



# ***A Review of The Cambridge Handbook of Service Learning and Community Engagement***

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**Book Review:**  
***Cambridge Handbook of Service Learning  
and Community Engagement***

*Cambridge Handbook of Service Learning and Community Engagement*, edited by Corey Dolgon,  
Tania D. Mitchell, and Timothy K. Eatman. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 2017.  
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In *The Cambridge Handbook of Service Learning and Community Engagement*, editors Corey Dolgon, Tania D. Mitchell, and Timothy K. Eatman take on the monumental task of assembling a resource to address all aspects of service-learning and community engagement (SL/CE). Beginning with a historical account of education and assessment and ending with critical voices from the field, virtually no stone is left unturned. It is equal parts hopeful about what service learning and community engagement “could be,” and critical of some of the current-day manifestations of these activities and processes. This volume serves as a comprehensive starting point for someone considering SL/CE work while also delivering a depth of material that would be of interest for SL/CE veterans interested in growing and refining their work.

**Keywords:** *Cambridge handbook, community engagement, community partners, service-learning*

In the last three decades, a number of works have focused on civic engagement in higher education. From Boyer’s (1996) introduction of a new model of scholarship, which helped create pathways for the scholarship of community-engaged work, to Bringle, Clayton, and Price’s (2009) creation of the SOFAR model, which outlined the interplay of numerous stakeholders, this discipline has grown in scope and complexity. In *The Cambridge Handbook of Service Learning and Community Engagement*, editors Corey Dolgon, Tania D. Mitchell, and Timothy K. Eatman take on the monumental task of assembling a resource for addressing all aspects of service-learning and community engagement (SL/CE). Beginning with a historical account of education and assessment within the context of SL/CE and ending with critical voices from the field, the handbook leaves virtually no stone unturned. It is both hopeful about what service-learning and community engagement “could be” and critical of some of the current manifestations of these activities and processes. This volume serves as a comprehensive starting point for those considering SL/CE work while also offering a depth of material that would be of value to SL/CE veterans interested in growing and refining their work.

The handbook provides foundational literature for informing best practices while acknowledging that there is always room to be and do better, to improve partnerships within communities, to better engage in innovative practices, and to more effectively initiate real transformative outcomes. The editors present these issues as a call to action, challenging the reader to become aware of the pitfalls and shortcuts that are all too easy to fall into time and time again, and to “put aside meaningless indicators of meaningless variables and begin to consider how one might measure the serious impacts necessary to make significant social change” (p. xix). The authors make it clear that this handbook embraces community-engaged practice as political education. As such, one should take on community-engaged work with more than just relationship building in mind: The goal should be

sustainable, substantive change. The sections included in *The Cambridge Handbook of Service Learning and Community Engagement* illuminate the stepping stones for moving toward that goal.

The handbook is divided into five parts, each of which is outlined here. Each section and chapter can be used as a stand-alone piece if the reader needs more information on one of the subtopics therein, or it can be used as a primer on the history and evolution of SL/CE. At over 500 pages, this volume is considerable; however, the editors make it easy to navigate as a reference tool.

In the first section, the reader is taken along the historical path of the “who, what, where, and when” of service-learning and community engagement. The section includes chapters on the pioneers who shaped the field and stories from the unsung heroes of the greater social justice practices that grew to be the heart of SL/CE. The editors make a notable effort to include the voices and vantages of those so often overlooked. For example, the handbook includes chapters detailing the significant part that feminist scholars, HBCUs, and programs such as agricultural and extension programs have all played in the evolution of SL/CE. These historical contributions have brought scholars and practitioners to the “here” of SL/CE work, offering working definitions and disciplinary direction. It is clear in the chapters of this section that progress has been an uphill battle of creating teaching and scholarship for social justice while still viewing higher education institutions through a critical lens.

