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Addressing the “How” and “Why” of Student Preparation for Community Partnerships

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Addressing the “How” and “Why” of Student Preparation for Community Partnerships

Book Review: Preparing Students to Engage in Equitable Community Partnerships

Tryon, E. A., Madden, H. C., & Sprinkel, C. (Eds.). (2023). *Preparing Students to Engage in Equitable Community Partnerships: A Handbook*. Temple University Press. ISBN: 1439922748, 9781439922743

Reviewed by Beth R. Levinson

Abstract

“Preparing Students to Engage in Equitable Community Partnerships” by Tryon, Madden, and Sprinkel provides a guide to prepare students for meaningful and transformative community partnerships. The authors emphasize student preparation, critiquing traditional service-learning models and advocating for community-based learning to avoid perpetuating unequal power dynamics. They offer strategies for developing student humility, cultural awareness, and social justice education, aiming to transition from a charity model to critical community engagement focused on systemic change. The book includes tools, resources, and reflections to support educators in implementing effective community engagement strategies, ideally to be incorporated into a semesterlong course prior to entering a community. However, service-learning and community engagement is rooted in experiential education. While some advance preparation is essential, frontloading all learning “in theory” and divorced from real-world experience contradicts the principles of experiential learning. Next, given their student demographics and the need to prepare students for engaging with diverse populations, the authors acknowledge that the material they introduce is primarily geared toward preparing (their) white students. Student preparation often focuses on those “crossing a border” during community-engaged work but many students are “returning home.” Overall, the text is a valuable contribution with limitations that must be overcome.

Abordar el “cómo” y el “por qué” de la preparación de los estudiantes para las asociaciones comunitarias

Reseña del libro: Cómo preparar a los estudiantes para participar en asociaciones comunitarias equitativas

Tryon, E. A., Madden, H. C. y Sprinkel, C. (Eds.). (2023). *Preparar a los estudiantes para involucrarse en colaboraciones comunitarias equitativas: un manual*. Temple University Press. ISBN: 1439922748, 9781439922743

Revisado por Beth R. Levinson

Resumen

“Preparar a los estudiantes para involucrarse en colaboraciones comunitarias equitativas” de Tryon, Madden y Sprinkel ofrece una guía detallada para estudiantes interesados en la construcción de colaboraciones comunitarias significativas y transformadoras. Los autores destacan la necesidad de una preparación profunda de los estudiantes y critican los modelos tradicionales de aprendizaje y servicio, proponiendo en su lugar el aprendizaje basado en la comunidad para evitar la perpetuación de dinámicas de poder desiguales. Se proporcionan estrategias para fomentar la humildad, la conciencia cultural y una educación en justicia social para los estudiantes, con el objetivo de pasar de un enfoque de caridad a uno de compromiso comunitario crítico que fomente el cambio sistemático. El libro incluye herramientas, recursos y reflexiones para apoyar a los educadores en la implementación de estrategias efectivas de participación comunitaria. Se recomienda de manera ideal su implementación en un curso de un semestre previo al inicio del trabajo comunitario. No obstante, dado que el aprendizaje y servicio y la vinculación comunitaria se basan en la educación experiencial, es crucial que la teoría no se desvincule de la práctica para no contradecir los principios de la educación experiencial. Los autores reconocen que, debido a las características demográficas de sus estudiantes y la necesidad de prepararlos para interactuar con poblaciones diversas, el material está principalmente orientado a

Keywords: community engagement, critical community engagement, community partnerships, service-learning and community engagement (SLCE), community-engaged learning, student preparation, student training, social justice education

estudiantes blancos. A menudo, la preparación se centra en aquellos estudiantes que viajan al exterior durante el trabajo comunitario, sin embargo, muchos de ellos trabajan de manera local en sus hogares. En resumen, el texto es una valiosa contribución, aunque presenta limitaciones que deben ser abordadas.

Palabras clave: *compromiso comunitario, compromiso crítico comunitario, asociaciones comunitarias, aprendizaje de servicio y compromiso comunitario (SLCE), aprendizaje comprometido con la comunidad, preparación de estudiantes, capacitación de estudiantes, educación para la justicia social*

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Service-learning and community engagement (SLCE) is a pedagogical approach that connects classroom theory with practical application in a community context. University educators partner with community leaders to achieve shared, but also separately desired, outcomes. Educators expect their students to make connections between course material and “the real world” while community partners are interested in having a need met (e.g., tutors for their students, completion of a project, or support for adult literacy). Both are focused on supporting the learning goals of students and affecting positive outcomes in the community.

