Invited Commentary

Scholar-Administrators as Leaders: Promoting Impact in Community Engagement

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Abstract

Community engagement has seen many changes over the years as scholars studied the field and learned more about its application as a methodology for teaching and learning, as well as conducting research. Henry R. Cunningham, the 2023 Barbara A. Holland Scholar-Administrator Award recipient, discusses some of the evolution in community engagement and identified community impact as an area of great importance to change the public's negative perception of higher education. The transformation led to the institutionalization of community engagement on campuses, where it is integrated into the fabric of the institution. Numerous studies have shown the benefit to students when they are engaged in the community, and the enhancement of teaching and learning with policies and practices such as faculty professional development can enhance this work. However, we need to look closer at the impact community engagement has on communities with which we are collaborating and how this work is helping to improve communities. Demonstrating that higher education is changing communities and improving the lives of individuals through educational attainment, economic development, and healthier communities, as well as in other areas, can change the negative public perception of higher education.

Keywords: scholar-administrators, leadership, impact assessment, higher education, anchor institution, transformation, community impact

Introduction

The field of community engagement, beginning with service learning, gained popularity in the 1990s and early 2000s (Yamamura & Koth, 2018) and, as a scholar-administrator, I am amazed at how much we have learned during these years to advance the field. We put into place systems, processes, and policies at the institutional level, but there are other areas to which more attention should be given. These changes created efficiencies that greatly improved the field. Much progress has been made with the infusion of engagement into the curriculum through service-learning or community-based learning courses, engaged scholarship, and outreach and partnership (Cunningham & Smith, 2020). There is a better understanding of mutuality and reciprocity in collaborating with community partners. Manuscripts looking at models of community engagement, strategies, community-university partnership and collaboration, diversity and community engagement, and a multitude of other topics have been published in community engagement journals and other scholarly outlets. These publications further informed the field and helped shape it today. According to Yamamura and Koth (2018), community engagement as a field within the last 25-plus years transitioned to be more "nuanced, refined, and self-critical" (p.7) as they discussed how the field morphed over the years as various elements of the field were developed or "refined". They claimed that the introduction of the community engagement classification by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in 2006 further helped to institutionalize community engagement on campuses as they had to put in place systems and processes. While the initial classification cycles did not assess community impact as Yamamura and Koth indicated, the 2024 cycle included an assessment of community impact and even required the submission of contact information for selected community partners. These community organizations are contacted by Carnegie and asked to respond to a series of questions on the partnership, elevating community voice to assess reciprocity and community impact.

Development of Community Engagement and its Benefits to Students

We have learned that engaging students in meaningful experiences in the community has many benefits, including the fact that this high-impact practice enhances student learning (Moore, 2023; Kuh, 2008)). Research on the impact of students engaging in the community through service-learning courses, also known as community-based learning, includes a better understanding of course content (Strage, 2000; Wurr, 2002), enhanced critical thinking (Eyler & Giles, 1999), the development of leadership skills, and better communication skills (Astin & Sax, 1998), students' personal and civic identities (Eyler et al., 2001), an increased likelihood of completing college (Lockman & Pelco, 2013) and cultural awareness (Bloom, 2008; Borden, 2007) to name a few of the benefits.

A better understanding of the benefits of engaging students in the community as part of their course and their contribution to the community-led many institutions to develop service-learning or community-based learning courses (Yamamura & Koth, 2018). Students engage in a variety of activities with community organizations as part of their course requirements. They provide direct services, conduct research collecting and analyzing data, and, in some cases, acting in an advocacy role. Students have also engaged with the community through internships, field placements, coops, and clinical experiences, contributing their time and knowledge to community needs. Because of the many benefits of engaging students in the community as part of their course requirement, I embarked on providing training for faculty on engaged teaching and developing community-based learning (CBL) courses through one-hour workshops and seminars as well as longer training sessions. Of significance is the annual community-based learning institute, which is a three-day training for faculty offered during the summer for those interested in revising an existing course or developing a new CBL course.

