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The Carnegie Elective Classifications: A Methodological Guide for Community Engagement Research

Andrew Pearl

Kansas State University, Manhattan, USA

Cammie Jones-Friedrichs

University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, USA

Elaine Ward

Merrimack College, North Andover, USA

Henry R. Cunningham

University of Louisville, Louisville, USA

Jennifer M. Azordegan

Australian Catholic University, Brisbane, Australia

Tabatha Cruz

University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, USA

Felicia Deas

Spelman College, Atlanta, USA

Emily Locke

University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, USA

Tania D. Mitchell

University of Maryland, College Park, USA

Tanvi V. Padalkar

University of Alabama at Birmingham, Birmingham, USA

Diana Quito

Rollins College, Winter Park, USA

Carol Cutler White

Mississippi State University, Starkville, USA

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and Carol Cutler White

Abstract

This article provides a methodological overview of research using the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement dataset. Established in 2006 to recognize institutionalized campus–community partnerships, 368 institutions currently hold the classification. In 2023, the Carnegie Elective Classifications Research Lab (CECRL) was formed as an international collaboration with eight co-labs, structuring data use, expanding access, and fostering a networked community of research practice. In this article, we describe the dataset, showcase current CECRL research trajectories, and discuss emerging and future research possibilities. This article offers scholars a road map for leveraging the Carnegie Elective Classifications data to advance understanding and evidence-based strategies for community engagement in higher education.

Keywords: *community engagement, Carnegie Foundation, Elective Classifications, methods*

Clasificaciones electivas de Carnegie: Una guía metodológica para la investigación sobre participación comunitaria

Andrew Pearl, Cammie Jones-Friedrichs,
Elaine Ward, Henry R. Cunningham,
Jennifer M. Azordegan, Tabatha Cruz,
Felicia Deas, Emily Locke, Tania D.
Mitchell, Tanvi V. Padalkar, Diana Quito y
Carol Cutler White

Resumen

Este artículo ofrece una visión metodológica general de la investigación que utiliza los datos de la Clasificación de Electivas Carnegie para la Participación Comunitaria. Establecido en 2006 para reconocer las colaboraciones institucionalizadas entre universidades y la comunidad, 368 instituciones cuentan actualmente con esta clasificación. En 2023, se formó el Laboratorio de Investigación de Clasificaciones Electivas Carnegie (CECRL) por sus siglas en inglés, una colaboración internacional con ocho laboratorios, que estructura el uso de los datos, amplía el acceso y fomenta una comunidad interconectada de prácticas de investigación. En este artículo, describimos los datos, presentamos las trayectorias de investigación actuales del CECRL y analizamos las posibilidades futuras y emergentes de investigación. Este artículo ofrece a los investigadores una hoja de ruta para usar los datos de las Electivas Carnegie y avanzar en la comprensión y uso de estrategias basadas en la evidencia de la participación comunitaria en la educación superior.

Palabras clave: *Clasificaciones Electivas, Fundación Carnegie métodos, Participación comunitaria*

*Editors' Note: Translation provided by **Karla Díaz Freire**
Directora Instituto de Aprendizaje y Servicio (IAS)
Dragon Outreach Center
Universidad San Francisco de Quito
Ecuador*

The Carnegie Elective Classifications: A Methodological Guide for Community Engagement Research

First awarded in 2006, the Carnegie Foundation’s Elective Classification for Community Engagement¹ (the CE Classification) recognizes colleges and universities that demonstrate a deep, institution-wide commitment to reciprocal, mutually beneficial community–campus partnerships that are built on the exchange of knowledge and resources to “enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching, and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good” (American Council on Education, n.d.-c). As of the 2024 application cycle, 368 institutions actively held the CE Classification, which is now hosted by the American Council on Education (ACE). In this article, we introduce readers to the Carnegie Elective Classifications Research Lab (CECRL), which was established to instigate intentional analysis of data from the Elective Classifications. Our goal is to provide a macro-level overview of the data available, as well as microlevel descriptions of specific, ongoing research initiatives currently underway by members of the CECRL.

Origins of the CE Classification

The CE Classification itself is grounded in many of the theoretical foundations that guide the community engagement field. For example, the framework was intended to honor achievements and respect multiple approaches to community engagement through a reflective self-assessment process (Driscoll, 2008) that emphasizes processes and purposes consistent with the principles of democratic civic engagement (Saltmarsh et al., 2009). Furthermore, the development of the framework was informed by existing documentation frameworks and a pilot cohort of institutions, suggestive of a participatory approach.

