

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

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

Star Plaxton-Moore is director of community engaged learning and research for the Haas Center for Public Service at Stanford University. Her scholarship focuses on faculty development for community-engaged teaching and scholarship, student preparation for community engagement, intersections of feminism and community engagement, assessment of civic learning outcomes, and community engagement in institutional culture and practice.

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