A Call for a National Strategic Plan

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In the 1995 *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* (MJCSL) article “Does Service-Learning Have a Future?” Edward Zlotkowski recommended focusing attention on the academic dimensions of the pedagogy, contending that its future depended on making inroads in and with the academy. For 20 years, service-learning and community engagement (SLCE) has grown and flourished, in large part due to efforts to embed it into the curriculum, develop faculty capacities to use it, and advance related research. In other words, as a movement we have taken Zlotkowski’s admonition to heart, and doing so has served us well.

But in those same two decades much has changed. The world has become more interconnected through globalization and technology, the U.S. has witnessed increased social and economic stratification, and the higher education landscape has been permeated by neoliberalism. These and other changes in the broader context in which SLCE is situated are sufficiently significant to warrant a fresh look at the future of our work.

This essay calls for the development and implementation of a U.S. national SLCE strategic plan, which, given the geographic-border-transcending nature of the academy in general and SLCE in particular, may well have elements that extend beyond the U.S. The kind of plan we have in mind is an intentional organizing effort broadly developed among multiple stakeholders, not a top-down pronouncement. A multi-voice plan could move us beyond the current prevalence of independent, individual efforts by a plethora of faculty, students, community members, academic institutions, and community organizations to a more coherent nationwide collective endeavor.

Why a national plan for the U.S. rather than an international or global one? The two of us are based in the U.S. and have little knowledge of higher education systems and communities in other nations; we can only speak out of and for our own most immediate context. Nevertheless, we hope our thinking about national-level organizing will come into conversation with similar ambitions of colleagues in other countries. The development of one or more national plans (in the U.S. and possibly elsewhere) is, perhaps, a manageable precursor to planning and coordination at multinational and global levels.

The Past Focus on Independent Individual Efforts

For the last 20 years, much of the work to advance SLCE within the academy has been at the level of the individual faculty and staff member, the individual course and program, the individual department and institution, the individual disciplinary association, and the individual national organization. Even as the work has been taken up by larger bodies, it has rarely if ever been the focus of truly national-level planning in the U.S.

Individual faculty and staff have sought out professional development through attending conferences, gleaned principles and best practices from reading the literature and talking with colleagues about one another’s work, and experimented in their own courses. Strategically influencing faculty toward SLCE in accordance with Zlotkowski’s prescription that the movement build strong academic foundations has been achieved mostly through initiatives based on individual campuses, such as the provision of pedagogical workshops and course development grants; the hiring of community engagement professionals to work with faculty (see Dostilio & McReynolds in this collection of essays); and the local creation and sharing of manuals, workbooks, sample syllabi, and other resources to support the integration of SLCE into the curriculum. The SLCE movement has achieved significant traction on many — though by no means all — campuses in the U.S. because of these efforts.

Institutionally, efforts to advance SLCE have included creating centers, strategic plans, and vice-president or provost community engagement positions. At the state level, more than 30 largely autonomous state Campus Compacts have formed; at the regional level, organizations (e.g., the New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE), the Midwest
Consortium for Service-Learning in Higher Education) and conferences (e.g., the Gulf South Summit for Service-Learning and Civic Engagement, Continuums of Service on the west coast) are advancing SLCE. At the national level, advocacy, resource-sharing, and capacity-building organizations include Campus Compact, Community-Campus Partnerships for Health, Imagining America, and the Engaged Scholarship Consortium. The International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement – while inherently international – has been a major contributor to professional development and support for SLCE across the U.S. And there are now about a dozen academic journals and a number of well-established publishers in the U.S. providing SLCE dissemination opportunities.

While most efforts to establish and develop SLCE have been at the level of the individual person, course, community-campus partnership, institution, state, and national organization, we do find exemplars of broader collaborative efforts among these entities. For example, some of the volumes in Zlotkowski’s *Service-Learning in the Disciplines* monograph series were co-published by the American Association for Higher Education and disciplinary associations (e.g., American Psychological Association). And NERCHE and the Center for Engaged Democracy at Merrimack College have come together to co-sponsor the Lynton Award for the Scholarship of Engagement for Early Career Faculty. While these and other collaborations have made significant contributions to SLCE, we wonder what other collaborations might evolve if there were a platform to which many SLCE stakeholders and entities could contribute their voices.

