meta-analysis of 62 studies involving 11,837 students indicated that, compared to controls, students participating in service-learning programs demonstrated significant gains in attitudes toward self, attitudes toward school and learning, civic engagement, social skills, and academic performance, thereby reaffirming the power of service-learning to help

students realize their full potential (Celio et al., 2011).

Even though the benefits of service-learning are well documented, many institutions fail to institutionalize service-learning initiatives. Without recurring resources for service-learning, as well as systematic tracking and evaluation, service-learning initiatives can flounder, lack rigor, and/or fail to be accessible to all students (Furco, 1999; Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013). Although Purdue's community service/service-learning grant program demonstrates committed recurring funds, research is lacking toward evaluation of programmatic outcomes and strategic alignment of the grant program with efforts to enhance and normalize engagement across the university. Performing such evaluation offers an opportunity to deepen the meaning, enhance access to service-learning outcomes for students and communities, and increase university and college retention (Bringle et al., 2010; Caspersz & Oлару, 2017; Coelho & Menezes, 2021; Goff et al., 2020; Mungo, 2017; Simonet, 2008).

Context

Purdue University is a public land-grant institution with campuses across Indiana and the nation. Land-grant universities were established to serve the needs of their surrounding communities and educate responsible citizens who can contribute to the public good. Partnerships between universities and communities are critical to fulfilling the land-grant mission. To support the Purdue land-grant engagement pillar, the Office of Engagement (OoE) was founded in 2001 by President Martin Jischke to serve as a liaison between university researchers, students, and entities off campus desirous of working with them. In addition to five regional offices, 92 Extension hubs, signature faculty development programs, and a scholarly journal for students, the office administers a student grant program. This article shares the Purdue OoE's efforts to critically examine and reenvision the grant program.

Grant Program History

In 2003, President Jischke earmarked funding for service-learning and engagement projects to provide incentives for students and faculty to take steps toward understanding and embracing the engagement mission of the university. The program provides funding to undergraduate, graduate,

and professional students on West Lafayette, Northwest, and Fort Wayne campuses who execute projects through collaboration with communities, nonprofit agencies, schools, and governmental bodies. Projects may be conducted for a course, a student organization, or by a student individual or group of students. To foster project quality and adherence to program guidelines, all projects must have a faculty or staff mentor and community partner sponsor. Partners and projects are jointly determined by the students, mentors, and partner sponsors. Grant projects must be completed in the semester awarded, and grant amounts range from \$100 to \$500 for an individual or a maximum of \$1,500 for a team. A database and an administrative assistant manage the application process and collect information from the grant applications. Grants are awarded based upon merit, as well as alignment with the OoE mission. Not all applications are funded.

At the completion of the grant, students are encouraged to submit a final report approved by both the mentor and community partner, including (1) financial reporting that conforms to OoE requirements and (2) learning gains and benefits to participation. Sometimes students fail to complete a final report for their grant project. Since 2014, when a digital recordkeeping system was implemented, nearly 1,500 grants have been awarded, involving over 400 community partners nationally and internationally around the world, awarding over \$1,000,000 in funding and engaging nearly 18,000 undergraduate, graduate, and professional students.

Example Grant Projects

Grant projects funded are highly diverse across academic disciplines, project objectives, and communities impacted. The office aims to fund projects that will result in gains of "community impact," "knowledge," "civic engagement," "experience with analysis, synthesis, and application," "discipline-specific skills," and/or "problem-solving skills." Examples of projects supported through the grant program include the development of a cost-effective "beep ball" for visually impaired individuals, as well as the implementation of community gardens to reduce food insecurity. For the beep ball project, students created a new, more cost-effective beeping ball for a club that competes in the National Beep Baseball Association League. Beep baseball, a competitive sport for visually impaired

individuals, is played with a softball that makes a pulsing, beeping sound when a pin is removed. Students used the grant funds to purchase materials to support designing and constructing a cheaper yet more mechanically durable beep ball.

For the food insecurity project, 70 students assembled five garden beds for GrowLocal Lafayette, a network for local volunteers who run sharing gardens for community members. More than 1,000 community members were positively impacted by the newly constructed garden beds, and students learned basic hands-on construction work, how to operate in a team, and how mutual aid can be leveraged to encourage food justice. These examples illustrate the value of supporting service-learning initiatives across disciplines that center on civic engagement, community impact, and more (Astin & Sax, 1998; Berry & Workman, 2007; Blewitt et al., 2018; Brandes & Randall, 2011; Celio et al., 2011; Culcasi et al., 2022; Fairfield, 2010; Mitchell, 2008; Omar et al., 2022; Post et al., 2023; van Laar, 2017). Further, these examples demonstrate how service-learning connects participating colleges and universities with the value of diverse community partnerships (Buys & Bursnall, 2007; Geller et al., 2014; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Tyndall et al., 2020; Vizenor et al., 2017).

Evaluation Methods

In 2021, the OoE set out to evaluate the administration and impact of the grant program guided by the following questions:

1. How can we capture data and measure impact more effectively?
2. What are students' learning gains and how can we improve them?
3. How can we enhance reciprocity between the grant participants?

After consulting the Institutional Review Board (IRB-2024-1678), it was determined that this "activity does not meet the regulatory definition of human subjects research," and our project did not need IRB approval, as the work is part of internal programmatic evaluation and quality improvement. The evaluation effort was divided into two phases. Phase 1 focused on evaluating the grant program administration, including workflow and gaps in data collection (Phase 1.1), as well as conducting quantitative descriptive analysis of final reports

drawn from a sample of completed grant projects along with qualitative analysis of student learning outcomes from this sample (Phase 1.2). In response to the results from Phase 1, Phase 2 included revising the grant program application process, database, and deliverables, as well as exploring interventions for increasing student learning gains. To maximize the breadth and depth of the results, we assembled a team of staff and students, including the director of service-learning, a lead administrative assistant, an evaluation specialist, and two graduate students to complete this work.

Phase 1.1: Grant Program Administration

To evaluate the grant program administration, our team performed an internal assessment in summer 2022. Individually, team members reviewed the grant administrative process, including the grant application, database functionality, approval process, and business office requirements, noting areas for improvement. The team then had reflective conversations biweekly to discuss areas for improvement and future goals. In addition to understanding how to effectively capture, measure, and report data, our group was also keen to explore ways to enhance storytelling and generate scholarship from the grant program.

Phase 1.2: Student Learning Gains

The team engaged in descriptive analysis of a sample of 48 student grant final reports to identify project affiliation and type, the average number of students involved per project, and the average amount awarded per project. Additionally, the following two open-ended prompts were analyzed from the deidentified sample set of 48 final reports, using content analysis to identify student learning gains and the connection (or not) to enhanced understanding of our land-grant mission:

1. Role and how many people benefited from the project, learning activities in project, and the major objectives completed by the project.
2. Suggestions for improving a similar project in the future.

We followed an inductive approach to create and group codes into categories of relatable content, and ultimately into overarching themes based on patterns involving the re-allocation of codes and redefining categories iteratively (Kohlbacher, 2006). Through

multiple coding steps and discussions, we established a high level of researcher code agreement and a resulting qualitative codebook of six student learning gains from the qualitative data.

Findings

Phase 1.1: Grant Program Administration Results

The team found the grant application lacked crucial information. For example, grants are open to students systemwide; however, our original application did not allow students to indicate whether they were from the regional campuses. Furthermore, all student project members were not required to submit their contact information, thwarting us from tracking their participation in the program over time and conducting further in-depth surveying.

Additionally, although the application portal and database are critical components of our program that allow us to measure the impact of the grants, we observed several weaknesses, such as the application portal timing out too quickly, as well as the application template not capturing data on all students or units represented in a project. These oversights cause us to lose important data that could be used to strengthen the grant program, enhance the experience of project participants, and increase community impacts. Lastly, grant application language surrounding travel, donations, equipment, and materials was assessed for clarity and compliance with our business office. Future meetings are planned with key business office staff to address inconsistencies.

Phase 1.2: Student Learning Gains Results

Descriptive analysis of the final report sample revealed that the sample grant projects involved an average of 13 students with \$997.00 awarded per project on average. Projects in the sample were most often affiliated with service-learning courses (56%). Other affiliations included student organizations (23%) and study abroad (4%), with an additional 17% unaffiliated. Furthermore, projects in the sample were distributed across six categories: community support resources (33.33%), education (31.25%), community innovation/math/engineering (12.50%), animal health (10.42%), health care (6.25%), and veteran or elderly care (6.25%). However, it should be noted that the measurement of grant project

applications is not a holistic measurement of all service-learning occurring on campus, as not all service-learning courses require grant applications. Additionally, no formal campuswide tracking system is mandated for service-learning participation.

The content analysis of responses to Prompt 1 (“role and how many people benefited from the project, learning activities in the project, and the major objectives completed by the project?”) revealed emergent themes that suggested gains in the following six areas: knowledge; problem-solving skills; experience with analysis, synthesis, and application; discipline-specific skills; civic engagement and/or civic-mindedness; and community impact (Appendix A). Students most frequently mentioned gains in community impact from their grant project, closely followed by knowledge gains; civic engagement and/or civic-mindedness gains; and gains in experience with analysis, synthesis, and application. As the service-learning grant program is open to projects diverse in discipline and scope, each project is unique. In turn, results from the content analysis indicated a range in the number of areas showing gains per project represented in the sample, with some final reports indicating more than one area of growth.

In addition, the analysis of Prompt 2 (“suggestions for improving a similar project in the future”) revealed five different areas in which students seek growth and improvement in their grant efforts (Appendix B). Students most frequently cited an interest in modifying the project results based on the project experience. They also expressed interest in increasing their impact and outreach efforts, increasing communication between project partners, increasing flexibility in the project modality and timeline, and having the ability to modify their grant application in the database.

Implications

As the authors of this article are experiencing considerable changes at the university—new administrative leadership, unit restructuring, and an increased emphasis on research—it is imperative that the grant program be reenvisioned with careful intent not only to maximize program efficiency, but also measure programmatic outcomes such that the impacts and value of the program can be easily communicated to and understood by decision makers.

Not only did the content analysis reveal positive learning outcomes for students in alignment with the findings of Celio et al. (2011), it also helped identify further potential for growth in the following areas: administration of grants, including data collection, reporting, and evaluation; deepening student learning gains as they relate to our land-grant mission, engagement, and civic-mindedness; and measuring community impacts.

Next Steps and a Promise for Sustainability and Impact

Grant Program Administrative Improvements

During the 2022–2023 academic year, our team became a service-learning partner and collaborated with a course in data science to create a revised grant application, a new grant submission and application review database, and a data reporting dashboard. The objectives of the project were as follows:

1. Develop a new web application for the grant program.
2. Extract, transform, and load data from the current database into a new database.
3. Design and create an interactive dashboard for data visualization.

The website, a database schema, and server for storing student applications was developed and the grant application prompts were expanded to report opportunities and collect more in-depth student information, such as student identification number, year of study, and contact information for all student applicants. The goal was to increase our understanding of the students we are reaching and make it easier to connect with students postgraduation.

Deepening Student Learning for Our Land-Grant Mission

To increase students' knowledge and awareness of engagement and its linkage to the university's land-grant mission, we plan to integrate a video on these topics into the grant application process. Student applicants will be required to view the video prior to submitting their grant application. To assess the effectiveness of this intervention, we are developing a pre/postvideo and post-project questionnaire to measure change in

knowledge and awareness of engagement throughout the project. Moreover, although our original grant reports allow students to reflect and indicate improvements to their projects, there is an opportunity to improve the quality and specificity of this line of questioning to better support critical reflection and improve students' abilities to demonstrate their learning.

Capturing Impacts and Evaluating Outcomes

Lastly, service-learning programming must take a critical approach to ensure reciprocity between campus and communities (e.g., Davis et al., 2019; Gregorova & Heinzova, 2019; Hudgins, 2020; Strait & Lima, 2023). Our team recognizes the importance of measuring impacts beyond student learning gains. We are working on an evaluation plan to effectively assess and capture additional programmatic impacts on both community partner sponsors and faculty mentors.

The team also acknowledges that in order to maximize community impacts and reciprocity, staff and faculty should not only reach out to community partners to share information, disseminate resources, and provide assistance, but they should also work to solicit feedback from community partners (Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013), which reaffirms the value of our efforts to extend critical service-learning to the measurement of community impact.

Conclusion

Our work to reimagine the Purdue Service-Learning grant program is part of a larger effort to enhance and normalize engagement across the university as the OoE navigates institutional restructuring and the higher education landscape is redefined daily (Boggs et al., 2021; Post et al., 2023). Through our analyses, we have uncovered new areas of potential growth in our grant program, including data collection, reporting, and evaluation, that will allow us to improve both the student and administrative experience of the grant program, as well as enhance student learning gains as they relate to our land-grant mission. Furthermore, our goals of a well-developed evaluation plan will support a deeper understanding of community impacts and ways in which we can enhance reciprocity.



About the Authors

Dr. Lindsey Payne is an associate professor of practice and the former director of service-learning at Purdue University. Her research sits at the intersection of sustainability, teaching and learning, and engagement, focusing on transdisciplinary decision-making in community-engaged design. She holds a PhD in ecological sciences and engineering from Purdue University.

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Appendix A. Themes From Prompt 1 of the Final Reports

Role and how many people benefited from the project, learning activities in the project, and the major objectives completed by the project?			
Theme	Definition	Excerpt examples	Frequency (# of reports)
Community impact	Community impacted through the completion of the project	"Our group of students completed direct service benefiting over 100 people. We worked with [organization] in the neighborhood of [city]. Altogether, we helped clean and paint at [organization] building where men and women stay."	44
Knowledge gain	Knowledge gained through the completion of the project	"I met people from different religions, with different sexual orientations, from different countries, [redacted] people from low-income communities, each of them with a different story but with the same purpose for being there: they want what's best for their pets."	37
Civic engagement and/or civic-mindedness	Civic engagement and/or civic-mindedness demonstrated through the completion of the project	"It was incredible to contribute to building something for the community and taking a hands-on approach to projects and repairs that were greatly needed."	37
Experience with analysis, synthesis, and application	Experience with analysis, synthesis, and hands-on application of knowledge demonstrated through the completion of the project	"We took our learning from earlier in the semester of creating personal audio narratives, paired it with more knowledge we obtained about techniques for interviewing people, and applied it to our project."	37
Discipline-specific skills	Skills related to a specific academic discipline gained through the completion of the project	"Four [university] pharmacy students visited 12 pharmacies throughout the state of [state] monthly during October–December to assist with the pharmacies' transitions from a dispensing model to a patient-centered model."	29
Problem-solving skills	Problem-solving skills gained through the completion of the project	"The second class allowed the students to gain experience applying the EDP [engineering design process] to a problem of their interest. Students used their knowledge from the previous class to inform the steps to complete the engineering challenge."	22

Appendix B. Themes from Prompt 2 of the Final Reports

Suggestions for improving a similar project in the future			
Theme	Definition	Excerpt examples	Frequency (# of reports)
Modify output based on response/results	Modify some of the project results based on responses/results during the process of conducting the project	“For more advanced students studying middle school science, some portions of the lessons would be removed to make the lesson a bit more challenging. The quiz that was created would also be a bit more in-depth.”	23
Increase outreach/impact	Increase impact/outreach based on the results from conducting the project, i.e., including more team members, resources	“We hope to create a flyer next semester to send to local businesses and surrounding area council members in order to gain more clients. In addition, we would like to keep increasing the opportunities for undergraduate students to get involved with [campus organization] activities.”	17
Increased feedback or communication from instructor or community partner	Increase feedback or communication with course instructor and/or their community partner	“To improve this project, I would suggest more regular communication with the community leadership to make sure the system usage information is updated more regularly as it has implications for future improvements to the implementation process.”	7
Flexibility in modality and/or timeline	Adapt the project methods for remote working and/or allow for longer timelines	“A lot of planning and logistics went into putting these kits together. Our timeline had to shift multiple times since we were not able to gather in groups to put things together and assembling them for the eLearners was a lengthy process.”	4
Modify grant program	Components of the grant program should be modified	“Grant submission form is buggy; I was logged out unexpectedly while documenting costs twice (one of which occurred after the action of checking the ‘Acceptance/Signature’ box).”	1

Promoting Health in the Hispanic Community: Evaluation of a Mentoring Program Between a School of Medicine and a Hispanic Community

Pallavi Kenkare, Elizabeth Seeley, Kimberly Anyadike, Mallory Peters, Helen Huetteman, and Claudio Cortes

Abstract

In 2016, Oakland University William Beaumont School of Medicine collaborated with the Catholic Charities of Southeast Michigan Hispanic La Casa Amiga Outreach program (CCSEM-LCA) to create a program through which medical students are paired to mentor local Hispanic youth from an underserved community. We assessed the program's effect on mentees' behavioral and social skills, evaluating satisfaction and program impact among mentees and their parents, and assessing the mentees' knowledge retention from the program's health education sessions. Using the Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale, 2nd Edition (BERS-2) questionnaire before and after the program, we observed significant improvements in mentee interpersonal strength, family involvement, intrapersonal strength, school functioning, and affective strength. Additionally, both mentees ($N = 45$) and parents ($N = 38$) reported high levels of satisfaction, and pre- and postsession assessments indicated increased understanding of the health topics covered.

Keywords: community partnership, medical education, mentoring program, community service, Hispanic children



In the United States the Hispanic population has grown rapidly and is projected to comprise nearly 28% of the population by 2060 (Noe-Bustamente et al., 2020; Zong, 2022). This population's rapid growth highlights the urgency of addressing health disparities between Hispanic and non-Hispanic communities. For example, in 2018, Hispanic Americans were 1.2 times more likely to be obese, 70% more likely to have diabetes, and Hispanic women were 40% more likely to be diagnosed with cervical cancer than their non-Hispanic counterparts (National Center for Health Statistics, 2021). Social and educational disparities further compound these issues; research links race and associated differences in health literacy to health disparities (Berkman et al., 2011). Health literacy is defined as the ability of an individual to competently contend with the "complex demands of promoting and

maintaining health" within modern society (Liu et al., 2020). In 2003, 41% of Hispanics (21 million persons) had below basic levels of health literacy (Kutner et al., 2007). In addition, in 2022, 27% of Hispanic adults held an associate degree or higher, compared to 45% of White adults (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023, Table 1-2, Table 1-6).