The “founders” are the individuals who were involved in conceptualizing, designing, and developing the CE Classification. Many of the founders served on the National Advisory Committee (NAC) for the CE Classification—the advisory body that supports the work of the CE Classification and review of campus applications. In 2023, a number of founders retired from the NAC, which, along with the approaching 20th anniversary of the CE Classification, catalyzed an intentional effort to document the experiences and work of the founders (Morales et al., 2025). An oral history study was designed so that the work of the founders could be captured in their own voice through video recordings that can be archived, preserved, and accessed by future researchers (Ward & Coello, 2023). ACE funded the research and provided media and communications support for the professional recording of the conversations with the founders. During one of the founders’ interviews, Tom Ehrlich indicated “one of the dreams that never really came about was to have a research arm in Carnegie that focuses on what difference are we making in the world.” His reflection served as a catalyst for the development of a research arm to elevate the research using the CE Classification data. Prior to this, researchers could request access to the application data, but there was no coordination of that research. For example, when the New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE) was the administrative host for the CE Classification, data were prepared and shared with researchers who requested access. In 2019, Brown University’s Swearer Center (the administrative host of the CE Classification from 2012 to 2020) developed an open-access policy for the full classification dataset (American Council on Education, n.d.-a). This was carried on when the institutional host was Albion College (2020–2022). When ACE became the administrative host for the Elective Classifications, a more focused effort was made to expand the research possibilities of the data. The data from the applications offer a rich source of information for research on community engagement in higher education, including institutional demographics, details about community engagement activities, and self-reported outcomes. Researchers can use these data to explore various aspects of community engagement, such as the types of

¹ Throughout this article, references to the Elective Classification for Community Engagement primarily refer to the U.S.-based Classifications. However, we also want to acknowledge and affirm the importance of the global presence of the CE Classification.

partnerships institutions are forming, the resources they are dedicating to these efforts, and the impact of these partnerships on both the institution and the community.

The CECRL was established in 2023 to coordinate and support strategic research to advance knowledge and understanding of the public purposes of higher education, increase the visibility and the number of researchers accessing the Elective Classifications data, facilitate a community of practice for networked knowledge connections between researchers in the field and around the world, and advance research capacity and field building through the creation of multigenerational research teams that mentor and train the next generation of researchers. ACE provided seed funding for the development of the CECRL, which included eight research co-labs, one in Australia and the remainder in the United States. Elaine Ward, professor at Merrimack College, designed and coordinated the CECRL and provided support to the co-labs. Each co-lab had a coordinating researcher and an identified area of research focus, and all but one co-lab had a team of student or early-career professional researchers. Four of the coordinating researchers were faculty members, and four were practitioner-scholars. In the second year of the lab, one of the practitioner-scholars was hired into a tenure-track faculty position. Table 1 provides an overview of the focus areas for each of the eight co-labs.

Table 1

Carnegie Elective Classifications Research Co-Labs

| Co-lab host institution | Focus area(s) | Methodologies |
|-----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| Spelman College | Community engagement at historically Black colleges and universities | Qualitative document analysis |
| Merrimack College (PEARL ² Co-Lab) | Founding of the Elective Classification for Community Engagement; institutional leadership for community engagement; coordination of CECRL | Oral history, interviews, qualitative document analysis |
| Kansas State University (CHEER ³ Co-Lab) | Institutionalization of community engagement | Latent class analysis, qualitative content analysis |
| University of Maryland | Community engagement and diversity, equity, and inclusion | Critical discourse analysis |
| Rice University | Leadership for Public Purpose Classification | Descriptive document analysis |
| Mississippi State University | Community engagement in community colleges | Qualitative thematic analysis |
| Australian Catholic University | Australian Elective Classification for Community Engagement | Case study |
| University of Colorado, Boulder | Leadership for Public Purpose Classification | Descriptive document analysis |

Note. CECRL = Carnegie Elective Classifications Research Lab

The increased research activity through the CECRL led to two additional affiliated research groups (not directly seed funded by ACE): one focused on graduate student preparation in community engagement and the other on promotion and tenure. The strong partnership with the International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE) helped connect graduate student researchers with the research co-labs and the practitioner-scholar community, as well as the future development of research special interest groups (SIGs) to sustain the research and build researcher capacity (E. Ward, personal communication, April 30, 2025). To date, more than 30 researchers from 12 campuses have collaborated through the CECRL, growing from two conference presentations in 2023 to 16 in 2024.

² Publicly Engaged Action and Research Lab

³ Community-Higher Education Engagement Research

In 2016, the Elective Community Engagement Classification was piloted internationally first in Ireland and later in Canada and Australia. In 2023, the first cycle of the CE Classification application was formally launched in Australia. In 2025, the CE Classification will be launched in Canada. An additional Elective Classification, Leadership for Public Purpose (LPP), was established in 2024 (American Council on Education, n.d.-b). This Elective Classification acknowledges institutions that demonstrate a clear dedication to societal improvement and the advancement of dignity and general welfare for all members of society. The 2027 cycle for the LPP classification is currently accepting applications. The co-lab work investigating the impact of the LPP classification is asking questions related to the conceptual frameworks of leadership that are present in applications, the supporting infrastructures, approaches to assessment, and related cocurricular opportunities and activities (Ward et al., 2025).