Yet, SLCE is often implemented in ways that limit its impact. What could be a High Impact Practice (Kuh, 2008) oftentimes falls short when universities send students into neighboring communities in significant numbers with little or no preparation. This lack of student preparation prior to engagement has been identified as a particular problem by scholars and community partners. Therefore, researchers have examined elements of SLCE, particularly focusing on authentic student development and the perspectives of community partners regarding the engagement. Educators are now called upon to consider these important critiques as they forge community partnerships and develop community-engaged learning opportunities for their students.

In their book, *Preparing Students to Engage in Equitable Community Partnerships*, Elizabeth A. Tryon, Haley C. Madden, and Cory Sprinkel (Tryon et al., 2023) offer a guide for postsecondary educators to prepare students for engagement in meaningful and transformative community partnerships. The authors’ approach is informed by two key factors. First, they acknowledge that unprepared students hinder effective outcomes for both their own learning and the community partners. Second, they consider the perspectives of community partners, who emphasize the need for students to be prepared to work with diverse populations.

The authors also draw on scholarly criticism of “traditional service-learning” (Mitchell, 2008), which can center on a charity model. This model typically involves sporadic engagement and lacks analysis of larger systemic issues or sustainable solutions, thereby encouraging students to develop an inflated sense of self-efficacy, or “savior complex.” The authors deliberately avoid using the term “service-learning.” Instead, they adopt “community-based learning (CBL)” in response to community feedback that indicates “service-learning” is “loaded with patriarchal meaning” and suggests that higher education institutions view communities through a deficit model, perpetuating an unequal power dynamic (Tryon et al., 2023 page 10).

The authors, all educators at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Morgridge Center for Public Service, identify appropriate training for postsecondary educators to integrate into their courses or programs and provide many resources, several online, for activities, discussion and reflection prompts, and shared stories of real experiences. Ideally, the material in this book should be incorporated into a semester long

course that students complete before entering the community. While intended learners are undergraduates, the authors note their approach is readily modified to meet learning objectives for graduate students. They maintain that students should only enter the community partnership once they become self-aware, are humble, reflective, and educated about the community they will partner with, and mindful of social justice.

The book is a valuable contribution to the SLCE literature. It emphasizes how both student learning outcomes and desired outcomes for community partners can be ethically and authentically achieved and provides a comprehensive bibliography. It focuses on two areas that are interrelated.

First, the authors discuss how students can be effectively prepared to engage in ways that maintain mutually beneficial partnerships. Second, they describe how to transition from a traditional model of helping, serving, or volunteering into “Critical Community Engagement” rooted in the work of scholars who define the goal of community engagement (CE) through the social change perspective discussed by Mitchell (2008). This approach advocates systemic change through a deep examination of root causes that create the need for service. Thus, the authors’ focus is on CE preparation with social justice education as a “crucial piece of CE preparation [that] cannot be extricated but it is just one piece of preparation” (Tryon et al., 2023, page 28).

But how are educators to take on this lofty goal? And why should we? These are the important questions that Tryon, Madden and Sprinkel seek to answer in their book.

Summary

The book is organized into three parts. Part I (Chapters 1 and 2) delves into the rationale for preparing students for community-engaged education and exploring the profound ‘why’ underpinning the CE pedagogical approach. Included is a broad overview of the theoretical framework on which the approach is based. These two chapters provide a comprehensive list of definitions for terms used throughout the book—useful for a field that uses a wide range of terms to describe the work—and the three core values of the approach, namely, (a) contributing to equitable partnerships, (b) focusing on relationships, and (c) considering root causes in CE efforts, while focusing on relationships grounded in humility and authenticity. The authors aim to cultivate respectful and thoughtful students through discussions and reflections that facilitate self-awareness and address potential savior complex tendencies stemming from biases and assumptions.