Health disparities often emerge early, particularly among Hispanic youth, children with limited English proficiency, and those who speak a language other than English at home (Flores et al., 2005). For instance, Hispanic children are less likely than non-Hispanic White children to receive routine wellness and preventive dental care (Langellier et al., 2016). They also face elevated risks for conditions such as obesity and depression (Rossen & Schoendorf, 2012), along with delayed diagnoses of attention deficit disorder (Berry et al., 2010) and autism spectrum

disorder (Mandell et al., 2009). Thus, experts suggest that interventions could take a “life-course” approach, beginning with health maintenance and educational interventions in childhood, to help mitigate disparities as children transition into adulthood (Thornton et al., 2016).

An intervention could be provided in the form of partnerships between community organizations and academic institutions focused upon addressing gaps in the health maintenance and education of Hispanic youth. It has been shown that community-academic partnerships can lead to beneficial outcomes for students, associated community organizations, and institutions of learning (Nora et al., 1994; Voss et al., 2015). Within this article, we specifically focus on community partnerships centered around mentoring programs for children, which have been associated with favorable outcomes to health, psychological well-being, and education/work in older adolescents. A mentoring program for children is a structured relationship in which an adult or older peer provides guidance and support to promote a child’s social, emotional, academic, and behavioral development. These programs often serve youth at risk due to socioeconomic or family challenges, aiming to foster resilience and reduce disparities (DuBois et al., 2011). For example, a mentoring program through which high school mentors engaged Hispanic middle school students using school-based obesity intervention lessons resulted in a sustained decrease in BMI (Arlinghaus et al., 2017). Another mentoring program for urban Hispanic fourth and fifth graders that focused upon development of academics and social skills yielded relationships that demonstrated high emotional engagement and youth-centeredness, as well as low program dissatisfaction (Coller & Kuo, 2014).

However, though the aforementioned programs provide evidence that youth mentoring programs can positively impact the health outcomes of minority children, there is no literature evidence of the impact of mentoring programs led by medical students for Hispanic youth (though such programs exist). Thus, evidence for the positive impact of these mentoring programs fills a gap in research on this aspect of higher education outreach.

Peters et al. (2021) previously described the creation of a health education mentoring program between Oakland University

William Beaumont School of Medicine (OUWB) and a local Hispanic youth nonprofit organization. They explored the logistics, benefits, and challenges of instituting a youth mentoring program between a medical school and the community. In this study, medical students had high levels of satisfaction with the program, and felt that they had improved their communication skills and increased their understanding of the needs of Hispanic children within this community. Although Peters et al. explored the benefits of this program to the participating medical students, the impact of this interaction upon the mentees has not yet been evaluated.

Thus, in this article, we evaluate several aspects of the program’s impact upon the mentees. We evaluate improvements in the mentees’ behavioral and social skills by assessing effects on their interpersonal strength, intrapersonal strength, family involvement, school functioning, and affective strength. In addition, we evaluate the mentees’ knowledge retention from the program’s health education sessions, as well as levels of satisfaction among mentees and mentees’ parents.

Methods and Materials

Program Description

Peters et al. (2021) have previously described the partnership and development of the mentoring program between OUWB and the Hispanic community. In 2016, OUWB established a partnership with the Catholic Charities of Southeast Michigan Hispanic La Casa Amiga outreach program (CCSEM-LCA) through which medical students are paired to mentor local Hispanic youth from an underserved community in Pontiac, Michigan.

The goals of the program are threefold. The first goal is to increase the mentees’ understanding of health-related topics (healthy eating, drug use prevention) so they are better able to foster optimal development of their own healthy behaviors and reduce health risks, as well as increase their knowledge of the consequences of unhealthy habits. Second, the program aims to motivate the mentees and improve their self-esteem and communication skills through personal interaction between mentors and mentees. Third, the program seeks to improve the cultural awareness of the medical student mentors by allowing them a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by diverse populations in the United States.

Mentors and mentees are paired, usually by gender, in a one-to-one ratio, at the beginning of the year. The mentor-mentee pairings meet twice a month (for approximately 5 hours each month) over the course of a year (excluding summer), and also engage in weekly phone calls. Approximately 15 sessions are held per year. The in-person sessions are generally divided into five main parts (Peters et al., 2021): (a) a prequiz consisting of five to 10 multiple choice questions (MCQs) to determine the mentees' basic level of knowledge of the given topic; (b) a 40-minute interactive small group didactic lecture presented by the student coordinators, a volunteer faculty member from OUWB, or a guest speaker; (c) a 20-minute small group discussion to allow collaboration among mentor-mentee pairs; (d) a 20-minute large group discussion to give mentees the opportunity to review the main points and share their new knowledge with their peers; and (e) a postquiz that includes the same MCQs as the prequiz to measure the effectiveness of the session and aid in mentees' retention of information.

Participants

Preclinical medical students from OUWB serve as program mentors (Peters et al., 2021). The mentees who participated in this study were Hispanic youth between 7 and 16 years old from Pontiac, Michigan ($N = 45$). The mentees' parents ($N = 38$) also participated in satisfaction questionnaires regarding the program. The selection criteria for this program specified that mentees be Hispanic children of immigrant parents who utilize services provided by LCA, including legal assistance, family support, and English classes.

Program Evaluation

The program is evaluated at multiple levels, including a parental assessment of children's behavior, assessment of mentee satisfaction with the program (both assessments provided by the LCA), and brief pre- and postquizzes included within the educational session for mentees that assess dissemination of knowledge during the session. These assessments were held in order to shape and improve the future development of the program. The deidentified data from both the surveys and the assessments was provided to OUWB by LCA. Nonhuman subject research approval for program evaluation was obtained from Oakland University IRB, Study Number 1192710.

Assessment of Knowledge. Of the 30 unique educational sessions provided between 2016 and 2020, 12 included pre-session and post-session formative quizzes within the lesson plan. These formative quizzes, on topics such as nutrition, mental health, and health equity, consisted of five to 10 multiple choice questions. The scores for pre-session and post-session quizzes were compared to assess information retention throughout each session. The pre- and post-session quizzes were created by the medical student program coordinators and faculty members, who also spearheaded creation of the educational material, to ensure that the mentees had grasped the main points of the sessions and to evaluate whether the information had been disseminated effectively.

Children Satisfaction and Program Impact Survey. Mentees responded to 23 items using a Likert scale to assess their level of satisfaction with the program (1 question) and their relationship with their mentor (satisfaction [1 question], encouragement [3 questions], communication [7 questions], confidence [2 questions]). Other question categories included content (1 question), school (2 questions), self-confidence (1 question), and communication skills (5 questions). (Questions are listed in Appendix A.)

Parent Satisfaction and Program Impact Survey. Parents were asked 14 questions to assess their level of satisfaction with the program and how it influenced their children. Question categories included satisfaction with mentor (1 question), emotions (2 questions), relationships (2 questions), home responsibility (3 questions), confidence (1 question), school performance (1 question), school attitude (1 question), and school responsibility (3 questions). (Questions are listed in Appendix B.)

Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale, 2nd Edition Assessment. The Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale, 2nd Edition (BERS-2) is a validated and reliable survey assessing children's emotional and behavioral strengths. One of the instrument's primary purposes is to document the effects of an intervention designed to enhance the functioning of children—in this case, a mentoring program (Buckley & Epstein, 2004). Mentees' parents complete a 52-item BERS-2 assessment rating scale to measure interpersonal strength (e.g., "Accepts criticism"; 15 questions), family involvement (e.g., "Participates in family activities";

10 questions), intrapersonal strength (e.g., “Is self-confident”; 11 questions), school functioning (e.g., “Pays attention in class”; 9 questions), affective strength (e.g., “Expresses affection for others”; 7 questions; Duppong Hurley et al., 2015).

Statistical Analysis

Paired *t*-tests were utilized to compare the means for the pre- and postprogram BERS-2 survey results, analyzing each of the five BERS categories (Duppong et al., 2015). Similarly, to determine mentee retention of learning sessions, a paired *t*-test was used to measure the mean differences between pre- and postformative assessment performance.

Results

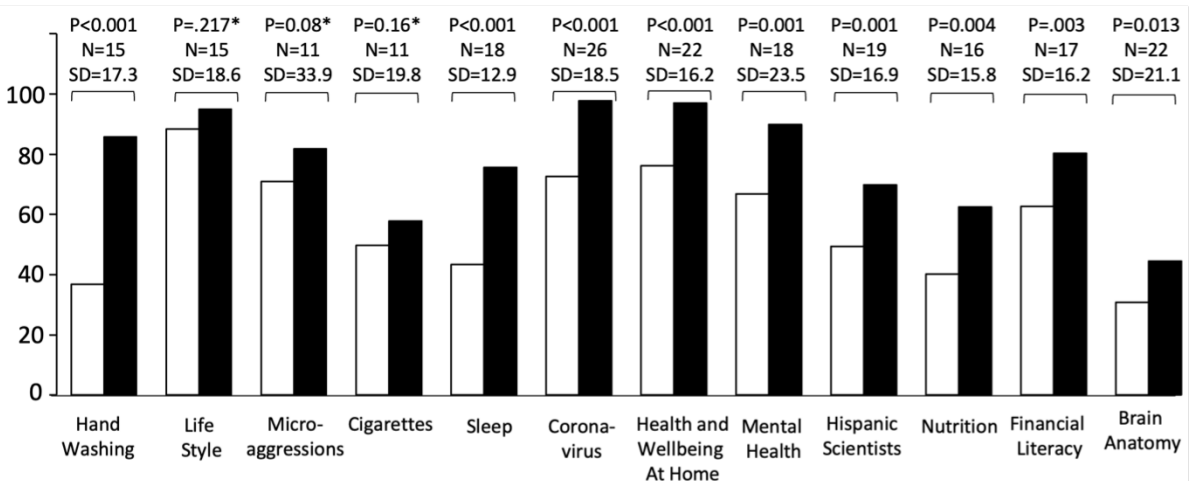
First, we evaluated whether students learned and retained information during the educational sessions (on topics such as handwashing, lifestyle, microaggressions, cigarettes, and sleep) and whether the sessions were an appropriate level of difficulty for the students. Twelve educational sessions included pre- and postsession formative assessments, consisting of five to 10 multiple choice questions each. Differing numbers of mentees attended each educational session, varying from 11 to 26 participants. Comparing the mean scores from the pre-session quizzes and postsession quizzes, we found a significant increase in student performance on the postsession quizzes in nine of 12 lessons (Figure 1). Significant percentage increases in the mentee assessment performance range from

improvements of 13.6% to improvements of 49%; insignificant percentage increases range from 6.7% to 10.9%. These results suggest that the mentees learned and retained information in most of the educational sessions.

The mentee satisfaction and program impact survey included questions about satisfaction with the program overall, the mentor-mentee relationship, and communication skills. Additionally, the survey included questions assessing self-reported changes in motivation, confidence, and performance in school after completing the mentoring program. Mentees rated most program attributes on a Likert-style scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*); on communication skills before and after the program, the scale ranged from 0 (*none*) to 4 (*expert*). Mentees reported they were satisfied with the program overall ($M = 5.38, SD = 0.62$) and with the content provided during educational sessions ($M = 5.10, SD = 0.77$).

The survey had four main categories evaluating mentor-mentee relationship (Appendix A). Notably, mentees were highly satisfied with their mentors ($M = 5.60, SD = 0.63$) and felt they could rely on their mentors for encouragement ($M = 4.98, SD = 1.19$), communication ($M = 5.11, SD = 1.22$), and increased self-confidence ($M = 5.21, SD = 1.07$). Mentees reported improved grades in school ($M = 4.41, SD = 1.50$), improved self-confidence ($M = 4.78, SD = 1.31$), and improved communication skills with adults ($M = 4.53, SD = 1.31$) after participating in

Figure 1. Results From Evaluation of Educational Sessions



Note. **p* < .05

the program. Lastly, the mentees were asked to rate their communication before and after the program, and the increase was significant ($N = 45$, from preprogram $M = 1.96$, $SD = 1.19$ to postprogram $M = 2.93$, $SD = 0.96$, $p < .0001$).

The parent satisfaction and program impact survey ($N = 38$) asked questions related to perceived satisfaction of their children with the program and noticeable behavioral changes in their children after completing the program (Appendix B). The behavioral changes were tracked via question categories such as emotions, relationships, home responsibility, confidence, and school conduct. These questions were answered on a 3-point scale in Spanish, where 1 = *No*, 2 = *Mas o Menos (More or Less)*, 3 = *Si (Yes)*. Parents perceived the program as highly satisfactory ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 0.30$). Notably, 97% of parents responded with “Si” to the question “Did your child enjoy their time with their mentor?” After completion of the program, parents reported that their children were more responsible and well-behaved at home ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 0.61$) and in school ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 0.58$), had stronger interpersonal relationships ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 0.42$), were more confident ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 0.55$), performed better in school ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 0.48$), and had a better attitude toward school ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 0.53$). In short, we found that parents perceived the program as highly satisfactory.

We also evaluated mentees’ improvements in behavioral skills after completing the program. CCSEM Hispanic Newcomer Outreach used the Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale, 2nd Edition (BERS-2) survey to ask parents questions relating to the children’s emotional and behavioral strengths. Each year from 2016 to 2018, parents ($N = 81$)

completed a BERS-2 questionnaire (52 questions) about their children’s improvements in five categories (interpersonal strength, family involvement, intrapersonal strength, school functioning, and affective strength). The mean difference between pre- and postsurveys on a Likert scale (0 = *statement is not at all like the child* to 3 = *statement is very much like the child*) was analyzed using a paired t -test. Each year shows varying results, but all display a significant increase in one or more categories (data not shown). When combining the data from all years, a significant increase in every category from before the program to after completion of the program is evident (Table 1).

Discussion

In 2016, OUWB developed a partnership with the local Hispanic community, creating a longitudinal mentoring program between medical students and Hispanic youth (Peters et al., 2021). A previous article evaluated the beneficial experience of medical students within this program. In this study, we analyzed the mentees’ knowledge retention from the program’s education sessions, mentee and parent program satisfaction and assessment of program impact, and changes in mentees’ behavioral skills over the course of the program.

We found that, using pre- and postquiz data to assess students’ information retention during the educational sessions (Figure 1), most mentees showed significant improvements in the mean scores on the postquiz compared to the prequiz (in nine out of 12 sessions). Although the program hosted roughly 30 sessions over the evaluated time period, the student/faculty coordinators created pre- and postquizzes only for certain sessions (more active sessions, like music

Table 1. Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale-2 (BERS-2) Evaluation

	Interpersonal strength	Family involvement	Intrapersonal strength	School functioning	Affective strength
Change	14.76%	11.10%	5.51%	12.00%	9.91%
Mean presurvey (SD)	2.10 (0.59)	2.25 (0.55)	2.36 (0.30)	2.25 (0.67)	2.22 (0.54)
Mean postsurvey (SD)	2.41 (0.48)	2.50 (0.45)	2.49 (0.47)	2.52 (0.51)	2.44 (0.45)
p-value	0.0001	0.0001	0.01	0.0001	0.0001

therapy or science museum field trips, were excluded), hence this smaller sample size of 12.

Overall, the pre- and postperformance data suggest that these lessons were provided at an appropriate level for the children and that they were able to retain information after the lesson. However, some lessons did not show significant results. It is likely that the wide age range of children involved in the program (7 to 16 years old) made it difficult to ensure that the material was provided in an age-appropriate manner. This result might be improved by separating the group into two smaller groups based on mentee age. Further studies could evaluate longer term knowledge retention by providing the same cohort of children posttests months to years later. Our current method evaluated only short-term knowledge retention, over the span of a 2-hour session.

We also evaluated the mentees' level of satisfaction toward and assessment of impact of the mentoring program (Appendix A). Of the eight categories evaluated on a Likert scale from 1 to 6, five received a score above 5 and three categories received scores between 4 and 5, suggesting that, overall, mentees were highly satisfied with the program. Although we did not acquire information regarding changes in testing scores at school, mentees indicated that being in the mentoring program improved their grades in school ($M = 4.41$). The response regarding grades in school was the lowest score found. This finding is not surprising, as this program does not necessarily align with the mentees' school curriculum, and may best be perceived as supplementary, but not preparatory, for the Michigan state curriculum. Nevertheless, a positive perception of the program was observed.

Some categories within the survey were specifically dedicated to evaluating the strength of the mentor-mentee bond: mentor satisfaction, mentor encouragement, mentor communication, and mentor confidence (Appendix A). Students highly rated these categories, indicating that they agreed that their mentor was encouraging, communicative, and improved their self-confidence. As every program session involved extended one-on-one pair mentoring time—usually from a quarter to half of the 2 hours—this data suggests that mentees perceived their mentoring relationship as a positive presence in their lives.

Furthermore, we asked mentees to rate their communication skills before and after the mentoring program and found mentees noted a significant improvement in their communication skills. Every program session was heavily structured around discussion activities and nonlinguistic representation via virtual models and art activities, both of which require mentees to communicate effectively with a larger group (Kim et al., 2020). Additionally, mentees participated in weekly phone calls with their mentor and, at the end of the year, were required to complete a presentation to a large audience of fellow mentees, mentor, and family members, on a health topic of their choosing. Thus, mentees regularly practiced their communication skills, whether within a one-on-one interaction with their mentors, a small group discussion, or the large-scale presentation, which likely directly contributed to this improvement (Sugito et al., 2017).

Overall, mentees were highly satisfied with their mentee-mentor interactions and relationships. Overall, the data suggests that mentees enjoyed and found value in the OUWB-LCA program, and that the program fulfilled its goal of assisting its mentees in improving their academic skills, communication skills, self-worth, and mentoring relationships.