The newest addition to the Elective Classifications is the Sustainability classification, currently in its pilot phase (American Council on Education, n.d.-d). This classification aims to recognize and celebrate higher education institutions that have successfully integrated sustainability and climate action into their core academic missions, embedding these crucial elements into their teaching, research, and operations. While the LPP and Sustainability classifications are relatively new compared to the CE Classification, the potential for combining datasets across these classifications is significant and growing. This data synthesis offers invaluable opportunities to gain deeper insights into the diverse strategies that colleges and universities employ to advance the public purposes of higher education. Furthermore, it allows for a comprehensive understanding of how institutions are integrating social responsibility, civic engagement, and environmental sustainability into their overall mission and strategic planning.

By examining these classifications together, researchers and policymakers can identify trends, best practices, and innovative approaches that can inform and inspire other institutions to strengthen their commitment to public purpose and societal impact. Additionally, this data synthesis can facilitate collaboration and knowledge sharing among institutions, fostering a collective effort to address pressing social and environmental challenges through higher education. The CECRL helps achieve not only the founders' dream of an Elective Classification "research arm" but also the partnership goals of both the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and ACE to "mine and share effective practices; catalyze networks of institutions [and researchers] that learn and improve together; and identify and amplify the work of postsecondary education institutions that effectively serve Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and first-generation students" (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, n.d., para. 5).

The establishment of the CECRL and its affiliated co-labs has definitely spurred a wave of new research on community engagement, and with the continued growth of the CECRL and associated efforts to increase access to the available Elective Classification data, researchers will have even more opportunities to explore the complex dynamics of community-campus partnerships and to develop evidence-based strategies for enhancing the impact of these partnerships and the "difference we are making in the world" (Ward & Coello, 2023). This research has the potential to inform policy and practice at both the institutional and national levels, ultimately leading to a more engaged and equitable higher education sector. The purpose of this article is to provide a methodological overview of the data, introduce some of the current research, and reflectively imagine future research possibilities in the data.

Overview of the CE Classification Framework

The CE Classification application is an institutional self-reporting assessment tool that "gathers data specifically provided by the campus and unavailable through other means and is intended to assist in a process of institutional change through self-assessment and national review to improve the educational effectiveness of the campus" (Saltmarsh & Johnson, 2018, p. 2). The application framework has been revised throughout the years in response to our developing understanding of community engagement in higher education. The 2026 application framework asks institutions to respond to questions in the following sections:

- Campus, Community, and Community Engagement Context
- Institutional Identity and Culture

- Quality of Community Engagement Relationships and Academic Partnerships
- Faculty and Staff
- Curricular Engagement
- Co-Curricular Engagement
- Civic Learning and Life
- Community Engagement and Other Institutional Initiatives
- Reflection and Additional Information

The data gathered through institutional responses in each area demonstrate the richness in the resulting dataset. Responding to questions in each area, institutions demonstrate the depth and breadth of their commitment to community engagement with detailed information on various aspects of their infrastructure, culture, and engagement practices and policies, including the institution's relationship with its surrounding community, the institution's physical presence, its interactions with local stakeholders, and the ways it actively contributes to the community's well-being. At the time of this writing, the institutional applications for the 2026 cycle are under review.

The framework allows institutions to emphasize their unique identity and culture, including their mission, values, and traditions. It also examines the role of executive leadership and the effectiveness of governance structures in supporting the institution's goals and priorities. The quality of relationships and academic partnerships is another critical component, highlighting the importance of collaboration and knowledge exchange within and outside the institution. Furthermore, the framework assesses the level of support provided to faculty and staff, recognizing their crucial role in achieving institutional objectives. Curricular and cocurricular engagement are also evaluated, focusing on the extent to which students are actively involved in learning experiences both inside and outside the classroom. The framework emphasizes the importance of civic learning and life, encouraging institutions to foster a sense of responsibility and active citizenship among their students. Finally, the framework examines community engagement and other institutional initiatives that promote social responsibility, ethical leadership, and sustainable practices. Overall, the current version of the framework provides a comprehensive road map for institutions seeking to demonstrate their commitment to excellence, innovation, and community impact.

The Process of Keeping the Application Framework Current

As the overall field of community engagement has continued to develop, so too has the framework for the Elective Classification. Each subsequent iteration of the CE Classification is more specific in the information being requested and provides more detailed guidance to applicants, including the purpose of questions and the type of information expected in responses. These revisions offer both opportunities and challenges for researchers. For example, the language used to describe institutionalization has become more precise, there is an increased focus on systematic campus-wide evaluation and assessment mechanisms, student and faculty involvement in community engagement is further developed, the framework more explicitly connects community engagement to other key institutional initiatives, and the quality of community engagement partnerships is more prominent. The Reflection and Additional Information section has shifted toward a more self-reflective and improvement-oriented approach, which informs how the framework is edited between cycles to better reflect the field, indicating a deepening understanding of what constitutes meaningful and impactful community engagement in higher education.

The changes to the framework and evolutionary process have been reflective of the principles that guide many practitioners and scholars in the field, including full participation (Sturm et al., 2011) and democratic engagement (Saltmarsh et al., 2009). To illustrate this point, a new director was named for the CE Classification in June 2023. Part of their initial charge was, among other things, to review and revise the current application framework to address two questions. First, why are there relatively few Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs), and two-year institutions applying for and receiving classification, given their historic and ongoing commitments to their communities? Second, how can the application be streamlined to increase feasibility and efficiency for all applicants, given ongoing concerns from past, current, and potential applicants about the amount of effort

and resources required for completion? The charge was to collect feedback from the field and make initial changes to the 2026 application, which was scheduled for release in January 2024.

