Exploring New Lines of Inquiry
A Practitioner–Scholar Inquiry of How Professional Organizations Have Evolved and Continue to Shape the Community Engagement Field

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Abstract
The community engagement field has evolved in the last decade, indicated in one way by significant shifts in professional organizations that support service-learning and community engagement. As practitioner–scholars, we critically reflect on the changing nature of the field, interrogating how it is evolving and how the organizations are as well. We engage in practitioner–scholar inquiry, questioning how the many professional organizations push and pull community engagement professionals, and explore pivot points, shared values, common thematic approaches, and opportunities for collaboration. Through the practitioner–scholar inquiry framework of experiences, practice, and context (Green, 2023), we engage in group critical reflection discussions with leaders across 12 professional organizations, including thematic analysis of the responses, and mapping distinct themes. Our critical reflection analyses suggest strategies for moving forward to build the community engagement field.

Keywords: critical reflection, community engagement field, practitioner–scholar, collaborative inquiry, professional organizations

Editors’ Note: Translation provided by Karla Díaz Freire
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The community engagement field has changed and evolved in the last decade, evidenced in one way by significant shifts in professional organizations that support service-learning and community engagement. From the Campus Compact to the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU), from the Carnegie Community Engagement Elective Classification to the Society for Experiential Education (SEE) and the International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE), and others’ leadership transitions and renewed areas of emphasis within service-learning and community engagement have both shaped the field and served as symbolic of the community engagement field’s evolution. At the same time, our positionality as community engagement professionals, serving in demanding multidimensional roles (Dostilio, 2017), challenges our ability to participate effectively in the numerous professional organizations that exist and compete for membership in the field. Reflecting on our experience in hybrid roles as practitioner–scholars and community-engagement professionals, we recognize our role as third-space professionals with multiple responsibilities at our respective institutions (Whitchurch, 2013). As practitioner–scholars who have served in various leadership roles within professional organizations, we engage in critical reflection on the changing nature of the community engagement field, exploring new lines of inquiry, questioning practices, and interrogating how it is evolving and how the organizations are (or are not) also evolving with it. To triangulate our own observations and reflections on our lived experiences, we engage in an inquiry approach of critical reflection, exploring how the many professional organizations push and pull community engagement professionals, and explore pivot points, shared values, common thematic approaches, and opportunities for collaboration.

Practitioner–Scholar Inquiry Approach

Green (2023) proposes an inquiry framework for scholar–administrators that involves practice research methodology. Green indicates, “Through inquiry and reflection, scholar–administrators have the opportunity to build from their local context, leveraging and generating local knowledge” (p. 96). Essentially, this approach anchors inquiry in the study of practice. Acknowledging practices, experiences, and context, “the inquiry framework below connects practice research methodology with the scholar administrator identity to create an intersecting inquiry approach” (Green, 2023, p. 97). As practitioner–scholars or scholar–administrators, we identify our professional experiences as localized knowledge, and we articulate the practices with which we engage as well as the practices of professional organizations, and the larger context of the community engagement field (Figure 1).
Figure 1.

*Inquiry Approach for Scholar–Administrators (Green, 2023, p. 98)*

With this inquiry approach as our conceptual framework, we identified and articulated our experiences serving as both members and leaders of professional organizations. We inquired into the current landscape and context through website review and analysis of professional organizations. We explored the practices of leading community engagement professional organizations through collaborative inquiry, individual reflection meetings, and group critical reflection discussions with leaders across 12 professional organizations. We continued our line of inquiry with a thematic analysis of the responses from our critical reflections. We map distinct themes and suggest strategies for moving forward in the community engagement field.

To provide a query for provocation to frame the entirety of our inquiry, we challenged ourselves, as well as those with whom we dialogue, to provide a high-level consideration or reaction to the following working hypothesis:

There is an oversaturation of professional organizations and opportunities in the field of community engagement. At best these simply provide fractured outlets for multiple stakeholders to engage in niche ways and at worst, are simple market competition that dilutes the effort and potential impact of people in the field. The result of this is that there are scattered efforts toward our shared goals that unfortunately oftentimes actually reflect the dynamics of our society that we purport to want to dismantle.