The survey evaluating parent satisfaction and program impact showed high levels of satisfaction (Appendix B). This table suggests that, from a parent's viewpoint, the program was deeply efficacious in fostering a mentoring relationship, and was also very effective in facilitating positive emotions, relationships, and attitudes outside the program. Although it is preferable to use a more common 5- or 7-point Likert scale in this survey to obtain more granularity in the results, research has shown that a 3-point Likert scale does not diminish reliability or validity of the ratings (Matell & Jacoby, 1971). Nevertheless, the results described in Appendices A and B suggest that parents were satisfied with the program and felt that it benefited their children.

The BERS-2 survey completed by mentees' parents showed significant mean increases in the five attributes—interpersonal strength, family involvement, intrapersonal strength, school functioning, and affective strength—assessed (Table 1). The attributes are described as follows:

The first subscale, interpersonal

strengths, assesses a child's ability to control his or her behavior in a social situation. The second scale, family involvement, focuses on a child's participation and relationship with his or her family. The third subscale, interpersonal strengths, assesses a child's outlook on his or her competence and accomplishments. The fourth subscale, school functioning, focuses on a child's competence on school and classroom tasks. Finally, the fifth subscale, affective strengths, addresses a child's ability to give or receive affect. (Epstein, 2000, p. 250)

This tool has been used every year, and the changes within each category for each year vary, though each exhibits a positive percentage change. For instance, interpersonal strength and school functioning are the most consistent in significant changes (three out the four years) when compared to other attributes (data not shown).

Overall, our findings indicate that mentees in the OUWB-LCA mentoring program show improvement in the behavioral skills addressed in BERS-2. Together with the results of the satisfaction and impact survey, which noted a significant improvement in self-rated communication skills and general satisfaction and growth within the program, these results again supported the positive impact of the program. Mentees also completed a BERS-2 survey; results showed an increase in scores for all categories assessed, but none of the results were significant (data not shown). The lack of significant results suggests that the children (age range 7 to 16) may have struggled to understand this survey, or the concept of self-reporting as presented in the BERS survey. In order to improve this method of measurement, it may be necessary to assess a greater

number of children or provide assistance in completing the assessment.

It is important to note that the surveys evaluating mentee and parent level of satisfaction and program impact (Appendices A and B) are not validated tools. Many components within these surveys mirror and support aspects evaluated in BERS-2 (Table 1) but are more customized to our specific program (e.g., mentor relationship) in order to better judge the program development.

Future goals for the program include a more longitudinal evaluation of the program's effects on mentees. For example, over the next decade we would like to evaluate whether this exposure actually increases the likelihood that these children will matriculate to college after graduating from high school. This research would involve following the children throughout their time in high school and through graduation. Furthermore, given that the program shifted online for one year in 2020 to 2021 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, we plan to conduct future research comparing the efficacy of in-person programs to our COVID-19 online program.

We have established that the relationship between OUWB and LCA, through which medical students at OUWB serve as mentors to the children involved in the program, is of value to mentees, parents, and mentors alike. Our future goals are to continue to improve educational sessions, nurture mentor-mentee relationships, and assess the effect of this program upon mentees' long-term progress, especially as pertains to high school graduation and college matriculation. Ultimately, this article serves as a measure of impact and efficacy of this program upon its mentees and their families, and will help inform the program's future development.



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Appendix A: Analysis of Satisfaction and Program Impact Surveys Given to Mentees After the 1-Year Mentoring Program

Question topic (number of questions)	Mean (SD) N = 45
Program satisfaction (1) Overall, how satisfied are you with the mentoring program?	5.38 (0.62)
Satisfaction with mentor (1) Overall, how satisfied were you with your mentor?	5.60 (0.63)
Mentor encouragement (3) My mentor helps me do better in school. My mentor praises me and encourages me to do well. I do better at school because my mentor tells me I can.	4.98 (1.19)
Mentor communication (7) I am able to ask my mentor for help when I need it. I am able to discuss problems with my mentor. I am proud to tell my mentor when I have done well. My mentor helps me to see different ways I can deal with my problems. I like talking things over with my mentor. I discuss with my mentor what I would like to do in the future. When I am worried or have a problem, I discuss it with my mentor.	5.11 (1.22)
Mentor confidence (2) I feel I can do more things by myself because of my mentor. My mentor helps me to feel good about myself.	5.21 (1.07)
Content (1) Overall, how satisfied are you with the educational activities?	5.10 (0.77)
School (2) Being in the mentoring program improved my grades in school. Being in the mentoring program helps me to obtain better grades at school.	4.41 (1.50)
Self-confidence (1) Being in the mentoring program improved my confidence.	4.78 (1.31)
Communication skills (3) After this experience, I have learned to better communicate with adults. After this experience in the mentoring program, I have learned to better communicate with my parents. After this experience in the mentoring program, I have learned to better communicate with my teachers.	4.53 (1.31)
Communication skills before and after (2), 2018 and 2019 combined data^a How would you describe your communication skills BEFORE you started the mentoring program?	1.96 (1.19)
How would you describe your communication skills AFTER you finish the mentoring program?	2.93 (0.96)

Note: ^aA statistically significant improvement in self-rated communication skills was found ($p < .0001$).

Appendix B: Analysis of Satisfaction and Program Impact Surveys Given to Parents After the 1-Year Mentoring Program

Question topic (number of questions)	2018 Mean (SD) N = 19	2019 Mean (SD) N = 19	Mean total (SD) N = 38
Satisfaction with mentor (1) Did your child enjoy their time with their mentor?	3.00 (0.00)	2.92 (0.40)	2.95 (0.30)
Emotions (2) Is your child happier? Is your child less angry?	2.81 (0.52)	2.90 (0.37)	2.86 (0.44)
Relationships (2) Does your child interact better with their siblings? Does your child interact better with their friends?	2.92 (0.36)	2.85 (0.46)	2.88 (0.42)
Home responsibility (3) Does your child listen better? Is your child more responsible? Does your child follow house rules better?	2.87 (0.44)	2.68 (0.70)	2.76 (0.61)
Confidence (1) Does your child have more trust in themselves?	2.84 (0.50)	2.79 (0.59)	2.81 (0.55)
School performance (1) Is your child more successful in school?	2.94 (0.25)	2.89 (0.58)	2.85 (0.48)
School attitude (1) Does your child have a better attitude toward school?	2.89 (0.46)	2.80 (0.58)	2.84 (0.53)
School responsibility (3) Does your child put more effort into school? Does your child have better attendance at school? Does your child follow school rules better?	2.84 (0.53)	2.75 (0.62)	2.79 (0.58)

Exploring University Student Experiences with Community Engagement During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Michele Tyson and Bright Mleta

Abstract

This study examined the experiences of undergraduate and graduate students who served as elementary school-level tutors through a grant-funded community-engaged partnership between a private institution of higher education and a public school district during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of this work is to explore the impact of this single-case community-engaged experience on the tutors' individual educational trajectories and their own learning. This study uses principles of narrative data collection to understand the collective experience as a singular case. Specific results include individual influence, personal fulfillment, a shared sense of community, and the importance of belonging to a group as outcomes of program participation in the community-engaged work. The findings also highlight the value of community-engaged work in understanding a sense of belonging in a time of crisis and provide insight on how future higher education and K-12 partnerships could address supplemental learning in the form of tutoring.

Keywords: community engagement, tutoring, involvement, belonging, community



Improving the college experience for undergraduate students has been a goal of institutions of higher education for well over 40 years. The social and environmental impacts on an individual's college experience (Museus, 2014; Renn & Patton, 2011; Strange & Banning, 2015), as well as the ability of an institution to retain students (Astin, 1984; Bean, 1982; Pascarella, 1980; Tight, 2020; Tinto, 1988), have been thoroughly researched. In recent years, student community engagement has emerged as a crucial aspect of higher education, surpassing the boundaries of traditional classroom learning. Defined as the active involvement of students in mutually beneficial partnerships with local communities, community engagement provides a transformative learning experience that empowers students to develop essential skills, cultivate empathy, and contribute meaningfully to society (Furco, 2010). The

concept of community engagement aligns with the fundamental mission of educational institutions to produce responsible and socially conscious citizens capable of addressing real-world challenges. Universities and colleges have a unique opportunity to harness the collective potential of their students in creating a positive social impact by connecting their academic knowledge and personal experiences with community needs. Students' community engagement can be a powerful tool for promoting civic engagement and social responsibility among students when designed and executed with care (Boyd & Brackmann, 2012; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Huda et al., 2018).

Role and Impact of Community Engagement

The literature identifies several benefits of student community engagement, which extend beyond the acquisition of

practical skills. Empirical evidence suggests that students who actively participate in community-based initiatives experience personal growth and enhanced self-awareness (Astin & Sax, 1998; Conner & Erickson, 2017; Hannibal & Robertson, 2023; Jung, 2011). Such experiences not only strengthen academic performance but also positively influence career decisions and long-term life goals (Lerner, 2005). Boyd and Martin (2022) extended what is already known about community engagement and introduced additional factors for consideration to include the student's sense of community (SOC) as well as the student's sense of community responsibility (SOC-R) to examine and understand the impact of community involvement while in college. Student community engagement refers to student involvement in local projects within a community setting. It normally involves a period during which students work for a community-based organization in ways that enable them to benefit the community and to learn from the experience (Millican & Bourner, 2011).

Millican and Bourner (2011) continued to illustrate that the involvement of students in community engagement is a form of development of students' capacity for and disposition toward social responsibility. Schiff et al. (2024) concurred that increasing community engagement predicts growth in social responsibility attitudes among undergraduates. They further highlighted that discipline-based community engagement fosters professional aspects of social responsibility, given the student's future professional obligation to society. Thomas et al. (2021) described the outcomes of community engagement, including strengthened democratic values and civic responsibility, advancement on critical societal issues, and important contributions to the public good. In addition to improving students' ability to apply what they have learned in real life, the involvement of students' programs of learning from community engagement reflects the enrichment of the institution's educational offerings.

Context of COVID-19 Pandemic

Although the complete effect of the COVID-19 pandemic remains to be seen, it was immediately clear that education was impacted, and many believe those impacts are with us for the long term (Daniel, 2020). Many would say that the pandemic was both a health crisis and an educational crisis, as it

disrupted instruction and learning modalities, created anxiety, and forced everyone into isolation. The context of the COVID-19 pandemic changed the entire educational experience for college students. Residence halls shut down, classes were moved online, and students were sent away from their campuses. This response to the pandemic meant leaving behind friends and communities, which led to isolation, and many have attributed a growing mental health crisis to the effects of these conditions (Ganesan et al., 2021; Ramírez-Ortiz et al., 2020; Salimi et al., 2023). Although this period of complete isolation was short in the grand scheme of things, the return to campuses proved challenging. College students returned to find their campuses in political turmoil, amid a renewed racial reckoning, adjusting to new hybrid and hybrid learning environments, and still contending with confusion about how to stay safe. All these factors impacted the way students were able to engage with their peers. At the same time, new opportunities for community engagement emerged as the needs within every community across the world grew (Cristofolletti & Pinheiro, 2022). For some students, engaging with the community provided an opportunity to have greater interaction with peers as well as contribute to the community in new and meaningful ways.

Tutoring

Although this study was not centered on the concept of tutoring, it is still important to understand the practice of tutoring to better understand the college students' experiences with the community engagement opportunity and the elementary children. Tutoring is defined as a formal process that involves a relationship between a more experienced and knowledgeable person who plays a supportive role and a less experienced and knowledgeable person, so as to facilitate that person's development (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Guerra-Martín et al., 2015; Guerra-Martín et al., 2017). Guerra-Martín et al. (2017) further described tutoring as coaching, assessing, facilitating, sponsoring, supporting, guiding, and role modeling. Nickow et al. (2020) explained that tutoring can be one-on-one or small-group instructional programming by teachers, paraprofessionals, volunteers, or parents. Further, Topping (2000) recognized that tutoring can occur when people who are not professional teachers help and support

the learning of others in an interactive, purposeful, and systematic way. Nickow et al. (2020) described the concept of tutoring as one of the most versatile and potentially transformative educational tools within education. The value of mass tutoring efforts in the aftermath of COVID-19 remains untested (Gamoran & Murnane, 2023; Wong, 2020). In the K-12 educational sector, prior to 2020, families in the United States spent more than \$630 million in private online tutoring for primary and secondary education (Wong, 2020). This spending occurred primarily among affluent families looking for additional academic support as the competition for college admission grew. During the COVID-19 pandemic years, demand for tutors increased as families scrambled to compensate for perceived deficits created by inconsistent school structures as the educational system responded to dynamic health and safety protocols (wearing masks, limited face-to-face school hours, online classes, etc.). The convergence of community needs along with the financial support of a funding agency allowed for the creation of the project for this current study. The college students wanted community engagement, the school district wanted academic support for their elementary school, and a grant funder wanted to address learning loss by providing the resources to create impact in the community.

Belonging, Retention, and Persistence

It is also important to understand the role of community engagement and involvement in retention and persistence. Retention in higher education is defined as the continued enrollment of students from the first to the second year, while persistence is more often described as the continued enrollment from Year 2 to graduation (Burke, 2019). Sense of belonging, the feeling of being valued and integral to a group, significantly influences student motivation, effort, and academic achievement (Mahar et al., 2013). Students' sense of belonging can also predict institutional commitment and persistence (Hausmann et al., 2009; Soria et al., 2003). Additional research indicates that students from marginalized backgrounds can be positively impacted through meaningful community service participation, increasing their desire to persist (Museus, 2014; Soria et al., 2003). Community engagement presents one way for students to get involved.

Sense of belonging is a personal feeling or perception of an individual as they relate

to or interact with others, a group, or a system that is separate from an individual's actions, behavior, or social participation (Strayhorn, 2018). Feeling needed, important, integral, valued, respected, creates a sense of belonging (Mahar et al., 2013). In addition, students' sense of belonging on their campuses is related to motivation, student effort, and academic achievement. Students' interaction with their peers—for example, by participating in campus activities and student organizations—is the most important contributor to becoming engaged (Styron, 2010). Furthermore, campuswide community programs help in promoting students' sense of belonging and retention on campus (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015). It's important for students to know that they do matter and that they belong to a specific community, a community that values their participation. Students who see themselves as belonging to the campus community are more likely to persevere, as this sense of belonging enhances not only motivation but also a willingness to engage others in ways that further persistence (Tinto, 2017).

During the COVID-19 years, students lost the engagement and interaction that can support a sense of belonging. When students do not feel a sense of fitting in, it leads to feeling they do not matter. One impact on students that this study explored was the effect of this community engagement on sense of belonging, and in turn its effect on retention and persistence.

Community Experience Framework

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of this single-case community-engaged experience on the tutors' individual educational trajectories and their own learning. This study leaned on several existing theories from both higher education and social psychology literature to situate the understanding of the tutors' experience. The research team first looked at theories of student involvement, which focus on the amount of physical and psychological energy a student devotes to the college experience. Student involvement theory states that the amount of learning and personal growth associated with any educational program is directly proportionate to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program (Astin, 1984). This study looked at community engagement as a form of involvement. We also drew upon the community experience framework, described by Nowell and Boyd (2014). They first used

the community experience framework to assess whether employees of an organization felt a SOC within their organization and if that SOC also contributed to a sense of responsibility to and within that community (SOC-R). Findings of a subsequent study indicated that both SOC and SOC-R were predictive of key outcomes, including retention, in a workplace setting (Boyd et al., 2018). Although the tutors within the current study were voluntarily participating in the community engagement experience, they were compensated for their time by the institution using resources provided by the grant funder. The students working as tutors were hired by the institution. As paid employees of the organization (institution of higher education), they worked in the organizational environment of the elementary school, and often saw themselves as employees. Given this connection to the organization, our analysis incorporated this model, specifically the sense of community (SOC) designation, which describes four core elements: membership, influence, integration, and shared emotional connection (Nowell & Boyd, 2014), to further understand these dynamics. Looking at the theories of student involvement and sense of community helped us understand why students got involved with this program and what they took away from the experience. Boyd and Martin (2022) also used this framework to understand community and responsibility in times of crisis. They indicated that individuals enter a community context with individual values and beliefs about responsibility toward others and will also look for ways to fulfill the need to influence or have an impact on people and communities, while also seeking emotional connections. The tutors' roles as engaged students on campus as well as paid employees in the organization during the COVID-19 crisis suggest that the community experience framework was a credible framework in which to examine this study.

Project Description

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the experiences of undergraduate and graduate students serving as elementary school tutors in a university-supported community engagement program in the 2021–2022 academic year, right in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. As in other programs across the country (Biag et al., 2021), the opportunity for partnership emerged as a grant-funding organization

approached the university with an idea and funding to support learning-loss recovery efforts. The organization had an interest in entering this education/tutoring work and was looking for a university and elementary or middle school to pilot this initiative. The funding organization administered a variety of assessment tools to measure the impact of the educational recovery efforts for the children; however, this study explores tutors' individual experiences, with a focus on their educational trajectory and their own learning.

The study took place at a mid-sized research private university in the Rocky Mountain West. Tutors ranged from 18 to 29 years old, spanning from freshmen through seniors pursuing a bachelor's degree as well as some pursuing a master's degree. The site for the community engagement was an elementary school located about 5 miles from the college campus. Tutors traveled to the site by car or mass transit. Twenty-four undergraduate and graduate students were hired and trained as elementary school tutors in fall 2021. The tutoring program began in January 2022 and ran for 4 months, ending in May 2022, the end of the school year for the district. The program enrolled 96 elementary school students, though not every child attended tutoring sessions each day. Elementary students' families self-selected the children into this elective extracurricular experience.

Sessions were offered two times per week for 2 hours. The tutors were trained for one or two specific grade levels and worked with small groups of children. The first half hour was intended to give the children a break in the day after completing their school day. Tutors provided snacks and an outdoor recess time for the first 30 minutes of each session. The following 60 minutes were intended to be either a literacy or mathematical lesson (depending on grade level), and the final 30 minutes of the session were spent wrapping up, which included cleaning up the space, connecting children with their parents, and debriefing with program leaders and one another. On average, each tutor spent about 40 hours with the children.