Professional Development

As community engagement professionals came to realize faculty need to be educated on community engagement as a pedagogy, we are offering professional development for our faculty on engaged teaching and engaged research, covering a variety of applicable topics. With an increasingly virtual world, we are offering and participating in these trainings from the comfort of our homes and offices. National organizations such as the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU), the Engagement Scholarship Consortium (ESC), Campus Compact, and the International Association for Research on Service Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE) all offer webinars and other virtual professional development opportunities for faculty and staff on various topics to foster community engagement. These professional networks created an explosion of professional development opportunities for campuses (Weerts & Sandman, 2010).

Colleges and universities also offer their own professional development for their faculty and staff, using the expertise on their campuses, as well as inviting individuals from other campuses to facilitate these trainings. Some community engagement offices have staff with the expertise to provide these trainings, while others may rely on or collaborate with the teaching and learning center on their campus. As a scholar-administrator at the University of Louisville, I believe it is my responsibility to equip our faculty with the knowledge to be effective community-engaged scholars. I lead and coordinate workshops, seminars, reading circles, faculty learning communities, symposia, conferences, institutes, provide mentoring opportunities for our faculty, and invite speakers from other institutions to facilitate training. Likewise, other institutions have invited me to lead workshops for their campus both in-person and virtually. This level of training being offered on campuses helped "professionalize" service-learning and community engagement and faculty professional development (Eddins & Green, 2018 p. xxiii) and created a

cadre of scholars on campuses who are well-versed in community engagement as a method of teaching and learning and an approach to conducting research.

These professional development opportunities allow us to explore best practices that place priority on student learning, pedagogy to enhance faculty teaching, and the needs of community partners (Eddins & Green, 2018). The array of models utilized in training varies and includes workshops, roundtables, scholarly talks, conferences, and symposia, which are relatively easy to schedule but may not have a long-term impact. Other models of faculty professional development are institutes, faculty learning communities, mentoring programs, faculty-student partnerships, and fellowships. These models are all time intensive and require long-term planning, but provide a higher level of participation from faculty and an increased sense of belonging and relationship building from the time spent with peers. Gravett and Broscheid (2018) discussed these various types of faculty professional development in detail for those who may want to explore them on their campuses.

Universities as Anchor Institutions

We have also come to realize that our institutions are anchors in our communities, and we are making efforts to enhance the economic well-being of others through workforce development and other initiatives. Cunningham, Hines-Martin, and Hall (2015) discussed the importance of having institutions of higher learning be an anchor in their community. The mission of institutions, their historical contexts, and community expectations are prompting higher education institutions to engage with their communities (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). Harkavy and Hodges (2012) argued that higher education's future and the well-being of communities where they are located are intertwined, and consequently, collaborating with communities to address needs is in the best interest of universities. Anchor institutions such as universities and their communities are bound together (Initiative for a Competitive Inner City and CEOs for Cities 2003), as these anchor institutions are immobile and tied to their communities (Harkavy & Zucker, 1999). The immobility of these institutions provides them stability and permanence in the community, affording them a unique opportunity to engage in community revitalization (Harkavy & Hodges, 2012; Hodges & Dubb, 2012) and to use their resources to address community needs (Taylor & Luter, 2013).

Anchor institutions, because of their sheer size, are usually the larger employers in their communities (Taylor & Luter, 2013), including a skilled and educated workforce (Harkavy & Zuckerman, 1999; Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities 2011) to address many of society's challenges (Harkavy & Hodges, 2012). Higher education institutions employ a significant number of individuals from their communities in non-faculty positions (Initiative for a Competitive Inner City and CEOs for Cities 2003) and may even employ others through the

construction of buildings and other infrastructure, which boosts the local economy (Harkavy & Zuckerman, 1999; Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities 2011).