Through the inquiry approach and critical reflection described above, what follows is what we unearthed in relation to this statement, as well as our recommendations for new lines of inquiry to foster the growth of the community engagement field.
Figure 2 overlays the various phases of our inquiry with the areas of the Practitioner–Scholar Inquiry Approach. As this heuristic demonstrates, this was a cyclical, iterative process.

![Phases of Inquiry](image)

**Figure 2.**

*Phases of this Inquiry in Practitioner–Scholar Inquiry Approach Areas*

As an iterative and cyclical process, each of the phases involved multiple activities, as we engaged in critical reflection and collaborative inquiry. These phases, and the actions that defined them, are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

*Brief Description of Each Phase of Inquiry*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase One</td>
<td>Shared reflection on experiences navigating field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase Two</td>
<td>Hatching a plan—website review of key organizations in field anchored in key inquiries/curiosities unearthed from shared reflection—(1) Definition &amp; presence of social justice; (2) Community partner perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase Three</td>
<td>Development of conversation guide, outreach to organization leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase Four</td>
<td>Conversations with key organization leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase Five</td>
<td>Summarize key takeaways, points of convergence and divergence, development of initial model and hypothesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase Six</td>
<td>Development of group dialogue guide, outreach &amp; communication of initial model to organization leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase Seven</td>
<td>Iteration through group dialogue with organization leaders—presentation of/reactions to initial model/themes, gathered reactions to emerging provocative hypothesis</td>
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<td>-------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase Eight</td>
<td>Reworking the model based on feedback, sending back to leaders for input</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is worth noting that this project unfolded over the course of a year and several months. Each phase took a different amount of time, based on what it entailed as well as competing commitments happening in each of our professional and personal lives. The summary provided demonstrates how it aligns with and animates a practitioner–scholar approach to shared inquiry.

**Experiences: Practitioner–Scholar Inquiry Into the Community Engagement Field’s Evolution**

Upon observation of numerous leadership transitions across professional organizations dedicated to community engagement, along with the recognition of our own experiences serving in leadership roles, we began by exploring our own experiences in the community engagement field. Serving as community engagement professionals and identifying as practitioner–scholars in community engagement, we situate our positionality in this context (Dostilio, 2017; Janke, 2019). Drawing from the practitioner–scholar framework of inquiry (Lytle, 2008; Ravitch, 2014; Salipante & Aram, 2003), we position our lines of inquiry as rooted in our practice and anchored in our professional experiences as local sources of knowledge. Our inquiry began with observations of leadership changes and programming shifts across professional organizations amidst the context of a global pandemic, racial injustice movement, and ever-changing higher education structures. This context of institutional and societal changes is an important frame of reference as is the recognition that social movements and institutional structures both shape and guide our work, as well as challenge it.

Both of us have served as board members of professional organizations, including the Board Chair of IARSLCE in the past. We continue to serve as board members of organizations, from IARSLCE to the SEE, as well as in other leadership roles. Our experiences include the multiple organizational priorities, from being attentive to membership needs as well as membership numbers in order to maintain the financial stewardship of the organization to strategic planning to build the field and contribute to the capacity of both members and higher education institutions. The invaluable network and communities of practice that emerge from the professional organizations provide a lifeline to many community engagement professionals who are third-space professionals and boundary spanners at their home institution (Whitchurch, 2013). We recognize that we have benefitted immensely from this network and community, and our collaborative writing emerges from this very connection.

