In the 20 years since Zlotkowski’s (1995) article “Does Service-Learning Have a Future?” the circle of service-learning (SL) has grown in ways that deserve attention. We are particularly interested in an expanded notion of who is considered a full collaborator in the development of community-campus engagement and a broadened scope of practice that embraces SL but locates it within the greater civic enterprise. As for who is considered a legitimate architect of SL experiences, the field has moved beyond positioning faculty and community partners as its two primary drivers and now encompasses an expanded circle that includes a wider range of collaborators (see Hicks, Seymour, & Puppo in this collection of essays). For example, Zlotkowski, Longo, and Williams (2006) advocate that students be considered “colleagues”; Stoecker, Tryon, and Hilgendorf (2009) amplify the role and voice of community partners; and Bringle, Clayton, and Price (2009) organize the stakeholders of service-learning and community engagement (SLCE) in a model called SOFAR, which defines Students, community Organization staff, Faculty, Administrators on campus, and community Residents all as full partners. With regard to the greater civic enterprise, SL is increasingly positioned as one of an array of strategies campuses employ in a holistic approach to meeting the civic, public service, and economic development aspects of their institutional missions, visions, and values (see Saltmarsh, Janke, & Clayton in this collection of essays).

These two concerns – positioning a broader set of constituents as full collaborators in a democratically-engaged enterprise and locating SL within a larger ecosystem of community-campus engagement efforts – may be plotted as points on a circle all equidistant to the center. Yet, within this expanded notion of collaborators and broadened scope of practice, very little attention has been paid to community engagement professionals (CEPs) – in terms of how we enrich and shape engagement practices or how we become change agents within higher education. A burgeoning line of inquiry seeks to promote and refine how we understand the CEP as part of the circle of SLCE.

Community Engagement Professionals

We see CEPs (Dostilio, in press; Jacoby & Mutascio, 2010; McReynolds & Shields, 2015) as vital to SL and the broader practices of civic engagement. CEPs are usually seen primarily as supportive staff facilitating the connectivity between points within and around the circle. However, looking closely at the myriad ways CEPs promote, complicate, and sustain engagement reveals that we also influence who is part of the circle; encourage those in the circle to be centered on and uphold civic ideals; strengthen those in the circle by providing professional development, promoting promising practices, and holding collaborators and institutions accountable; orient the constituencies in the circle toward the future by keeping abreast of trends and pushing beyond the current edges of practice; and hold a mirror to the constituencies in the circle through critical reflection on practice (see Ó Donnochadh in this collection of essays). We believe that for SLCE to flourish, we must recognize and develop the role of CEPs.

According to Campus Compact’s 2014 Annual Survey, nearly 100% of respondents – a total of 423 institutions – reported having an office or center to coordinate community engagement efforts, with the majority being led at the director level (which may include faculty who are part-time directors as well as administrative directors); in contrast, in 1986, only 22 institutions had a paid director or staff member. In Welch and Saltmarsh’s (2013) review of engagement centers across institutions that held the Carnegie Foundation’s Community Engagement Classification in 2010, 91% of survey respondents indicated their centers had full-time administrative leadership. As we consider the significance of this growth, not only must we pay attention in various ways to those serving in CEP roles (e.g., targeted professional development efforts), but two ideas emerge regarding the potential role of CEPs in the future of SLCE: (a) CEPs, particularly those who cultivate a practitioner-scholar self-identity, can complicate and enrich extant disciplinary and epistemological approaches to SL, and (b) CEPs can connect SL courses to one another and to larger institutional civic efforts and, in doing so, amplify the
institution’s greater civic enterprise.

Complicating and Enriching Disciplinary and Epistemological Approaches to SLCE

Similar to most faculty, CEPs are grounded in disciplinary training (Dostilio, in press) and in many cases have had interdisciplinary preparation. For example, the first author, Lina, director of the Center for Community-Engaged Teaching and Research at Duquesne University, received her bachelor’s degree in sociology, followed by graduate work in community mental health counseling, and doctoral study in educational leadership. The social theories Lina learned as an undergraduate structure her thinking and approach to engagement: she thinks systemically, organizes her engagement work through a lens of social problems, and is guided heavily by a concern with privilege, power, and social and political capital. From her graduate work in community mental health counseling, she utilizes skills of group facilitation, clarification of individuals’ needs and agendas, empathetic listening, and specialized attention to group process in working with others as they navigate the intersections and boundaries of community and campus interests. Her doctoral studies in educational leadership lead her to apply learning theory to program, faculty, and student development. By reflectively using her disciplinary training to inform practice, she hones her capacity to identify the ways her disciplinary lenses may be applied to—and influence—approaches to SLCE and to determine when those disciplinary lenses may be limiting or restrictive when applied to a civic concern. This reflective disciplinary practice helps Lina and other CEPs like her be conversant with faculty and quickly see how faculty members’ respective disciplines might connect with and contribute to civic issues.

However, unlike most faculty who are disciplinary specialists, CEPs also have a body of community-practice knowledge that spans more than one discipline and incorporates a variety of methods such as community organizing and democratic communication. We are invested in facilitating others’ involvement in community-campus engagement—by promoting students’ civic development, cultivating community collaborators, supporting faculty in course and participatory research design, and/or directing campus-wide programs; and our area of specialty is the practice of civic engagement itself—with its associated knowledge, skills, competencies, and perspectives. Thus, we are positioned to develop and draw on such capacities rather than work from within only one disciplinary framework and to complicate and enrich attempts to address public problems from uni-disciplinary and solely academic epistemologies. From our institutional vantage point and skill base, CEPs are able to build and sustain multidisciplinary partnerships by inviting contributors across disciplines and sectors as well as helping partners navigate the discipline-based structures of higher education institutions to secure legitimacy and resources for their work.

