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Community Engagement Professionals as Inquiring Practitioners for Organizational Learning

H. Anne Weiss and Kristin E. Norris

Abstract

This essay examines the inquiry activities that community engagement professionals (CEPs) can utilize to support organizational learning. We advocate for an inquiry approach that focuses on improvement and informing community-engaged practices and organizational change. By unpacking why inquiry is imperative for CEPs and outlining the tensions that may arise, we introduce three concepts: inquiry consists of different yet connected activities including, but not limited to, assessing student learning; CEPs are key knowledge workers in higher education; and, finally, CEPs can and should leverage inquiry to inform institutional planning and systematically align policies, processes, and procedures to demonstrate our public missions for society and other key stakeholders.

Keywords: inquiry, community engagement professional, organizational learning, assessment, evaluation, tracking, monitoring

Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to reflect upon the activities of inquiry within community engagement broadly and the implications for community engagement professionals (CEPs) specifically. The term *inquiry* is used here to acknowledge the variety of approaches, purposes, and methodologies that researchers, evaluators, assessors, critical consumers, and reflexive practitioners use to pragmatically improve their work and to advance community engagement in higher education writ large. Examples of inquiry include, but are not limited to, research that produces new knowledge for the field of community engagement, evaluating whether a program or course is "of good quality," assessing gains in student civic learning, and measuring community impact.

Assessment is another commonly used term in the community engagement field and higher education broadly, which is appropriate when referencing student learning. However, Hersh and Keeling *(2013)* argue that higher education should strive for a culture of learning rather than a culture of assessment. Therefore, we

use the term *inquiry* because it is more encompassing and because it accurately represents activities such as tracking, monitoring, assessment, evaluation, and research—all of which allow us to ask questions, gather and interpret data, and use results to improve and inform processes, policies, or practices.

John Dewey *(1938, 2018)* defined *inquiry* in its most basic sense as "the intertwining of thought and action that proceeds from doubt to the resolution of doubt" *(p. 11)*. That is, the inquiring practitioner searches for any action that "works" better or sufficiently within the context of the problem at hand, and the inquiry can cease as soon as the desired result(s) are achieved. Inquiry can be continuous, informing and answering new questions garnered during or from the prior inquiry activity. This is a pragmatic approach to inquiry, which differs from typical "scientific investigation" and means that trained and competent CEPs can utilize the activities of inquiry to inform their own practices, better the practices and decisions of groups across their institution, assist or lead learning moments for the organization, and produce new knowledge through the traditional methods of "scientific investigation." For the purpose of this essay, we focus on a pragmatic approach to inquiry that supports learning moments for the organization.

Within inquiry we get to ask questions, gather insights, contemplate, analyze, or evaluate in order to provide useful insights about the practices, policies, programs, pedagogies, and constituents of community engagement. Having CEPs engage in inquiry activities in an ongoing, consistent, and systematic manner is important because of the growing skepticism of higher education's public purpose *(Boyer, 1996)*. According to a national survey of senior academic leaders, "colleges and universities must more clearly and persuasively communicate relevant, timely, and contextualized information on their impact on students *and value to society* [emphasis added]" *(Jankowski, Timmer, Kinzie, & Kuh, 2018, p. 4)*. Furthermore, "institutions must find ways to use assessment data internally to inform and strengthen education, *and externally to communicate with policy makers, families, and other stakeholders* [emphasis added]" *(p. 7)*.

Community engagement is a fundamental aspect of our institutional missions and, as illustrated by the previously offered source, institutions are under increasing pressure to demonstrate effectiveness in their public mission and beyond. Competencies surrounding the activities of inquiry are, therefore, imperative for the collective future of higher education and specifically the practice of institutionalizing and improving community engagement in higher

education. Therefore, whether or not inquiry is an explicit aspect of a CEP's job description, inquiry is often an assumed responsibility largely influenced by pressures of accountability (to a supervisor, to stakeholders, and to the public) or for gaining awards and public recognition (e.g., Carnegie's Elective Classification for Community Engagement). In this way we believe that CEPs must acquire some level of competency for inquiry. For example, CEPs must be capable and competent in developing strategic, meaningful, and doable (i.e., measureable) or timely inquiry questions, identifying the necessary data points, interpreting results, and reporting results to a variety of constituents, decision makers, and stakeholders. It is essential and necessary, therefore, to strengthen inquiry practices surrounding community engagement in higher education in order to help demonstrate the value of higher education to society.

