Twenty years ago it was an open question how or even if the service-learning and community engagement (SLCE) movement would go forward. Levine (1994) had pointed out that “service” as a concern of the academy tended to come and go every 30 years. The then current service cycle had begun taking shape in the mid-1980s with the founding of the Campus Opportunity Outreach League (COOL) in 1984 and Campus Compact in 1985.

Talk of imminent decline was one of the reasons I published an essay in the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* entitled “Does Service-Learning Have a Future?” (1995). In it I attempted to make the case that, without academic legitimization, service or engagement in higher education might well be doomed to repeat the 30-year cycle Levine had identified. Hence, the SLCE movement needed to prioritize the creation of resources that would help faculty – and their students – demonstrate that community-engaged work strengthened high-quality teaching and research rather than distracted from it. From this proposition followed the American Association for Higher Education’s 21-volume series on “service-learning in the disciplines”; dozens of other books, articles, workshops, and presentations on SLCE; the founding of organizations such as Community-Campus Partnerships for Health and Imagining America; Campus Compact’s Engaged Department Institutes and Indicators of Engagement projects; and the establishment of hundreds of campus-based centers – many of them endowed – to support faculty-led SLCE in local, national, and international communities.

The speed with which the SLCE movement grew in the late 1990s into the first few years of the 21st-century can be traced to many factors – from the creative ferment generated by Boyer’s *Scholarship Reconsidered* (1990) and the leadership of other respected academics to the availability of public and private funding and broadly bipartisan support in Washington. But there were also larger cultural factors that played a role in propelling the movement’s growth. In 1991 the Soviet Union collapsed, and the Cold War suddenly came to an end. Throughout the 1990s it appeared as though the United States, and the rest of the world, were entering a new historical era in which civil – and civic – concerns would no longer be overshadowed by military demands. The 1990s was also the first decade of the digital age, and the explosion of computer technologies – with their potential for revolutionary modes of communicating and organizing – seemed as full of promise as the end of the Cold War. Driven by these technologies, economic growth helped generate new financial resources while instantaneous collaboration became as easy as using a keyboard.

It was, in short, a good time to dream of a new era in which the SLCE movement could contribute in a significant way to solving the nation’s social problems. If only the intellectual power of the academy could be harnessed to address community and civic concerns, the limited achievements of traditional volunteerism might be eclipsed in a heartbeat. If only the potential of Boyer’s “Scholarship of Engagement” (1996) could be brought home to America’s faculty, a new kind of engaged academy might emerge – one that could make the promise of democracy and equality more of a reality.

Nor was this an exclusively American dream. Indigenous SLCE programs in Latin America and the Caribbean drew new attention. Post-apartheid South Africa recognized SLCE as a potentially important resource in reforming its higher education system, while Australia and Ireland also began developing national models. The long-established International Partnership for Service-Learning launched a new master’s program in International Development and Service with sites in Italy, Thailand, and Ecuador. Even countries with very formal academic traditions, such as Germany, developed initiatives to explore SLCE’s educational applicability.

Today the sociocultural optimism that helped propel this wave of civic engagement seems remote. The events of 9.11 and America’s subsequent “war on terror” made it abundantly clear that there would be no “peace dividend,” while socially reactionary forces began to use their wealth and privilege to push back aggressively against any policy or practice that deviated from market fundamentalism. The “great recession” that swept much of the globe between 2007 and 2009 left the vast majority of people with little psychological space to think of anything except making ends
meet. Jobs across all sectors and at all levels became scarcer as globalization sent more and more corporations on an open-ended search for ever cheaper labor markets. Even the concept of a “common good” was called into question by conservative commentators.

Not surprisingly, during this period of social and economic retrenchment, higher education itself came to resemble ever more closely the market culture from which it liked to think of itself as distinct. As Andrew Delbanco, Levi Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University, writes in a review entitled “Our Universities: The Outrageous Reality” (2015), “The story these numbers [of college costs and access] tell is of a higher education system – public and private – reflecting the stratification of our society more than resisting it” (para. 10). More and more, access can be correlated with family income as state governments abandon their colleges and universities to those “consumers” who can afford them while private institutions raise costs beyond what is affordable for all but the top 20%. As Delbanco observes, “in our current system the relation between vulnerability and support is an inverse one” (para. 11).

And what about the SLCE movement? How has it fared after its impressive leap forward in the years immediately preceding and following the turn of the millennium? On the positive side, many of the resources developed then – program and course models, disciplinary presentations and publications, research findings, definitions of scholarship, and principles of good practice – have continued to be produced and refined. The same can be said for a variety of initiatives intended to advance not just the movement’s academic legitimacy but also institutional transformation. Sophisticated metrics have been created to measure and recognize overall institutional engagement, the Carnegie Foundation’s Elective Community Engagement Classification (2006-present) being perhaps the most influential. At the same time, institutional associations such as the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), and the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) have continued their efforts to clarify and promote the community responsibilities of the specific kind of institution each represents.