The “why” is also addressed. The authors provide a clear rationale for the importance of preparation, informed by both the community perspective and scholarly criticism of “traditional service-learning”. Unprepared students can harm the community as noted in the lead author’s influential study, “*The Unheard Voices*” (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009), which revealed that community partners often feel burdened by the need to prepare students for working with diverse populations. That study challenged assumptions about the effectiveness of service-learning and highlighted the unequal relationship between communities and academic institutions. Notably, community partners asked their university counterparts to improve the training of their students. In a follow up study, Tryon et. al. (2022) found little improvement in students’ cultural awareness and understanding of social identity.

The authors highlight scholarly work examining how inadequate preparation can hinder students’ academic and personal growth when engaging with communities. For example, citing Peterson (2009), they argue that without proper guidance, students may perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce unequal power dynamics. Similarly, drawing from Eby’s early critique of SLCE, *Why Service Learning Is Bad* (1998), the authors expose the concerning trend of commodifying communities for the benefit of students who often lack critical awareness of the historical and political contexts shaping their community experiences.

Part II (Chapters 3–7) discusses how to help students develop appropriate skills to engage in an equitable and mutually beneficial partnership. Chapter 3 provides a strong foundation for examining student motivation for CE and addresses common pitfalls, such as the savior complex and the charity model. The authors emphasize that students’ awareness of their biases and community strengths is necessary for them take an asset-based approach to community work. Chapter 4 offers strategies and tools to build student awareness through a critical examination of their social identity. Chapter 5 explores the inherent power

imbalances in campus-community relationships and proposes solutions. A compelling suggestion is to validate community knowledge by inviting community partners to coauthor articles and collaboratively design projects or research.

Chapter 6, which could be considered the core of the book, addresses the development of students' professional and interpersonal skills. This chapter highlights the significant gap between students' initial capabilities and the actual on-site requirements; the crucial role of students as stewards of often long-standing partnerships between faculty and community organizations; and the specific skills needed for effective engagement and strategies to develop them. Chapter 7 focuses on developing cultural and intellectual humility. By developing cultural humility, students gain awareness of their own cultural background and "the ability to understand and respect another person's culture without judgement (page 129)."

The authors rightly state that developing students' capacities to uncover their motivations and their social identities makes them stronger partners who can identify their own strengths and those of their partners. This text is powerful, and the tools and resources presented are excellent. So often students do not confront their tendency to view their work as "helping" or "fixing" a community by offering a service to individuals. By uncovering and honestly interrogating this perspective, educators can move their students past the charity model toward higher level thinking about systemic causes and possible solutions that involve working "with" their community partners toward a more equitable society.

Two aspects of this approach resonate with me as a university educator in a unit that runs a SLCE program for students across campus: the focus on developing humility and the emphasis on asset-based analysis. Butin (2007) argues that justice learning requires students to confront the ambiguity and complexity inherent in the issues that necessitate service in the first place. To effect meaningful change, students must engage authentically with the world around them. However, they are often ill-equipped to navigate this complexity. The authors contend that educators are uniquely positioned to foster humility in students, enabling them to engage ethically while learning from and alongside their community partners.

As noted in the book, messaging from universities to students often stresses their collective inherent excellence and brilliance. The focus on developing humility is refreshing. We must allow ourselves and our students to be comfortable with getting it wrong on occasion and having the capacity to reflect on these mistakes in an honest and critical way. The emphasis on adopting an asset-based approach is commendable. This perspective encourages students to recognize and leverage a community's strengths and collective expertise. Doing so, it simultaneously enhances the community's capacity to develop sustainable solutions and fosters students' academic and personal growth. This dual benefit underscores the value of asset-based thinking in CE, promoting more equitable partnerships and deeper learning experiences for students.

The "how" to prepare students for such a lofty undertaking is brilliantly outlined in the book, supported by ample resources that guide student reflections and discussions of complex topics. This guide offers us the tools by which to best prepare our students to do this. In Appendix A, two identity and inclusion activities are designed to uncover how bias can lead to assumptions and influence perceptions of what is considered "normal." One activity involves a visioning exercise where students are guided to imagine different people based on descriptions provided. This is followed by a series of reflective discussion questions that prompt students to consider how their assumptions change as they gain more insights.

However, the book also highlights limitations. While it serves as a valuable resource, it underscores the significant challenge students face in engaging in community work through a campus that does not offer a full-semester prerequisite course for such activities. This gap in preparation is a sobering reminder of the complexities involved in adequately equipping students for meaningful CE.