Differentiating Inquiry Activities for CEPs

In this section we will distinguish among inquiry activities for community engagement by identifying and defining the broad categories of activities associated with inquiry: tracking or monitoring, assessment, evaluation, and research. It is important to note that the definitions and examples included here will differ across disciplines, roles, and professionals or practitioners within higher education. Much as in the community engagement literature, terms may be interpreted, redefined, or refined over time and context, so what we offer here is up for reinterpretation and discussion.

Activity: Tracking or Monitoring

Tracking and *monitoring* mean implementing systems and procedures that allow community engagement professionals to "follow" or see what students, faculty, and staff are doing in relation to community engagement (e.g., courses, events, programs, research, outreach, sustained initiatives, anchor work, grants). Tracking and monitoring require us to connect to other sources of data from across campus that may not focus on community engagement but track something related to our constituents' learning, productivity, satisfaction, and/or success during their time at our institution (learning management platforms, faculty annual reporting or productivity tracking, staff and faculty satisfaction with employment or advancement opportunities, etc.). The types of data that should be connected to tracking and monitoring community engagement include, but are not limited to

- *Data points related to the activity itself:* goal or name of the activity; community partner information (type of organization, address, contact information); length of partnership; curricular or cocurricular connection(s); intended outcomes; funders (external or internal); scholarly outputs; whether the activity is tied to other campus-based initiatives (diversity and inclusion, global learning, community priorities such as quality of life, grand challenges, etc.); and so on.
- *Data points about the community:* location of the community-based or community-engaged activity; social issue(s) addressed; population(s) served; roles that community plays; how this work relates to community priorities.
- *Data points about constituents of the campus:* demographics, financial aid, enrollment, student success metrics (e.g., DFW rate, persistence from semester to semester or year to year, grade point average [GPA], satisfaction [i.e., course evaluations]); faculty status, type, demographics; staff involvement; schools, departments, centers/institutes involved.
- *Data points or metrics related to other anchor initiatives for your campus/location:* percentage of minority hires in staff positions; percentage of local hires in staff positions; operating funds spent on economic development; businesses created and retained by/with the institution; percentage (or amount) of university procurement to local businesses; percentage (or amount) of university procurement to minority- and/or women-owned businesses; dollars spent on neighborhood development; dollars spent on environmental health initiatives; and much more *(Sladek, 2017, pp. 57–58)*.

We have identified these four types of data to call attention to the wide variety of data needed in order to robustly engage in tracking and monitoring. The data points about the community are particularly challenging given the traditional systems and processes within higher education, yet addressing them is imperative if we are to examine the collective impact of community engagement (i.e., community impact, issue impact, and capacity-building of our community partners). We also acknowledge that CEPs cannot be, nor should they be, solely responsible for tracking or collecting all of this data. Instead, CEPs should have some level of competency to

effectively advocate for integrative (vs. additive) systems and processes that capture these types of data and to work with others who are instrumental in supporting our shared goals around tracking and monitoring.

Tracking and monitoring are usually performed through some form of information technology (IT) platform, whether a vended platform such as GivePulse, Collaboratory, Galaxy Digital, or Digital Measures/Activity Insights or a home-grown platform (i.e., not vended). IT is still considered as important to business and higher education today as the steam engine was to the industrial revolution, and in this way, tracking and monitoring (via IT platforms) are becoming an integral part of CEP duties—pulling from various IT platforms who is doing what, with whom, and to what ends . . . at a moment's notice. IT platforms are, however, a rather resource-intensive endeavor on any campus; IT requires not only money but large amounts of time to implement, and many different forms of capital (social and political capital being the most useful) to onboard and sustain the use of such platforms by a variety of constituents. Therefore, organizations that invest in IT to track and monitor their constituents' community engagement will need to eventually ask questions about the relationship between IT investment and organizational performance or productivity *(Dhning & Richardson, 2002; Lucas, 1999; Sircar, Turnbow, & Bordoloi, 2000)*.