Our scholar–administrator inquiry (Green, 2023), rooted in our community engagement professional experiences, observations of transitions in the field, and experiences with professional organizations, interrogates how the changes in the field are indicators for new ways of pursuing this work and whether/how these changes align with our most deeply held values. Our experiences with various professional organizations in community engagement include duplication of programs and competing invitations for involvement for busy community engagement professionals, not to mention those who lack funding to participate in multiple (or even one) space(s). The lack of collaboration across the many organizations and competition for membership are not sustainable given shrinking budgets and limited capacity of professionals in higher education. Applying the practitioner–scholar framework and inquiry approach (Green, 2023), we moved from our local professional experiences and observations to a critical reflection approach on practices and context, engaging with leaders at 12 professional organizations. We engaged these leaders in dialogue about generations of community engagement and its shifts, exploring literature that informed the field and discussing their perspectives in areas informed by our review of their website information and of the literature itself.
Context: Critical Reflection and Localized Inquiry

Collaborative inquiry relies on interrogation and questioning in collaboration with others (Donohoo, 2013), and the practitioner–scholar approach requires that we critically reflect on our experience, generating local knowledge and retheorizing based on our professional experiences (Lytle, 2008; Ravitch, 2014; Salipante & Aram, 2003). Drawing from these methodological approaches, we developed a critical reflection and inquiry frame to discuss with leaders in professional organizations. Emphasis on local knowledge and experience provided the foundation for our inquiry stance (Lytle, 2008). The set of questions we established emerged from our reflexive approach to our community engagement practice and professional experience.

Our reflections on our experiences in the field garnered inquiry into the context of the community engagement landscape through the lens of professional organizations, with specific themes such as organizational transitions, changing audience focus across community and higher education, renewed emphasis on justice and anti-oppression, and generations of professionals in the community engagement field. We then conducted an analysis of the websites of 12 different professional organizations (see Appendix A) through the lens of these themes. From the online analysis of the websites, we explored how each organization communicated their mission, values, and philosophy of community engagement. We inquired how justice and anti-oppression were represented, articulated, and/or emphasized, and we observed and recorded how community partners were invited to engage or become members.

Through this web analysis, we developed reflection questions to guide information conversations with leaders across the professional organizations to further explore context and practice. The questions, drawn from this critical reflection exercise, comprised a critical reflection protocol mirroring a semi-structured interview. The critical reflection protocol is featured in Appendix B. We intentionally created a dialogue space with each of the organizational leaders, taking notes on major themes and questions or further inquiry generated, but we did not record the conversations to keep them more informal in nature. The semi-structured approach not only record for some questions to be addressed but also for the dialogue to emerge where the individual desired. Rather than a formal interview, this approach also created the opportunity for critical questions to emerge, as well as the explicit thought process and experience of each of the organizational leaders.

Practice: Literature That Pivots and Shapes the Field

As each of the professionals explored their understanding of the generations of community engagement, specific literature emerged as pivot points that both shifted the focus of and shaped the community engagement field, demonstrating further insight into practice. Through collaborative inquiry in which we interrogated relevant scholarship in collaboration with others (Donohoo, 2013), these works were identified as noteworthy by the organizational leaders for the next generation of community engagement professionals, as well as for the ways in which they contributed to new priorities in the community engagement field. The following scholarly works were referenced multiple times by the organizational leaders for the ways in which each served as a marker for a transition in the community engagement field. The summaries of each pivotal scholarly work are provided to offer shared language in the community engagement field as well as how they were perceived and communicated for their contributions to shaping the field.

The scholarly article provided a literature review of the field to date, identifying two models of service-learning, namely, traditional and critical service-learning. The fundamental claim of this piece was the emerging literature advocating for a critical approach to community-based learning with a social justice focus. Mitchell explains: “Critical service-learning programs encourage students to see themselves as agents of social change, and use the experience of service to address and respond to injustice in communities” (2008, p. 51). As opposed to a more transactional approach to service in the community, the critical service-learning heuristic elevates a social change orientation, working to redistribute power and developing authentic relationships. This scholarly article gained more attention, as it positioned the
educational potential of service-learning explicitly to address social justice goals, extending the dialogue of community engagement professionals and expanding the purpose of community-based learning.