IRB approval for this study was received and data collection began immediately following the completion of the tutoring program in two separate phases. The first phase of the study was focused on program assessment. Of the 24 tutors, 20 participated in the initial round of survey data, which was collected

via a Qualtrics survey to gather their perspectives on strengths and challenges of the program. This initial data point provided useful and timely information for the grant funder about what worked and did not work as they went into immediate planning for future iterations of the program. One specific element of that survey was extracted to inform the next phase of the study, which focused on the impact of the engagement work on the tutors' college experience. Eight of the tutors chose to continue their participation into this phase of the study, with individual interviews conducted in summer 2022. The second phase of the study was intended to better understand how community engagement, specifically tutoring children, affected the educational experience and retention of the tutors.

Measuring the Impact

A qualitative research design was used in this study. The study involved collecting student tutors' reflections on their personal experience and their involvement in community engagement through the tutoring program. The interviews were audio and video recorded via Zoom and transcribed, and the transcripts were used as the primary documents. The interviews were set for a 30-minute to 1-hour time slot. The transcripts were precoded in 12 ways using Nvivo to identify the main stressors and word frequency. The stressors were ranked according to the frequency of quotes during analysis. This qualitative study acts as a bridge from Step 1 (thematic and contextual analysis) to Step 2 (identification of possible ways to improve the program). Data was coded and analyzed using the four elements of the theory of sense of community (Boyd & Martin, 2022): membership, influence, integration, and shared emotional connection.

Two research questions guided the study:

1. What were the experiences of undergraduate and graduate students participating in a designated community engagement program?
2. How did participation in this designated community engagement program impact education trajectory and career choices?

Findings

Topics emerged organically from the data and were coded by themes by the researchers using the sense of community (SOC) theoretical framework (Boyd & Martin,

2022): individual influence, fulfillment and integration, significance of group membership, and shared emotional connection. The themes are described below, with specific examples of how they were present in the tutoring space.

Theme 1: Individual Influence

Undergraduate and graduate students serving as tutors had varying levels of interest in the field of education prior to working in the elementary school. Their prior interest, along with surprises they encountered with the children, interactions with parents and family members, and the challenges they faced, all contributed to the overall sense of influence they felt they had as individuals on the children. Although several tutors had experience working with children in this age group in other settings (summer camp, child care, their own siblings), only a small handful had intended to become early childhood, elementary, or secondary educators in the future. For these individuals, the experience supported that decision. As a male tutor reported, "It was an eye-opening, and really made me very resolute in my decision to be a teacher."

Thoughts on Education. When asked about their thoughts on education, tutors explained that the field of education is more complicated than what occurs inside a classroom each day, recognizing the influence of the government and stakeholders. One female tutor reported,

Being part of the [tutoring program] was just exciting to me. I had not worked with elementary school before, so it was a new light. It was a new perspective and I appreciated elementary school teachers so much more because they are doing a lot of work which is not appreciated enough.

Most had not considered a career in elementary education, though two had indicated they considered teaching at the secondary level at some point. They felt that even though they were in the school for only "a couple hours" each week, the experiences gave them a practical view of what teaching elementary school might be like. They felt teachers should be receiving special accolades to honor the effort that it takes to help a young child learn a new concept and understand its meaning. The exposure to elementary-aged children and the physical

school building where they participated in the community engagement program had them thinking and reflecting on what it really takes to be an early childhood and elementary school teacher. Some expressed the pressure they felt in their responsibility to capture the prescribed lessons and ensure the time spent after school really did meet the goals of improving learning for the children. Most tutors described the community engagement program as an important opportunity both for the children who got to participate and for the tutors, who enhanced their own thoughts and beliefs in regard to education.

Surprise Moments. Tutors expressed how they were surprised by the students themselves. Some discussed their initial assumption that the children were more mature and described their surprise at how immature they ended up being. Others shared that they anticipated all the children would be struggling academically, when in reality some of them actually learned very quickly. One tutor was surprised by how the children enjoyed challenging assignments rather than simple ones; the children even expressed how they were more energized by assignments that the tutor designed rather than the prescribed lessons that the tutors were instructed to facilitate. A female tutor reported,

[One] surprise I can think of is that there were a couple of kids who, at the beginning of our program, did not seem super engaged, and it took probably two weeks to get those kids on board. Some lessons did not require much effort for every kid to catch up.

Overall, the variations in how children learned seemed to surprise the tutors over the course of the community engagement program.

Parental Involvement. Although not a required aspect of the programming, some tutors engaged with parents during the pickup portion of the day. Study participants noted that the parents who talked with them during pickup seemed to have a “specific influence” on their children’s performance in the program. One tutor specifically noted interacting with one mother who was in regular contact since she was aware of her child’s behavior issue in school and was always following

up with the tutor when she picked up her son to determine if behavior was also a concern in that setting. “So, she was just very communicative, and very sweet,” the tutor noted. Having parents and teachers engage in open and regular communication forms an effective collaborative partnership focused on supporting the child’s education and well-being. Sharing information about a student’s progress, challenges, and successes promotes a sense of community. This communication cultivates a sense of shared responsibility, because parent and teacher both play critical roles in students’ development.

Recognizing these contributions that bridge the gap between school and home strengthens appreciation of community effort. Parent–tutor effective communication highlights an individual child’s unique needs and strengths.

Challenges Experienced. Each of the tutors participating in this study described encountering challenges that they would want others to be aware of when working in a community–engaged environment with children. Some challenges were resolved right away, and others were left unresolved even after the program had completed. First, some elementary students had disabilities or specific behavioral issues that were difficult to handle. One male tutor reported, “Obviously us tutors are not trained teachers, so we don’t know the best ways to deal with kids behaviorally.” Second, sometimes students did not know how to communicate their problems. Third, tutors expressed concerns with overall communication from the program leaders. Fourth, being a tutor for elementary grades required considerable knowledge about taking care of the children at different levels, such as reminding them to use the bathroom. One female tutor reported, “It was a lot more babysitter energy than it was teaching.” Another tutor echoed this sentiment: “It is hard to make sure children are safe while having fun, and hopefully learning along the way as well.” A final challenge discussed was handling conflict among the children themselves. One specific example centered on the bullying between children from different religious groups. The tutor described an argument among the children belonging to either Christianity or Islam during the month of Ramadan. Children who were observing Ramadan were being teased by their peers, and the tutor was unsure how

to address the conflict with the children.

Throughout the program, the tutors had various experiences. Some tutors came to realize their passion for children or community, some gained important skills for their future careers, and others learned about the many efforts that need to be applied to teach a child.

Theme 2: Fulfillment and Integration

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

Favorite Lesson. Many of the tutors reflected on their students enjoying the lessons that would allow them to work in groups assisting one another or working together to solve some problems. They did not seem to care for or like individual assignments. These lessons also became favorites for tutors because the students seemed to enjoy the learning process, which made them enjoy teaching as well, producing a vibrant class environment. One tutor specifically recalled several lessons where the younger children drew pictures to tell their own story, which they seemed to love doing.

Change of Interest in Education. The program increased the general interest in the field of education for many of the tutors. A number of tutors reported an increased passion for teaching. Having gained experience through this tutoring program, they felt they had a better understanding of what a career in teaching is all about and what it might take for students to understand the subject or topic being instructed. They admitted that teaching is not simple: It requires commitment, connection with students, and flexibility when presenting the lessons. One female tutor who thought she had an interest in teaching reported,

This program showed me that, I don't want to work with kids, I would be comfortable handling high school students, elementary students require patience and dedication of another level.

Theme 3: Significance of Group Membership

Most of the tutors had not participated in an organized community-engaged learning opportunity in their time as a college student, though some had experience from their time in high school. However, we also found from the data that their definition of community engagement or understanding of community engagement was unclear and perhaps confusing. In the context of this experience, this lack of clarity was likely due, in part, to some organizational challenges in getting this program up and running. Some of this confusion was around the tutors' role and the level of interaction with the elementary school staff that was expected. We found that some of the ambiguity contributed to the tutors' feeling of community membership. The confusion that each of the tutors was experiencing in this program seemed to have created a shared sense of camaraderie while at the school for tutoring hours or in training sessions.

Previous Community Engagement Experience. When asked about prior community engagement experiences, a number of the tutors indicated they had some, but they were unable to provide much description or detail that separated an independent service activity from an engaged learning experience. "We would go paint schools and things of that nature, or like I work at a horse ranch or a summer which, of course, is not really working with students but it was part of community engagement programs," one of the tutors described. One of the male tutors who had connections to the geographical community from growing up in the area discussed his experience: "I have had experience with community engagement before. In high school and in my early college experience, I was working with programs similar to this and with community engagement initiatives."

Another tutor reported this as a first in college, but she described her time before that:

When I was in high school, I was working in a couple of different capacities, working like a grant officer, writing programs for my high

school, and working with the community on a couple of fundraising initiatives like girls' education and things like that.

These comments indicated that having had some connection to the community in the past drove the interest in being a part of this program.

I previously worked with community services and I was pretty heavily involved with the community serving. But not like the same thing. I worked for a food bank for a while, and at undergraduate level we did a lot of community engagement programs there. . . .

One of the tutors even connected her work in the community to the opportunity to attend college, saying, "I have been involved in a number of community service projects, sort of like community organizations. I got a scholarship because of my community service."

Interaction With Parents. "I noticed that kids were improving, and I heard directly from parents—something that motivated me to do more." As described above, the level of interaction with parents and guardians was significant to the tutors' overall experience. However, there was minimal time to interact with parents, as contact occurred only during the pickup at the conclusion of the session. Tutors described the benefit of these interactions as being one way to gain further understanding about a specific child and their needs. One tutor indicated they enjoyed being able to talk with a parent about the child's performance in the tutoring sessions and connect that experience to the child's other experiences outside the school environment. Although the engagement was minimal, it did have an impact on the way tutors would work with the children in future tutoring sessions. For example, one tutor described their interactions with a parent: "We talked about how it helped with their reading and how they felt like their kids were becoming better at understanding and reading sentences, and comprehension."

Tutors indicated they felt as though having contact with parents and guardians allowed them to feel more like they were contributing to the child's overall educational experience. "Parents gave us the confidence to

continue doing what we were doing because they were providing feedback that their kids were improving in many areas including behavior," one tutor proudly described.

Theme 4: Shared Emotional Connection

Sense of community describes a concept of personal connection with the community and the importance of having a shared emotional connection. SOC is a strong predictor of satisfaction with an experience and leads to retention of college students, more so than academic achievement (Boyd et al., 2022). It is not surprising that one of the findings of this study was that meaningful interaction with the children and getting feedback from those children were the most impactful and enjoyable parts of the community-engaged tutoring experience.

Interaction With Children. Many of the tutors were overjoyed to talk about the interesting and meaningful interactions with the children they worked with. One common experience was that they each felt they helped at least one student overcome a certain academic or social challenge. For example, a fourth-grade student had difficulties in understanding math, and the tutor guided the student to the point that they became a master. One of the tutors for the younger children indicated, "Some kids could not pronounce certain letters. They didn't know how to differentiate s and t. So I think that that was done, and it was exciting to see them improving." One of the second-grade tutors felt that some of the children had specific challenges and difficulties getting along with their peers. Even though the children were together in the school environment for many hours before the tutoring session, this tutor felt it was her "responsibility of a tutor to teach them good behavior" in the time she had with them, in addition to the academic instruction she was providing. A different tutor reported, "I appreciate our involvement in the program, I saw students who knew nothing at the beginning, they became creative, grammar improved greatly, and this encouraged me." Another went on to describe,

There were a couple of students that just didn't really want to be there, and were kind of there because their parents wanted them there. So it was hard to deal with them but through the process, they started enjoying everything.

Personal interaction with children also helped improve the understanding of the purpose of the program. One tutor commented, “It was wonderful getting to be able to connect with the students and figure out what it was they really wanted out of the program itself.”

One of the tutors spoke at length about what she was learning from being with the children. She described a situation:

We had a little girl named Miriam. It was during Ramadan, and her family was observing Ramadan, so she often had to miss the afternoon snack. I was complaining one afternoon, like Oh, it is so hot outside and I’m so hungry. This is like such a long day and she and a couple of little girls were running by and playing, and she stops and looks at me, and she says, “You’re not as hungry as I am.” I said, Oh, my goodness, okay! So humbled very quickly.

Feedback From Children. Unsurprisingly, the children were always ready to provide feedback about the lessons they were receiving. When they enjoyed a lesson, they would tell the tutor right away, and when they were not enjoying the lesson, they would express themselves right away. Some of this feedback was needed for formal assessment of the program or of the children’s academic progress on specific skills. However, it was the informal feedback offered by the children in the moment that was most meaningful to the tutors. The children were clear about what they wanted and what they liked about what they were learning and the ways in which they were learning it.

Interaction Among the Tutors. Interpersonal connections contribute to a sense of community, as individuals recognize and appreciate the diverse perspectives and contributions of their peers. Most of the tutors did not know one another prior to the launch of this program. Prior to entering the school in February, they had several months to complete asynchronous training modules that focused on both the fundamentals of community engagement (provided by the institution of higher education) and tutoring strategies (provided by the grant funder). Throughout the time the tutors were in the school, the program administrator also offered synchronous training opportunities to

learn more about curriculum development, classroom management, and social-emotional behavior in children. These trainings provided tutors the opportunity not only to develop a shared sense of understanding about the logistics and expectations of the program, but also to talk about the challenges they experienced with certain children or the dynamics they were witnessing among children. Additionally, the crew of tutors had about 20 minutes before each session as they arrived at the school to talk informally and were guided through a 10-minute formal debrief session at the conclusion of each tutoring session. Both formal and informal time provided allowed for the tutors to interact with one another.

Additionally, a formal discussion board for tutors was available on Canvas, and a number of text threads and individual chats were created informally as tutors got to know one another. Because the tutors had different prior experiences with children and educational settings, they were able to serve as a resource for each other. Serving as a mutual resource in this way proved to be a critical aspect of the program as tutors sought advice on handling certain situations and how to manage lesson plans. One key benefit for tutors was learning tips and developing skills on how to approach classroom management, as one tutor described:

On my first day, I made a mistake by allowing a student to go to a different side of the school which I was not supposed to allow. One of the colleagues I worked with who majored in social work had a lot of training as far as working with different groups of people prior to this experience. She came up with an activity where the students could write their own stories, and they were going to merge them into one story, and then act, which, of course, third graders were entertained and exposed their creativity.

Working collaboratively with colleagues enabled the refinement of prescribed lesson plans and allowed tutors to develop their own lesson plans.

I learned how to talk to little kids for a long time and keep them engaged. I learned how to engage with the younger audience. It requires a different kind of patience, and you

don't have to get into the program if you don't want to. I have appreciated this program a lot more because it was elementary and also because it just taught me many things, I didn't know a few things like problem-solving in many different ways. And just through my colleagues, I learned how to solve problems for certain situations.

The themes identified and described above (individual influence, fulfillment and integration, significance of group membership, and shared emotional connection) highlight the elements of the sense of community theory that describe the connections tutors developed and fostered as participants of the community-engaged experience. Specifically noted by two of the tutors was the importance of being aware and attentive to creating an inclusive learning environment for the children, where they could feel valued and supported. Acknowledging and being respectful of religious observances, holidays, and dietary restrictions was noted as one way to ensure that the children's educational experience is inclusive, at least during the tutoring time. As with Miriam and her tutor, most of the tutors indicated that developing relationships required communication, asking questions, sharing ideas, and openness to learning from one another.

Through shared planning sessions, discussions, and feedback, tutors aligned their teaching approaches, integrated interdisciplinary connections, and ensured a coherent and comprehensive educational experience. This curriculum development collaboration has helped create a unified vision and ensures that the classroom's academic goals are met.

Implications and Recommendations

Each of the members of this community partnership learned from this pilot program and collaborated on a final year-end assessment provided to the grant-funding organization. Results and recommendations from this specific study on the tutors' experiences were included in that final report and are discussed in this section. All of the 24 tutors either graduated or reenrolled at the university in the following year, which resulted in a 100% retention rate. This high rate of retention is likely not a direct result of participation in the program; however, it certainly speaks to the importance of

community-engaged partnerships as an experience to enable students to engage. More clearly, the results of the program overall and this specific study indicated that undergraduate tutors were likely to apply to graduate school; in fact, some of them chose to pursue a program of study that was adjacent to the field of education. To date, four of the tutors have communicated their intention to continue in education-related fields. The tutors who were already graduate students indicated that participating in the program made them feel more connected to the city they were living in for school.

We learned that additional training was needed to set the tutors up for success. From the program administrators' point of view, this training should have been about the elementary school building itself, such as safety protocols for an emergency; the tutors, however, indicated a desire for more intense development related to behavior management, understanding group dynamics among young children, and providing social-emotional support.

Program leaders, in consultation with tutors, agreed on the following top three lessons learned: (1) Children needed additional adult attention outside the typical school day with teachers, regardless of whether this attention was academically focused. (2) Tutoring created connections among the individual tutors both inside the school setting and on the college campus. (3) The level of school leadership in the tutoring program should be adjusted to either be "all in" on the experience, or not included in the experience at all. Expanding on these lessons learned has led to these corresponding broad recommendations that go beyond the goals of the specific study at hand:

1. More adults in the school system. Whether these adults be college students in a tutoring capacity, additional teachers in the school day, more paraprofessional student support personnel, or additional staffing in nonacademic positions, the need for children to have more opportunities for attention from adults was very clear to the tutors, as they spoke about the children just wanting to hang out and tell their tutors about their day and the things on their mind. Often tutors spoke about not getting to all of the content on their agenda simply because the children just wanted to visit with them. This additional social-emotional support must be established and in place in order for

the children to be open to more academic support and instruction. The tutors reported children being more excited and engaged when learning about nonacademic topics—bullying, how to be a good friend, how to interact with others—than they were for the math and literacy programming.