Activity: Assessment

The majority of assessment of community engagement is driven by desires to articulate the extent to which the university, course, or program is fostering student civic-mindedness *(Norris & Weiss, in press)*, instilling what it means to be part of a society and how to engage as part of that society *(Dewey, 1916; Dickson, 1979; Jefferson, 1812)*. *A Crucible Moment (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012)* suggested that colleges develop civic pathways for students' civic learning that combine rich knowledge of democratic principles with practices with the community and making participation a requirement for every student. And in 2018, Campus Compact launched the Education for Democracy initiative, which was supported and informed by a group of visionary college presidents and chancellors who are committed to fostering the knowledge, skills, and motivations necessary for a thriving democracy with our communities *(see https://compact.org/education-for-democracy/)*. Being set up in this way, the activity of assessment has focused primarily on the learning outcomes associated with community-based or community-engaged

pedagogical practices. Although not exhaustive, there is a plethora of scholarship regarding the positive and statistically significant relationships between participating in service-learning and gains in students' disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary (specifically, civic) learning, development, and success during college *(Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011; Conway, Amel, & Gerwien, 2009; Warren, 2012; Yorio & Ye, 2012)*.

Assessing student outcomes will continue to be important for CEPs, as well it should be, given that our workplaces are first and foremost institutions of higher learning. The assessment activities within inquiry competencies that a CEP needs are twofold: (1) conducting assessment of student learning and developmental outcomes and (2) supporting and building capacity for faculty and staff to assess their courses or programs for students' learning. These assessments may be formative or summative, indirect or direct, but they should predominantly focus on student learning and success during college. The preliminary competency model for community engagement professionals *(Dostilio et al., 2017)* directly addresses this aspect of inquiry in the rows "Facilitating Students' Civic Learning and Development" and "Facilitating Faculty Development and Support."

More recently, the work of assessment has expanded to include the outcomes of participating in professional development experiences for faculty or staff who are practicing community-based or community-engaged scholarship *(Welch & Plaxton-Moore, 2017)*. Meanwhile, others call for a shift to reprioritize community outcomes above student learning outcomes, urging us to remember and trust that, if planned well, student learning will happen *(Stoecker, 2016)*. In all, most of the work around assessment still prioritizes *students*' learning, development, and success outcomes. Moving forward, assessment will need to involve other outcomes and other types of community-engaged activities (e.g., research and creative activities, outreach, anchor mission work; *Norris & Weiss, 2019*).

Activity: Evaluation

Evaluation is gaining greater attention due to the questions CEPs and other stakeholders are beginning to ask about the fidelity of interventions that connect campus with community (e.g., outreach programs, anchor institution initiatives, extension work, and sustained service programs). Evaluating the fidelity of an intervention means measuring the degree to which the intervention is delivered as intended. Although there are many purposes for con-

ducting evaluation, implementation fidelity is often used because it helps answer questions about how the *design* of the experience influences a variety of outcomes. Implementation fidelity is, therefore, critical for translating evidence-based interventions into high-quality or high-impact practices *(Bickman et al., 2009; Carroll et al., 2001; Zilvinskis, 2017)* that can be implemented with high quality to scale.

Implementation fidelity is particularly useful for CEPs because it has the potential to uncover the extent to which best practices were executed; to identify gaps (i.e., steps or characteristics, such as reflection, that were not addressed) when implementing an intervention; and to address inconsistencies or examine variations across contexts, stakeholders, populations, and so on. Luckily, tools have been developed to help design these interventions and also evaluate the levels of fidelity for certain interventions that are community-based or community-engaged. Examples include *IUPUI Taxonomy for Service Learning Courses (Hahn, Hatcher, Price, & Studer, 2016)*, "PRELOAD" *(Kieran & Haack, 2018)*, and *Implementation Fidelity in Community-based Interventions (Breitenstein et al., 2010)*.