The unique contributions of CEPs lie in marrying a disciplinarily-framed conversation with community-practice knowledge in order to work collaboratively across disciplines and across knowledge traditions, traversing the actual and perceived boundaries of academic departments as well as community and campus. It is, therefore, imperative for CEPs to embrace, clarify, and interrogate our own disciplinary training so as to journey with faculty, staff, and students as they discover the link between their disciplines and civic issues. We must also challenge any tendencies toward recession into disciplinary silos when confronted with civic challenges.

This ability to critically interrogate both the practice and the knowledge that informs SLCE is a defining characteristic of practitioner-scholars. As CEPs make visible our contributions to the practice of engagement, our theory-based practices and full participation in scholarship will move us further into an identity and capacity as practitioner-scholars. “Practitioner-scholars have the unique ability to perceive deficiencies in current theories and practices. Their research and best pedagogical knowledge are needed to challenge and drive the development of a stronger academy” (McReynolds, 2015a, pp. 3-4). As such, CEPs have much to contribute by way of complicating the academy’s disciplinary and epistemological approaches to civic issues and public problem-solving.

Connecting Service-Learning to Institutional Civic Commitments

Zlotkowski (1995) raises a concern that if we retain a “hoops mentality” (p. 129) with unreasonable expectations of the ideological standards and best practice structures that govern SL, either faculty will be scared away from the pedagogy or it will coalesce into an academic specialty more concerned with personal or civic growth than disciplinary learning. This is distinctly possible if we insist on endowing single SL courses with full responsibility for producing civically oriented students and addressing multifaceted issues such as hunger. We believe civic development is a life-long process, community issues are multifaceted in their origins and resolutions, and a uni-disciplinary instance of SL cannot by itself meaningfully address a public problem. CEPs can alleviate the unrealistic pressure placed on individual SL courses (and by association the faculty who teach them) in two ways: (a) connecting SL courses focused on the
same civic issue or geographic community to one another and (b) integrating SL efforts into the larger palette of institutional civic initiatives. Having a campus-wide vantage point enables CEPs to identify and bring together multiple efforts focused on the same public problem or seeking similar and/or complementary civic outcomes for students.

It is immensely freeing to suggest an individual SL course need not be responsible for students’ overall civic development or comprehensively address a seemingly intractable social problem. It fosters a spirit of intellectual humility and the perspective that we are all part of a much larger ecosystem of knowledge generation, application, and synthesis. CEPs exhibit strategic institutional leadership when we connect the dots between distinct activities and the larger set of institutional efforts to graduate engaged citizens, attract and retain civically committed faculty, and contribute knowledge and collaborators to the coalitions seeking to address pressing social and environmental concerns. The implication – the challenge – for CEPs is to think systematically and see our work as promoting the larger civic purpose of higher education. Though not every CEP is predisposed to being a connector, the role of the CEP in a multi-disciplinary and multi-strategic institution is to amplify and synthesize various efforts, making this a crucial quality for us all to develop.

Diving Deep and Growing the Profession

CEPs play critical roles in sustaining and pushing forward SLCE practice. It behooves us to develop within the community of CEPs a shared commitment to embrace our identities as practitioner-scholars, to clarify and leverage our respective disciplinary training, to develop systemic thinking, and to act as connectors across our institutions and beyond. We suggest this, not as a dictum to the SLCE movement, but as a charge to CEPs as a group. Seeing and positioning ourselves as practitioner-scholars requires developing a curiosity about our own work and that of our institution such that we critically question how it is best conducted and how it can be continuously improved. Clarifying and leveraging our disciplinary training necessitates a revisiting of the lenses that inform how we make sense of civic collaborations and the public problems they seek to address. It also means recognizing the limitations of disciplines and how they may unnecessarily bound our approaches to civic engagement. Developing systemic thinking is a habit of mind (Parks Daloz, Keen, Keen, & Daloz Parks (1996) that requires critical reflection and institutional (and community) mentors who can help us see our efforts in the context of the larger ecosystems in which they occur. Acting as connectors between projects, people, ideas, priorities, and trends requires us to be anchored in our local context while reading scholar-ship about engagement and participating in professional associations concerned with SLCE. By doing so we are simultaneously active citizens of our institutions, the communities in which we work, and the larger scholarly field of civic engagement practice.

A body of inquiry around CEPs is emerging. Initially represented within practice literature (e.g., Jacoby & Mustascio, 2010), testimonials of experience (e.g., Bartha, Carney, Gale, Goodhue, & Howard, 2014), and professional development programming (e.g., Campus Compact; Engagement Scholarship Consortium), CEPs are just now being systematically investigated as a distinct stakeholder within community-campus engagement (see Dostilio, in press, for a more comprehensive description). Stemming from interest in the roles CEPs take and the preparation we bring to our work, Campus Compact has initiated a research project to empirically investigate questions related to CEP roles, competencies, and professional development desires. Such lines of inquiry are critical to leverage the full complement of factors that will drive engagement practice and theory forward. It is time for CEPs to assume leadership in the research about CEPs and to embrace our roles as field contributors (Degraaf & Hirt, 2015). We must take it upon ourselves to investigate the competencies, dispositions, preparation, and unique contributions of CEPs and to help the next generation of CEPs develop into the institutional strategic leaders and practitioner-scholars needed for SLCE to flourish in the future. It is “time to dive deep and grow the profession” (McReynolds, 2015b).

References


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