



Breathing New Life Into Community-Engaged Teaching, Partnerships, and Scholarship: A Review of Faculty Service-Learning Guidebook: Enacting Equity-Centered Teaching, Partnerships, and Scholarship (1st ed.)

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Abstract

In a moment when higher education is called upon to critically examine how it is situated in the production and perpetuation of injustice, community engagement continues to offer promising pathways toward social change. Yet, tensions surface when community-engaged aims fail to address or become drivers of what they originally sought to dispel. Rather than allowing these unfortunate ironies to inhibit such aims, Cress et al. provide a vision for how higher education can move forward through leveraging reciprocal, inclusive, and justice-oriented partnerships and scholarship. This timely resource offers a roadmap of reimagining community-engaged teaching, learning, and scholarship with equity at the forefront. By doing so, narratives of higher education as the sole source of knowledge creation and democracy advancement can be disrupted and constructed anew.

Keywords: *critical service-learning, reciprocity, justice, equity, community partnerships, course design*

Reseña del libro: Dar nueva vida al aprendizaje basado en la comunidad desde la enseñanza, los socios comunitarios y la sabiduría de los involucrados

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Resumen

La educación superior está en un momento en que está llamada a examinar críticamente cómo se sitúa en la producción y perpetuación de la injusticia. Es por esto que la participación comunitaria y el aprendizaje basado en la comunidad, continúan ofreciendo soluciones prometedoras hacia el cambio social. Sin embargo, surgen tensiones cuando los objetivos del trabajo comunitario no logran lo ofrecido y más bien impulsan lo que originalmente buscaban eliminar. En lugar de permitir que estas ironías inhiban los objetivos originales, Cress et al. sugiere una alternativa de cómo la educación superior puede promover relaciones y obtención de conocimiento que sean procesos recíprocos, inclusivos y con enfoque en justicia. Este oportuno recurso, ofrece una hoja de ruta para reinventar la enseñanza, el aprendizaje y la erudición basada en el trabajo comunitario con la equidad como eje. Al considerar esta alternativa, las narrativas de la educación superior como única fuente de creación de conocimiento y avance de la democracia pueden alterarse y reformularse.

Palabras clave: *aprendizaje y servicio crítico, reciprocidad, justicia, equidad, relaciones comunitarias, diseño de cursos*

Editors' Note: Translation provided by

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Throughout recent decades, community engagement has evolved remarkably as higher education institutions around the world have sought to lean into their civic missions (Post et al., 2016). However, amid the confluence of multiple forms of social injustices that continually impact our local, national, and global communities, we find ourselves at an inflection point at which we are obligated to ask ourselves: How are we to proceed with equity and reciprocity in mind? In *Faculty Service-Learning Guidebook: Enacting Equity-Centered Teaching, Learning, and Partnerships* (2023), authors Christine M. Cress, Stephanie T. Stokamer, Thomas J. Van Cleave, and Joyce P. Kaufman investigate how faculty can design, administer, and assess service-learning courses alongside community partners. Their recommendations are applicable to various types, formats, and contexts of service-learning and community engagement (SLCE) experiences, whether facilitated in person or online, in classrooms domestic or abroad. This book review will unravel the key insights of this text and discuss its strengths and potential areas for improvement.

Review of the Book

With a nod to John Dewey's commentary on the importance of strengthening democracy, which typically undergirds the broader aims of community-engaged teaching and learning (Post et al., 2016), the book begins with articulating its purpose and overview. Right away, the authors argue that compounding trends of sociopolitical tumult—including increasing presence of authoritarian political figures and unrest associated with the COVID-19 pandemic—necessitate that community engagement in higher education be reasserted to confront threats to our democratic systems. They stress that, at these critical junctures, it is more crucial than ever for higher education to “create space for democracy” (p. 2).