A report commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education makes the case for educators and public leaders to advance an educational vision, incorporating civic learning and democratic engagement as an instrumental aspect of undergraduate education. Acknowledging the challenges to civic participation, the report provides recommendations for civic learning and responds to the national discourse limiting higher education’s purpose to workforce preparation and training. The national call to action emerging from this report includes reclaiming the civic mission of schools, expanding the national narrative to include civic aims and civic literacy, advancing a framework for civic learning, capitalizing on the interdependent relationship of K–12 education and higher education, and expanding civic partnerships.

The report describes a framework for 21st-century civic learning and democratic engagement, including civic knowledge, civic skills, civic values, and collective values. Among the recommendations, a civic-minded campus is defined as one that includes “civic ethos governing campus life, civic literacy as a goal for every student, civic inquiry integrated within the majors and general education, and civic action as a lifelong practice” (Figure 4 in The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012, p. 15). The report names service-learning explicitly: “Without question, service learning, in its many manifestations, has been the dominant curricular vehicle for promoting different dimensions of civic learning and engagement with larger communities” (The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012, p. 58). It also challenges how service-learning could be more effectively utilized to achieve these civic goals. The report explicitly connected the work of community engagement professionals to a larger goal of civic learning and democratic engagement.

A book dedicated to elevating a new generation of academics identifying as publicly engaged scholars opened the conversation for many community engagement professionals, who redefined their roles and indeed community-based learning in higher education. The book introduces the context of ever-changing higher education:

There are indications that the next generation of students and scholars, a much more racially and ethnically diverse group, are increasingly public in their identities and are developing new patterns of engagement that are changing the nature of teaching, learning, and knowledge generation. (Post et al., 2016, p. 1)

The book provides important paradigmatic understandings involving the work of scholar–practitioners, historically underrepresented populations whose scholarly identities are closely tied to community engagement, demands for new modes of scholarship and teaching, a new generation of faculty who were publicly engaged scholars as students, and next-generation engagement scholars oriented toward public engagement. Through a cocreated volume with multiple author–scholars writing chapters, the implications for higher engagement are explicitly stated:

A collaborative engagement paradigm shaping a public engagement knowledge regime in the context of next-generation has implications for the future of higher education. … A participatory epistemology needs to guide knowledge cocreation. This epistemological orientation shifts the position of students from knowledge consumers to knowledge producers. It also shifts community groups from being subjects of research or spectators to the research process, to collaborators in knowledge-generation and problem solving. (Rendon, 2009, pp. 9, 10)

The call for a fundamental shift in epistemology is central to this work, and the work provided a foundational framing of community engagement work as instrumental in redesigning higher education structures and their relationships with the community. In effect, for community engagement professionals, this resource both expanded the roles and claimed them as publicly engaged scholars.

In this text, Dostilio and a team of practitioners–scholars present the professional identity of community engagement professionals, rooted in a distinct body of knowledge and practice, the development of professional communities, shared professional identity, and shared set of ethical commitments. In the process of exploring the professional identity of community engagement
professionals (CEPs), the characterization of change-leadership frameworks for community engagement professionals includes tempered radicals, transformational leaders, and social entrepreneurs:

Tempered radicals challenge prevailing wisdom and incrementally nudge culture change in a very localized ways focused on their immediate spheres of influence and work. … Transformational leadership is expressly concerned with facilitating change within a system or an organization. … The conceptions of tempered radicals, transformational leaders, and social entrepreneurs discussed within the previous section may provide us with the templates and vocabularies to explain the ways in which CEPs function as leaders on their campuses and within larger associations of civic workers. (Dostilio, 2017, pp. 16–20)

Similar to the multiple conceptions of this professional identity, the competency framework identifies the multidimensional work of the community engagement professional, including leading change within higher education, institutionalizing community engagement, facilitating student civic learning and development, administering community engagement programs, facilitating faculty development and support, and cultivating community partnerships. This text not only provided a professional identity with clear criteria and definitions but also a functional map of strong community engagement work in higher education. Articulating shared goals, shared responsibilities, shared functions and approaches, shared skills, and shared values provided language and nomenclature to a group of professionals who often existed in the blurred spaces between the academy and community. Such description and thought-leadership paved pathways for community engagement professionals to stake a claim in their professional identity as well as advocate for the change management toward which they worked.