2. Tutoring created connections. The college students (both undergraduate and graduate) who served as tutors connected with one another through the time of the experience. Most did not know one another in advance yet became close throughout. Examples of this included a portion of the group going to a baseball game together, sharing meals together, creating text threads, and participating in group chats on social media. There was one specific instance of a graduate student taking on one of the undergraduate students in a mentoring capacity. These connections were very important, as the college students themselves were also coming out of a second year of COVID-related isolation, virtual classes, and masked faces.
3. School leadership “all in” or not. The tutoring site for this project was a public elementary school. Tutoring took place after school in the school building. During that afterschool time, a number of school administrators, teachers, and staff were still finishing their workday when tutors came into the building. We used their classrooms, teachers’ lounge, and library for tutoring groups. When a behavior issue arose, sometimes it was the school community that knew how to best defuse the situation, and the staff would step in, although doing so was outside the scope of their workday. For a similar partnership, expectations must be made clear at the beginning whether school personnel should be involved. Too much ambiguity and confusion existed without those agreements in advance.

Overall, the program administrators agreed that an opportunity exists to maximize partnerships between the university and the community to share resources. They also agreed that the university is seeing a steady stream of young adults who are interested in the field of education (though they may not want to be classroom teachers) who could participate in such university–community partnerships. The national teacher shortage is real (Nguyen et al., 2022; Schmitt & deCourcy, 2022), and utilizing a program such

as the one described here to get young adults into school systems may help with that need in schools. However, the program did not continue after the completion of the pilot (2021–2022) academic year, for reasons outside the university’s control.

Lessons Learned

Community engagement among undergraduate and graduate students has clear benefits (Boyd & Brackmann, 2012; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Huda et al., 2018). One such engagement experience, an afterschool tutoring program, exposed students to issues of social justice and educational equity, the application of their academic learning to the elementary school children enrolled in the program, and the development of skills and tools for contributing to change in partnership with communities. This study involved collecting undergraduate and graduate student tutors’ reflections on their personal experience with community engagement as they tutored children during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants in the study indicated having a better idea about the profession of teaching as a result of serving as a tutor, as the opportunity developed personal skills in engaging with elementary-school-aged learners. For some, tutoring contributed to career decisions. For others, tutoring provided a greater understanding for challenges in the educational system as the community emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic. These lessons would indicate that there is value in offering opportunities to engage in the public school system in roles beyond that of a classroom teacher. Institutions with colleges of education may want to pursue similar opportunities for engagement to expose undergraduate and graduate students to education-adjacent careers.

This specific community-engaged partnership was created to serve as a pilot program, with the intention of expanding or revising the program. This study helped to inform the program funders regarding what worked well and where the program would need improvement. For the purposes of this study, it was determined that the program had many benefits for the student tutors and the elementary learners. Some of the lessons learned from this pilot initiative were provided to the grant-funding organization as they considered how the program might advance. One such lesson

was the need to schedule specific times or days for tutors to have direct engagement with parents and school staff. Tutors would have an opportunity to learn from other staff experiences, and the feedback from parents would help them understand students' behavior. Student community engagement is the social or normative glue that holds student college experiences together. The more support colleges and universities provide in addressing student community experiences, the more likely change will come in our educational institutions. Learning can happen anywhere, and whether in or outside

the classroom, learning happens through the relationships that students build among themselves and with the world around them (Paguyo et al., 2022).

Finally, regarding the specific context of COVID-19, program partners learned it was essential to be flexible. Illness of both the tutors and the elementary students was inevitable, causing the individual sessions and tutors themselves to pivot on a moment's notice. This need for flexibility and mutual support showed us how important community was during this time of crisis, for everyone involved.



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Same Words, Different Worlds: Navigating Semantic Drift in Higher Education's Outreach and Community Engagement Discourse

David E. Meens

Abstract

This article examines the challenge of semantic drift in higher education's community engagement discourse, where terms like "outreach" and "engagement" have expanded beyond their original scholarly definitions and been appropriated by institutional actors for diverse purposes. Drawing upon the relevant literature and the author's experience as an administrator and practitioner, this analysis demonstrates that scholarly responses emphasizing boundary work to police definitional integrity prove counterproductive to goals of institutionalization and promotion of high-quality practice. The article argues for an alternative approach (strategic adaptation) that maintains scholarly rigor while engaging productively with evolving institutional usage. Operationalized through an outreach and engagement Definitions and Concept Map Tool (DCMT), this pragmatic approach emphasizes semantic differentiation, plural aims, and zones of strategic overlap. The article demonstrates how strategic adaptation enables community engagement scholars to influence emerging policy and practice while preserving analytical precision necessary for meaningful research and assessment.

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



The scholarly literature on civic and community engagement in higher education faces a fundamental challenge that extends beyond methodological concerns to the very language through which the field defines itself. As universities increasingly embrace community engagement as a strategic priority, core concepts such as "outreach" and "engagement" have undergone significant semantic drift—the process whereby word meanings change over time through complex interactions between pragmatic usage and conventional meaning (Traugott & Dasher, 2001)—expanding far beyond their original scholarly and practical definitions to encompass a broad range of institutional activities. This linguistic evolution presents community engagement scholars with a critical choice: maintain definitional purity through boundary work or adapt strategically to influence emerging institutional practices.

Drawing upon both the research literature and the author's experience as an administrator and practitioner in higher education, this article argues that boundary work approaches—although well-intentioned—prove counterproductive to the goals of institutionalization and promotion of high-quality practice. Instead, a strategic adaptation approach offers greater promise for advancing both scholarly understanding and institutional practice. This pragmatic and pluralist strategy emphasizes semantic differentiation and distinctions between normative aims, paired with articulation of zones of strategic overlap. I argue that this combination of elements is most likely to enable community engagement scholars to exert influence on emerging policy and practice while preserving the analytical precision necessary for meaningful research and assessment.

The analysis that follows demonstrates

how the field's tendency toward normative boundary work has inadvertently marginalized engagement scholarship from institutional decision-making processes. By contrast, strategic adaptation—illustrated through the outreach and engagement Definitions and Concept Map Tool (DCMT)—provides a framework for productive engagement with diverse institutional stakeholders while maintaining scholarly rigor and commitment to transformational practice.

The Problem of Semantic Drift in Community Engagement

Semantic drift represents a particular challenge for community engagement scholarship because it occurs at the intersection of academic theory and institutional practice—a space that practitioners must but that researchers may or may not navigate on a daily basis. For terms like “outreach” and “engagement” to serve as anchors within the academic discourse of engagement scholarship, it is essential that they be given consistent and relatively precise application across research contexts, in order to build the field's findings and theoretical knowledge base. Advancing knowledge in any domain requires that we are discussing, and are aware that we are discussing, the same phenomena under investigation.

Such terms also carry “commonsense” (i.e., pervasively intuitive) meanings that make them susceptible to appropriation and dilution across contexts. The fact that these words, in their stipulative academic definitions, anchor a discourse of both research and practice stands in tension with their availability to commonsense usage. From a practitioner perspective, this dual usage creates confusion not only in scholarly discourse but in day-to-day operations where different institutional actors use, as a matter of course, the same terms to describe fundamentally different activities.

Outreach, in its commonsense usage, refers to efforts by one entity to extend beyond its traditional domain to contact others. *Engagement* implies mutual contact and influence—analogueous to interlocking gears that affect each other's movement, rather than mechanisms spinning independently. Even at this general level, the distinction between “outreach” and “engagement” thus matters enormously for practitioners attempting to design, implement, and

assess a whole range of activities. Yet even the distinction in commonsense usage becomes increasingly difficult to maintain as institutional actors appropriate the language for different purposes.

In light of these dynamics, we can understand why the effort by scholars to fix the definitions of key terms in both literature and practice has been central to the development of the field. These efforts have not forestalled semantic drift; if anything, the positive normative valence associated with “community” and “engagement” that results from such scholarly efforts in turn accelerates appropriation of these terms by institutional actors seeking to align their activities with values of authenticity, equity, and reciprocity (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). Activities previously characterized as outreach, recruitment, public relations, or customer service may be rebranded as “engagement” to benefit from these positive connotations, regardless of whether the underlying practices embody the reciprocal, transformational characteristics that define genuine community engagement (Dostilio et al., 2012).

This appropriation creates significant challenges for both scholarly discourse and practical implementation. For scholarship, it complicates construct validity in research and obscures important distinctions between transactional and transformational approaches to university–community relationships (Checkoway, 2001). For practitioners, it complicates efforts to design meaningful partnerships, assess program effectiveness, and communicate with diverse stakeholders about institutional commitments. When “engagement” can mean anything from a one-way information session to a multiyear collaborative research partnership, both community partners and institutional stakeholders struggle to understand what universities in fact offer and expect from their relationships.

The Carnegie Foundation Definition: Scholarly Anchor and Institutional Constraint

By far the most successful attempt to fix the meaning of “community engagement” in higher education comes from the Carnegie Foundation. The foundation's definition has occupied a central position in higher education discourse since its introduction in the early 2000s, serving simultaneously

as scholarly anchor and institutional framework. Carnegie defines community engagement as “collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (American Council on Education, 2025, para. 1). This definition emerged during development of an elective Community Engagement Classification, designed to recognize institutions demonstrating significant commitment to community partnership.

Scholarly Influence and Institutional Adoption

The Carnegie definition has achieved remarkable penetration within academic discourse, becoming the *de facto* standard for community engagement scholarship and institutional self-assessment. Its emphasis on collaboration, mutual benefit, partnerships, and reciprocity aligned with emerging scholarly consensus about best practices in university–community relationships, while its institutional legitimacy provided a framework that administrators could readily adopt for strategic planning and external communication.

The definition's scholarly influence is evident in its widespread citation across the community engagement literature, where it functions as both normative ideal and operational standard. Researchers regularly invoke Carnegie's language to establish theoretical foundations, assess institutional practices, and critique activities that fall short of its reciprocal ideal. The definition has become so embedded in scholarly discourse that many studies assume rather than examine its conceptual adequacy, treating it as settled knowledge rather than one particular construction of complex university–community relationships.

Beyond classification processes, the Carnegie definition shapes hiring practices, promotion criteria, and resource allocation decisions across higher education. This widespread institutional adoption has created path dependency effects, where the definition becomes increasingly difficult to modify or replace as institutions develop systems and processes aligned with its framework.

Contemporary Relevance and Limitations

Although Carnegie's definition has contributed to increased legitimacy of community

engagement work in institutional contexts, its implementation reveals significant tensions between normative ideals and organizational realities. Twenty years after its introduction, the Carnegie definition faces challenges from multiple directions. Community-based scholars and practitioners increasingly critique its university-centric framing and limited attention to power dynamics, community sovereignty, and social justice concerns.

Although such internal critiques—that is, criticisms of the Carnegie definition from within its own aspirational framework—may be valid, they fall short of identifying what I argue is the more significant theoretical limitation of the Carnegie definition. I refer here to the “external” critique that it does not in fact describe, align with, or capture major outreach and engagement functions essential to the modern university. Presented with Carnegie's definition and framework, I have heard from several institutional leaders responses to the effect that “It's all well and good, but that's just not what we do in [public relations, student recruitment, alumni relations, advancement, etc.]” The Carnegie definition can be considered a mirror that reveals to us the essential content and perhaps the normative ideal of community engagement. But many external engagement practitioners find that, when this mirror is held before them, they simply do not recognize themselves in it.

Simultaneously, institutional actors continue to expand the definition's application to activities that stretch its conceptual boundaries, using engagement language to describe everything from economic development initiatives to marketing campaigns. This expansion reflects both the definition's positive valence and its conceptual limitations in distinguishing between different types of university–community relationships. In this somewhat fraught context, the definition's continued centrality in scholarly discourse reflects the field's limited development of alternative frameworks that balance normative clarity with practical applicability.

Definitional Challenges and the Limits of Boundary Work

The prevalence of definitional challenges and the tendency toward normative boundary work in community engagement scholarship has been a recurring theme in

the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* (JHEOE) since its inception. The publication was itself launched in 1996 as *The Journal of Public Service and Outreach* before changing names, exemplifying the semantic instability that has characterized the field.

Giles (2008) explicitly identified “variability of the central terminology” (p. 98) as a central challenge facing the emerging field, noting that the lack of conceptual clarity undermines both scholarly rigor and practical implementation. Driscoll and Sandmann (2001/2016) observed early on that the need for “translating” engagement scholarship into traditional academic categories demonstrates how institutional adoption often requires conceptual compromise. Additionally, Fear and Sandmann (2001/2016) highlighted how scholarly attempts to define engagement within existing disciplinary and institutional categories inevitably distort its essential characteristics. In the broader literature, others have gone further by arguing that such distortions in translation and appropriation present a fundamental challenge to the engagement movement’s ability to achieve its aims (Kliwer, 2013; Meens, 2012, 2014).

One response to semantic drift involves intensifying definitional boundary work—developing more stringent normative definitions and asserting that appropriate uses represent illegitimate deviations from scholarly usage. This approach reflects a commitment to conceptual precision and normative clarity that has deep roots in the community engagement literature.

Prevalence of Normative Approaches in Engagement Scholarship

A review of frequently cited JHEOE articles reveals a consistent pattern of scholarly effort to establish and maintain definitional boundaries around engagement terminology. Holland’s (1999/2016) analysis of faculty involvement in public service demonstrated how scholars have historically approached definitional work through normative frameworks that specify what engagement “should” look like rather than examining how it actually manifests in diverse institutional contexts. Similarly, O’Meara and Saltmarsh’s (2008/2016) integrated model reveals how normative approaches can become prescriptive in ways that limit rather than enhance institutional capacity for community partnership. Although

well-intentioned, these approaches reflect the field’s tendency to privilege scholarly definitions over the practical wisdom that emerges from sustained community partnership work.

Institutional Resistance to Scholarly Boundary Work

Although boundary work expresses a natural tendency among promoters aiming to preserve and promote specific values and practices, significant limitations face this strategy in the current higher education context. Sandmann et al.’s (2009) study of early Carnegie-classified institutions reveals how institutional actors consistently interpret and implement engagement definitions to serve their own priorities rather than conforming to scholarly specifications.

The constituencies and interests appropriating community engagement terminology—senior administrators, development offices, marketing departments—often wield greater institutional power than scholars rooted in the academic tradition of public engagement. Practitioners working within these institutional structures face the daily reality that scholarly definitions, however well-crafted, must compete with more powerful institutional narratives about efficiency, visibility, and resource generation.

Fitzgerald et al.’s (2012/2016) analysis of “the centrality of engagement” acknowledges this reality, noting that engagement has become so institutionally ubiquitous that traditional boundary work strategies prove inadequate. Their observation that engagement language appears across virtually all university functions suggests that scholarly efforts to contain or control definitional usage face insurmountable practical obstacles.

Importantly, boundary work also risks marginalizing community engagement scholarship from broader institutional conversations about university–community relationships. As engagement language becomes institutionally ubiquitous, scholars who insist on restrictive definitions may find themselves excluded from policy discussions, strategic planning processes, and resource allocation decisions that ultimately shape institutional practice. Administrators and staff responsible for community engagement programs need scholarly guidance that helps them navigate institutional pressures while maintaining commitment

to high-quality practice—guidance that boundary work approaches often fail to provide.

Strategic Adaptation: Engaging the Conversation

A more promising approach involves strategic adaptation—modifying scholarly usage to remain intelligible to diverse audiences while maintaining analytical distinctions necessary for rigorous research and practice. This strategy recognizes that language evolves through use and that scholars can more effectively influence emerging conceptions by participating in institutional conversations than by remaining on the margins.

Learning From Engagement Scholarship's Evolution

The higher education community engagement literature provides compelling evidence for the potential of strategic adaptation approaches. Driscoll and Sandmann's (2001/2016) retrospective analysis demonstrated that the field's greatest successes occurred when scholars engaged productively with institutional realities rather than insisting on pure normative approaches. Fear and Sandmann's (2001/2016) examination of the "new" scholarship suggested that conceptual flexibility, rather than definitional rigidity, enables scholarly influence on emerging practices. Fitzgerald et al.'s (2012/2016) analysis supported this argument by demonstrating how engagement concepts have successfully influenced institutional practice precisely because they proved adaptable to diverse contexts.

Strategic adaptation offers several demonstrated advantages. First, it aligns scholarly work with powerful campus and community constituencies, potentially increasing resources and institutional support for community engagement research and practice. Holland's (1999/2016) analysis revealed that scholars who learn to communicate their work in institutionally recognizable terms achieve greater success in advancing engagement initiatives. An especially relevant example of this approach is Weerts' (2019) framework mapping community engagement intersections with resource development, recruitment, and other institutional outreach goals. Second, strategic adaptation enables scholars to influence emerging conceptions that orient policy and practice, rather than ceding definitional authority

entirely to institutional actors.

The community engagement literature reveals numerous examples of successful strategic adaptation. My argument builds upon this recognition among scholars that advancing engagement requires context-specific practical shifts from stipulated definitions developed over the past three decades. Rather than anchoring the field in stipulated definitions and related boundary work, scholars can develop frameworks that acknowledge definitional diversity while preserving analytical precision and commitments to core values.

The O&E DCMT: Outreach and Engagement Definitions and Concept Map Tool

What does strategic adaptation look like in practice? The prevalence of the Carnegie definition of community engagement is likely due, as previously noted, to the dearth of alternative frameworks that have been operationalized in practice and implemented at scale. It is beyond the scope of this article to propose such a full-scale alternative; it may be possible, however, for a theory to be present, at least germinally, in the form of an artifact. To this end, I present the Outreach and Engagement Definitions and Concept Map Tool (DCMT)—a practical framework designed to enable scholars and practitioners to work productively with definitional diversity while maintaining analytical precision.

The DCMT consists of three integrated components: (1) inclusive definitions of "outreach" and "engagement" that avoid prescriptive language; (2) normative criteria of "reciprocity" (a quality of process) and "mutual benefit" (a quality of outcomes); and (3) a visual concept map showing varieties of outreach and engagement activities as overlapping circles, representing zones of strategic overlap where different institutional actors can find common ground. Together, these components provide a framework for navigating definitional diversity without sacrificing analytical precision or normative commitments.

