Moments to Inspire Movement: Three Seminal Moments in Community Engagement

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This article comprises edited remarks delivered on November 17, 2015, during the keynote luncheon panel at the 2015 IARSLCE Conference in Boston, MA. In these remarks, the author identifies three "seminal" moments in the field of community engagement: critical literature, the monetization of service hours, and two prominent "calls to action" in 2012, one from the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (2012) and the other from the U.S. Department of Education. Reflecting on these three seminal moments, the author advocates for a community engagement practice that leverages the resources and capacity of institutions, their stakeholders, and communities in actual work that contests power to *change* the situations and circumstances that perpetuate inequality.

In preparation for this panel, we were asked to consider "seminal moments" and "under-examined areas that are essential for growth and vibrancy in the field" (D. Giles, personal communication, November 9, 2015). It might not surprise you that the three seminal moments that I chose are also the three that have most significantly directed my work as a scholar and practitioner in community engagement.

For some reason, I always think it is important to remind people that I was a student of service-learning. I was introduced to the pedagogy as a college student and was forever changed. Like many of you, I organized my university's first "insert name of dynamic community engagement program here"—for me, it was Alternative Spring Break—and I was excited by the thought that my professional life could be one in which I created the same experiences that transformed my education for students who followed me.

As a person of color, and particularly as a Black woman from a working-class home, my community engagement did not reflect much of the literature I was reading as I began to study service-learning pedagogy. I was not unfamiliar with the community where I had been placed for service. I had personal experience with racism and sexism, and had to navigate structural unequal opportunity (either for myself or with family members), so I did not struggle to connect the needs and circumstances of the people whom and communities where I served to "root causes" and structural injustice.

Moment 1: Critical Literature

The first seminal moment relates to the rise in literature critical of service-learning's "transformational narrative" (Gilbride-Brown, 2011)—that is, those writings that cautioned us against the universal goodness of community engagement practice. I point first to my mentor, Nadinne Cruz, and her diversity principles, which contrast with Honnet and Poulsen's (1989) principles of good practice. So, instead of the Wingspread principle of "allow[ing] … those with needs to define those needs" (Honnet & Poulsen, 1989, p. 2), Nadinne argued that in order to affirm diversity in our practice, we must

> recognize that some people may not view themselves primarily in terms of "need," and that the concept of "need" may be contested by those who view themselves as having borne the costs of historical legacies of colonialism, slavery, patriarchy, and other forms of subjugation or oppression. (Cruz, 1990, p. 1)

I remember the sense of my eyes opening wider the first time I read John Eby's (1998) "Why Service-Learning is Bad," in which he maintained that service-learning can do harm and even be "traumatic" (p. 5) for the communities we purport to serve. I was heartbroken at Marilynn Boyle-Baise's (1998) revelation that, after service, her teacher candidates returned to the classroom with their deficit notions reinforced rather than challenged. When Tony Robinson, in a 2000 *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* article, questioned whether service-learning was nothing more than a "glorified welfare system" (p. 145), I began to wonder whether I was in the right field.

This rise in what I will call critical literature—referring to its criticism, not necessarily to a connection to critical theory (a conversation for another day)—feels seminal to me because it allowed for a more complex conversation among scholars and practitioners in the field. The initial critical community engagement literature created space to ask hard questions—different questions—about service-learning pedagogy and practice. It gave us permission to challenge colleagues and students about the haphazard deployment of students into communities. It ignited a different kind of community-engaged practice, one that does not assume that service is good simply because it is service (Davis, 2006) but requires us to align our intentions and actions to ensure that our community engagement work is justice-oriented.

As excited as I feel about this more critical service learning practice (Mitchell, 2008), I know that it is still a marginalized approach. Most service-learning practice continues to prioritize the needs of the institution and its stakeholders (i.e., students, faculty, and staff) above those of the community. In considering who participates in community engagement experiences, our research still normalizes—in fact, emphasizes—Whiteness by frequently ignoring the experiences of students of color, even as engagement research has shown that service-learning is the one high- impact practice in higher education in which students of color participate at higher rates than White students (Harper, 2009). Much of our research focuses on student learning and development, with scant attention devoted to the impacts and implications of our work on the community (Butin, 2010; Cruz & Giles, 2000).

I am challenged by that discrepancy in our work. I am challenged by that discrepancy in my own work.

Moment 2: Monetization of Service Hours

The second seminal moment I point to is the monetization of service hours. I know that this monetization has not been reflected upon as frequently in research as it is reflected in reporting, but this moment when the Independent Sector (2015) decided to place a dollar amount on a single volunteer hour and then colleges and universities (and the organizations that support community engagement) embraced this formula in efforts to communicate the value of students' service to community feels like it requires more attention.