**Critical Reflection and Meaning Making: Findings From Analysis and Iterative Reflective Dialogue**

Although we documented dialogue with our notes, after the conversations, we conducted a thematic analysis noting high-level insights from each of the conversation topic areas from each of the leaders in a spreadsheet. We went through it separately and reviewed the high-level insights in each area across all leaders, making note of our observations on notes of convergence, divergence, and calls to action in each area. From there, we created a map in Kumu to visually capture what we derived and then invited all of the organizational leaders with whom we had these discussions to a group meeting to provide reactions to the map and the provocative hypothesis (as enumerated at the end of the first section). Those who were able to attend provided thoughts and reactions to the hypothesis and then broke into two groups (assigned two areas each) to discuss/record thoughts on what emerged on the map utilizing the following questions:

- Key Observations and Reactions of Resonance (What is standing out and/or resonating?)
- Key Observations and Reactions of Dissonance (What is missing and/or misrepresented?)
- Implications and Future Directions (How does what is represented influence what we should be doing as a field and how we should be doing it—or not—in collaboration with or complement to one another?)

The group then came back together to share across all four areas and to wrap up. After this meeting, we reconvened to edit/modify the map based on the feedback. The most recent iteration of the map is represented in Figures 3–6.
Figure 3.

Evolution of the Field
Figure 4.

*Role of Community Partners/Members in the Field*
Figure 5.

Anti-oppression and Justice Aspirations of the Field
From Inquiry and Reflection to Action: Strategies, Tactics, and Next Steps

Our inquiry approach yielded critical reflections that point toward a course of action. For example, our exploration based on our experiences, practice, and context revealed that although we are oftentimes working toward a broader, shared purpose, we are doing so from separate silos. We are advocating for a new approach in the community engagement field, led by practitioner-scholars who seek to grow the field
and professional organizations that continue to commune and evolve the field. We recognize and honor the diversity of the community engagement ecosystem in which professional organizations are serving specific roles and purposes for different groups, filling specific niches. Yet if we seek to move the field forward, how are our organizational efforts cocreating and co-building the future of community engagement? Our isolated organizational approaches do not serve the community engagement field as powerfully as collaborative organizational approaches. Professional organizations centered on community engagement focused only on their existence, and programs dilute the collective power of the whole. Beyond the concept of a network of networks, we call for an explicit articulation of shared goals and a common vision with a clear path toward advocacy and policy change rather than diluting through fragmentation our collective political power.

To do this, we suggest that leaders in the field draw on the wisdom of Adrienne Maree Brown in *Emergent Strategy* (2017) specifically around movement building. She says that she is “socialized to seek achievement alone, to try to have the best idea and forward it through the masses. But that leads to loneliness and, I suspect, extinction. If we are all trying to win, no one really ever wins” (p. 54). She goes on a bit later in this same section to say,

> Compelling futures have to have more justice, yes; and right relationship to planet, yes; but also must allow for our growth and innovation. I want an interdependence of lots of kinds of people with lots of belief systems, and continued evolution.

> Right now we don’t know what’s right so much as we know what’s wrong, and what we’ve tried. And based on how constantly surprised I still am by life every day, I suspect that will likely continue to be the case, and hopefully, perpetually resolving these major issues continues to be interesting. (p. 57)

In her work around what building a movement requires of us, Brown lays out steps we need to not only consider but also implement within our collaborative work in the field. These sentiments hearken back to our conversations with our field’s organization leaders, oftentimes caught in that same cycle of needing solitary achievement and how that is at odds with the collective we are all trying to create, one where our unified power both celebrates our uniqueness as organizational contributors and allows us to more effectively catalyze our shared power to make change—a truly interdependent field, movement, and ecosystem.

