Introduction
Special Section on the SLCE Future Directions Project

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The Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning (MJC SL) is delighted to invite readers into a project inspired by the 20-year anniversary of our publishing “Does Service-Learning Have a Future?” (Zlotkowski, 1995). Much of Zlotkowski’s envisioned future has been realized in a variety of ways – some anticipated, some unexpected, and some bringing new and exciting challenges – and we are once again at a key moment to think intentionally about the future of our work. We are proud to partner in launching the international SLCE Future Directions Project and look forward to seeing where this collaborative exploration takes us in the coming months and years. [JH, Editor]

Twenty years ago, having taken a critical look at the state of service-learning (SL) and having thought about what was necessary to move forward, Edward Zlotkowski (1995) issued a warning and a challenge to the movement:

Unless we learn soon to respond in a much more differentiated and adequate way to the realities of our institutional and professional contexts, our commitment to social ideals will not generate long-term progress. And without such progress, it is a question if we can—or even should—survive. (p. 15)

Many heeded his call, working thoughtfully and collaboratively across campuses and communities to create programs, partnerships, courses, and projects that foregrounded the academic dimensions of the pedagogy. The institutionalization of SL within the academy accelerated, complete with faculty development initiatives, full-time professional positions, internal and external funding, research agendas, and enhanced expectations related to the presence and quality of SL within higher education curricula.

Now, in 2015, after the emergence of a plethora of models for community-campus engagement and in light of uncertainty nationally and internationally regarding the nature and goals of higher education in the early 21st century, the movement finds itself at another crossroads. The dedicated leadership of students, community members, faculty, and staff around the world over the last several decades has rendered the earlier question posed by Zlotkowski’s title – does SL have a future – largely moot. The richness of what we now understand as service-learning and community engagement (SLCE) and the complexities of how we now position it in local and global social, political, economic, cultural, and ecological contexts give rise to different questions for the coming decades. In general terms: What are our visions now for the future of SLCE, why, and what will it take to get there? With more nuance: How can we best come together around the question of our work’s ultimate purposes and focus effectively on what we are trying to achieve? How can we leverage the movement to advance those ends – intentionally, inclusively, and with integrity? What are the points of tension in how we understand and undertake SLCE that we need to hold creatively as we articulate and enact future directions for our work? What fundamental, transformative changes are required to realize our ends and for the associated paradigms and practices to emerge, grow, and be sustained?

Such questions prompt us to critically reflect on our practices and their alignment with our goals, on our commitments and the challenges we face in bringing them to fruition, on the possibilities of our partnerships – all with an eye toward deeper understandings of ourselves, our work, and our shared and contested visions for the future and with the intent to build our capacities to work collaboratively as agents of positive change. The nature of the questions themselves as well as the maturation of the movement toward ever-more inclusive generation of knowledge and practice call for the full range of perspectives and experiences to be at the table as we move forward from the current crossroad. The SLCE Future Directions Project is a co-created space for such critical reflection among all who wish to contribute their voices.

Background

The SLCE Future Directions Project goes beyond simply taking stock of where we are 20 years after
Zlotkowski’s influential article and determining next steps in SLCE’s journey. Rather, it is intended to catalyze, facilitate, organize, and analyze international conversations in a way that positions everyone involved as a co-educator, co-learner, and co-genera-
tor of new questions and new knowledge. It is intended to stimulate and assemble ideas from new and estab-
lished voices, from champions and critical friends, throughout and beyond the SLCE community as well as to enrich dialogue about the future and inform current and future practice and policy. Our primary objective is to form an inclusive learning community to support, inform, sustain, and excite our colleagues and ourselves in thinking creatively and collaboratively about the future of SLCE.

Earlier in 2015, the core leadership team supporting this project – Patti Clayton, Sarah Stanlick, Edward Zlotkowski, and Jeffrey Howard – began discussing how to mark the 20th anniversary of the 1995 article in a way that would not only examine and celebrate progress made to date but also play a similar role in contributing to the future directions of SLCE. We invited thought partners to join us in conceptualizing and designing the project, and we reached out to colleagues across SLCE stakeholder groups and contexts with diverse perspectives that span levels of experience, roles, philosophies, and lived experiences as potential contributors. To launch the project, we solicited short, approachable, conversation-provoking thought pieces from colleagues in both our immediate circles and our extended networks.

We asked each contributor to read Zlotkowski’s 1995 article for context, reflect on the most important future directions for SLCE from her or his own unique perspective, and then issue a bold, specific, and actionable call. Together with the contributors, we agreed that each of the pieces would have its own distinctive voice—some more personal, others more academic. Our commitment was—and is—to appreciative inquiry: We encouraged contributors to adopt a generous lens on our collective work and to be constructively critical, envisioning a positive future that grows out of the energies and opportunities of the present instead of highlighting deficiencies in the literature, research, and/or practice or emphasizing obstacles to change.

Rather than developing a template for the thought pieces, we culled the following questions from early online conversations among the contributors and encouraged their use to help ground the essays:

• What is your vision for the future of SLCE?
• What is the thing you particularly think we must attend to in order to advance and nurture the flourishing of SLCE (i.e., what is your particular topic in this project), and why is it con-
sequential for the future flourishing of SLCE?
• What has helped us get us to the point that your particular priority is thinkable and doable?
• What will it take for us to move forward with advancing your particular priority?
• What questions do we need to ask, what do we need to keep thinking about, and what are the tension points with which we need to engage (e.g., between short- and long-term, among multiple values) as we move forward?