Arguably, some the most critical questions in service-learning and community engagement involve the use of best practices. Without evaluating whether teachers and scholars are doing good, meaningful work—whereby all of the players at the table are served and represented—they run the risk of doing more harm than good. The second section of the handbook outlines the importance of creating strategies to insure quality work that delivers desirable outcomes. These strategies must consider all of the stakeholders—that is, community partners, students, faculty/staff, administrators, and the larger community—as a whole. The chapters in Section 2 prompt the reader to step outside of traditional ideas about how one creates, delivers, and evaluates curriculum in order to grow a larger community ecosystem. For example, in her chapter, “Service Learning Course Construction and Learning Outcomes,” Pamela Motoike challenges the reader to find the balance between checking off the boxes of learning outcomes and allowing students the time they need to process the personal and developmental challenges that might arise in a service-learning course. In Chapter 11, “Catalyzing Ecologies of Transformative Community Partnerships,” Romand Coles encourages the reader to move past traditional community-service activities that give the merest nod to community partners and instead to create lasting, meaningful, and clearly articulated partnerships for maximum efficacy.

In Section 3, the editors bring together a selection of chapters across disciplines to provide examples and strategies highlighting how engaged teaching and learning can be done in various fields. Collectively, these chapters address the inherent difficulties and rewards of taking an activist approach to communities and classrooms. In Chapter 19, Tyler Branson and Sara Roberts argue that, at their core, the humanities have historically linked civic engagement and academic study toward the end of developing more informed and engaged citizens. Most of the disciplines lending their voice to this section add to this theme. Universities were traditionally places—albeit places of incredible privilege—where students were sent to be molded into more engaged citizens. While many disciplines strayed from these roots for a time, the last half century has begun to bring them back into the fold. As Catherine Orr shares in Chapter 22, “the enterprise of scholarly activism for challenging inequality and exploitation remains a powerful weapon in the fight against power and oppression” (p. 243). The chapters in this section emphasize that engaged scholars and learners are critical in the process of challenging and changing systems.

Section 4 focuses on the interdependence of research, teaching, policy, and profession. These components work together to help the discipline of SL/CE evolve. At its core, research is meant to sharpen and refine ideas, adding legitimacy to a discipline. Unlike some other fields whose work often operates in a vacuum, community-engaged scholarship addresses pressing public issues and frequently does so in collaboration with entities outside of academia. Sharing this research through

various channels gives readers insight into best practices for both teaching and policy. Profession emerges as the thread that links and directs the research, teaching, and policy of community engagement. As Lina Dostilio describes in Chapter 30, “community engagement professionals are charged with administrating the implementation of community engagement and are in a central position to shape the synergy between institutional priorities, values, and the engagement strategies that are developed” (p. 370). The chapters in this section highlight that when research, teaching, policy, and profession are engaged and in balance, one’s knowledge is more robust.

The fifth section of the book, “Critical Voices,” asks readers to reflect on the assumptions and worldviews they may bring to their community-engaged work. As Tania Mitchell states in the introduction to the section, it is easy to get caught up in the notion that this work is a universal good. Universities have increasingly embraced the idea of community service and consider it good PR. Supporters of community-engaged work point to higher grade point averages of students who participate in SL/CE classes and programs and produce narratives of transformative experiences. The chapters in this section discuss ways practitioners must enter this work—with eyes wide open regarding who controls the terms of service, who decides which community-engaged work will be supported, and whether the commitment to greater diversity is genuine or simply lip service. These final chapters advocate increased reciprocity between universities, their community partners, and the communities they serve.

As someone who considers community-engaged work integral to all aspects of my teaching, scholarship, and service, I appreciated the editors’ efforts to confront the complicated issues facing practitioners in this work, while also providing a functional handbook that can easily be put to good use. For my students in the beginning stages of imagining their own projects, it will provide an invaluable resource for teaching them how to properly approach community partners, invite stakeholders to the table, and create service projects with best practices in mind. This handbook is comprehensive and thorough, and will undoubtedly be reached for time and time again.

## Reference

Boyer, E. L. (1996). The scholarship of engagement. *Journal of Public Service and Outreach*, 1(1), 11–20.

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