

Productive Tensions and Uncomfortable Conversations

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Introduction

It was late fall 2019 in Philadelphia at the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU) annual conference. Matthew Durlington was sitting in the audience of a panel entitled “Comprehensive Evaluation of Civic and Community Engagement” with Stephen Percy, the former president of Portland State University, and community engagement legend Barbara Holland. As Dr. Holland moderated the session, the conversations turned to an intriguing question: “What happens when ‘comprehensive evaluations’ of community engagement show problems or even failure?” As many in the field quietly acknowledge, the comprehensive evaluation of engagement work is sometimes a picture that is too rosy. In other words, we consistently hear about ‘objectives met,’ ‘successful assessment,’ ‘mutually beneficial outcomes,’ etc. President Percy then added a quip, “What about spectacular failures in higher education?”

In community engagement work in higher education, we rightly focus on our successes with communities and our achievements in diversity, equity, and inclusion work. We highlight when we get our place-based and hyper-local social justice work right. Yet, what about when it does not go well or when the institutional practices of higher education itself create stumbling blocks? If we are honest about our community engagement and place-based work, we recognize that the work leading up to those successes is where the real entanglements and challenges occur. The arduous but rewarding process of rapport-building and finding common ground for projects makes up much of the relationship work. It is hard, however, to adequately reflect this nature in a publication, university reward structure, or quantitative measures of

impact. There are tensions and uncomfortable moments in rapport building and relationship development with partners. Within our institutions, there are numerous obstacles to connecting equitably with partner communities. This is even more heightened when we are working with underserved populations or with communities that have tense relationships, historically and contemporaneously with higher education institutions. Sometimes things do not work out. Why? Sometimes, the best-laid plans for partnership are subject to shifting administrations and the attention spans of faculty projects. Why? We may live our academic lives by semesters, trimesters, or quarters, but our community partners live on different calendars and timelines. How do we navigate that reality of campus and community relationships?

Clearly, there are problems, tensions, challenges, and failures in place-based work. Why not have a productive dialogue on these issues and own them? If we can share with one another the barriers and challenges to anti-racist community engagement, then are we not also creating a more transparent space? Are we not interrogating the power dynamics of higher education institutions and communities in doing so? The goal of this special issue is to further critical conversations on these questions with our higher education community and, ideally, our community partners as well.

Some of the ways we use to measure impact in place-based and community engagement work are problematic. One example is the undervaluing of qualitative data compared to quantitative analysis. Why do we give so much power to the N? It can overwhelm reflection on the rich narratives and deepening relationships that come from working with community partners thoughtfully over an extended amount of time. Further, funding program officers and philanthropic donors may have more interest in the larger aggregate data than in what happens during the slow pace of equitable place-based work. Imagine a metric based on the joy of kids re-engaging in play and education after COVID-19 and articulating that in a grant application. The complexity of university-community relationships makes this work challenging to measure, and easy to disregard community voices in defining impact.

These are just some of the issues we brainstormed in the months leading to this special issue. Along with colleagues from the Place-Based Justice Network (PBJN), we began to seriously think about creating a platform for this type of critical dialogue. In addition to interrogating those “spectacular failures,” we wanted to explore what we can learn when community engagement initiatives run into the everyday ways in which White supremacy pervades our institutions—and sometimes our own minds as practitioners. Openness about these challenges can be hard, with job security and promises made at stake. In a time of increasing precarity around diversity, equity, and inclusion work, these questions can be unnerving and risky. We believe that

creating spaces for dialogue and mutual support around the discomfort and tensions that exist in community engagement is more important than ever.

Context

In 2022, as members of a PBJN committee charged with considering how to more widely disseminate the network’s mission to support antiracism in place-based community engagement, we landed on the idea of a special issue that would grapple with these challenges. To build a solid foundation for the concept of “productive tensions and uncomfortable conversations,” our committee hosted a series of conference discussions. We took the approach of soliciting potential topics in real time during these sessions around the following prompts:

- External tensions - issues between a university focus and community interests.
- Internal tensions - embodying values and alignment on our campuses.
- Tensions between words and action - how do you define and measure impact?
- Epistemic justice - whose knowledge counts, and how is it valued?

We then solicited ideas and contributions from the practitioners in attendance. That dialogue informs this issue. The process during these conference sessions was somewhat messy. Still, we felt that the messiness was worth embracing, illustrating as it does how dialogue happens in real-time, as scholarship in design thinking and idea scaffolding demonstrates (Ingold, 2013). The themes that emerged, we found, were reflections of specific experiences in the work while simultaneously representing broad patterns in the way institutions of higher education pursue community engagement missions. Here, we quote the questions, problems, and challenges participants added to the Google Jamboard we used during our session discussions.

External tensions

- Student expectations vs. community reality
- University prioritizing international reputation over local engagement (including a map erasing historically Black neighborhoods given to incoming first years)
- Translating our work to our own institution. Our work is often not understood or misunderstood within our own institution and other major institutions in our area.
- University aspirations (Top 15 based on US News & World Report rankings) vs. community needs.
- Working with and for community while being paid by the enemy
- Equitably valuing and supporting partner time and energy.
- Lifting co-educators.