The 2026 framework features a more streamlined and accessible application process, with an emphasis on how campuses across sectors—in particular, HBCUs, MSIs, and community colleges—demonstrate their commitments to reciprocal and mutually beneficial partnerships with communities. The 2026 framework enables institutions to articulate the nuances of their work and their connections with their communities more effectively. A revision was particularly important, given the diverse range of stakeholders in the Community Engagement Elective Classification, including executive leadership in institutions of higher education, associations, funders, applicants, and scholars, among others.

The revision process was co-led by a representative from an MSI and guided by a revision committee composed of representatives from HBCUs, a Hispanic-Serving Institution, and two-year institutions. Members were selected for their previous engagement in their campus's 2024 application process and their willingness to increase access for other underrepresented institutions. Using an asset-based approach, the application revision process enabled a collective action vision, creating pathways for various perspectives from engaged campuses to be represented, validated, and legitimized, ultimately amplifying a diverse scope of community engagement models at the national level.

The comprehensive feedback provided iteratively informed the revision process. The 2026 framework addresses the following themes that will impact future frameworks: (1) how to ensure that questions are appropriate and inclusive for different types of institutions; (2) how to structure the questions and formatting so that campuses can effectively and efficiently tell their engagement stories; and (3) how best to frame questions related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in community engagement, given diverse and diverging political climates across the United States. The nature of the revision of themes is ever-evolving, thus the necessity for the application to be both stable and innovative, striking a fine balance between meeting institutions where they are and upholding a rigorous process.

While the changes are important to the growth of the field and the ability of institutions to tell a complete story about their community engagement work, the changes do present some challenges in clearly connecting data between cycles. Additionally, the changes in administrative hosts and platforms for classification have led to inconsistencies. There are ongoing efforts to develop a comprehensive guide codebook for the complete dataset.

Practice-Oriented Uses for the Dataset

An in-depth examination and exploration of the CE Classification dataset provide opportunities for scholars, practitioners, and those who find themselves “betwixt and between” (Green, 2023, p. 91) multiple professional identities in the community engagement space (e.g., community engagement professionals [CEPs], practitioner-scholars, scholar-administrators, and boundary spanners). For example, CEPs play multiple essential roles on their campuses (Dostilio, 2017). They have the ability to affect institutional practices by developing and implementing policies that impact the direction and nature of community engagement on their campuses. CEPs are often involved in all aspects of community engagement, including leading and supporting community engagement programs, and providing professional development for faculty and community partners. In essence, they are involved in all aspects of community engagement on their campuses (Janke, 2019). Because of the critical role CEPs play, it is essential that they keep abreast of a rapidly evolving field, including innovative programs, practices, and processes occurring at other institutions (Cunningham, 2024). Data from the applications for the CE Classification contain a wide range of strategies and approaches that institutions take to enact their engagement priorities. These data can provide valuable examples for CEPs who are interested in learning about how other institutions are engaging with their communities, offering opportunities to potentially explore how those models could be adapted or replicated to fit different institutional contexts.

A significant amount of the utility of the dataset comes from its diversity. There are myriad approaches for community engagement across various institutional types—public, private, research, liberal arts colleges, rural, urban, HBCUs, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, community colleges, land- and sea-grant, and

others. Of course, there are possibilities for CEPs to glean lessons learned and best practices from other institutions that are similar to their own, but it is equally beneficial to learn about and critically reflect on what is happening across the broad spectrum of community engagement in higher education.

The data from the applications serve as a source for conducting empirical research by providing a window into knowing what is happening at other institutions in community engagement. Because of the comprehensive nature of the community engagement application framework, critical areas such as infrastructure development, data collection and impact assessment, faculty professional development, curricular and cocurricular engagement, partnership development, and others are addressed. This provides a significant amount of information to better understand the field and the varied ways in which colleges and universities are approaching community engagement. For instance, the framework provides a space for institutions to include their campus-wide definition of community engagement. These definitions explain why community engagement is central to each institution and the historical or visionary contexts that influence each definition. The findings from research of the self-studies can inform how college and university leaders and CEPs leverage their institutional definitions to more effectively prioritize and institutionalize critical approaches to community engagement. Analyzing this vast amount of data can enable CEPs to have a deep understanding of community engagement on other campuses. The data can lead to expanded knowledge and a better understanding of fundamental principles of community engagement. This can lead to theoretical frameworks that explain the development and advancement of community engagement across institutions.