Development Process and Stakeholder Dialogue

The DCMT emerged through iterative dialogue with diversely positioned campus leaders and stakeholders, including administrators; faculty from multiple disciplines;

recruitment, advancement, and public relations practitioners; community partners; and professional staff responsible for engagement program implementation. This collaborative development process proved essential for creating a framework that serves both scholarly and practical needs.

Through multiple iterations, the concept map component of the DCMT evolved to emphasize zones of strategic overlap where different institutional actors could find common ground despite varying definitions and priorities. This evolution reflected growing recognition that productive engagement requires not definitional agreement but shared commitment to practices that advance both institutional and community interests.

Component 1: Inclusive Definitions

The first component of the DCMT provides broader and, most importantly, relatively neutral definitions that are inclusive of diverse institutional practices:

- *Outreach* refers to the ways in which university professionals (faculty and staff members) and students go beyond the university, geographically and organizationally, to contact, communicate with, and engage “external” audiences or constituencies.
- *Engagement* refers to collaborative efforts that involve university and nonuniversity partners in reciprocal and mutually beneficial endeavors. Public or community engagement often includes, extends, and deepens connections established through outreach.

These definitions deliberately avoid prescriptive language about what outreach and engagement “should” accomplish, instead describing what they characteristically involve. This approach enables institutional actors across diverse functional areas to recognize their work within the framework while preserving important distinctions between different types of university–community relationships.

Component 2: Normative Criteria

Activities that fall under the relatively value-neutral terms “outreach” and “engagement” can then be helpfully analyzed in terms of normative criteria or indicators

of quality. Thus, the second component of the DCMT specifies two key concepts that enable assessment of engagement quality, again without imposing rigid standards:

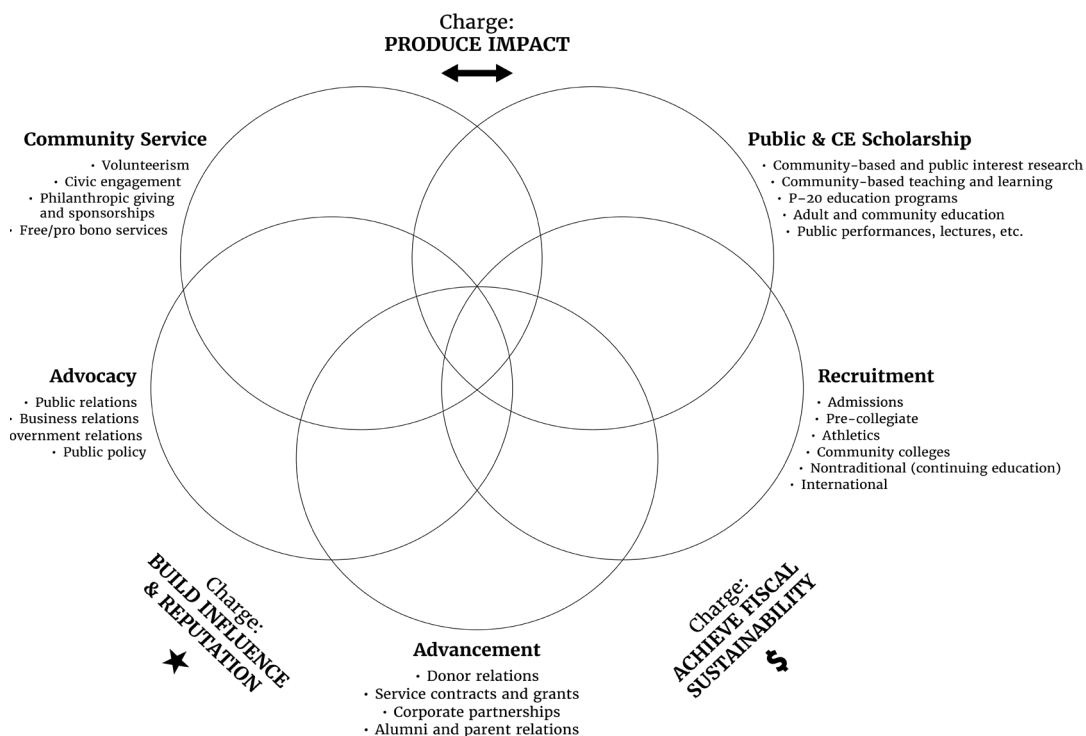
- *Reciprocity* refers to a quality of processes based on equitable “give and take” between partners in a shared endeavor (in decision-making, resource contributions, etc.).
- *Mutual benefit* refers to outcomes that substantially address the goals and needs of all partners in a collaborative effort.

By distinguishing between process characteristics (reciprocity) and outcome characteristics (mutual benefit), the framework enables practitioners to assess and improve their work along multiple dimensions while acknowledging that different types of partnerships may emphasize different aspects of these concepts.

Component 3: Concept Map Diagram

The third component of the DCMT is the visual concept map diagram, which provides a typology of various, actually occurring outreach and engagement activities as overlapping circles. Rather than prescribing specific definitions or hierarchical relationships, the concept map enables users to position their current activities within a broader ecosystem of university–community relationships and the terminologies that help constitute them.

The representation of three types of external engagement goals and functions (the activities’ “institutional charge”) includes an additional, explicitly normative element—albeit one that is plural/multipolar. Community service activities and engaged scholarship both aim primarily to “produce impact,” meaning both the advancement of knowledge and learning alongside the substantive amelioration of public problems and transformation of problematic social and environmental conditions. The overriding aim of most recruitment and advancement efforts is to develop institutional resources, to ultimately “achieve fiscal sustainability.” Advocacy and advancement efforts share, as their overriding goal, to “build influence and reputation.” Thinking of these three “charges” as a triangle superimposed over the Venn diagram, one can see the fundamental divergence of activities represented in terms of the aims. This visualization enables one to differentiate activities even

Figure 1. Results From Evaluation of Educational Sessions

Note. This outreach and engagement concept map includes the Venn diagram showing varieties of outreach and engagement activities as overlapping circles, with the primary institutional objective or “charge” appropriate to each indicated at the top middle (Produce Impact), lower right (Achieve Fiscal Sustainability), and lower left (Build Influence and Reputation). The concept map visually illustrates the zones of strategic overlap where different institutional actors can find common ground despite varying definitions and priorities.

as the overlapping circles emphasize their constant collocation in geographic and social space.

This visual representation (Figure 1) has proven particularly valuable for practitioners and scholars working across internal institutional boundaries. By acknowledging definitional diversity while highlighting shared interests and complementary capabilities, the framework enables productive dialogue between actors who might otherwise remain isolated within their own terminological systems. The overlapping circles illustrate how activities traditionally categorized as distinct types of work can share common characteristics and contribute to broader institutional engagement goals, even as these goals remain distinct and to some extent in tension.

The concept map is presented above as Figure 1 within the text for purposes of discussion of the DCMT elements; the complete

DCMT—including the inclusive definitions, the reciprocity and mutual benefit normative criteria, and the concept map—is presented as a complete one-page instrument in Appendix A.

Practical Applications of the O&E DCMT

The DCMT’s dual emphasis on semantic and conceptual differentiation paired with strategic overlap enables multiple practical applications. For institutional planning, it provides a framework for assessing current capacity and identifying opportunities for enhancement without requiring abandonment of existing programs or terminology. For assessment purposes, it offers flexible criteria that can accommodate diverse approaches while maintaining standards for quality and community benefit. For professional development, it helps practitioners understand how their work connects to broader institutional engagement goals while maintaining their specific functional expertise.

Implications for Scholarship and Practice

The strategic adaptation approach and DCMT have important implications for both community engagement scholarship and institutional practice. The analysis demonstrates that boundary work approaches, although reflecting admirable normative commitments, prove counterproductive to goals of institutionalization and promotion of high-quality practice. By contrast, strategic adaptation enables productive engagement with institutional realities while maintaining core engagement values and commitment to transformational outcomes.

For researchers, the DCMT offers a more sophisticated approach to construct validity that acknowledges definitional variation while increasing analytical rigor. Rather than treating definitional diversity as a problem to be solved through boundary work, scholars can use the concept map to specify precisely what type of university–community relationship they are investigating. The concept map’s emphasis on zones of strategic overlap also provides opportunities for developing more nuanced research questions that examine movement between different types of engagement, factors that influence institutional positioning, and outcomes associated with different approaches to university–community relationships.

For practitioners, the strategic adaptation approach provides practical guidance for navigating institutional pressures while maintaining commitment to authentic community partnership. The DCMT’s emphasis on semantic differentiation paired with strategic overlap proves particularly valuable for practitioners working across institutional boundaries, enabling productive dialogue between actors who might otherwise remain isolated within their own terminological systems. From a professional development perspective, strategic adaptation suggests that community engagement professionals should develop skills in institutional translation and stakeholder communication rather than focusing primarily on defending normative definitions.

Conclusion

The semantic drift affecting community engagement terminology presents both challenges and opportunities for higher education scholarship and practice. Definitional precision remains important for research

validity and normative clarity; however, the changing institutional landscape requires strategic adaptation rather than defensive boundary work. By engaging productively with evolving usage while maintaining analytical distinctions, community engagement scholars can influence emerging institutional practices while preserving the conceptual rigor necessary for meaningful scholarship.

The analysis presented here demonstrates the scope and complexity of current usage patterns; in this context, the DCMT provides a framework for navigating terminological diversity without sacrificing analytical precision. This approach recognizes that concepts derive their meaning from use and that scholarly influence depends on active participation in the conversations that shape institutional practice. The implications of this analysis and approach for the Carnegie Foundation’s Community Engagement classification and the definition that it has made so pervasive are not explored here. Given the insights about practical implementation challenges and institutional relevance, the DCMT could help to inform future iterations of the application framework. In the meantime, it might help institutional leaders and practitioners charged with implementing the Carnegie framework at their universities or colleges to critically situate this implementation among other campus and community priorities, and to translate the process for various campus constituencies charged with diverse engagement functions.

The bottom line for community engagement scholars is this: Rather than viewing semantic drift as a threat to scholarly integrity, we would do better to embrace it as an opportunity to extend our influence while advancing both understanding and practice in university–community relationships. The strategic adaptation approach outlined here offers a path forward that maintains scholarly rigor while engaging productively with the institutional realities that shape contemporary higher education. The alternative—policing boundaries, discounting or condemning engagement practices at variance with stipulated definitions—risks marginalizing community engagement scholars within their own institutions. Given the unprecedented challenges presently faced by public institutions and higher education, approaches to fostering shared purpose and strong alliances across external engagement functions are more important than ever.



About the Author

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Appendix A: Outreach and Engagement Definitions and Concept Map Tool

Outreach and Engagement (O&E) Definitions and Concept Map Tool (DCMT)

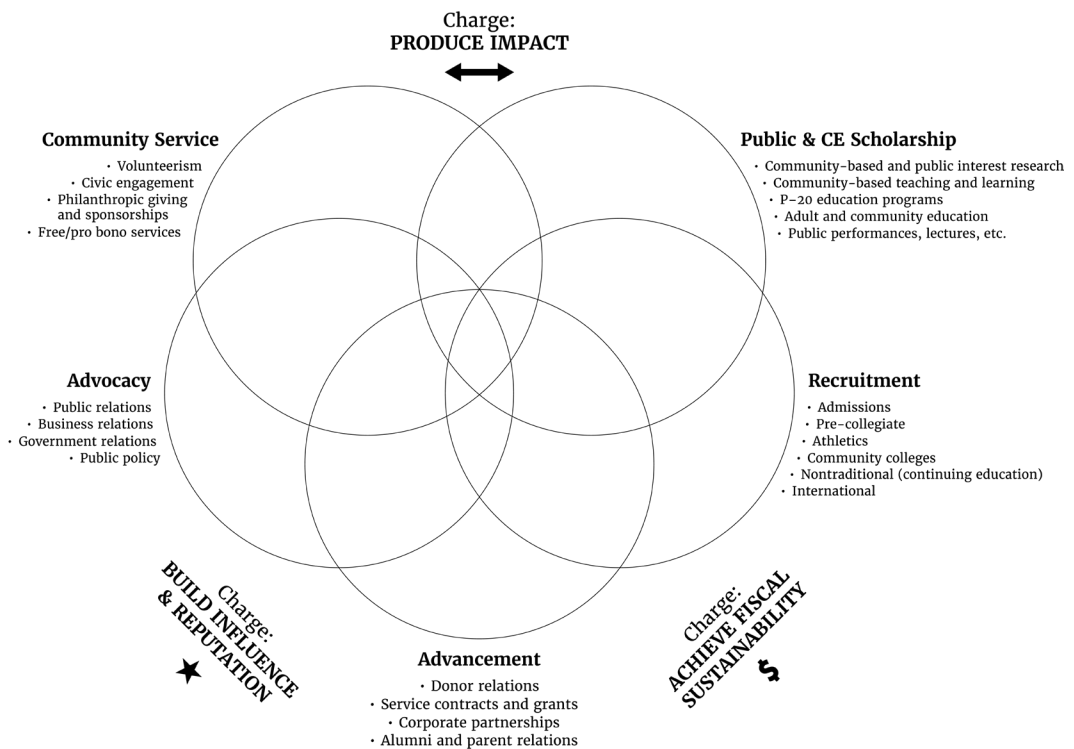
(Developed by David E. Meens and colleagues at University of Colorado Boulder, 2019)

Outreach refers to the ways in which university professionals (faculty and staff members) and students go beyond the university, geographically and organizationally, to contact, communicate with, and engage “external” audiences or constituencies.

Engagement refers to collaborative efforts that involve university and nonuniversity partners in *reciprocal* and *mutually beneficial* endeavors. Public or community engagement often includes, extends, and deepens connections established through outreach.

- *Reciprocity* refers to a quality of *processes* based on equitable “give and take” between partners in a shared endeavor (in decision-making, resource contributions, etc.).
- *Mutual benefit* refers to *outcomes* that substantially address the goals and needs of all partners in a collaborative effort.

Figure A1. Varieties of Outreach and Engagement Activities With Their Institutional Charge (Concept Map)



Note. This is the complete outreach and engagement Definitions and Concept Map Tool, including the inclusive definitions of “outreach” and “engagement” and specifications of “reciprocity” (a quality of process) and “mutual benefit” (a quality of outcomes). The Venn diagram shows varieties of outreach and engagement activities as overlapping circles. The concept map visually illustrates the zones of strategic overlap where different institutional actors can find common ground despite varying definitions and priorities.

The Research 1 Community-Engaged Institution: Addressing Critical Community Needs

Henry R. Cunningham, Theodore R. Smith, and Baylee Pulliam

Abstract

Higher education institutions have heeded the call to be engaged with their communities, and many have responded by partnering with community entities to address the various social and economic challenges in their locale. Among these are public, Research 1 (R1) higher education anchor institutions that are inextricably linked to their communities, focused on bringing human and intellectual capital to help address local challenges. This article looks deeper into community engagement and explores how public R1 institutions can partner with the community to conduct cutting-edge research that positively impacts their shared home. A four-quadrant research and engagement model of modern higher education institutions is presented. The model focuses on the value and impact of this new breed of research-intensive, place-based institutions.

Keywords: Research 1, community-engaged, research model, community engagement model, place-based



Many universities are anchors in their communities, holding significant purchasing power, making major investments, and serving as major employers (Initiative for a Competitive Inner City & CEOs for Cities, 2003), although the degree and manner of engagement in that community varies from institution to institution, depending on research and geographic focus. In this article, we present a four-quadrant research and engagement model of modern higher education institutions, with special focus on the value and impact of a new breed of research-intensive, place-based institutions.

We argue that these institutions are inextricably linked to their home communities (Harkavy & Zuckerman, 1999), giving them a unique stake in these communities' outcomes—the health, success, and growth of their community benefits the institution, its employees, and students (Cunningham et al., 2015). What's more, these institutions have the capacity to engage in local revitalization (Haarman & Green, 2023; Harkavy

& Hartley, 2012; Harkavy & Hodges, 2012; Yamamura & Koth, 2018). These institutions have resources, including human and intellectual capital, both employing and producing a workforce that is skilled, educated, and able to partner for improvement, growth, and development (Harkavy & Zuckerman, 1999; Perry & Menendez, 2011). The skills and expertise this workforce brings can be used to engage in new discoveries and help to address many of the societal issues in direct partnership with community members and local organizations (Harkavy & Hodges, 2012; Whitmer et al., 2010). Many practitioners and scholars have argued for this kind of engagement, including Ernest Boyer (1996), who called for institutions of higher learning to become a more vigorous partner in finding the answers to the most pressing societal problems. The Kellogg Commission (1999) further emphasized the need for academia to be more involved in finding the answers to pressing community issues by challenging universities to return to their roots and go beyond service and outreach to engage with the community in

a meaningful way. The Commission defined “engagement” as the redefinition of teaching, research, and service to become more involved with the community in a productive manner with a commitment to “sharing and reciprocity” (p. 9).

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching defined community engagement as the “collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities . . . for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (ACE, n.d., “What Is Community Engagement?”). The purpose of community engagement is to utilize the knowledge and resources of higher education institutions in collaboration with community partners, both private and public, to address critical community issues through teaching and research. Although the Carnegie Foundation recognized community as local, national, and international, institutions of focus in this article engage with their immediate surroundings—partnering with their neighbors to solve problems and make discoveries in their own backyard. This focus on local engagement reinforces universities’ role and the value of being an anchor and enhances the town–gown relationship.

