

Letter from the Guest Editor

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The purpose behind this special edition of *ENGAGE!* was to capture perspective, understanding, and seminal work that was illuminated at the IU Statewide Community Engagement Unconference – Better Together – that was facilitated at IU Indianapolis by faculty, staff, and students from all IU campuses on March 22, 2024. Although a broad aspect of community engaged scholarship is presented, I think it is all contained under the larger picture of—we are better together. The power of relationships, trust, and transformative partnerships facilitate creativity, innovation, cultural humility, civic engagement, and impactful work. Articles within this special edition are expansive and range from models and best practices to the importance of community engagement as well as civic engagement to other articles that are reflective in nature. These are important and each piece, a fabric if you will, are woven into a beautiful tapestry of mosaics and gradations showing the intricacies, patience, and collectiveness of an underlying unified vision of community engagement encompassing research, creative activity, service, and teaching.

For some, community engagement is a calling. For others, maybe, it's an expectation. Either way, it's deeply rooted in collaboration, trust, authenticity, and wanting to serve something larger than oneself. In one of the articles in this special edition, Rafael Alamilla reflects on a statement by his undergraduate research mentor, Dr Jason Ng, who once stated “People who work at universities are servants to their communities.” This statement epitomizes, but also grounds, our cohort of community engaged faculty, staff, and students. Our work is about collectiveness: the sharing of expertise and resources with the goal of reducing obstacles and increasing opportunities for Indiana residents across the state. Hopefully, IU—across its campuses and hierarchy—realizes that who we are and what we do contributes to the social, political, economic, and cultural larger footprint of serving the state and its people. This work is not transactional; but is rooted in the concept of collaboration, and IU has increasingly embraced this role.

Over the past few years, I have seen continual growth and a groundswell of interest regarding engagement work with communities across Indiana. There is a deep commitment and passion regarding community engagement. Community engagement takes many forms, from research to creative activity, to teaching, to scholarship, to service. Tenure and non-tenure track faculty, professional staff, and undergrad and graduate students constitute the coalition of the willing—the community engaged cohort—who are impassioned about working with our communities whether they are urban, suburban, or rural.

Our focus and interest as a coalition of community engaged practitioners aligns and overlays across all three pillars of the IU 2030 Strategic Plan: student success, transformative research, and service to the state (<https://strategicplan.iu.edu/index.html>).

Based on the strategic plan, IU faculty and staff should institute and facilitate “immersive student experiences that elevate students among their peers in the workplace and beyond,” have “a commitment to the pursuit of discovery, creativity, and innovation that improves communities and changes lives,” and develop and enable “a commitment to engagement, partnership, and collaboration that strengthens the vitality of Indiana, the nation, and the world” (<https://strategicplan.iu.edu/outcomes/index.html>). Our IU community engaged cohort of faculty, staff, and students work diligently across and within all three pillars of IU’s 2030 Plan. We create experiential learning opportunities and activities for students. We leverage networks and interdisciplinary collaboration. And we facilitate meaningful and impactful community-centric projects and initiatives as part of a campus-community collaborative partnership. We increase the vitality of Indiana and Indiana University through our work.

As a Center of Rural Engagement (IU Bloomington) staff member, I along with many others see the importance of further facilitating and hopefully even enhancing already established efforts by various schools and units across the university system by creating and facilitating opportunities for this community engaged cohort to grow and expand.

We did this through the orchestration of building networks, reducing silos, sharing best practices and initiatives, and reducing obstacles and barriers among the cohort that does community engagement work. There was an intentionality to unite our nine campuses around the importance of community engaged work in order to share lessons learned, highlight student immersive experiences, show impact and the importance of translation, as well as to highlight the lack of recognition and support for this important work by some faculty and administrators. This is further highlighted in an

article penned by Annalise Janke who purports that the Unconference not only assuaged the geographical distances between campuses, but also reduced silos and barriers between faculty and staff on the same campus.