Unquestionably there have been enormous efforts by individuals, universities, and state, regional, and national organizations to advance SLCE. But now what? Given the passage of time, changes in the world and in higher education as identified in Zlotkowski’s framing essay and others in this collection, and increasing critical self-scrutiny of our work (Hartman, 2013; Kliewer, 2013; Meens, 2014; Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009), perhaps it is a moment to step back, take stock, and develop a national strategic plan to guide the next phase(s) of our work. A critical mass of past efforts that appear to have plateaued (Saltmarsh et al.) suggests we may benefit by providing a compass for future work – one that not only guides individuals to and through the academic realm but also synergizes across all levels of organizations (individuals, programs, campuses, communities, networks) and all stakeholders (students, faculty, staff, community members) for more lasting civic engagement that has greater impact on social justice.

The Impetus for a National Plan

There are multiple rationales for creating a national strategic plan; we offer a few that seem significant to us and note there are undoubtedly others. First, SLCE has grown immensely as one of the foremost higher education innovations in the last 20 years (T. Ehrlich, personal communication, November 30, 2014). Second, the process of preparing a national plan may lead to previously unimagined innovations, may better leverage current activities, and may culminate in new synergies. Third, some of the movement’s thought leaders are suggesting that significantly different ways of thinking about, implementing, and supporting SLCE are necessary if it is to continue influencing institutions and communities. And fourth, developing a plan based on a panoramic view of the movement by all stakeholder groups and many SLCE entities may lead to clarity about end goals and the strategies needed to achieve them.

The collection of essays in this Special Section of the *MJCSL* – indeed, the SLCE Future Directions Project more generally – implicitly offers an additional rationale for developing a national strategic plan. Each thought piece identifies an innovative, bold, actionable strategy for the future of SLCE, giving voice to an important possibility for enhancing our work. A strategic planning process can provide the impetus, the structure, and the focus to bring each of them into conversation with other visions and strategies within and beyond this project. This set of essays represents but a small fraction of the ideas needing a platform for their articulation, dissemination, critique, enhancement, and implementation. For example, Dostilio and McReynolds call for greater attention to the role of community engagement professionals; one could imagine this being a goal in a national strategic plan, accompanied by specific strategies for advancing it that are informed by the experiences of campuses around the U.S. As another example, Siemers, Harrison, Clayton, and Stanley’s call for place-engaged SLCE might be included in a national strategic plan and thereby lead local, regional, and national SLCE organizations to put out calls for conference sessions, journal articles, and other activities dedicated to the exploration of partnerships with particular places across the country, with a potential result being significant collaboration in operationalizing specific strategies generated in the resultant body of work. As one more example, one could imagine Ó Donnchadh’s interest in Communities of Reflective Practice making its way into a national strategic plan and thereby encouraging, legitimating, and connecting such structures on campuses across the country (and around the world). In summary, each of the essays gathered here – and
additional ones to be generated through this project and other venues – proposes a concept or practice or question that could well become part of a broader organized, strategic effort if the space for such existed. A national strategic plan could provide such a space and help us move from individual efforts informed by Zlotkowski’s asking the question “Does service-learning have a future?” to collective efforts to engage with the question “What are our visions now for the future of SLCE, why, and what will it take to get there?”

A National Strategic Plan for SLCE

What do we have in mind for a national SLCE strategic plan? Drucker’s (1973) work provides guidance:

> Strategic planning is the continuous process of making present entrepreneurial (risk-taking) decisions systematically and with the greatest knowledge of their futurity; organizing systematically the efforts needed to carry out these decisions; and measuring the results of these decisions against the expectations through organized, systematic feedback. (p. 125)

Applying this to SLCE, we are proposing that a strategic planning process be developed that would culminate in a widely disseminated strategic planning document that would identify goals and activities to which individuals and collective entities could contribute.

What we imagine resulting from an effort to develop a national strategic plan is not a prescription but a set of recommendations. These recommendations would serve as both a guide to which U.S.-based and, as they apply, other individuals and organizations in the SLCE community could turn as they consider their own respective strategic plans and a catalyst for collaborative efforts amongst SLCE stakeholders. Intended to support the flourishing of the work and its purposes across a wide range of contexts, such a large-scale strategic plan would, of necessity, be grounded in a sense of our ultimate vision(s), emerge from a set of broad goals, be accompanied by illustrative strategies, and point to indicators of positive change – all dynamic and co-created by the SLCE community as a whole.