Regardless of the growing popularity of one type of evaluation (implementation fidelity), CEPs would benefit from learning about community-based or community-engaged methodologies for conducting evaluations because they align well with the "critical commitments" *(Dostilio et al., 2017)* of our work: inclusion, voice, mutually beneficial outcomes, reciprocity, and engaging community as competent colleagues in the creation of knowledge *(Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2011)*. For example, extension officers, faculty members, and some staff within higher education organizations are required (by funders or other stakeholders) to conduct evaluations of their community-based programs and may utilize a participatory-based evaluation methodology. Other valuable resources for CEPs include professional associations such as the American Evaluation Association (AEA) and Better Evaluation, literature on participatory evaluation methods or values, and the professional competencies developed for evaluators broadly (e.g., *Galport & Azzam, 2017; King & Stevahn, 2015*; also see the American Evaluation Association's competencies available at *https://www.eval.org/page/competencies*).

Activity: Research

The final area of inquiry that CEPs may conduct is research. For the purposes of outlining this activity for CEPs, we highlight

and distinguish between three types of research: engaged scholarship, scholarship of engagement, and institutional research. The first of these buckets, engaged scholarship, is defined as a form of collaborative inquiry between academics and the community that leverages their diverse perspectives to generate knowledge *(Benson, Harkavy, & Puckett, 2007)*. In this case, scholars employ community-engaged methodologies that value the community as coinvestigator, and the purpose of conducting research is to address issues of common concern. In the second, the scholarship of engagement goes beyond research to include the scholarship of teaching, application, and integration *(Boyer, 1990, 1996)*. For many CEPs, the purpose of the scholarship of engagement is to contribute to the field of community engagement, which may not necessarily use community-engaged methodologies. Finally, CEPs must have some level of competency for institutional research, which is research conducted within an institution of higher education to provide information that supports institutional planning, policy formation, and decision making about key institutional-based initiatives and goals *(Howard, McLaughlin, & McKnight, 2012;* see also the *Association for Institutional Research, https://www.airweb.org/)*.

Regardless of whether CEPs identify as engaged scholars or categorize their work as scholarship of engagement, the evolving role of CEPs to advance the public mission of the institution and the institutionalization of community engagement requires us to examine institutional systems, policies, and goals (i.e., institutional research questions). We urge CEPs to continue to find time to conduct any one—or more—of these types of research, but certainly the one most lacking in outputs (i.e., published reports or research articles) is robust institutional research studies on community engagement in higher education. In order to stay abreast of the latest published practices and outputs from institutional research colleagues, we highly encourage CEPs and other constituents to check out the *Journal of Higher Education* or *New Directions in Institutional Research*, as well as other resources from these colleagues *(see https://www.airweb.org/collaborate-learn/reports-publications/journals-journal-news)*. These three categories for the activity of research are introduced here in a fundamental way, but they are worth much more attention and discussion among CEPs.

In summary, our desire to understand how community engagement leads to a variety of outcomes, including how we are fulfilling our institutional mission(s), requires systematic and systemic inquiry activities, such as those listed above. Although the field lacks a full determination of whether the investments in inquiry

and its related activities are worthwhile, we remain optimistic that the pressures of accountability, as previously mentioned, will lead to deeper and more meaningful lines of inquiry and can help transform our institutions. Finally, in the next section, we articulate why activities of inquiry are absolutely necessary in order for CEPs to lead change in higher education and advance the public missions of our institutions.

Inquiry and the CEP's Role in Organizational Learning

In this section we frame inquiry as essential to organizational learning and, therefore, to institutionalizing community engagement and leading change in higher education. Inquiry is notably important for CEPs as reflexive practitioners *(Schön, 1996)*, but for the sake of space we focus on the role of inquiry in organizational learning. The literature on organizational learning is useful here because it frames inquiry as "improvement-focused," which reemphasizes the primary purpose of inquiry: to transform, strengthen, and better our institutions, communities, and the human experience *(Darwin, 1953/2009; Susman & Evered, 1978; Tandon, 1989)*.