All of these initiatives have helped the SLCE movement win considerable academic support while enlisting a new generation of practitioners and scholars. And yet, despite recognition on every institutional level and successes in every academic area – if not every academic discipline – the “transformation of contemporary academic culture” I envisioned in 1995 (p. 130) has not taken place. Indeed, at least since the middle of the last decade, there has arisen a concern among many that the movement has, in the words of an influential white paper, “plateaued and requires a more comprehensive effort to ensure lasting commitment and institutional capacity” (Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton 2009, p. 1). As the authors of the Democratic Engagement White Paper ask, “Will higher education live up to its democratic purpose and undertake the kind of deep change in institutional culture needed to create the conditions for sustained civic engagement?” (p. 1).

The alarm articulated here deserves serious attention, and the possibility that the movement may actually be losing momentum argues for the importance of revisiting not just our strategies but our goals. For example, should we continue to emphasize the “transformation of contemporary academic culture” (Zлотowski, 1995, p. 130) and invest new energies in fundamental institutional change? One of the following essays (Saltmarsh, Janke, & Clayton) argues eloquently for just such a rededication. But other essays in this collection, without directly challenging – let alone, rejecting – comprehensive institutional change, seem to suggest other priorities.

Perhaps we should emphasize, as do most of these essays, what might be called “enhanced social efficacy”: that is, greater stakeholder inclusiveness and demonstrable community impact. Perhaps we need to prioritize, regardless of the degree to which an institution embraces engagement as a core value, more effective utilization of whatever human and material resources it can invest in this work. For example, Stanlick calls for “design of SLCE as a brave space of authentic dialogue” in which disorienting – and hence potentially transformative – experiences are deliberately foregrounded for all stakeholders. Similarly, when Siemers, Harrison, Clayton, and Stanley propose that SLCE be re-conceptualized not as simply occurring in a particular place but as “in and with and of” that place [emphasis in the original] and when Hicks, Seymour, and Puppo propose replacing the traditional faculty-community partner pairing with more genuinely “democratic relationships” among all stakeholders, our focus shifts from academic expertise and community needs to what the latter authors refer to as “collaborations not limited by the usual hierarchies implicit in relationships among faculty, students, and community members.”

We can feel a related shift even when institutional players remain the focus of attention. While Dostilio and McReynolds emphasize the increasingly pivotal role of Community Engagement Professionals (CEPs), they stress that what makes CEPs so valuable is their experience and credibility with the community as well as with their faculty peers. And if Ó Donnchadh sees great promise in Communities of Reflective Practice, in which “civically engaged academics…meet on a
regular basis (physically or online) to reflect on their practice,” it is largely because such a process can help shape the role of an institution in the larger community as an agent of social justice. The perspective can be found in Bauer, Kniffin, and Priest’s call for an asset-based orientation to community engagement; as these authors point out, SLCE that does not deliberately emphasize the knowledge and resources of all stakeholders can easily devolve into “an uncritical dominant narrative” in which there are those who give and those who need.

When the enhanced social efficacy of an SLCE process or partnership becomes the center of our concern, when the conversation shifts from how to change the nature of the academic undertaking to how existing academic resources can best be utilized to achieve a more or less specific social good, a different dynamic comes into play. It is not necessarily less transformative, but transformation becomes an experienced feature of the work rather than a requisite condition. Indeed, one possibility of such transformative work is that we come to understand more concretely the limits of higher education as an agent of social change. As Hartman suggests, we should not simply assume that “the conventional university structure” – however transformed – aligns well with critical “community-driven” concerns. Perhaps there is a fundamental mismatch at the heart of our work that we have not wanted to recognize.

But even if we continue to believe that we are on the right path in prioritizing institutional transformation and that many if not all of the suggestions made in this collection of essays can best be understood as elements of such a transformation, we are still left with a timing problem.

As I have suggested above, the SLCE movement of the mid-1990s rode a broad social and cultural wave in which large-scale transformation seemed not only necessary but possible. The ideological context in which we work today is far less promising, and if we have learned anything over the last 20 years, it is just how difficult it is to bring about the transformation of higher education institutions.

Today there are voices often unrepresented or underrepresented demanding our attention more urgently than ever before. Given the current racial climate in America and elsewhere, Hickmon’s call for an SLCE movement that speaks more directly to the interests and needs of students of color could not be timelier. Worldwide migrations of displaced people create a new imperative for international understanding and add immediacy to Pisco’s critique of conventional international service programs. Recent developments in the world beyond the academy compel us to ask: When does the need to act more forcefully in the greater community overshadow – not eliminate – other needs such as institutional transformation?

In the final essay of this collection, Jeffrey Howard and Sarah Stanlick propose we formally recognize the need for a movement-wide conversation that could eventually lead to “a national SLCE strategic plan.” Such a plan would help guide entrepreneurial energies, not impose a set of top-down prescriptions or constraints. It would actively seek to include the voices of all relevant constituencies and to develop with them a language meaningful to and accessible to all. In this way it might enable the SLCE movement to listen more deeply and to respond more effectively to the priorities and concerns of today’s communities. If the challenge of 1995 was to create the academic resources that would make the SLCE movement more than an educational epiphenomenon, the challenge of 2015 may be to decide how best to collaborate and direct the resources we do have – academic and non-academic, campus-based and community-based – so that more communities flourish despite the mounting challenges of today’s world. At the very least we should ask how our awareness of the inequality, injustice, racism, and other forms of identity-based oppression that devalue the lives of so many of our fellow human beings affects where we locate the center of our efforts. Our resources – however limited – are still vast in comparison with what they were in 1995. I believe we have yet to discover just how much we can achieve with them.

References


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