Current Research Directions

Over the past 20 years, the landscape and proliferation of research and scholarship focused on community engagement in higher education have been rapid. Within the field, there are numerous professional organizations and associated conferences (e.g., IARSLCE, Engagement Scholarship Consortium, Campus Compact) that advance and advocate for the practice of and research on community engagement. In addition, several international, peer-reviewed academic journals are options for the dissemination of engaged scholarship (Doberneck, 2021). The data from the applications to the CE Classification can continue to grow our understanding and practice in the field. In the following sections, we will provide brief overviews of current research being conducted by the CECRL. In each example, we will focus primarily on the questions being examined, innovative uses of the data, and analytical approaches. Each of the studies described next has been presented at research conferences and is currently being developed toward manuscript preparation and publication.

International Perspective of Community Engagement

While the CE Classification has been a fixture for self-examination and improvement of community engagement in the U.S. higher education institutions for nearly 20 years, its first successful implementation internationally was in Australia in 2023. As such, it was important for a CECRL co-lab to be focused on this new international expansion of the CE Classification and include an intentional focus on research from the beginning.

The early focus of the Australian co-lab has been to explore the degree to which the CE Classification framework can be adapted to other national contexts, while maintaining its core values and definition. It also examines the CE Classification's potential impact on Australia's university–community engagement field in which the concept of institutionalized and embedded community engagement is still emerging. To this point, the research has used a case study approach to analyze Australian universities' pilot and inaugural first-cycle Carnegie applications and higher education policy documents, providing an overview of community–university engagement in Australia, outlining the adoption of the Carnegie approach, and sharing findings on how Australian universities promote and support community engagement. Guided in part by analyses of the first cycle of the CE Classification in the United States (Driscoll, 2014; Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013), the initial analysis of the applications is specifically focusing on coordinating infrastructures for community engagement, faculty development, and curricular-embedded community

engagement. The introduction of the CE Classification in the United States significantly impacted community engagement practices, providing legitimacy and standards to the field (Saltmarsh & Johnson, 2020). While it is too early to predict a similar effect in Australia, the establishment of the CE Classification is a milestone. With the imminent launch of the CE Classification in Canada and growing interest from other regions, the Australian co-lab research aims to further understand how it can be adapted to promote and advance reciprocal and sustainable community-engaged university practices.

This early research involving the CE Classification in Australia will be instructive for future international growth and open the door for comparative studies that provide insight into the adaptive approaches taken in different countries and regions. These studies might focus on the state of community engagement in higher education broadly, as well as specific elements of the framework. There will also be opportunities to incorporate epistemic and ontologic approaches from different countries into future research initiatives.

Defining Community Engagement

The Community-Higher Education Engagement Research (CHEER) Co-Lab is primarily focused on learning about the multifaceted ways in which colleges and universities approach community engagement. This encompasses not only how these institutions define community engagement within their contexts but also how they embed this commitment into their organizational structures and translate it into tangible action. Building from the Carnegie Foundation's official definition, the CHEER Co-Lab explores the diverse definitions of community engagement that exist across higher education institutions, recognizing that these definitions can and should be interpreted and enacted in various ways. Having a campus-wide definition of community engagement can serve as an important indicator of what an institution values.

To begin understanding the different institutional approaches to defining community engagement in the 2015, 2020, and 2024 cycles, the CHEER Co-Lab employed a multimethod approach to examine the responses to the question about sanctioned, campus-wide definitions of community engagement. In one of the studies, the responses in the framework were used to create a typology of six classes of institutional definitions of community engagement (Quito et al., 2024). The CHEER Co-Lab began by creating a data collection instrument based on the Carnegie definition of community engagement that included the following components: identifying and defining community, connections to scholarship, collaborative processes, mutually beneficial outcomes, and critical approaches. A latent class analysis (Collins & Lanza, 2010) was then conducted using the responses recorded in the data collection instrument.

Concurrently, the CHEER Co-Lab employed both deductive and inductive qualitative approaches to answer the research question: How do institutions incorporate a critical lens to their institutional definitions of community engagement? Initial coding was used to collaboratively sort and align the institutional applications with the study's purpose and the research question (Saldaña, 2013). Following this, the researchers engaged in consensus coding (Richards & Hemphill, 2018) to descriptively code and categorize how institutional definitions of community engagement addressed structural and systemic inequities and power dynamics that exist between higher education institutions and their communities. The individual codes were collaboratively refined and developed into a codebook using pattern coding (Miles et al., 2020). Each researcher then individually deductively coded the data for quality assurance and to finalize the codebook, which was used to identify salient examples that represented the scope of the critical lens in community engagement. These examples were shared during a group meeting, in which the research team engaged in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) and identified the following themes: balancing institutional and community-based priorities; institutional commitment to preparing students for lifelong learning, social justice, and activism; and targeted approaches and philosophies for improving the well-being of local communities.

The CHEER Co-Lab's initial findings suggest that institutions may be formally defining community engagement to signal their related values to different audiences (Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Spence, 1973). Some next steps for this line of inquiry are exploring the alignment between the values expressed and

institutional definitions, and the evidence of institutional practice that is demonstrated through other questions in the CE Classification framework.