I was troubled by the "when" as I read this book. The authors adeptly present a wealth of valuable content for exploration, introduce many deep discussions to have and point to even more reflection essays to read through. For many educators, time is their most scarce resource. In the program I work in, we have barely two weeks to prepare students to work in the community. A good portion of this time is spent on state mandated compliance requirements that include documenting tuberculosis tests, criminal background

checks and youth protection training. Additionally, students must be introduced to our learning management system, and we try to incorporate team building.

I felt at once invigorated by the discussion in the book and frustrated by the paucity of time we have to prepare our students for this important work. In my program, it is not possible to frontload this level of training. Our office takes a more integrated approach, weaving similar training and activities throughout the semester. At the heart of our curriculum lies reflection, carefully aligned with students’ experiences at their service sites. This method has proven highly effective, as it allows students to continuously examine their perspectives—shaped by prior experiences, biases, and predilections—alongside their ongoing CE and course content.

The effectiveness of this approach stems from the fundamental nature of SLCE, which is deeply rooted in experiential education. While some advance preparation is undoubtedly essential, attempting to frontload all learning “in theory” and divorced from real-world experience would contradict the core principles of experiential learning. Instead, our model encourages students to examine their experience and reconcile theory, practice and their assumptions, fostering deeper understanding and more meaningful engagement. Assigning critical reflection prompts to students *in situ* does not fully address community partners’ requests for well-prepared students. Nevertheless, this approach offers significant benefits for deep student learning. The tension between theoretical preparation and experiential learning highlights the complex nature of effective CE and the ongoing challenge of balancing different stakeholder needs in SLCE programs.

Part III (Chapters 8–11) investigates the structures and infrastructure required for SLCE. Chapter 8 provides instructional strategies to create a “critical classroom,” which the authors define as the foundation for preparing students for critical CE. In a critical classroom, emphasis is placed on developing students’ capacity to work with diverse populations, while acknowledging that mistakes will occur. This chapter guides educators toward creating a learning environment in which students feel safe to make mistakes and are empowered to learn from them. The authors contend that shifting focus from preventing student mistakes to developing their ability to respond appropriately and humbly when errors occur is crucial. Students can only acknowledge their missteps after recognizing them, such as using insensitive language or communicating inappropriately with partners. This self-awareness enables authentic conversations, which can effectively and honestly strengthen relationships between campus and community partners.

The authors stress the importance of recognizing that well-prepared students are generally better equipped to avoid the common pitfalls their less-prepared peers might encounter. Rather than focusing on avoiding mistakes, the emphasis should be on fostering resilience, self-reflection, and the capacity for genuine dialogue when mistakes inevitably happen. By cultivating these skills, the authors contend, students are prepared not only for immediate CE but also for long-term success in navigating complex social interactions and professional relationships. This holistic preparation empowers students to turn potential missteps into opportunities for growth, learning, and deeper connection with community partners. This approach not only enhances students’ learning experiences but also contributes to more robust and sustainable community partnerships.

The authors point out that educators should discuss the use of language and behaviors that diminish an equitable partnership. As campus practitioners, we occasionally find ourselves intervening on behalf of our students but, by building students’ self-awareness and capacity to recognize their responsibility in the partnership, the need for interventions subsides.

Chapter 9 discusses the importance of developing relationship-centered systems, both on and off campus. The emphasis here is on preparing students and establishing campus structures that prioritize both student learning and community outcomes. This approach centers on meeting both needs equitably through partnerships and supporting policies. Attention is paid in the chapter to campus level structural recommendations and the necessary infrastructure required to support students.

Chapter 10 of the book offers valuable perspectives from community engagement practitioners (CEPs) at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). The authors acknowledge that their primary focus has been on preparing students who may be culturally disconnected from the communities they engage with, including white students, out-of-state or international students, and those from rural areas.

Recognizing their limited expertise on the experiences of students of color in CE, the authors include essays written by faculty and staff from HBCUs to broaden the book's relevance. These essays provide engaging and thought-provoking insights into the challenges faced by HBCUs in offering community-engaged, experiential learning opportunities to their students.