Similarly, the nature of research has been evolving. In the United States, the largest funders of research largely represent the fields of life sciences, health care, basic science, and engineering. Specific funders include the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, and the Department of Defense. These agencies have made their research agendas a balancing act: on one side, basic research, which may have a very long timeline (if any) for practical application; on the other, translational or industry–supporting research. Less funding is available from the federal government in the humanities or professional schools to support research and scholarship. Public and private philanthropy have a more prominent role in these areas. Interestingly, philanthropic support is often provided by a mix of national foundations that support scholarship that builds and advances scholarly fields of study as well as local or regional activities. Regardless of the funder, increasing value has been placed on ensuring that research activities are not “extractive” but rather participatory (Emanuel & Bird, 2022; Gill, 2013; Vera et al., 2019). For research addressing societal challenges in

the medical, environmental, and social sciences, there has been increasing emphasis on cocreation of research activities that seek to build agency in community and likely improve the success of the project (Christopher et al., 2008; Wilson et al., 2014). The nature of research is changing so that in many cases, funding sources expect research with societal relevance to be performed in and with society (Odedina et al., 2024; Sanchez-Youngman et al., 2021).

Here, we consider the intersection of these two important functions of a higher education institution and how the evolution of these functions may create a new breed of institution that excels in research because it excels at community–engaged scholarship. Here, we will consider in more detail the forces at play in each area and offer a framework to bring them together.

What Is a Community–Engaged Institution?

The engaged institution is one that is committed to working closely with community partners in a reciprocal relationship in a spirit of sharing and collaboration. For institutions to be truly engaged, they must see their relationship with community partners as a two–way street where there is mutual respect for each other and what they bring to the table (Cunningham, 2020). The nature of such collaboration includes defining problems together, identifying common goals and agendas to pursue, and determining what success will look like for both the university and community partner (Kellogg Commission, 1999). This concept is supported by others, including Overton (2017), who indicated that communities are more likely to find research helpful when they are involved, most likely because the research will be relevant to their needs. The Kellogg Commission (1999, p. 12; see also Inman, 2004) laid out seven guiding characteristics for the engaged institution:

- Responsiveness—listening and responding to community needs
- Respect for partners—respecting the knowledge and resources of partners
- Academic neutrality—maintaining neutrality when dealing with contentious issues
- Accessibility—enabling partners

to navigate and access university resources

- Integration—integrating scholarship with service and teaching missions of the university
- Coordination—ensuring all are well-informed about the partnership to enhance efficiency
- Resource partnership—identifying and allocating resources to fund the work

The Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU) in its 2019 report advocated for similar initiatives in what it termed “public impact research” (p. 3). The report outlined six guiding principles for universities to truly engage in research that impacts the community, which has some overlap with the Kellogg Commission’s seven guiding characteristics. In addition, the report provided five action steps institutions must take to engage in this work.

Role and Function of a Public Community-Engaged Institution

Universities are well-positioned to engage with their local community to address the ever increasing need for academic research. Bringing as they do the intellectual capacity of skilled and knowledgeable faculty and students from diverse fields of study, no other entity is as equipped as universities to confront the complex issues in our communities (Whitmer et al., 2010); these institutions therefore have a responsibility to society to utilize their intellectual capital to address community issues (Overton, 2017). Boyer (1996) shared these thoughts when he stated that universities and colleges remain “one of the greatest hopes for intellectual and civic progress,” further stating that colleges and universities must partner to address “pressing social, civic, economic, and moral problems” (p. 11).

The role of public community-engaged institutions is to participate in research for the public good, as stated by the National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good (Overton, 2017). Research for the public good, or public impact research (APLU, 2019), is research that positively impacts the community. These researchers argued there is a need to engage in research focused on social issues and to find solutions to social problems. Community-engaged institutions should participate in engaged research to

address current issues and give back to the community (Overton, 2017).

APLU in an undated report stated that the core aspect of public universities’ mission is to serve their communities to enhance the lives of citizens through cutting-edge research in just about every field and discipline. According to the report, public universities annually conducted over \$61 billion of research, making up 66% of all university research. They further argued that public universities have a responsibility to ensure their community is vibrant and prosperous and that these universities should be engaged with community stakeholders in all aspects of community issues, including health care, K-12 education, and urban neighborhoods. This responsibility encompasses engaging multiple stakeholders, including communities and organizations (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2016; APLU, 2019; Gelmon et al., 2013; Overton, 2017). All initiatives should be aligned with the needs and strengths of the community. This concept was supported by Harkavy and Hartley (2012), who in their research discussed how Penn State University effectively served its community by focusing on teaching and research on addressing public issues, including work with area schools, in health care, and on economic development.

Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement Standards and Criteria

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching developed the Elective Classification for Community Engagement for institutions of higher education to demonstrate their level of engagement with the community (ACE, n.d.). Like the Carnegie designations for research institutions, the community engagement classification requires that institutions qualify by conducting a lengthy self-study, which is then reviewed by a panel of experts who determine whether the institution has demonstrated that it has the infrastructure in place and is engaged with the community in meaningful and reciprocal partnerships. The classification encourages institutions to ensure continuous improvement in community engagement. Institutions demonstrate infrastructure through adequate staffing, policies, practices, and systems to promote and support mutually beneficial partnerships through engaged teaching, research, and outreach initiatives. Engagement is demonstrated through indicators such as campus and community

context, foundational indicators, leadership support, outreach and partnership, faculty and staff scholarship, and inclusion in curricular development.

Carnegie Classification in Research Standards and Criteria

In addition to the Elective Classification for Community Engagement, Carnegie also provides criteria for its classifications surrounding degrees offered and research activity. This includes the Research 1, or R1, designation for U.S. colleges and universities that award doctoral degrees and meet the definition of “very high research spending and doctorate production.” Long considered the gold standard for research institutions, the R1 designation indicates that a school has met or exceeded the following criteria: conferred 70 or more research/scholarship doctoral degrees and had at least \$50 million in research spending within the measured fiscal year. As of the 2025 listing, 187 U.S. institutions meet these criteria, with other universities designated as the lower activity Research 2 or the new designation, Research Colleges and Universities (Palmer, 2025).

Role and Function of an R1 Institution

Knowledge Creation. R1 research universities have a focus on knowledge creation, constantly pushing the boundaries of human understanding in various disciplines. Through groundbreaking research projects, these institutions generate new knowledge, devise innovative solutions, and create intellectual property that can lead to economic growth. R1 institutions must also award research- and scholarship-focused doctoral degrees; they are also responsible for training the next generation to continue this pursuit.

Economic Engines. R1 research universities serve as critical economic drivers for the communities in which they are embedded. They attract funding from government grants, industry partnerships, and private philanthropy, resulting in significant investments in research and development. This influx of resources stimulates local economies by creating jobs, supporting businesses, and fostering entrepreneurship. The university-industry collaborations facilitated by R1 institutions often lead to the development of new technologies, startups, and industries, further enhancing economic growth and prosperity.

Educational Excellence. R1 research

universities provide exceptional educational opportunities for students. These institutions offer a vast array of undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs, enabling students to engage with world-class faculty and cutting-edge research. The presence of R1 institutions in a community elevates the overall quality of education by fostering a culture of academic rigor, critical thinking, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Graduates from these universities contribute to the local workforce, bringing their expertise, skills, and fresh perspectives to address community needs and drive innovation.

Community-Engaged Services. R1 research universities actively engage with their surrounding communities, recognizing their responsibility to serve as catalysts for positive change. Through community outreach programs, partnerships with local organizations, and knowledge transfer initiatives, these institutions address societal challenges, promote social justice, and improve quality of life. R1 universities also facilitate public lectures, workshops, and cultural events, fostering a vibrant intellectual and cultural atmosphere that enriches the community and promotes lifelong learning.

Health Care and Public Service. Many R1 research universities have renowned medical schools and health care facilities, providing advanced medical care, research, and training. These institutions contribute to improving health care outcomes, developing innovative treatments, and addressing public health concerns. Additionally, R1 universities often have faculty members and experts who contribute their expertise to inform public policy decisions, providing evidence-based recommendations on issues affecting the community, thereby enhancing the well-being of the region.

Managing Conflicting Interests

Academic researchers are often under pressure to pursue funding to support their scholarship, especially in the health and biomedical realms. In an ideal world, the funding opportunities available to researchers would be perfectly aligned with community-identified interests; in practice, however, available funding requirements can create unaligned interests. For example, a competitive grant to study a specific chemical that may be present in a community could be awarded without the requirement that the community considers

this specific issue a priority. This context—a project that has been defined and has started absent community input—can disrespect community partners and the important role their lived experience can play in formative research design and erode trust. As a result, researchers may struggle to establish lines of communication with community members and university community engagement offices. A possible best practice for avoiding this type of conflict is development of institutional policies and mechanisms for screening for community endorsement in the preaward phase of grant development. In cases where the community is engaged later than they should be, it is important to acknowledge the oversight and consider restorative strategies such as community benefits agreements or other explicit acknowledgments that value the community.

Proposed Framework for R1 Community-Engaged Institutions

Although frameworks exist for each of these classifications individually, there does not currently appear to be any standardized framework describing the intersection of

these two factors—research activity and community engagement—across institutions. We propose a four-quadrant model mapping the alignments of various institutions along these measures, and the unique value of high research activity, high community engagement institutions. This framework yields four alignments that capture the majority of U.S. institutions.

1. Low research, low engagement: These institutions focus on graduation, with little connection to or involvement with the community. Trade and online-only schools may fall into this category.
2. Low research, high engagement: These institutions have a connection to the community through such activities as service, arts, and culture, but have little focus on original research. This quadrant may include community colleges and some private liberal arts schools.
3. High research, low engagement: These institutions have a strong focus on research, but have little connection to their community.

Figure 1. Framework for Local Community-Engaged Research



4. High research, high engagement: These institutions have a heavy focus on both research and community connection, often working collaboratively with community members to solve problems that affect their shared home. This quadrant may include large, public metropolitan research institutions.

Each of these institutional alignments creates value, though their focus may be on different measures. Low-research, low-engagement institutions, for example, can be major contributors to the local skilled talent pipeline; high-research, high-engagement institutions may pair their research expertise with community agencies to contribute to larger scale solutions for public health, transportation, and economic development. This framework assumes that local community engagement is bilateral. Both low-research and high-research institutions need to have high fidelity information about the situation on the ground in these places in order to act on community-derived data or discover new knowledge perhaps about root causes or offer interventions to address community-identified needs. A low-research, high-engagement institution might develop community-specific vocational programs that are evaluated using criteria established by the community. A high-research, high-engagement institution may be asked to find the cause of a cluster of cancer cases in a neighborhood or inform a debate about alcohol advertisements placed on city buses. It is a necessary precondition that such awareness of community needs and priorities can come only from long-term relationships that reinforce partnership by meeting community needs over time. As of Carnegie's finalized update of both lists in 2025, about 102 institutions hold both designations—roughly 2% of all institutions classified by Carnegie. These are the nation's foremost community-engaged research universities—those that not only conduct a very high level of research and train the next generation of terminally trained researchers, but focus their energies on ensuring that research is in partnership with and offers benefits to their community. They bring the backing of the institution with the full force of its infrastructure—faculty expertise, equipment, technology, and grant funding, as well as internal budgetary allocation. Engaging in community-engaged research is no different from what is happening in other types of scientific research on campuses

except that it is conducted in partnership with community stakeholders to address community-identified issues that directly benefit the community. The Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (2019) encouraged its member institutions to engage in this type of research, which it calls “public impact” research.

For reference, one need only look at the university of Louisville, an R1 community-engaged metropolitan institution in Louisville, Kentucky. The institution has put a heavy focus on community-engaged research, resulting in direct impacts to the city that researchers share with their community collaborators. For just a few examples, researchers at UofL have partnered with the community to

1. Lead the planting of thousands of trees and shrubs across South Louisville as part of a first-of-its-kind interventional study on how greenness affects health. As the first large-scale interventional clinical trial of this kind, this study will have significant value as cities around the world seek to mitigate the health risks from a changing climate through green infrastructure. The results could also reveal new public health approaches to improving heart, psychological, and other health outcomes.
2. Study the evolving “future of work” in different settings and industries, each with its own unique workforce needs. This research led to targeted industry-specific training and apprenticeships, developed in partnership with employers, that connect what students learn in class with their eventual careers. The apprenticeships also give students field experience with disruptive, cutting-edge technologies.
3. Understand the barriers first-generation immigrants face in navigating the complex health care system. The result was a health care “storefront,” staffed by community volunteers who can help immigrants to secure insurance, find a provider, and more.

Other high-research, high-engagement universities include the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNC Charlotte), Northeastern University, and Arizona State University. UNC Charlotte received a \$20 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education, one of the largest in the

university's history, and used it to develop a program whereby the university partnered with state and local education agencies, vocational rehabilitation agencies, and service providers to study and enhance efforts to improve employment options, education, and integration into the community for young people dealing with disabilities (UNC Charlotte, 2020).

Northeastern University, through its Climate Justice and Sustainability Hub, awards grants to its faculty aimed at reducing environmental impacts and promoting equitable research. This initiative resulted in several projects being carried out in the community to address environmental concerns (Northeastern University, 2025). Faculty at the University of Arizona formed a research team comprised of Indigenous and non-Indigenous scientists in a tribal-university partnership with the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe Council. The research team looked at how climate change and upstream pressures threaten the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe Council ecosystems, lands, and resources (Chew & Chief, 2023).

The Ohio State University, focusing on its status as a high-research, high-engagement institution to address issues relevant to communities, funded a study to learn about community leaders' perspective on university researchers conducting research in the community, particularly including participants in research. The study aimed to provide community members with a voice in the nature of university research conducted in their community. The study had four aims: (1) identify ways community members want Ohio State University to build and maintain relationships with them, (2) describe community members' experiences with the university research and engagement, (3) document the language community members use when discussing community-university research relationships, and (4) understand community members' perceptions of the institution and its role in the community (Clark et al., n.d.).

The benefits of partnering with the community on research are numerous, but include (1) better research questions and lines of inquiry, because they are formed in collaboration with people experiencing the problem or phenomenon being studied, and (2) assurance that the research being conducted can have a direct, positive impact on the world.

Best Practices for Connecting High-Research and Community-Engaged Research

Institutions of higher learning can adhere to a number of best practices when engaging in high-research, high-engagement practices. Community partners need to be involved in the research process throughout, from beginning to end, such that they have a voice in all matters pertaining to the research and they feel valued and empowered to contribute. Clear communications between institutions and community partners are essential to enabling research findings to be clearly communicated, including research methodology and ownership of data. It is also important that trust is developed with community partners. Development of trust occurs over time and therefore requires a long-term commitment to the partnership from institutions. Given that many projects are grant funded, it is important to maintain contact at the completion of the project or when funding ends to sustain a relationship with community partners. During this time, reports and publications that include community partners as coauthors may be drafted, with these partners authoring the sections about their community, their lived experiences, and other areas that can tap into their expertise. This is also a time to explore other projects for collaboration. The end of funding or the completion of a project should not mark the end of the partnership but rather a time to explore other opportunities on which stakeholders may embark.

For high-research high-engagement to take place, institutions must have strong partnerships with their communities. Scholars have established several models for successful university-community partnerships. Bryan and Henry (2012) developed a seven-stage model for building school-family-community partnerships. One of its stages is creating a shared vision and plan between the university and community, emphasizing the need for collaboration and ensuring community partners have a voice in the process. Another model that provided best practices for university-community partnerships comes from Hudson and Hardy (2002). They presented six principles for successful partnerships between universities and communities: (a) acknowledgment of the need for partnership; (b) clarity and realism of purpose; (c) commitment; (d) development and maintenance of trust; (e) establishment of clear and robust partnership arrangements; and (f) monitoring, review,

and organizational learning. Strong university–community partnerships are important for high–research, high–engagement institutions. For these institutions to be engaged with their communities in conducting research, these models serve as a blueprint to ensure successful collaborations.

Conclusions

R1 research universities are vital assets to the communities in which they exist. Their commitment to knowledge creation, economic growth, educational excellence, community engagement, and health care advancements make them indispensable partners for societal progress. As centers of intellectual and innovative excellence, R1 in-

stitutions bring together the brightest minds to collaborate, explore, and create, leading to positive transformations that extend far beyond the boundaries of the campus and into the lives of individuals and communities they serve. The presence of such institutions within a community fosters an environment of intellectual curiosity, attracting exceptional minds and contributing to the overall knowledge base of society. Our proposed framework can help to categorize that contribution and understand the unique role high–research, high–engagement institutions play in the growth and success of their communities.



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Review by Star Plaxton-Moore



Since I first entered the field of higher education community engagement almost two decades ago, I have been convinced of the need to prepare students for working with communities. This belief emanated from my own early-career observations of student behaviors during community engagement activities, as well as from feedback shared by community partners and arguments posed in scholarly literature. However, I noted that community engagement scholars often made the case for *why* we should prepare students but didn't thoroughly provide guidance about *how* to do it. Whether the imperative for preparation is driven by direct experience or familiarity with our field's scholarship, it's clear that we need to intentionally prepare students for their responsibilities in both the community and the classroom, developing their technical and social competencies for engagement and guiding them to be mindful of their own strengths and limitations, community dynamics and priorities, and the pedagogical framework that they are working within. But how do we foster this kind of student learning (needed prior to leaving campus) across diverse community, institution, and classroom contexts . . . while also accounting for the compressed timeline of an academic term? How do we empower and equip community-engaged course instructors to facilitate this learning in their courses? And how do we respond effectively to ongoing calls for accountability, collaboration, and mutuality from communities that have experienced dynamics of extraction and exploitation in relationship to higher education institutions? Enter this wonderfully comprehensive and thoughtfully curated book, *Preparing Students to Engage in Equitable Community Partnerships: A Handbook*.

Multiple times as I read this book, I found myself exclaiming aloud, "YES!" in

response to the authors' assertions. This is a book that I wish I could take back in time, like Marty McFly with the almanac in *Back to the Future* (1985), and deliver it to myself in the early years of my career. It would have made my work so much easier, and more effective! In my role as a community engagement professional (CEP), I've supported and connected faculty, community organizations, and students in community-engaged course partnerships in disciplines ranging from communication studies to philosophy to computer science. Thus, I've always been interested in understanding the "universal" elements of a preparatory curriculum that are relevant across academic disciplines, types of engagement and service, local to global contexts, and student backgrounds.