Since the 20th century, organizations have faced a "learning imperative" *(Argyris & Schön, 1996, p. xvii)*. This learning imperative requires that organizational members become perpetual learners *(Senge, 2006)* who continuously develop and refine knowledge relevant to improving individual, program- or group-based, and institutionalized practices and policies. It is also imperative that CEPs, as organizational learners and actors, use this information to determine how to effectively or efficiently achieve the public mission(s) of the organization. Unfortunately, the prevailing system of management in many organizations is unequipped to deliver the necessary, continuous learning required for meaningful and effective institutional learning or change *(Senge, 2006)*. Too many organizations are constrained by persistent habits, traits, or structures left over from the industrial era that do not encourage learning: hierarchy, functional separation, bureaucratic policies, and a focus on managerial control and stability *(Preskill & Torres, 1999)*. In contrast, our current knowledge era favors "(a) radical decentralization, (b) intense interdependence, (c) higher expectations, (d) transparent performance standards, (e) distributed leadership, and (f) networking and reciprocity" *(Preskill & Torres, 1999, p. 10)*. According to Senge *(2006)*, we must find ways for our organizations to become "more complex and dynamic . . . work must become more 'learningful.' . . . The organizations that truly excel in the future will be the

organizations that discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels in an organization" *(p. 4)*.

Here the theories of organizational learning emphasize the importance of investigating and institutionalizing learning across multiple levels of the organization, from individual to group to organization *(Senge, 2006)*. Following sociologists Burrell and Morgan *(as cited in Jenlink, 1994)*, an organization can be characterized as "a network of intersubjectively shared meanings that are sustained through the development and use of a common language and everyday social interactions" *(p. 320)*. In Argyris and Schön's *(1996)* terms, an organization represents knowledge, or specifically a collective theory-in-use, that is reciprocally related to the individual theories-in-use of its members. The organization's theory-in-use is observed as the organization's routines and practices, such as concrete decision-making procedures and roles delegated with authority and power. Organizations are thus environments that structure individual thinking, action, and learning. *Organizational* or *institutional* inquiry requires that individuals inquire on behalf of the organization, in accordance with its prevailing roles and values. In turn, organizational learning provides opportunities for changing or informing the organization's theory-in-use—usually evidenced by shifts in aggregate patterns of thinking, behaving, or knowing across its individual members and groups. In sum, "organizational action cannot be reduced to the action of individuals . . . yet there is no organization action without individual action" *(Argyris & Schön, 1996, p. 8)*, and therefore organizational learning cannot happen without the three levels—individual, group, and organization—to develop, retain, and transfer knowledge within an organization.

The factors that hinder organizational learning broadly are the same two greatest challenges facing inquiry about community engagement practices in higher education: a hierarchical infrastructure and higher education's decentralized nature. Both factors yield suboptimal support for CEPs seeking to take the role of "knowledge worker" *(Ducker, 1959)*. However, the literature on institutionalizing community engagement does suggest that an entity providing some degree of coordination must exist (e.g., center, office, or committee; *Furco, 1999; Gelmon, Seifer, Kauper-Brown, & Mikkelsen, 2005; Holland, 1997, 2009; Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013*). Additionally, Gelmon et al. *(2005)* note in their self-assessment tool that community engagement must be intentionally connected to other structures, constituents, and policy-making entities (e.g., board of trustees, faculty senate), thereby working effectively across

the decentralized nature of the organization. We believe, however, that in order for CEPs to be successful knowledge workers for organizational learning, they need more than infrastructure and connections to other stakeholders across the institution. They need an inquiry-based approach to their decision support or knowledge worker role.

In order to illustrate how to think about the levels of organizational learning—individual, group, and organization—we have taken on two activities for the sake of this essay, which we will briefly introduce here. First we looked at the six areas of competence included within Dostilio et al.'s preliminary competency model for community engagement professionals *(2017)*. Using the literature from organizational learning that distinguishes between organizational and individual-level or group-level learning *(Senge, 2006)*, we found that two areas—leading change in higher education and institutionalizing community engagement on campus—require organizational-level inquiry processes, procedures, and activities, whereas the others involve group and/or individual levels of inquiry activities to inform and beget learning. The group level of learning means working with others to create new knowledge about community engagement practices. Group-level learning is, in fact, an essential and crucial task of the CEP because, according to Senge *(2006)*, teams and not individuals are "the fundamental learning unit" of an organization and "unless teams can learn, the organization cannot learn" *(p. 10)*. We believe that mapping out the broad areas of CEP competencies to levels of organizational learning provides CEPs a coherent learning and knowledge management strategy that informs inquiry activities.