The first step would be to determine who or what will take the lead in creating a national strategic plan. Perhaps an individual or individual entity will step forward. However, given that such an undertaking will be a Herculean task, and given that we want to ensure broad representation in the plan’s development, we recommend a coordinating entity, one that has a comprehensive view of the field and the respect of those in it. Perhaps one of the national organizations identified earlier in this essay could take the lead. Alternatively, a coordinating group comprised of a representative from each of the aforementioned national organizations (and potentially others) would constitute a more democratic approach. Echoing the recommendations represented in some of this Special Section’s collection of essays, it would be important to have non-higher education stakeholders involved in such a coordinating group.

Once a coordinating entity has formed, its members would guide the next steps, such as developing a process for engaging the full range of stakeholders; drafting a proposal to potential funders and hosts; convening and facilitating conversation, presumably in multiple venues; sharing drafts of the emerging plan iteratively for comprehensive input; and developing dissemination outlets and processes for ongoing critique and refinement. It would be important to include SLCE pioneers and individuals brand new to the movement; practitioners, scholars, and practitioner-scholars; community and campus representatives; regional and national organization leaders; current students and alumni; non-U.S.-based voices; and representatives of potential stakeholder groups, including those to date largely omitted from SLCE conversations.

Challenges

It would be naïve not to expect obstacles, impediments, and challenges in the process of developing such a plan as well as controversy related to the content of the eventual product. First and foremost, the very idea of a national strategic plan is likely to be contested. Additionally, strategic plans customarily are developed by individual entities (e.g., corporations, programs), and developing a national strategic plan for a constellation of entities will be much more involved and complicated. Inevitably there will be individual or entity stakeholders who are not part of the plan development process, and it will be difficult to reach consensus on both the general direction and the specific elements of a national strategic plan. No doubt other challenges will arise – foreseen and unforeseen.

However, we believe there is sufficient goodwill in our movement and amongst organizations and entities committed to SLCE to overcome such potential adversities. Further, each individual and entity would be able to choose which recommendations, if any, included in the plan to which to contribute; and the plan’s suggestive rather than prescriptive elements would not diminish the local focus of individual service-learning centers’, institutions’, community organizations’, and other entities’ own strategic plans.

A Call to Action

This proposal provokes many questions: What happens once a strategic plan is developed? What is
its life expectancy? How would progress be tracked? Since it is unlikely that everyone in the SLCE community will embrace the proposal to develop a national strategic plan or would act on the resulting recommendations, what is the critical mass needed to move forward collectively and how do we best maintain open-ended dialogue around contested ideas?

While these and many other questions need to be articulated and carefully pondered, our call is clear: everyone interested in forwarding the SLCE movement – advancing student learning, strengthening communities, transforming educational institutions, working for social justice, cultivating change agents, and renewing our democratic dispositions and behaviors – should reach out to our peers, our SLCE partners, and our organizations and engage with the question of co-creating a national SLCE strategic plan. Readers supporting this proposal might consider advocating within your respective networks, especially with your respective national organization leaders, to pursue this possibility. We also invite readers to share your thoughts on a national strategic plan and concrete ideas for moving forward with this proposal at the SLCE Future Directions Project website: www.slce-fdp.org. We seek to engage diverse voices and perspectives with this project, and we envision a multitude of opportunities for co-creation and collaboration – from conversations to white papers to a finalized strategic planning process. We urge you to become involved and join us.

Notes

1 “Neoliberalism is associated with supply-side economics, deregulation and reregulation of markets, privatization of the public sphere, the imposition of market principles in all aspects of social life, and a general suspicion of social and political welfare-regulatory programs originating from the state” (quoted in Kliwer, 2013, p. 72; original references: Brown, 2006; Harvey, 2005; Vázquez-Arroyo, 2008).

2 SLCE has gained traction internationally, such as in Australia, South Africa, and in Asia. In fact, Ireland (see www.campusengage.ie) has developed what may serve as a rough approximation of a national strategic plan.

3 This type of effort to unite a group of stakeholders to enact a large, multifaceted strategic plan would be akin to multinational efforts to address goals for development (e.g., the UN Millennium Development Goals) or climate change (e.g., Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change).

References


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