Connecting Community Engagement and DEI

Community engagement and efforts related to DEI in higher education are inextricably linked (Sweet, 2023), and questions that recognize this connection have been increasingly emphasized in the CE Classification framework. For example, the 2024 cycle of the Elective Classification for Community Engagement included a new question that asked respondents to “Describe how community engagement efforts since your last classification have been impacted by recent national and global events, including the COVID-19 pandemic; greater attention to racial justice; the crisis of decreasing trust in American democracy and institutions; and natural disasters.”

Because of this growing understanding and acknowledgment, when the CECRL was formed, one of the co-labs was focused specifically on these connections. This co-lab used the new question from the framework to look into how institutions articulate connections between their DEI objectives and their community-engaged work (Mitchell & Cruz, 2024).

This research examined data from both first-time and reclassification applicants from the 2024 cycle. Responses were reviewed by question—11 questions for first-time applicants and 8 questions for the reclassification applicants. These questions were selected out of the application as they specifically ask for content in relation to DEI themes in community engagement work. In this study, critical discourse analysis was used to analyze the data. In particular, the analyses relied on interest convergence, a tenet of critical race theory, and utilized “an expanded notion of criticality, one that includes attention to learning, agency, hope, liberation, solidarity, and justice” (Rogers, 2018, p. 8).

The analysis revealed a spectrum of intentional and evasive responses regarding connections between DEI and community engagement activities. This spectrum includes the following:

- avoidance: does not mention DEI, racial injustice, or marginalized groups in their community engagement work
- broadening the scope: mentions other marginalized identities beyond race, in an effort to make DEI more acceptable
- performative: responses that demonstrated superficial and empty understandings of DEI without any meaningful action
- intentional: responses that centered the community and their needs across an extended period

These findings have led to additional analyses including considerations of how institutions from states that have passed anti-DEI legislation are responding in the application and how those institutions now position community engagement. For example, are there mentions of work related to DEI? Are the institutions no longer collecting specific types of data regarding community engagement initiatives? Are they prohibited from using certain terminology, and how does that impact how community engagement is presented (e.g., through websites) and enacted (e.g., program descriptions, mission/vision/values statements)?

In a moment where DEI is being “dismantled” in higher education (Gretzinger et al., 2025), exploring the language informing institutional rhetoric in the connections between DEI and community engagement is an important and strategic opportunity to understand how community engagement is either vulnerable to political attacks or can be leveraged to continue advances toward equity.

Community Engagement in Underrepresented Institutional Types

As discussed earlier, the Elective Classification for Community Engagement is held by 368 institutions at the time of this writing, but there are certain institutional types that have been dramatically underrepresented. When the CECRL was established, there was an intentional decision to include a focus on two institutional types: HBCUs and community colleges. The following sections provide an overview of the research being conducted in those areas.

Community Engagement in HBCUs

HBCUs were founded with a commitment to educating students of color, at a time when they were excluded from other institutions of higher learning. These institutions were and continue to be a response to the specificity of the context of being people of color in America. However, they are often viewed as “other” by the majority culture, and have historically been overlooked in the culture of higher education, with very limited R-1 institutional representation (Weissman, 2024). The CE Classification, while not intended as a ranking, has become the standard for recognizing community-engaged campuses. In the lifetime of the CE Classification, only eight HBCUs have received the first-time classification and of those eight, only three campuses have been reclassified. This suggests that the language, metrics, and tools that have been created as the standard for community engagement have been crafted with a different context in mind. The CE Classification was initially created with a specific standard of practice for higher education and did not consider that HBCUs embody community engagement practices within their mission, values, and institutional priorities. Recent revisions have acknowledged the disconnection within past frameworks, creating inclusive pathways within the application for HBCUs’ stories to be amplified, heard, and accepted, rather than asking HBCUs to adapt their programs to fit these original standards.

This research examines the ways in which classified HBCU campuses speak about their community engagement context and institutional identity and culture, with the goal of adding to the limited knowledge of community engagement at HBCUs. It also seeks to identify what is missing and what is not captured by current models, with the hope that community engagement practitioners operating in this context will add their voices, stories, and contexts to create a more complete and inclusive picture of community engagement. The overarching goal is to move away from exclusivity to honoring the full participation of practitioners, partners, and programs in community engagement, while also recognizing and honoring the unique context and contributions of HBCUs.

The co-lab reviewed existing literature on community engagement at HBCUs. Based on this review, the team identified key factors and chose to focus on the historical mission and vision of these institutions. Researchers then analyzed first-time classification data from six HBCU campuses during the 2010 and 2015 cycles, with particular attention to how community engagement was reflected in mission statements, marketing materials, and strategic plans. The lab also considered optional materials submitted by institutions that highlighted their engagement efforts, aiming to understand how each campus framed its community engagement narrative within its unique context.

Community Engagement in Community Colleges

Like HBCUs, community colleges are also underrepresented among the institutions that have earned the CE Classification. Also, like HBCUs, community colleges have fundamental ties to their communities, which raises questions about why these institutions, many of which are deeply engaged with their communities, are underrepresented in the community engagement classification. To explore these questions, a co-lab focused on community colleges was included when the CECRL was founded.