Many institutions have formally established themselves as anchor institutions, implementing policies and practices to enhance their work as anchors. CUMU, in collaboration with the Democracy Collaborative, launched the Higher Education Anchor Mission Initiative as a pilot in 2018, inviting member institutions to commit to developing a plan to demonstrate their role as an anchor in their community. Thirty-three members responded to the call and participated in this pilot program, committing themselves to "intentionally apply their economic power and human capital in a long-term partnership with their local communities to improve mutual well-being" (Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities, 2023). The Higher Education Anchor Mission Initiative provided support to institutions through regularly held virtual gatherings and in-person meetings at the annual conference. Institutions were encouraged to develop an anchor plan to address such areas as workforce development, hiring, building a local hiring pipeline, minority business support, procurement, and supplier diversity, to name a few areas. By 2023, the number of institutions involved in the Anchor Learning Network increased to 47 members. CUMU dedicated an entire edition of *Metropolitan Universities* journal in 2023 to place-based and anchor initiatives occurring within its member institutions. Two of the more developed of these anchor initiatives are the University of Pittsburgh and Drexel University. The University of Pittsburg created Centers for Urban Engagement to partner with neighborhoods, facilitated by a neighborhood ambassador (Yamamura & Koth, 2018) and hired an Assistant Vice Chancellor for Anchor Initiatives to oversee this work (University of Pittsburgh Office of Engagement and Community Affairs, 2023). Drexel University, which published a number of "how to" handbooks based on their experience as an anchor (Drexel University Office of University and Community Partnerships (2023). Yamamura and Koth provided several other examples of university anchors in their communities through place-based initiatives. Because of the apparent popularity, CUMU is relaunching the Anchor Learning Network in 2024 using a new format.

Scholar-Administrators as Leaders and Change Agents

Scholar-administrators have been key to these initiatives on their campuses, often playing a lead role and providing their expertise to enhance student learning through community-based learning courses, engaging in faculty professional development, and leading anchor initiatives. To further elevate community engagement in higher education, scholar-administrators have the distinct opportunity to play a leadership role in serving as change agents on their campuses (Janke, 2019). This is of particular importance with community engagement, which is an evolving field, going through changes as we explore its practice, theorize, and collect more data. As scholar-administrators, we need to keep abreast of the evolving field of community engagement and be prepared to help guide our institutions to be at the forefront of this work. According to Janke (2019), the role of university leaders at all levels, which includes scholar-administrators, is to

keep abreast of a changing society and the impact of these changes on higher education. It is the role of administrators to understand what is coming and plan to position their institution for the future. She argues that the scholar-administrator is a "change agent" (p. 110), a belief also shared by Green (2023), who seeks administrative roles because it presents access to resources and networking that can help create change. Fossland and Sandvoll (2021) refer to the roles of university leaders as "change partners" and "influencers" (p. 307), while Dostillo and Perry (2017) refer to the many roles Scholar-Administrators or Community Engagement Professionals as they call these individuals, play in promoting community engagement. Scholar-administrators do play many roles on our campuses. We are practitioners, researchers, policymakers, mentors, and community advocates, just to name a few of the roles required of us.

As a scholar-administrator, I capitalized on this network that Janke (2019) mentioned to initiate change on my campus. I partner with individuals across campus to get much of my work done. A few examples include collaboration with the Office of Institutional Effectiveness to develop and implement processes to assess the impact of community engagement on student learning, faculty scholarship, and the community. I also collaborated with the Office of Research and Innovation to include community-engaged research presentations in their monthly town halls where faculty research focused on the natural sciences and engineering is normally featured. This brought community-engaged research from the "margins to the mainstream" of research (Furco, 2010, p.379). My work also included collaboration with the Office of the Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs to offer professional development for faculty and initiate conversations on rewarding community-engaged work in promotion and tenure. I also partnered with the Delphi Center for Teaching and Learning and the Center for Engaged Learning to co-facilitate a reading circle on key practices for engaged learning, as well as collectively offered other professional development opportunities for faculty. This collaboration enabled the Office of Community Engagement to provide support that we otherwise would not have the capacity to offer on our own. It also strengthened the relationship with these offices and the individuals who staffed them, providing opportunities for additional collaborations.

Community Impacts and Organizational Change

However, despite advances in community engagement we have seen over the years led by scholar-administrators, one area that has not received enough attention is measuring community impact (Yamamura & Koth, 2018). According to Sandman (2006), assessing community impact is central to community engagement. Therefore, we must include community impact assessment among our many responsibilities. While we can say that as institutions, we are engaged in our communities through community-based learning courses, community-engaged research, and as anchor institutions, how do we know that we are making a difference in the lives of others? What mechanism do we have in place to measure impact, and do we know what community impact looks like? Institutions cannot be satisfied that we have hundreds of partnerships and boasts that

we have several hundred, even thousands, of students in the community, providing hundreds of hours of service valued at thousands of dollars, if we cannot measure the difference they are making in the actual community.