About 10 years into my career, I was able to work with David Donahue and colleagues at my institution to synthesize our community-engaged teaching insights and expertise into a series of three preparatory videos for students titled *Ready, Set, Engage!* The videos featured students, faculty, community partners, and alumni, and introduced topics like reciprocity, saviorism, and cultural humility (among others). CEPs at our institution integrated these videos into one-hour preparatory sessions in community-engaged courses, interspersing facilitated reflective conversations among students after each video. We saw positive outcomes from this brief but impactful intervention, so we began sharing these videos with colleagues in the field, and eventually integrated them into a book, *The Student Companion to Community-Engaged Learning: What You Need to Know for Transformative Learning and Real Social Change* (Donahue & Plaxton-Moore, 2018). As noted in the title, the target audience for the book is students, though we included a brief note to faculty as well. Although I'm proud that we were able to respond to a

collective desire to fill the gap in preparatory curricular resources, our contribution was limited to 100 pages and some multimedia links, integrated through QR codes, to allow readers to dig deeper into complex topics. Tryon et al.'s handbook is the next level of guidance that we need to better align our community-engaged teaching practices with our espoused aspiration for community engagement to be mutually transformative for students, communities, and institutions.

The book's primary audience is community-engaged faculty and/or staff who facilitate and support community-engaged learning. The tone of the book is conversational and invitational, allowing readers to engage with ideas from multiple points of entry, whether they are new to community-engaged teaching or seasoned professionals with several years of experience. Simultaneously, the authors compellingly assert the urgency and gravity of the need to prepare students, leaving no room for doubt that this is a necessary component of a community-engaged course. Where they *do* create wiggle room is in the level of intensity of curricular integration, laying out four options for readers to consider, ranging from "condensed basic training" (p. 3) that addresses the minimum threshold of "do no harm" to an in-depth introduction encompassing a broad array of foundational concepts. For instructors who may not have the time, expertise, or support to develop their own preparatory curriculum, the authors generously share instructions to access Canvas online learning modules (via Canvas Commons) created by the University of Wisconsin–Madison that facilitate self-guided interactive preparatory learning activities for students. The book also concludes with an appendix that describes a range of learning activities and assignments, thematically organized, so instructors can easily adapt or replicate them in their own classes.

The handbook is expansive in the topics it covers, addressing enduring tensions, challenges, and aspirations for community-engaged learning while also situating the work within this particular moment in history. The authors set the stage for our learning with a preface that makes the case for why we need to prioritize student preparation, and how the current forces of national political and ideological division, ongoing movements for racial reckoning, and continuing impacts of the global pandemic make this work even more

urgent. Readers are then guided through the book, which is arranged in three parts: (1) Introduction and Theory; (2) Essential Concepts of Community Engagement Preparation; and (3) Additional Skills, Concepts, and Considerations.

Part 1 includes a chapter focused on defining community engagement and related concepts, and another chapter that synthesizes critical theoretical underpinnings of community engagement. Having Chapter 1's array of community engagement definitions at one's fingertips is incredibly helpful. I can imagine readers easily lifting these definitions into a slide deck or handouts to share with students as a starting point for developing common language and cognitive constructs. Indeed, Chapter 1 is where instructors can find straightforward, concise descriptions of concepts ranging from reciprocity to cultural humility to intersectionality to implicit bias to positionality. Additionally, the authors offer clusters of reflection questions that instructors can use to support students in critically examining intent versus impact, root causes of injustice, and the nature of mutually beneficial partnerships. Building on the core concepts, Chapter 2 provides a brief literature review and offers theoretical traditions to inform community engagement. The authors acknowledge that scholarship on student preparation for community engagement is sparse, though they make a point of honoring the growing integration of critical approaches into literature and practice by specific scholars in our field. Accounting for the need to look outside our field as well, the authors lean into "adjacent" fields of scholarship, including social justice education rooted in critical race theory, feminist theory, Marxism, and disability justice. This chapter also provides a critique of strictly framing community engagement in terms of career preparation and explicitly describes the potential for negative impacts when students are ill-prepared for engagement.

Part 2 includes Chapters 3–7, focused respectively on motivations for engagement, building student self-awareness, institutional power dynamics, student skills for engagement, and cultural and intellectual humility. In Chapter 3, on motivations, readers are first introduced to a brief history of higher education community engagement and how it is experienced by community partners, including their critiques. The authors subsequently classify

and describe common student motivations for community engagement, ranging from saviorism to pity to personal gain, and provide some frameworks and activities to re-orient students' motivations toward a focus on relationships, acknowledging community assets, and enacting ethical principles. Chapter 4 digs into the complex topics of identity, positionality, and student awareness of dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression. This chapter draws heavily on well-known critical scholarship (e.g., Peggy McIntosh's [1989] "Invisible Knapsack" and Derald Wing Sue et al.'s [2007] studies of microaggressions), frameworks (e.g., Harro's [2013] "Cycle of Socialization" and Hall's [1976] cultural iceberg), and activities (e.g., the Social Identity Wheel [Abdoo, 2020]). The authors provide recommendations for guiding student reflection on these topics, along with helpful question prompts. The chapter culminates with a compelling student vignette about the value of reflecting on identity and culture.

Chapter 5 invites readers to guide their students to "zoom out" and engage in critical analysis of institutional power dynamics. To begin, the chapter describes some practical power imbalances between colleges/universities and nonprofits: specifically, access to resources and funding, and how those imbalances shape community perspectives on, and experiences with, community-engaged learning. The authors then articulate an imperative to foster more equitable relationships through a focus on trust-building, listening, and being responsive to community-identified priorities. Practical guidance is given about how to approach project development, funding, logistics, and infrastructure components of partnership. Chapter 6 focuses on student skills development in the areas of relationship-building and community engagement. The authors assert that relationship-building skills include active listening, communication, and willingness to accept discomfort and accountability. Community engagement skills encompass stakeholder engagement, professionalism, flexibility, project/time management, understanding community context, and conceptualizing social change. Again, the authors provide myriad activities and strategies for facilitating student learning and development in these areas. As the culminating chapter for Part 2, Chapter 7 offers up the concept of cultural and intellectual humility. The authors define cultural humility and situate it in contrast

to university messaging about community engagement, which frequently conveys a unidirectional benefit provided by students, faculty, and the university to communities "in need." In parallel with the framing in the *Student Companion* (Donahue & Plaxton-Moore, 2018), the authors recommend stances of curiosity, openness, and non-judgment, offering reflection questions and examples to illustrate each. Regarding intellectual humility, they encourage a growth mindset, embracing learning from failure, and seeking multiple sources of wisdom and knowledge. This final chapter strikes a tone of invitation versus admonishment, offering students alternative ways to understand the community and their role in it.

In Part 3, the authors give readers a chance to take their praxis to the next level. I believe this is where the book becomes particularly innovative. This section takes us through Chapters 8–11, covering topics of building a critical classroom, relationship-centered systems, and accounting for the importance of context before conveying final thoughts to close out the book. Chapter 8, on building a critical classroom, brings instructors' attention to the importance of creating community among students as a foundation for vulnerable learning, sharing, and reflecting. There's a helpful vignette in this chapter about cultivating ethnographic sensibilities in community-engaged learning. This is also where the authors make visible how oppression shows up in classrooms and among students and provide activities for interrogating dominant norms and biases while building relationships of trust and accountability. In the ninth chapter, the authors make the case for developing relationship-centered systems and highlight exemplary models of initiatives, projects, and centers that integrate this approach. The chapter is peppered with vignettes from diverse institutions, allowing readers from different institutional contexts to see connections with the stories that are shared.

Speaking of context, Chapter 10 gives special attention to contexts that remain marginally examined and accounted for in community engagement scholarship: Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Minority-Serving Institutions, and global institutions that operate outside the United States. I immensely appreciated the narrative contribution from Del M. N. Barath, who boldly and vulnerably shared reflections on a community-engaged

course that didn't go as planned. I think we often learn so much more from colleagues sharing cautionary tales than from when they share successes. The final chapter summarizes the authors' closing thoughts, reiterating the importance of preparation for community engagement, inviting readers to commit to a praxis of preparation, and leaving the door open for current and future scholars and practitioners to iterate, add, and innovate to continue making our community-engaged work more impactful and accountable. The authors end the book by humbly asserting, "Our goal in writing this was not to *be right* but to begin a path to help us *get it right*" (p. 223). To me this exemplifies the whole spirit of the book: There's always more we can learn. We can continuously strive to do better in our community-engaged relationships. And we have a responsibility to continue building our capacity to be more respectful, humble, accountable, and impactful in this work.

Although this text is ambitious in scope, the authors are forthright about the limitations. Indeed, they have taken care to note their own positionality as "three white authors writing from the landscape of a public service center within a primarily white research-intensive university" (p. xii) and have accounted for the limits in their experience and perspectives by inviting contributions from diverse faculty and staff that represent an array of higher education institutions and disciplines. These contributors' vignettes serve to make the book's concepts tangible and nuanced, situating the work within specific institutional and community contexts and illuminating the inevitability of complexity and tension. Additionally, the authors embed multimedia resources and reference contemporary critical scholarship from myriad disciplinary traditions throughout the book to strengthen their

recommendations and deepen the opportunities for learning.

Overall, I'm immensely grateful to Tryon, Madden, and Sprinkel for this powerful, necessary, and timely contribution to our field's scholarship. I anticipate that this text will have meaningful ripple effects across multiple levels and contexts: individual, interpersonal, course, community, and field. Having gleaned new learning from the book myself, I am certain that individual community-engaged faculty and staff members will take away new understandings and resources that will inform their community-engaged praxis. In turn, their interactions with students and community partners will be infused with a nuanced analysis of power and positionality, and a commitment to building trusting and mutually beneficial relationships. With this book guiding instructors' course design, their community-engaged courses will more effectively focus on student preparation, making their engaged efforts more accountable to community priorities and more impactful in achieving desired outcomes. As more students and faculty engage with community from this intentional and informed stance, community partners will become more receptive to coeducating students and collaborating with colleges and universities to advance positive social change. This transformation of our collective practices will infuse the field of higher education community engagement with more exemplars to emulate so we can effectively scale up approaches that work toward equity, justice, and social change. In other words, I foresee this handbook taking its place among the pivotal touchstone texts in our field and shaping our work for years to come.



About the Reviewer

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Fisher-Livne, D., & May-Curry, M. (Eds.). (2024). *The Routledge Companion to Public Humanities Scholarship*. Routledge. 456 pp.

Review by Lisa Dush



The *Routledge Companion to Public Humanities Scholarship*, edited by Daniel Fisher-Livne and Michelle May-Curry, is to date the broadest and most substantive collection documenting the nuts and bolts of funding, launching, and sustaining public humanities projects in higher education contexts. It is a valuable resource for educators, campus-community engagement professionals, and higher education administrators alike. These readers can learn from the successes and the challenges the collection describes, as well as from the guiding themes it outlines for public humanities work in higher education.

Fisher-Livne and May-Curry both served as project directors at Humanities for All (HFA), a 6-year initiative of the National Humanities Alliance to document and share best practices in the public humanities across U.S. colleges and universities. Their collection is timely for two reasons. First, generative artificial intelligence has, almost overnight, undermined the scholarly essay and its pedagogical equivalent, the student essay. The *Companion* shows the many ways beyond scholarly writing that humanities knowledge can be activated and shared, from podcasts to public conversations to exhibits to zines. It provides a wealth of ideas for a long-overdue broadening of humanities scholarship and pedagogy. Second, partisan shouters and online bullies now dominate our public discourse. The *Companion* reminds us that reflection and civil dialogue are possible, and that colleges and universities have a role in nurturing these practices.

The *Companion* is a thick book, with 24 chapters authored by 49 contributors, along with a glossary that defines selected terms related to the public humanities. The contributors include academics whose primary affiliations are, in rough order of frequency, history, English, women's and gender studies, American Studies,

anthropology, archaeology, rhetoric and communication, art history, and philosophy. Additionally, a handful of authors and coauthors are not professors but rather work in historic preservation and cultural heritage organizations, museums, and university archives. As a scholar of writing and rhetoric, I enjoyed the contributions by authors from disciplines and settings beyond my own, including Smith's description of his public archaeology work in rural western New York state and Saffery's account of 'Āina Education, a theory and pedagogy grounded in Indigenous traditions and worldview that shapes her organization's work with native Hawaiians.

In their helpful introduction, the editors describe their approach as one of zooming in and zooming out, moving between process-rich case studies of public humanities projects and discussions of theory and principles to inform public humanities more broadly. In this method, the *Companion* adopts a similar approach to HFA's excellent website, which zooms in with profiles of over 2,000 public humanities projects and zooms out with blog articles and reports on public humanities methods, evaluation, and training (See note). The *Companion* also complements another valuable recent collection of scholarship on public humanities in the United States, the Spring 2022 issue of *Dædalus* (Berkowitz et al., 2022), which focuses on "The Humanities in American Life." Fisher-Livne and May-Curry's collection includes contributors from a broader set of U.S. higher education institutions and places greater emphasis on process and pedagogy than the *Dædalus* issue.

The core of the *Companion*—the case studies—document the development, logistics, outcomes, and impact of individual publicly engaged research and teaching projects. The best of these chapters, like Tell's "Vandalism and Storytelling in

the Emmett Till Case,” zoom out from the process details to artfully convey a memorable takeaway. In Tell’s case, the takeaway is that his team’s effort to engage the public in the story of Emmett Till, the victim of a racist murder, was characterized by constant vandalism followed by creative responses to adapt and persist with the project. The team was grounded in the conviction that difficult-to-achieve “racial reconciliation begins by telling the truth” (p. 250), and they thus carried the project forward, even as the signage they installed about Till across the Mississippi Delta region was repeatedly shot full of bullet holes.

Some chapters in the collection stay closely zoomed in, with copious detail about project chronology and logistics that make it difficult to discern their overall lessons. However, among the chapters that I found most compelling were those that provided detailed histories of multistakeholder projects similar to the one I direct at DePaul University, including Burton et al.’s chapter on the cross-institutional Humanities Without Walls consortium and Cook and Chin’s chapter on History Labs at the University of Michigan. That is, individual readers may find the in-the-weeds details helpful when the profiled project aligns with their interests and local context.

The editors help readers draw connections across these case studies through the book’s strong opening and closing sections, which include four opening chapters on “Foundations and Frameworks for Public Humanities Scholarship” and two closing chapters on “Building and Supporting Publicly Engaged Scholarship.” The editors’ introduction, for example, provides a helpful summary of public humanities methods (p. 17) and sites (p. 20), and briefly describes six goals of the public humanities. These goals are used to group the book’s case studies into sections. Five of the goals were articulated by Fisher-Livne (Fisher, 2018) in an essay on the Humanities for All blog: amplifying community voices and histories, preserving culture in times of crisis and change, informing contemporary debates, helping individuals and communities navigate difficult experiences, and expanding educational access. The *Companion* adds a sixth goal, building and supporting public humanities scholarship.

Other important zoom-out concepts in the collection’s bookend sections include Barrios et al.’s idea of “strategic legibility,”

a flexible, audience-dependent approach to public humanities practice and promotion. Kornstein’s section of that chapter, which describes how Drag Story Hour operates at the “threshold of invisibility and hypervisibility” (p. 59), resonates at this moment in 2026, when doing humanities work in public carries real bodily risk for some. Macaya and Sullivan, writing about their engaged work at the City Universities of New York (CUNY), present a more hopeful claim, which is reinforced throughout the collection:

Publicly engaged research in the humanities may be one of the best tools that we have to convince others that universal access to high-quality low-cost public higher education is as foundational to human flourishing as fresh air, clean water, and rich humus. (p. 370)

As I read the *Companion*, two overarching questions surfaced about its arguments, questions that future scholars can take up. The first concerned the editors’ definition of “scholarship,” which they describe as “humanities research, teaching, and programming, conducted in co-equal partnership *with and for* a diversity of individuals and communities” (p. 3). I wondered to what extent the editors’ definition of scholarship is embraced across higher education. Academic readers expecting a more traditional definition of scholarship may be surprised by both the number of case studies focused on pedagogy and the claim that teaching and public programming are scholarship. This argument is not new—it was notably made nearly 20 years ago in Ellison and Eatman’s (2008) *Scholarship in Public* report for Imagining America. A range of scholarly associations in the humanities, including the Modern Language Association, the American Historical Association, and the American Philosophical Association, have likewise issued statements validating public humanities work as scholarship. However, many American higher education institutions have a much narrower definition of what “counts” as scholarship, especially in their tenure and promotion criteria.

Second, I wondered about both the precision and the tenor of the six goals of the publicly engaged humanities that organize the *Companion*. Articulating such goals is a valuable contribution; I have long used Fisher’s (2018) “Goals” essay to introduce both faculty and students to the publicly

engaged humanities. However, as I read the *Companion*, I was often compelled to flip back to its table of contents to see under which of the six goals the chapter at hand was grouped. Many chapters could fit under multiple goals, and some projects were puzzlingly categorized. The editors' taxonomy, while an essential starting point, may not be a perfect field-organizing scheme. Additionally, I think more urgently formulated goals for the publicly engaged humanities may now be in order, given the dire current state of the humanities, higher ed, and deliberative democracy. That is, not "preserving culture in times of crisis and change," but rather "saving cultures threatened by state-sanctioned erasure." And not "informing contemporary debates," but rather "publicly countering dangerous,

politically motivated oversimplifications of complex issues."

In this moment, with the network of state humanities councils in the United States on life support and our colleges and universities likewise sliding into a new era of austerity, it seems plausible that Fisher-Livne and May-Curry's book may have memorialized the golden years of public humanities in American higher education. We can only hope that educators, administrators, and community practitioners will remain committed to the work, regardless of the political and financial realities that bear down on them.



Note

The HFA website is no longer updated; however, the National Humanities Alliance has posted a PDF "Compendium" that archives much of the site's content at <https://nhalliance.org/higher-education/humanities-for-all/>.

About the Reviewer

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