- The issue of the university is that they want authentic engagement but are still determining if a community member can compensate a community member for their time.
- University using the region as a testing ground for research.
- University misaligned in espoused values and action (ex, launching the Center for Shared Prosperity and simultaneously participating in gentrification)
- Ways in which our strategic framework/planning process is supposed to have equity, diversity, and inclusion woven throughout, but it did not include partners and students from the beginning.
- Race is still an issue that must be addressed consistently and boldly with the communities most impacted leading.
- Navigating state politics.
- Lack of political will to address historical power imbalances between campus and community.
- How can we talk honestly about the tensions between various goals, e.g., acquiring political power in the city vs. working with grassroots community organizations that challenge the power structures in our city?

Internal tensions

- Reporting lines and support: Where do you sit in the organization chart?; Funding; Lack of institutional support for programs
- University focus on researchers teaching community and not seeing the need for researchers to learn FROM the community (who is seen as holding the “knowledge.”)
- Inviting community members/activists to campus as experts (talks, facilitation, etc.) vs. Faculty/Terminal Degree holders seen as the “true” experts
- Tension between branding/admissions and institutional mission values
- A story is being told through branding and marketing/is the story authentic? Is it the story we want to be telling and promoting?)
- Wanting to incorporate engaged learning in all curricula without potentially doing the work with all faculty

Tensions between words and actions: How do you define and measure impact?

- Are we creating and practicing equitable compensation models and truly valuing our collaborators' time and labor?
- Does it impact integrity? Are we being honest about how we demonstrate impact?
- What do we actually mean by “impact”? Are metrics for impact actually reflecting what we are doing with communities?
- We want to measure impact and continue investing our energy in counting “service hours.”

Epistemic justice: Whose knowledge counts and how is it valued?

- A frequent struggle to get our community writers paid to lead workshops – having a simplified process is not necessarily enough!
- When grant funding will pay for administrative/logistical support, we hire grad students to do it, not community members.
- Ability to pay partners and students due to bureaucracy/established policy.
- Power Balance, Ambition vs Follow Through, Funding
- Institutional power as holders/purveyors/creators of knowledge requires sustaining epistemic injustice.
- Impact on how professionals of color in our field can show up and take their roles.
- Different conceptualizations of the fundamental values that drive our work (PR vs. social justice/systemic change).
- Equity vs. equality
- Translating our work to our own institution

The articles featured in this special issue coalesced not only around the four specific productive tensions and the ideas that surfaced in our conference discussions but also demonstrated additional necessary thematic layers in the dynamics described by the prompt.

When Whiteness permeates our institutions as an unspoken default, our connections with communities of color can deliver harm instead of mutual benefit.

Frazier and Cotterman’s “Implementing Rest as Resistance: Balancing Care for Students, Community, and Self” highlights the collision of multiple tensions in the higher education community engagement space: institutional expectations of productivity, engagement professionals desire to nurture high-quality relationships with community partners and holding participating students accountable for showing up and delivering on promises; but also the cumulative and collective exhaustion that students and faculty of color especially are experiencing since the combined impacts of the pandemic and ongoing daily challenges of working and learning in institutions characterized by assumptions of White supremacy. They call on Hersey’s *Rest Is Resistance* to decolonize not only our practices of community engagement but also our own internalized expectations.

In Moore’s “Toward (Racial) Justice-in-the Doing-of Place-Based Community Engagement,” what the authors’ term “justice-in-the-doing” confronts how Whiteness is normative in our institutions and how it undermines building relationships with neighboring communities from authentic connections. Their powerful self-critical process demonstrates that as Whiteness infuses university identities, productivity culture, and epistemologies, an institution’s

relationships with community partners can devalue community identities and knowledge, even when the intent is mutually beneficial collaboration.

In the absence of rigor and reflexivity in program design, well-intentioned community engagement can replicate the dynamics of colonialism through extractive practices.

Community engagement initiatives emerging from higher education need not default to an extractive dynamic, Stanlick argues in “Experiential Extractivism in Service-Learning and Community Engagement: What We Take and What We Leave Behind.” Yet, absent an intentional and self-critical approach to program design, professional development, and pedagogy, university-community engagement can cause harm by reproducing colonial frameworks of extracting and devaluing community knowledge, labor, time, and talent. A set of recommendations for building engagement initiatives from goals of justice and authenticity can guide practitioners in their work.

McHugh et al., in “Extractive Knowledge: Epistemic and Practical Challenges for Higher Education Community Engagement,” bring a tight focus on extractivism where knowledge specifically is concerned. They note that universities, as epistemic institutions, can use community engagement to extract community knowledge in ways that mirror the extraction of material wealth in colonial structures. As an antidote, they offer a case study of a University of Dayton center that employs Marianist principles to foster equitable and effective relationships between universities and their community partners.