Next, we conducted a basic content analysis of accreditation guidelines for programs of study (e.g., the Association of Theological Schools, which accredits programs related to master of divinity, master of arts in Christian ministry, etc.) to identify terms used to describe civic learning outcomes (CLOs). We focused on CLOs because they are the broad, transdisciplinary outcomes associated with service-learning *(Bringle & Hatcher, 1996)* Civic learning outcomes can be understood in terms of two key aspects: (1) they are transdisciplinary because they represent outcomes beyond any single discipline or program of study *(Mitchell, 2005)* (2) they are the knowledge, skills, attitudes, or abilities any human being needs to possess for "the creation of a freer and more humane experience in which we all share and to which we all contribute" *(Dewey, 1976, p. 230)*. Examples of broad civic learning goals include civic literacy, civic identity, civic agency or efficacy, and civic-mindedness.

Inquiry related to CLOs is prevalent in the literature of community engagement, but an examination of both transdisciplinary and civic language used within disciplinary-based accreditation revealed something different (see Figure 1). Results of the content analysis illustrate some of the challenges that CEPs face when working across the institution: The word *civic* never appeared in any of the guidelines.

Figure 1. Terminology Within Disciplinary Accreditation Guidelines

The lack of common CLOs from across accreditation bodies illustrates how CEPs must be aware of jargon in the field of community engagement and be able to code-switch back and forth between the field's language and the language that is most familiar within others' disciplines. Consequently, when working across campus (organizational-level learning), our language and inquiry practices need to support *any* discipline (i.e., any epistemological, ontological, and axiological assumptions at the individual level or group level) when, for accreditation purposes, CEPs seek evidence for factors such as ethical or moral reasoning, contributing to a healthy society, intercultural awareness, or instilling a commitment to public service. We note this because not only does code-switching become necessary within organizational learning, but the activities of inquiry also require shared terminology and shared definitions or understandings (e.g., inclusion/exclusion criteria), and both of these achievements become more challenging when the goal is organizational learning.

Being an inquiring CEP is, consequently, about acknowledging and framing our role as a particular kind of knowledge worker *(Ducker, 1959)* in higher education: a worker who can proactively shape the organization's environment for organizational learning in order to foster commitments to systems thinking, cultural diversity, full communication, pragmatic inquiry, learning to learn, and democratic change for our higher education institutions. CEPs are vital to creating or sustaining a culture that enables organizational learning and the dissemination of that knowledge with constituents, particularly decision makers across our communities and our higher education institutions.

Tensions and Future Directions for Inquiring CEPs

In this section we outline three major tensions that the authors have personally struggled with as they bridge the worlds of community engagement and inquiry. Working with diverse others is a core value of democratic engagement. The tensions we have identified suggest that working with diverse others around inquiry is nuanced. We close with recommendations for CEPs who wish to commit to their role in inquiry, organizational learning, or systematic processes for decision making around community engagement initiatives, practices, or goals.

Tension: Working Across Differences

From our lived experiences, community engagement and inquiry professionals offer amazing potential to inform each other's work, but we may approach the work differently. The best way to describe these differences is by examining the axiological, ontological, and epistemological approaches, ascertaining how they differ between CEPs and other inquiry professionals and knowledge workers in higher education (e.g., accreditation staff or officers, directors of institutional effectiveness or institutional research and decisions support, or those in strategic planning offices and similar). To further articulate these differences, we reference the adaptation of Alkin and Christie's *(2004)* metaphor of "The Evaluation Tree" by Mertens and Wilson *(2018)*. Table 1 illustrates how one's approach to inquiry differs based on those axiological, epistemological, and ontological assumptions.

In order to execute any form of inquiry for organizational learning, individuals have to work with others across campus *(Fulcher, Good, Coleman, & Smith, 2014)*, and this is absolutely true for CEPs, given job descriptions and competing priorities for time and other resources. However, the values and critical commitments of CEPs can be at odds with the assumptions and backgrounds of our colleagues who are also knowledge workers from across the institution. The preliminary competency model for CEPs *(Dostilio et al., 2017)* describes what CEPs need to do—for example, "work with rather than against administration," "manage conflict," or "unveil and disrupt unequal power structures" *(pp. 46–51)*—but understanding the sources of potential tensions (via the assumptions outlined in Table 1) is helpful when working with others. Additionally from the preliminary competency model, CEPs need to "advocate for community engagement and communicate its value" and "advocate for the development of policies that support community engagement" *(pp. 46–51)*. To be successful in this way, CEPs that engage and report on inquiry projects for improvement purposes must provide evidence-based information to support recommendations.