Scholar-administrators need to play a crucial role in helping institutionalize the practice of measuring community impact on college campuses, as well as harnessing community voice to define that impact. It will require a change in ways of thinking about engagement and the reasons for engagement with community partners, as well as thinking of how we measure success and progress. It will require building an infrastructure to support community impact assessment. Making this all happen requires a paradigm shift or organizational change within higher education, where community impact assessment is the norm and community partner voices determine how impact is defined in the local context. Kezar (2001) offered several theories and models for organizational change, arguing that individuals are instrumental in the change process. The evolutionary models of change are based on environmental factors that influence the change process. In referencing the work of Morgan (1986), Kezar argued that change is based on "circumstances, situational variables, and the environment faced by each organization" (p. 28). Sandman & Weerts (2008), in discussing the framework for organizational change proposed by Levine (1980), support this theory that environmental factors promote change. Environmental conditions trigger new ways of thinking, leading to innovation. This appears to align with Bringle and Hatcher (2002), who state that community expectations prompted many institutions to engage with their local communities. Based on this theory of change, perhaps if community partners and others demand that institutions of higher learning focus more attention on the impact of their engagement on the community, this will prompt more colleges and universities to address this issue.

As environmental factors trigger changes on college campuses as it relates to community engagement, scholar-administrators are uniquely positioned to help create change. They are "change agents" (Janke, 2019, p.110) who are committed to the successful implementation of community engagement and all its related variables. The network of faculty, staff, and community partners that many scholar-administrators have can play a critical role in institutional changes, such as developing practices, policies, and procedures for assessing community impact. Scholar-administrators have already led many professional development initiatives on community engagement on their campus. Adding strategies for assessing community impact from the engagement being done with community partners can be incorporated into current faculty and partner professional development programs.

The Importance of Assessing Community Impact

Addressing the impact of engagement on community is crucial for institutions to demonstrate the difference they are making in the community. Barbara Holland, an international expert in

community engagement, lamented in a conversation with me how higher education was valued in this country and was perceived as a community asset. However, somehow, the value of higher education was lost. She expressed concern about the negative view of higher education – that it is irrelevant, not contributing to the betterment of the community, and too expensive for students to enroll. The 2023–2025 Board Chair of CUMU and Chancellor of the University of Missouri-St. Louis, Kristin Sobolik, in her remarks at the 2023 conference in Washington DC, reminded the audience of the low opinion the public has of higher education and urged them that we must do something about it. Powell and Walsh (2018), in their study of higher education in Europe, noted the dissatisfaction the public has of higher education and countered that community engagement is the response needed to change the negative perception.

In addition, Fischer (2023), in a Chronicle of Higher Education publication called College as a Public Good, acknowledged the decline in public opinion for higher education. She went on to state that documenting local impact on our communities will not only build trust but will demonstrate the institution's value and the impact higher education has on communities will help counter the notion that colleges and universities are "distant, indifferent, and unresponsive". Yamamura and Koth (2018) likewise shared these concerns about the value and relevance of higher education but believe place-based engagement can be the way to demonstrate their importance to the public. This notion is supported by the Association of Public and Land Grant Universities (APLU) (2019), which urged institutions to embark on what it calls "public impact research", that is, research that benefits the public, to demonstrate how universities are saving lives and serving the local, national, and international communities to regain the public trust that was lost.

Community engagement can help to bring back relevance to higher education. If we can demonstrate to others the difference we are making in the community, how we are changing lives by providing essential health services to those who may otherwise never receive the healthcare they need, how we are helping young entrepreneurs get their footing in the business market, how we are helping to eradicate poverty, how we are addressing environmental justice, how we are working with law enforcement agencies to address gun violence, we will get the attention of others. There are so many social, economic, health, environmental, and educational issues we can address in collaboration with community partners. In doing so, higher education is not only relevant, it is responsive to community priorities and the world's most pressing issues.