The book's most substantive contribution is its advancement of the Equity-Centered Community Engagement Excellence (ECCEE) model. This model, cocreated by the authors, explores approaches to designing and delivering community-engaged scholarship and pedagogy in ways that elevate and center community-based expertise. Additionally, this model is firmly oriented toward acknowledging and alleviating the racial, social, economic, and environmental injustices increasingly prevalent across global contexts. The introduction includes a brief description of the ECCEE model and explains to the reader that it is the implementation of this model that will guide them through the text. It does so by delineating the model across four components: “cultivating” coeducational partnerships, “creating” inclusive learning and service, “crafting” critical engagement and conscientization, and “composing” transformational assessment.

Following the introduction, the authors transition to articulating what they posit to be the common purposes of equity-oriented, community-engaged teaching, learning, and scholarship. The comprehensive goal that they share for such aims is the “educational formation of graduates who are personally and professionally prepared to contribute to the vitality of our democratic communities” (p. 19). However, this goal and others associated with community engagement are hindered by injustice, and the authors stress that progress is incumbent upon authentic learning and dialogue about issues such as White supremacy, oppression, and xenophobia. This section of the book is accentuated with a clarion call to habitually examine all facets of our teaching and research through a lens of social justice.

Subsequently, the authors explore a novel definition of excellence in community engagement. Epistemic justice, critical solidarity, and methodological integrity are situated as fundamental principles of excellence in all aspects of community engagement. This section also orients the reader toward three equity-centered community engagement outcomes: student agency, community efficacy, and scholarly advocacy. These principles and outcomes are foundational to the ECCEE model and are consistently woven through the text as essential notions for faculty to keep in mind in their practice.

After exploring their perspectives on common purposes and community engagement excellence, the authors introduce the first pedagogical component of the ECCEE model: “Cultivate.” Throughout Chapters 3 and 4, they walk the reader through what they consider to be the practices necessary for faculty to initiate, maintain, and nurture relationships with community partners. These relationships, described as coeducational partnerships, ought to “mutually educate students and enhance communities”

(p. 85). Additionally, the authors nudge us to consider a myriad of factors—for example, reciprocity orientations and transactional versus transformational partnerships—when preparing to develop a new partnership or deepen an existing one or to codesign a service-learning experience alongside community partners. Other important elements of community service-learning experiences are reviewed, such as logistical components, legal and liability issues, and student rights and responsibilities.

Chapter 4 focuses on cross-cultural collaborations. Beginning by discussing potential rationales for engaging in either immersive or international service-learning experiences, this segment lays out items of utmost significance when teaching and learning in cross-cultural contexts. The Latin maxim *primum non nocere* (first, do no harm), a cornerstone of the Hippocratic Oath in medicine, is applied here as a guidepost for facilitating immersive and international service-learning. The authors share unfortunate anecdotes of how student volunteers have unintentionally inflicted harm upon communities within which they have served. In response, tools are offered to help preempt or mitigate harm. For instance, the authors recommend that potential community partners are “critically vetted” (p. 120)—in other words, faculty should take immense care in selecting agencies and sites for immersive or international service-learning—and that high “educational, economic, health, and legal” (p. 121) stakes demand even more rigorous vetting processes for cross-cultural partnership development.

The second pedagogical component of the ECCEE model, “Create,” is introduced next. Beginning with a focus on preparation, Chapter 5 elucidates course design methods that aim to embed equity-centered service-learning in a new or existing course. A primary theme of this is the interrogation of curriculum. The authors encourage readers to make intentional efforts to ensure course content is framed appropriately and does not convey community challenges in culturally insensitive ways. A particular strategy that may be considered counter normative yet enables cocreation of learning is to invite community partners into course design processes. This can be done by “[encouraging] their specific recommendations for readings, websites, learning objectives, community site descriptions, service responsibilities, etc.” (p. 153). In the final segment of Chapter 5, assessment and feedback are situated as primary structures by which faculty can elicit direct insights related to what did and did not work throughout the service-learning experience.