As the contributors, including the four lead project facilitators, developed essays, we shared drafts online, invited one another’s questions and comments, and convened virtually to continue refining our shared understanding of our collective purpose and our individual calls. Thus, the resulting set of essays is the product of robust collaborative processes.

Organization

This MJCSL Special Section consists of 12 essays—a framing statement, 10 thought pieces, and a concluding proposal—that compose the first phase of the SLCE Future Directions Project. Zlotkowski’s framing essay reviews developments within SLCE against the backdrop of changes in the sociocultural landscape over the past two decades and suggests some of the implications of the thought pieces, individually and collectively, as we respond to the challenges of the present. Each thought piece then delves into a topic viewed by the respective author(s) as a critical arena to which the SLCE movement must attend, drawing on the author(s)’ own experience and expertise while also considering more general implications and connections. Howard and Stanlick’s concluding essay implicitly weaves the various priorities and recommendations from the thought pieces into a larger integrative call for a national strategic plan.

The 10 thought pieces are arranged to flow from a focus on students to a focus on communities and partnerships, then to a focus on faculty and staff, and finally to a focus on the systems and cultures underlying SLCE:

1. Gabrielle Hickmon – designing SLCE to honor diverse student voices
2. Tamara Bauer, Lori K niffin, and Kerry Priest – asset-based design of SLCE in the first year
3. Kathryn Pisco – global partnerships and critically reflective practices
4. Eric Hartman – community-driven SLCE and “fair trade learning”
5. Cheryl Siemers, Barbara Harrison, Patti Clayton, and Talmage Stanley – “place-engaged” SLCE
6. Travis Hicks, Liz Seymour, and Allison Puppo – democratic relationships among students, community members, and faculty
7. Brian Ó Donnchadha – engaged academics as agents of institutional and societal change
8. Lina Dostilio and Mandi McReynolds – community engagement professionals as leaders and scholars
9. Sarah Stanlick – creating brave spaces for authentic dialogue and transformation
10. John Saltmarsh, Emily Janke, and Patti Clayton – transformation of higher education institutions

A Civic Salon

These essays launch a multi-perspective, multi-year, multi-venue project. As this initiative has begun to grow, we have come to see it as akin to the intellectual “salons” of the 18th- and 19th-centuries: gatherings designed for sharing ideas and discussing contemporary issues. Like those salons, we hope to see it, thanks to its intermingling of diverse perspectives, contribute to the development of formative public conversations on campuses and in communities across the country. As we see it, the SLCE Future Directions Project is, at its heart, a civic salon.

The 21 contributors, including the 4 lead project facilitators, range from undergraduates to retirees and from first-time SLCE authors to well-established scholars. We live in three countries and five time zones. We are social entrepreneurs; faculty, staff, and students on campuses; consultants; and community leaders. In the spirit of collective intentionality, we envision the SLCE Future Directions Project as a catalyst for an ever more widely ranging conversation that spans the full spectrum of experiences, roles, geographies, and philosophies.

This project, therefore, launches in three venues, each designed as an invitation to ongoing dialogue within an ever growing learning community. First, as a lead partner, the MJCSL will again publish select thought pieces in another Special Section in the Fall 2016 issue, a call for which will be issued in November 2015. Second, the project’s website – www.slce-fdp.org – is an interactive space for our civic salon to convene and continue growing. This set of essays is excerpted there now, open for comments and questions, and will be posted there in its entirety January 1, 2016. In subsequent months other features will be developed to support ongoing virtual dialogue. Additional thought pieces will also be shared at this site; please contact Sarah or Patti to express interest in developing your own idea regarding the future of SLCE for dissemination on this site as a thought piece (which, if desired, can also be further developed and reviewed for publication in the Fall 2016 MJCSL Special Section). And please share the link widely to expand participation in this project.

Third, we will be convening at a number of conferences and other face-to-face gatherings (e.g., the Imagining America conference, the annual conference of the International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement, NC Campus Compact’s Pathways to Achieving Civic Engagement conference, national Campus Compact’s 30th anniversary, the International Service-Learning Summit). The ongoing conversation at these and other venues will take such forms as thematic event foci, informal and formal discussions, poster sessions, working groups, concurrent sessions, plenaries – all co-created with event organizers to suit and contribute to the particular context. The project’s website will maintain a running list with additional information. Please contact Sarah or Patti with additional possibilities for such gatherings, and share within your networks the opportunity to contribute to this project at any or all of the events.

On behalf of everyone who has joined and will join the SLCE Future Directions Project, we invite questions and feedback as well as stories and insights on how this collection of essays does and does not speak to your own experience and your own vision for the future of SLCE – through the website, at the various events, and by emailing either of us. Harkening back to the 1995 article that serves as the launching point for this project, we are reminded of Zlotkowski’s urging that “we must ourselves be willing to take risks, to stretch and learn from experience” (p. 129). It is in that spirit that we ask you to engage with these essays and join us in this project, so that we might all – intentionally and with a sense of hope – co-create our shared future.

Reference

Authors
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PATTI H. CLAYTON (patti.clayton@curricular engagement.com) is an independent consultant and SLCE practitioner-scholar (PHC Ventures), a senior scholar with IUPUI and UNCG, and a visiting fellow with NERCHE. She works with practitioner-scholars and campuses to envision and establish SLCE infrastructure and to build capacities among all partners for excellence in SLCE, especially through integrated course design, critical reflection, reciprocal partnerships, and collaborative scholarship. Her current interests include democratic engagement, co-learning among all partners in SLCE, civic learning, place-engaged SLCE, and the power of language to shape how we understand and enact engagement.