When we think of community impact, we cannot be satisfied with outputs, which are the activities we implement, such as conducting a health needs assessment of the community and implementing programs to address health challenges experienced by the community. On the other hand, outcomes are the results of those activities implemented, such as what changes occurred among individuals because of the programs executed or what growth emerged from communities because of activities implemented. These may include lifestyle changes such as a

better diet, engaging in more exercise, and fewer hospital visits because of improved health experiences among individuals. Much of the work in which colleges and universities are engaged in their communities is centered on outputs; therefore, little is known about how engagement is changing communities. Powell and Walsh (2018) define impact as the "measurable effect of either a direct intervention or via the researcher to a recipient organization" (568), so when we think of impact, it must be outcomes resulting from the input or intervention.

Conducting Community Impact Assessment

The impact assessment on the community comes with challenges due to a lack of time and resources to conduct a systematic assessment, as discussed by Block, Hague, Curran, and Rosing (2018). This may prevent community engagement offices and faculty engaged in the work from conducting adequate impact assessment. So, while colleges and universities are engaged with their communities in meaningful ways, they may have little or no knowledge of the extent to which they are making a difference.
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At the University of Louisville, we realized the importance of assessing the impact of the university's engagement with community stakeholders. We developed a survey instrument based on one for assessing service-learning impact created by Gelmon, Holland, Driscoll, Spring, and Kerrigan (2001). The instrument was adapted to ensure relevance to the University of Louisville's engagement agenda and the community context. The survey is administered to community partners to determine the extent to which community organizations or the clientele they serve are impacted from the collaboration with the university. The survey focused on the following areas to determine community impact.

1. Access to increase financial and human resources
2. Capacity of the organization to fulfill its mission
3. Perception of the partnership from the community perspective
4. Impact of the partnership on the community (clientele served)
5. Perception of the university

Survey results allow the University of Louisville to have an idea of how its collaboration is making a difference in the community. While conducting interviews would allow the university to focus on particular areas to determine how specific programs and partnerships are changing lives and well-being of individuals, this is not possible at all times due to financial and human capacity constraints. To alleviate this situation, the Office of Community Engagement relies on graduate students who intern in the office, who conduct in-depth interviews with community partners. The findings inform decisions in the Office of Community Engagement. Professional development for faculty, staff, and students who are engaged in these communities may be offered to address concerns mentioned by community partners.

For institutions wishing to embark on community impact assessment, Gelmon et al. (2001) offer the assessment matrix for community as a strategy for assessing community partners. While the matrix was developed with service learning in mind, it is applicable to other types of community engagement initiatives. The matrix looks at concepts applicable to the community partner organization and the university-community partnership itself and includes the following categories (p. 87-88).

1. Capacity to fulfill organizational mission
2. Economic benefits
3. Social benefits
4. Nature of community-university relationship
5. Nature of community-university interaction
6. Satisfaction with partnership
7. Sustainability of partnership

The matrix developed by Gelmon et al. (2001) serves as a starting point for assessing the impact of community engagement with community stakeholders. Institutions of higher learning must look for ways to maintain constant improvement in the community-university collaboration to ensure that engagement has a public impact.

Conclusion

As representatives of higher education engaging with our communities, we must lead the charge and put in place the systems and resources to ensure that we can measure the extent to which we are contributing to the well-being of communities. Scholar-administrators, as we have done with other aspects of community engagement, must lead the community impact assessment effort to change the culture of higher education so there is more emphasis on community impact. Scholar-administrators need to publicize the incredible work our colleges and universities are doing to improve the communities and tell these stories. However, scholar-administrators cannot do this work alone and need the assistance of senior leaders. Presidents and Chancellors need to respond to this call to action and ensure their institutions are contributing to the public good and impacting communities. These stories of evidence-based community impact need to be a major part of marketing and capital campaigns. Just as medical breakthroughs are included in these campaigns to alumni and philanthropists, "breakthroughs" in community engagement should be included.

All of us in higher education have a responsibility to take the issue of community impact and the negative public perception of higher education seriously. As Scholar-Administrators, we need to find out what needs to be done so true community impact can be determined and demonstrated

with evidence. We need to remind senior university leaders of the importance of demonstrating public impact to change the negative perception of higher education so it can once again have the public's trust. Senior leadership, in turn, must allocate the necessary resources to ensure this work is done. We have the means to improve the public's false narrative of higher education, we just need the will and commitment. Collectively, we can change the narrative regarding higher education.

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