The HBCU practitioners highlight structural and institutional barriers limiting CE opportunities for Black, Indigenous and People of Color students and share their successes. Dr. Lena Jones's essay *"Community Engagement Challenges and Opportunities at an Urban Community College"* describes offering community-engaged learning at an urban community college. Despite lacking a dedicated office, they partnered with Public Achievement and secured temporary funding for a center. The students' deep community knowledge enabled insightful discussions about power and political institutions' effects on their lives. This example illustrates the unique challenges HBCUs face in implementing CE programs.

By incorporating these perspectives, the book acknowledges the need for a more inclusive approach to CE in higher education, recognizing the valuable contributions and unique challenges faced by HBCUs and their students in this field.

In Chapter 11 the authors share their thoughts and reflections on the topics covered throughout the book, synthesizing key themes and offering forward-looking perspectives on CE in higher education.

The book concludes with two appendices that enhance its practical value. The first contains a compilation of activities designed to support and reinforce the concepts discussed in the preceding chapters. The second contains additional resources for educators, including reading materials, online tools, and organizations relevant to CE work. These final sections of the book connect theoretical text to a practical guide, equipping educators and practitioners with concrete tools and resources to implement effective CE strategies in their own institutions and communities.

Those who work on campuses that embrace comprehensive community-engaged education, both through embedded infrastructure and funding, will certainly find these suggestions on point. For those who do not work on such a campus, the recommendations appear both frustrating and heart wrenching. Early in the book, the authors recount how their conference sessions on student preparation are consistently standing room only. This demonstrates a strong desire among educators to learn effective methods for preparing their students for community-based work. However, once the suggestion is made for a course to be added to the undergraduate curriculum, there is significant pushback. Students and faculty suffer from course overload, where adding one more course just seems like a bridge too far.

Discussion

Given their student demographics and the need to better prepare students for engaging with diverse populations, the authors acknowledge that the material they introduce is primarily geared toward preparing (their) white students. Given the book's focus on critical CE and its stated goal of examining and dismantling deep-rooted social injustices, I find the emphasis on preparing white students puzzling. The authors acknowledge their limited expertise in this area and mention that a study is currently underway at their institution, focusing on the experiences of students of color. I cannot help but wonder why they just didn't wait until the study was concluded and write a more inclusive guide for how to prepare ALL students. The racial and ethnic makeup of the postsecondary student populations is rapidly changing. The program with which I work has a significantly diverse student demographic. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), the 7.8 million white undergraduate students enrolled nationwide in 2022 were joined by 3.3 million Hispanic, 1.9 million Black, 1.1 million Asian, and over a million students with other identities.

This seems to confirm what Mitchell et. al. (2012) recognizes as pervasive whiteness in service-learning pedagogy and practice. Mitchell discusses the discomfort and inadequacy many educators experience when facilitating discussions about race and inequity, and astutely observes that, while student preparation often focuses on those "crossing a border" during community-engaged work, many students are actually "returning home." The authors fall short in designing experiences for students who may engage with community work from vastly different perspectives. For instance, the exercises on

assumptions and biases would resonate quite differently with students from priority neighborhoods yet readers are not offered adequate support to manage this in their classrooms. As mentioned earlier, the authors recognize the need for more inclusive student preparation strategies. The authors acknowledge this limitation in their work, admitting they do not provide experiences for these diverse student groups. Instead, they direct readers to seek resources elsewhere, highlighting a rather frustrating gap in their otherwise comprehensive approach.

A comprehensive resource would, ideally, include tools and strategies to support all students, addressing the unique challenges and opportunities each faces in their CE. This would have made the book more aligned with the critical CE focus. The authors miss the opportunity to address the burden placed on students of color in our classrooms and meet their educational needs, making the guide incomplete.

Conclusion

I greatly appreciate the book’s focus on critical community-engaged learning. Attention is paid to adequately preparing students to interrogate root causes of societal problems by gaining a deeper understanding of the community context. I support the advocacy for change to create a more equitable society rather than sending students to communities as volunteers who only provide temporary relief from problems that we, as a society, agree to live with. It is worth mentioning that in the current political climate when diversity, equity and inclusion programs are being dismantled, advocating for critical race theory and a redistribution of resources could be risky in some places.

Overall, the authors make a compelling argument for social change at a fraught time in our nation’s history. It is a valuable contribution to the literature with limitations that must be overcome.

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