Chapter 6 applies course design considerations discussed in Chapter 5 to collaborative online international learning (COIL) and virtual exchange courses. Importantly, the authors make a point to contextualize these types of courses and parse out how they are typically structured and administered. As they note, the terms “COIL” and “virtual exchange” are often used interchangeably and refer to courses that utilize technology to connect classrooms located in different countries or cultural settings. Through these experiences, students participate in collaborative learning with international peers without leaving their own communities. Chapter 6 provides perspectives on how global agency can be promoted through COIL and virtual exchange courses. Tips and tools for developing partnerships, designing pedagogies, and facilitating courses in COIL settings are shared.

“Craft” represents the third component of the ECCEE model. Chapters 7 and 8 are dedicated to building capacity for creating and marshaling meaningful activities that do not malign the “people, places, and particulars” (p. 217) involved in SLCE. Chapter 7 familiarizes the reader with best practices in cultivating learning communities oriented toward leadership and empowerment. Specifically, topics such as teambuilding, group learning, and leadership development are pointedly discussed. Chapter 7 also includes explanations of how faculty can consult prevalent models within leadership and group learning to inform how to operationalize these notions in their courses.

In Chapter 8, opportunities and risks associated with critical service-learning are revisited. Freire’s (1970) concept of conscientization is a theme of this section and is treated as a key ingredient of how students—and, indeed, all learners—can grow in their understandings of the world around them and engage in critical reflection of their learning experiences. Simply understood, conscientization seeks to reveal social inequities and unearth what is required to build a more equitable world. The authors conclude by considering how reflection can be a vehicle for developing conscientization.

The final component of the ECCEE model, “Compose,” is covered in Chapters 9 and 10, which offer closing guidance to faculty in creating space for equity-centered engagement that weaves together student

agency and community efficacy. Chapter 9 clarifies the nuances between traditional academic scholarship and community-engaged scholarship, noting the recent claim that the latter tends to carry greater “epistemological legitimacy” (p. 289) because of its dedication to shared knowledge creation. Through describing how assessment and evaluation and community-based participatory research can be avenues to engaged scholarship, the chapter provides a host of resources and recommendations for how faculty scholars can pursue advocacy and change through their research.

Chapter 10 serves as a synopsis of key elements of the ECCEE model. In addition to expounding on how to compose transformational assessment of SLCE, it revisits the previous three components of the model, mentioning strategies most germane for faculty seeking to adopt and integrate the model. The book concludes by elevating student agency, community efficacy, and scholarly advocacy as imperative to the “realization of equity-centered community engagement excellence” (p. 320).

Discussion

The ECCEE model that stands as the focal point of this text comes at a time when higher education community engagement is on the cusp of significant paradigmatic shifts. National and global crises have forced practitioners and scholars of SLCE to examine how to move forward, and this model provides a potential pathway of doing so. This volume consistently attends to the importance of elevating community voices as key partners in teaching, learning, and scholarship. The authors present a tireless commitment to advancing justice in all of its forms, distinguishing this approach from more traditional or normative models of engagement.

Noticeably absent from the text was the inclusion of graduate-student perspectives. Graduate students are oftentimes instructors of service-learning courses and can be important figures in how service-learning is designed, administered, and assessed. Future iterations of the ECCEE model should seek to integrate consideration of how graduate students and graduate education more holistically may contribute to the advancement of the justice aims of SLCE pedagogy and practice.

At a deeper level, the text neglects meaningful engagement with the impacts and legacies of settler colonialism. Although including land acknowledgments in service-learning courses is mentioned as a means to recognize colonialism and honor Indigenous peoples, such statements are often critically perceived as empty. Given the complicated history of higher education—particularly land-grant institutions—and its treatment of Indigenous communities, our field is in a moment of reflection upon the potential ways in which community engagement may be reimaged as a vehicle for decolonization, and these possibilities are largely absent from the book.

Conclusion

As the authors suggest early in the text, we are each presently faced with the opportunity to leverage community engagement to enact “democratic justice and positive collective transformation” (p. 15). This book is a tremendous resource for all who aspire toward such aims. By synthesizing seminal scholarship in the field as well as offering dynamic resources and recommendations for those who design and facilitate equity-centered engagement, this book and, indeed, the ECCEE model are sources of hope and renewal as we enter a new era of teaching, partnerships, and scholarship.

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