Using a qualitative thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022), this co-lab analyzed materials submitted by the 26 community college applications that had earned the CE Classification. The inquiry, grounded in the theory of institutional logics (Friedland & Alford, 1991), distilled themes across the colleges from within the Foundational Indicators and Categories of Community Engagement Application sections and yielded four themes defining internal community engagement approaches at community colleges: Collaboration and Reciprocity, Student Learning and Development, Civic Responsibility, and Addressing Community Needs.

These findings help to explain why only a small percentage of community colleges have achieved this classification by highlighting the various internal and external forces influencing their decision-making processes. The institutions that currently hold the CE Classification represent a small minority of the nearly 1000 public community colleges. Expanded research is needed to determine how and why community colleges remain underrepresented in the Elective Classification. The work of this co-lab has established an important foundation for a continued research agenda on service-learning and community engagement

within the two-year college sector, addressing prerequisites for institutionalization and obstacles to implementation.

Our Origin Stories and Our Collective Research Futures—The Publicly Engaged Action and Research Lab

When the CECRL was established, the vision included an intentional focus on growing the field through mentorship of graduate students and other emerging scholars. Seven of the eight co-labs include students (undergraduate and graduate), recent graduates, and practitioner-scholar coresearchers. The diversity of perspective strengthens our collective work and provides emerging researchers leadership and learning opportunities as they explore new methodological approaches and epistemic perspectives. The Publicly Engaged Action and Research Lab (PEARL) is an example of putting the principles of field building into practice. PEARL has an intentional focus on supporting and developing the capacity of recent graduate students and emerging professionals of color through research on service-learning and community engagement. PEARL researchers designed the oral history project discussed earlier that archives the perspectives of the founders of the CE Classification and have active studies on the institutional assessment of community engagement, community engagement at Catholic colleges, and institutional leadership for community engagement. PEARL researchers collaborate across multiple co-labs and affiliated research teams to help strengthen knowledge sharing across the co-labs and Elective Classifications. This collaborative networked approach has led to the formation of a community of research practice exploring graduate student preparation in community engagement. This group includes current graduate students, practitioners, and faculty scholars from across the country. The team has conducted research on existing training and mentoring programs, documenting opportunities for graduate students through IARSLCE’s Graduate Student Network, Campus Compact, the CE Classification application review process, and faculty-led publicly engaged research labs. The research is leading toward a deeper understanding of program impact, training, and mentoring on the development of the next generation of publicly engaged field leaders. The group proposed becoming one of the new IARSLCE SIGs, with intention to develop an infrastructure model to sustain research teams into the future. As we continue to develop our research networks and more purposefully connect internationally through research associations like IARSLCE, we begin to realize the dream the founders of the CE Classification had about having a network of researchers empirically examining the impact we, as community-engaged scholars, have in the world.

Future Research Opportunities

The availability of extensive and intricate datasets, such as those derived from the Carnegie Elective Classifications, facilitates the adoption of advanced quantitative and qualitative methodologies, as discussed in the previous examples. Dahan (2024) has highlighted the scarcity of community engagement studies utilizing causal inference designs, such as propensity score matching or difference-in-difference analyses. This scarcity is partly attributed to the requirement for substantial sample sizes in these techniques. Although a significant portion of the primary data within the Carnegie Elective Classifications dataset is qualitative, the CHEER Co-Lab example illustrates a methodology for quantifying qualitative data to enable diverse analytical approaches.

This “quantification” of qualitative data opens up new avenues for research and analysis. By transforming qualitative data into numerical values or categories, researchers can apply statistical techniques that were previously limited to quantitative data. This allows for different types of analytic methods that can complement deep and rich qualitative approaches. For instance, in the context of promotion and tenure policies, quantifying qualitative data could help identify patterns and trends that would not be visible through qualitative analysis alone. This study also demonstrates how much data are available, even when examining a single question across all classified institutions over time, providing a research team with data for numerous levels of analysis. As another illustration, the CHEER and PEARL co-labs are collaborating with affiliated researchers to examine the types of promotion and tenure policies found in successful applications and employed artificial intelligence tools to manage the data (Pearl et al.,

forthcoming). Furthermore, the use of advanced methodologies, such as causal inference designs, can provide more robust evidence for policy and practice. By controlling for confounding factors and isolating the causal effect of specific interventions, these designs can help identify effective strategies for improving community engagement, the complex factors that contribute to successful community engagement and academic careers, and evidence-based policies and practices to support these outcomes. However, it is important to be mindful of the limitations of different methodologies and the importance of using appropriate techniques for the specific research question and context.

The sheer amount of data available, which will continue to grow as new application cycles are completed, also holds the possibility of data scraping techniques (Bradley & James, 2019). For example, researchers can explore the frequency of particular terms and phrases in applications and track how those frequencies have changed from cycle to cycle. Furthermore, research studies that initially utilize the Elective Classifications data can create a springboard for additional data collection. For example, a potential avenue for collaboration with ACE could involve the development of anonymized or confidential surveys designed for distribution to specific campuses. These surveys could delve into the perspectives of campus administrators and faculty on how external pressures, such as shifts in public policies and funding priorities, or fluctuations in economic conditions, have impacted their capacity to effectively fulfill their institutional missions related to community engagement.