As an example, Campus Compact's 2014 annual report celebrated the community engagement activities of its member institutions by estimating that the "overall value of service" to their communities was $3.5 billion (p. 4), based on Independent Sector's value of volunteer time at $23.07 per hour for 2014. Now, mind you, this is in contrast with the federal minimum wage of $7.25 per hour (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). Also, a review of the pay scale structures for work-study students at several institutions of higher education lead me to estimate the average hourly wage for a work-study student at around $9.65.[1] Thus, in adhering to Independent Sector's valuation, we credit a student for his or her work in the community at approximately 2.5 times what we pay the same student working in a community engagement office on campus. It is an amount often double, if not triple, what community

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[1] To arrive at this estimate, I looked at published work-study rates (available online) at 10 different higher education institutions: Augsburg College, Blue Ridge Community and Technical College, Eastern Connecticut State University, Hamline University, Michigan State University, Oklahoma State University, Texas Christian University, Umpqua Community College, University of Denver, University of Hawaii. This is a woefully inadequate and imperfect way to approximate this number, but it was the best option I could identify in the moment.

organizations might pay their employees for equivalent work.

Of course, here, I am limiting my thinking to the "typical" community service work that undergraduate students are tasked with in service-learning courses: stocking shelves, serving food, sorting clothes, tutoring. We could add to this complexity by reminding ourselves that many campuses include commuting and training time in their counts of volunteer hours, or that these numbers might include, for instance, the 100 collective hours that 20 students contributed on a Saturday painting a mural on the side of a community building, only for that mural to be painted over the following Monday morning by a city maintenance worker because the students had not acquired the appropriate permissions. It does not take into account that some students are, quite frankly, more effective in their service sites than others and that if we did have the opportunity to compensate them for their labor, those dollar amounts would differ drastically (and might not reach the $23 mark Independent Sector suggests).

Rick Cohen (2013), writing for the *Nonprofit Quarterly*, worried that this type of reporting may "inadvertently signal to policy makers that … volunteer labor can take the place of the vital government appropriations that nonprofits need to truly help people and communities in need" (para. 9).

My friend Corey Dolgon would also have us remember that with all of these efforts to place a value on students' service in dollar amounts or hours, we make no attempt whatsoever to consider the contributions of our community partners (personal communication, November 14, 2015). We have no monetization of the teaching hour that accounts for the time, resources, and potential revenue community organizations "donate" to our colleges and universities to facilitate community engagement. We make no effort to calculate how our institutions are served by the communities in which we place students.

This moment feels seminal to me because, despite our calls for reciprocity, it seems that higher education institutions communicate a very direct message about what work, and *whose* work, matters. This message reinforces the already entrenched hierarchy that privileges higher education. It keeps us distracted—focusing on the hours served rather than on the impact and implications of that time on the communities where we are supposed to do good work.

Following the recent incidents at the University of Missouri,[2] Amer Ahmed (2015) included service-learning as one of nine practices "that many institutions undertake in order to appear committed to change when actually seeking to maintain the status quo" (para. 7). If service-learning is a pedagogy aimed at better preparing students for success in an increasingly diverse democracy, what does the monetization of volunteer hours teach us—teach our students—about democracy and citizenship?

Moment 3: A Call to Action

The publication of both *A Crucible Moment* by the National Task Force for Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (2012) and the national call to action, *Advancing Civic Learning and Engagement in Democracy*, by the U.S. Department of Education (2012) represents the final "seminal" moment upon which I would like to remark. These publications strike me as important because they seem to demonstrate that, even as federally funded programs like Learn and Serve are being zeroed out, and as federal (and in some cases institutional) support for community engagement appears to be waning, our work matters. In fact, both of these documents stress the urgency of our work in a time when our democracy—have you all been watching the presidential candidate debates?—needs informed and involved citizens more than ever.

What I continue to be struck by, however, particularly from the Department of Education's call (2012), is the challenge that our work can (and should) be a more attentive, more integrated, more

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[2] In the fall semester of 2015, there was an increase in student activism responding to a degraded racial climate for minoritized (specifically, Black) students at the University of Missouri Columbia. A student group, Concerned Student 1950, staged several demonstrations; a graduate student went on a hunger strike, refraining from eating until Missouri's president resigned; and, in what many consider "the most persuasive" action of the events, the football team refused to practice or play. In the end, both President Wolfe and system Chancellor Loftin resigned from their posts at the University of Missouri (Ford, 2015, para. 20).

committed project at influencing and transforming our democracy. Even though most national surveys report that approximately 70% of higher education students participate in some form of community work (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2014), the Department of Education still sees postsecondary institutions as "tinkering at the margins" (p. 13). So what does a community engagement practice that is not just vocal about the change our democracy needs, but active and engaged in work that bolsters that transformation—that leverages the resources and capacity of our institutions, its stakeholders, and our communities in actual work that contests power to *change* the situations and circumstances that perpetuate inequality—what does that look like? These publications inspire me with the realization that we can do more and that we can do better, and I am interested in research and practice that helps us do that.

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