This community engagement coalition has met through various mediums: monthly zoom calls (cross campus connections), poster sessions, meet and greets, celebrations, colloquiums, an urban research conference, rural conferences, a research and dissemination webinar, unconferences, and the *ENGAGE!* Journal. The Unconference that took place this past March 2024 at IU Indianapolis was an opportunity to convene representatives from IU’s campuses to share best practices in programming and models for working collaboratively with communities, explore opportunities for future multi-campus collaborations, and develop and strengthen IU networks. Case in point, is a co-written article in this edition by Kim Decker, Catherine Sherwood-Laughlin, and Suzanne Allen who through networking at the 2023 Unconference and Rural Conference discussed how their units from the School of Nursing, School of Public Health, and IU Corps could build and grow capacity with the implementation and evaluation of substance use prevention and mental health programs in rural schools.

Jennifer Price Mahoney who has contributed an article to this special edition points out that a striking feature of community engagement is that it helps all Hoosiers win, but not only that, Jennifer illuminates a salient point about the Unconference. “It gave us the opportunity to find our fellows. It was lovely to see and hear from others who are doing incredible and inspiring things in communities across the state.”

The Unconference attempted to amass IU staff, faculty, and students from across the IU campuses around key and central topics that resonate, but also to continue to build momentum and turn ideas into positive action. Another important component regarding community engagement is developing our students so they are ready when handed the torch from the current generation of faculty and staff who do community engaged work. Karen Banks, who contributes an article on the importance of service learning for students, expresses the importance of such an endeavor, “because it allows students to work with real data, understand organizational challenges, and apply their new skills and knowledge” which is exponentially important to student experience, growth, and learning.

Both Rafael Alamilla and Elizabeth Bennion, in different articles, highlight the need for civic skill development and why that is so important. For Rafael, civically engaged professionals are seminal to the success of stakeholder networks and community capacity. And for Elizabeth Bennion, she illustrates how civic skill development as a part of community engagement can be developed across levels, modes, and disciplines. Moreover, Alexander Lipsey contributes a useful reflective essay on how tools such as Mentimeter (<https://www.mentimeter.com/>) can be an incredibly powerful for not only collecting important demographic information, but also important feedback on thoughts, questions, and inspirations that can be easily captured and shared in real time through visualizations, charts, and word clouds.

To highlight some of the ideas and conversations that transpired, we believed that a special edition of *ENGAGE!* could be realized to capture this important work by ways of reflection, collaboration, models, and best practices.

It was a way to fundamentally capture information and share it. For example, Rebecca Mueller’s work is highlighted in her article,

“Technical Assistance: A High-Touch, High-Impact Community Engagement Model” which demonstrates and shows that success is grounded in long-term relationships throughout the whole process from asset-based inventories to implementation to sustainability planning.

Of important note regarding the articles in this special edition is that they are all diverse and distinct from each other which I think is indicative of the nature of community engagement and the broad framework of disciplines, units, staff, faculty, students, and the communities that they work with. Jeremy Price who authors an article in this edition, coined this consortium of articles as pluralism or multiplicity. I couldn’t agree more. The many facets, layers, and dimensions of this endeavor—community engaged work—are varied and diverse. It’s the real world. It takes time. It’s messy. It’s complicated. But it’s also beautiful. Jeremy in his work goes on to say, “Community engaged research prioritizes honoring community knowledge and capital, accepts diverse outputs, and values transformative goals,” whereas this is not always the case in traditional research.

What do we—a non-land grant, Big Ten university—owe to the people beyond our campus boundaries? I would say a lot. Indiana University has a steeped tradition in research combined with a spectrum of doctoral programs in innovation and research.

Although this is incredibly important, this image doesn’t paint the full picture of what Indiana University brings to the table. For many faculty, staff, and students it’s about journeying off the campus and into communities across the state to meet people where they are and collaborate on opportunities and initiatives that make a difference. I hope that you enjoy this special edition. One thing is for sure. Our coalition of community engaged practitioners have been engaging in scholarly interdisciplinary work, establishing meaningful student immersive experiences, and serving our community partners and the state for decades.