The complex ways in which geographies, institutions, and collective goals meet can produce tensions that, to resolve, call on participating institutions to articulate, in collaboration with community partners, clear pathways to accomplishing shared goals.

In a legacy city institutionally fragmented and experiencing depopulation and racialized impacts of poverty, an anchor network finds that its successes in supporting people can work at cross purposes to support place. “The People-Place Dilemma: The Challenge for Anchor Networks in Legacy Cities,” an analysis from Swanstrom et al., argues that this tension is navigable, but the work to overcome it must be guided by data while centering social networks and community empowerment.

In “Many Bumps in the Road: The Tensions of Cross-Organizational Navigation in a University Public School Partnership,” Moye demonstrates the importance of understanding different and unequal operating practices and capacities when universities connect with public school systems in K-12 support programming. Informed by “street level bureaucracy” framing, this study offers recommendations for practitioners developing such programming to overcome the obstacles to

goals of equity and transformation that are generated when two quite different institutional systems meet.

Learning flourishes when pedagogical approaches affirm that the knowledge of often marginalized people matters.

An approach to graduate-level community-engaged scholarship that flattens conventional hierarchies of knowledge demonstrates the power of facing head-on some of the tensions that arise in place-based community engagement. In Diaz et al.'s "Engaging Epistemic Tensions in Graduate Education: Promising Practices and Processes from the Tulane Mellon Graduate Program in Community-Engaged Scholarship," participating students, faculty members, and community partners interrogate epistemic tensions between traditional and authentically community-engaged methodologies and build relationships that enrich the learning experience.

Salinas et al. share, in "Family-Centered Theory of Change: A Conceptual Framework for Improving Teaching and Learning in Undergraduate STEM Courses," demonstrate the value for the student learning experience of connecting curriculum to the lived experiences and community heritage of Latinx families and communities. Through this program, a Hispanic Serving Institution finds a place of *servingness* that goes beyond mere enrollment to fully engaging families in higher education.

In addition to these important contributions, we have solicited colleagues' thought pieces on three additional topics. Ducar introduces the Place-Based Justice Network and how it addresses issues around diversity, equity, and inclusion in community engagement work. Guarasci asks where we are in terms of creating inclusive democracy, and Kuttner challenges us to consider how we assess our community engagement initiatives.

As some of our contributing authors highlight how White supremacy culture pervades the structures of academia, we ask ourselves if we make the right choice by making use of academic publishing, a White-dominated mechanism (Chakravartty et al., 2018). This effort was prompted by publishing as a core currency in higher education. Still, we are also aware that the editorial process, combined with language of research rigor, can potentially exclude important voices and ideas. The choice of creating a special journal issue is still solid. This kind of forum can provide a valuable space to unmask the things we find uncomfortable to talk about in community engagement spaces; it creates a visible conversation, and, in this particular special issue, we are able to provide a platform for a few voices new to publishing. In addition, our choice to start with *Metropolitan Universities*, a journal committed to elevating anti-racism in higher education, was intentional. But we also understand that this must be just one among many channels that we use to support a national conversation in higher education about the obstacles that stand in the way of truly equitable place-based work.

Conclusion

As we write this introduction and wrap up this journal issue, higher education is under intense scrutiny, with some public questioning the value of a degree along with accusations of bias and anti-semitism in light of international conflicts. Perhaps no other moment provided fodder for those attacking higher education than three prominent university presidents' December 5, 2023 testimony. In attempting to provide careful testimony following legal advice, these presidents were seen as wavering on how best to respond to anti-semitism on campus in the fall of 2023. Instead of making strong statements on the existence of both anti-semitism and Islamophobia and reactions to both, their testimony fed further political attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices in higher education.

DEI initiatives have been under attack for years, but the efforts to undermine or eliminate this work have accelerated in the past few years. In some states, elected officials have eliminated DEI centers and employee positions using false narratives of the impact of critical race theory and other usual topics of the cultural wars. While these may be political stunts and rhetoric for some politicians, the real-world impact is the loss of employment, lack of support for diverse student populations, and a silencing effect for our colleagues that ripples beyond these states. When soliciting contributions to this issue, we had to consider this precarity, along with the professional danger of raising these types of questions for valued colleagues located in states where their work is under fire. They could not contribute to this issue because of this climate, and so we are missing some powerful voices where the topic of challenges to anti-racist place-based community engagement is concerned.

So, where do we go from here? In a recent piece by Campus Compact Strategy and Visioning Fellow Castel Sweet, she bravely asserts, "Equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging embody measurable, tangible, and observable values instrumental to fulfilling the strategic missions of higher education institutions" (Sweet, 2023). This, combined with the recent Campus Compact publication *Anti-Racist Community Engagement: Principles and Practices*, demonstrates where we feel engagement work is going. Community engagement work must be seen through a diversity, equity, and inclusion lens that is attentive to social justice. That may create the most uncomfortable conversations around engagement work in higher education. But, in an age of precarity for our colleagues who conduct this important work, it is a dialogue that is more important than ever before.

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