### New Lines of Inquiry

Through this critical reflection on our experience as community engagement practitioner–scholars, we explore changes in the community engagement field through the lens of professional organizations. Often pulled in different directions through engagement with multiple professional organizations, as well as observing the duplication of programs and services across competing professional organizations, we interrogate this tension within our experiences as practitioner–scholars in the field. Our inquiry approach framing experience, practice, and context, including collaborative inquiry with leaders across 12 professional organizations, does not provide a clear or specific answer, but rather it is the answer—interdependent, collaborative inquiry to move the field.

Our critical reflection calls for new lines of inquiry on how professional organizations centered on community engagement may leverage their power collectively. Our practitioner–scholar inquiry framework and critical reflection in collaboration with other leaders yields a guide for collaborative inquiry with the following reflection questions:

- **Experiences:** As we explore the experiences of community engagement professionals, what are they seeking from professional organizations? How can interdependent collaboration between organizations support both the development of its members and the growth of the field? How are the themes of the Kumu map informed by the experiences of other community engagement professionals?
• **Practice**: Through interrogating our practices, what opportunities exist to share strategies and evidence-based practice in shared spaces rather than silos? Where can we leverage an interdependent network of networks to improve practice as well as share promising practices in shared spaces?

• **Context**: In the midst of critical reflection and dialogue, how can we articulate the current context while envisioning a hope-filled future? How do we create shared spaces to identify contextual factors that inform, challenge, and build community engagement in higher education?

Collaboration across professional organizations and shared inquiry can lead to collective responses and collaborative approaches that honor our interdependence. The result of this collaborative approach has the potential to lead to shared goals and vision, community-building, collective power, and larger efforts in advocacy and policy change.

**Appendix A**

**List of Professional Organizations**

- ALL IN Democracy Challenge
- Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U)
- Campus Compact
- Carnegie Community Engagement Elective Classification/American Council on Education (ACE)
- Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU)
- Collaborative for Global Community-Based Learning
- Engaged Scholarship Consortium
- Forum on Study Abroad
- Imagining America
- International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE)
- Place-Based Justice Network
- Society for Experiential Education (SEE; formerly National Society for Experiential Education)
Appendix B

Reflection Discussion Protocol

1. Evolution of Community Engagement Field Through the Lens of Generations
   ● 1A: If you think of community engagement in generations, what generation are we in as a field?
   ● 1B: How would you describe the focus of each generation?
   ● 1C: If you were to imagine what the next generation of the field will manifest, what would that be?

2. Anti-Oppression and Justice Aspiration of CE Work
   ● 2A: From the perspective of the organization you represent, how do you define anti-oppression justice work in service-learning/community engagement (SLCE)?
   ● 2B: Do you think this is clearly defined within your organization? Why or why not?
   ● 2C: How do you reconcile the reality of SLCE work versus aspirational goals to anti-oppression and justice in SLCE work?
   ● 2D: How are you responding to this call for this space (anti-oppressive and justice-oriented work and the space to deal with these issues) in the field?
   ● 2E: What are specific programs, practices, and initiatives that respond to this call?

3. Role of community partners and members in SLCE
   ● 3A: Through the lens of your organization, who is the target audience for this SLCE space?
   ● 3B: Whose perspective is most present?
   ● 3C: Whose perspective is missing?

4. Tension between Infrastructure and Philosophical/Epistemological Practices
   ● 4A: What strategies do you utilize to challenge the limitations of organizational infrastructure (e.g., budgets, staffing, resources) to implement the practices that match SLCE philosophy?
   ● 4B: What innovative programs, practices, or initiatives are you excited about that move closer to achieving the goals of SLCE?
   ● 4C: What are the ways that organizations may interact to achieve the goals of our field? What are potential catalysts for doing so? Potential obstacles?
References


About the Authors

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