Additionally, longitudinal studies that track changes in institutional classifications over time could shed light on the dynamic nature of engagement within higher education. Such research could identify trends, reveal patterns of institutional adaptation, and highlight the influence of external factors on the trajectory of engagement efforts. This information could be valuable for policymakers, institutional leaders, and researchers, as it would provide a deeper understanding of the complexities and challenges inherent in fostering meaningful and sustainable community engagement in higher education.

There are also numerous higher education datasets that could be connected for data sharing, most obviously, the connections between the Carnegie Elective Classifications and the universal classifications. The data from the universal classifications have been used to categorize institutions that hold the CE Classification, but a more intentional integration between the datasets for research benefits would benefit the field. The Cooperative Institutional Research Program and Higher Education Research Institute include comprehensive, longitudinal data on students, faculty, and higher education institutions. Indiana University's Center for Postsecondary Research manages several surveys, including the National Survey of Student Engagement, Faculty Survey of Student Engagement, and Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement, and there are opportunities to connect these surveys to Carnegie reports related to curricular and cocurricular engagement sections.

Finally, numerous community-focused sources of data would be beneficial to examine in relation to the data from the CE Classification. For example, the U.S. Census and the American Community Survey, both administered through the U.S. Census Bureau, provide valuable contextual community-level information that might inform the landscape for partnerships in a particular geographic area relevant to different higher education institutions. Data related to local primary and secondary schools, as well as nonprofit organizations, would provide further insight into the ways that colleges and universities might partner with their communities.

As the field considers avenues for future research, it is worth mentioning that the data available are not without their limitations. All of the data collected through the CE Classification process are self-reported and intended to put the institution in the best possible position to earn the CE Classification. Therefore, while there is a thorough and comprehensive peer review process for submitted applications, it may be possible that the information included in the application is not fully reflective of the degree to which community engagement practices are deep and pervasive at the classified institutions.

Conclusion

In this article, we have provided a methodological overview of the Carnegie Elective Classifications data, with a particular focus on the CE Classification, highlighting its evolution, current framework, and research

possibilities. The CE Classification's journey, marked by iterative changes and an increased emphasis on assessment, equity, and diverse institutional participation, reflects the dynamic nature of community engagement in higher education. The establishment of the CECRL has further catalyzed research efforts, exploring various facets of public purpose and community engagement, from institutional definitions to its intersection with DEI. It is our hope that this article inspires continued inquiry utilizing the Carnegie Elective Classifications data. All of the instructions and information necessary to submit a data request can be found on the website for the Elective Classification for Community Engagement (American Council on Education, n.d.-a).

The rich datasets generated by the CE Classification applications serve as invaluable resources for CEPs, scholars, and policymakers. They offer insights into best practices, institutional strategies, and the impact of community engagement on students, faculty and staff, and communities. Moreover, the data facilitate the development of theoretical frameworks and evidence-based strategies to enhance the effectiveness of community-campus partnerships. As the CECRL continues to engage in collaborative research, including international perspectives and connections with other Elective Classifications, the potential for advancing the field of community engagement is significant.

Future research directions, including the use of advanced methodologies, data scraping techniques, and longitudinal studies, promise to deepen our understanding of community engagement dynamics. By connecting these datasets with other higher education data sources, we can gain a more comprehensive view of institutional missions and the impact of external pressures on engagement efforts. Finally, the focus on mentoring graduate students (including through theses and dissertations) and newer publicly engaged scholars ensures the growth and sustainability of the field. The Carnegie Elective Classifications serve as a vital tool for recognizing, studying, and enhancing the public purpose of higher education.

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About the Authors

Jennifer M. Azordegan is a manager of community-engaged learning with ACU Engagement at Australian Catholic University.

Tabatha Cruz is a doctoral student in higher education at the University of Minnesota.

Henry R. Cunningham is the director of community engagement at the University of Louisville.

Felicia Deas is the associate director of the Bonner Office of Civic Engagement at Spelman College.

Cammie Jones-Friedrichs is a doctoral student in higher education administration at the University of Southern Mississippi and the director of the Carnegie Elective for Community Engagement at the American Council on Education.

Emily Locke is a doctoral student at the University of Alabama in Anthropology.

Tania D. Mitchell is the inaugural associate provost of community engagement at the University of Maryland, College Park.

Tanvi V. Padalkar is a staff scientist in the Division of Hematology and Oncology at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

Andrew Pearl is an assistant professor of leadership and community-engaged learning at Kansas State University's Staley School of Leadership.

Diana Quito is a visiting assistant professor in education at Rollins College.

Elaine Ward is a professor of higher education in the Department of Applied Human Development and Community Studies at Merrimack College and cofounder/coordinator for the ACE Carnegie Elective Classifications Research Lab.

Carol Cutler White is an associate professor of community college leadership at Mississippi State University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Andrew Pearl, email: apearl@ksu.edu