In summary, we recommend CEPs reflect upon Table 1 as they consider who they need to work with now and in the future from across their institution to advance the public mission of higher education. The tensions that come with "working with others" mean that CEPs must consider and balance the potential assumptions, values, use-theories or priorities, and methodological preferences because they will hinder or contribute to their collaboration with

Table 1. Assumptions and Approaches to Inquiry

	Methods (Postpositivist)	Values (Constructivist)	Use (Pragmatic)
Description	Focuses primarily on quantitative designs and data	Focuses primarily on identifying multiple values and perspectives through qualitative methods	Scientific method is insufficient to discover truth; use common sense and practical thinking
Axiological assumptions	Respect, Justice, Beneficence	Evaluator aware of own values and those of others	Gain knowledge in pursuit of desired ends as influenced by the evaluator's values and politics
Ontological assumption (reality)	One reality knowable within a certain level of probability	Multiple, socially constructed realities	There is a single reality, and all individuals have their own unique interpretation of reality
Epistemological assumption	Distant, Objective	Meaningful dialogue and reflection to create knowledge	Relationships in evaluation are determined by what the evaluator deems as appropriate to that particular study
Methodological assumption	Scientific method, hypothesis, quantitative methods	Qualitative, but quantitative too; Participatory	Match methods to specific questions and purposes of research; mixed methods can be used as evaluators facilitate work back and forth between various approaches
Theorists	Tyler, Campbell, Cook, Shadish, Boruch, Cronbach	House, Scriven, Stake, Guba, Lincoln, Eisner	Stufflebeam, Weiss, Wholey, Patton, Preskill, Alkin

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others who are essential for supporting inquiry activities and for informing organizational learning.

Tension: Inquiry for What? Improvement or Public Relations and Marketing

Marketing and communications seem to be higher education's response to the lack of trust in higher education and the need to demonstrate our value to society *(Jankowski et al., 2018; Kezar,*

Chambers, & Burkhardt, 2005). The good news is that community engagement is a big part of the story that many campuses are interested in telling. In a recent study of community-engaged researchers *(Norris, Weiss, Wendling, & Besing, 2018)*, subjects indicated that their work is valued rhetorically and that their campus uses it when marketing the department, school, or institution. Similarly, CEPs are under increasing pressure to develop and track metrics of engagement (e.g., number of community-engaged courses, number of students, number of hours, number of community partners, number of faculty, percentage of faculty living in the county, number of faculty receiving awards, percentage of students enrolled from local communities, percentage of goods and services purchased locally) to be used in infographics and other communication media such as websites, billboards, and brochures.

Through these media the glamorous numbers ("Over one million hours served which has an estimated economic impact of over $2.6 billion for our community partners") and persuasive messages from community engagement initiatives (Student A stated, "If it weren't for my time working with ABC Organization, I would never have learned as much about our homeless neighbors and how we can work together to change their lived experience in our community") are shared and utilized to form a narrative of your campus's unique flavor of community engagement. But is that reason enough to perform inquiry, or should it be the primary reason to pursue inquiry activities? We extrapolate on these rhetorical questions below by focusing on (1) utilizing data or information from inquiry activities for communicating and marketing the outputs and persuasive stories of community engagement and (2) the inherent dilemma of situating inquiry on community engagement initiatives within the institution.

Within the first tension, we acknowledge that when CEPs are asked to provide numbers for communication purposes it is, overall, a good thing. It is a signal that the institution values community engagement, and it gives the CEP a sense that the institution needs community engagement staff for these purposes; CEPs offer something that no one else on campus can provide. As an example, Carnegie's Elective Classification for Community Engagement requires institutions to offer examples of how community engagement is included in messaging, further confirming our role in marketing and communications. And yes, if CEPs are not being asked for information for these purposes, there is cause for concern.

From an inquiry perspective, the purpose of utilizing inquiry of community engagement for marketing and communications is not, however, without serious tensions. CEPs who seek to improve practices and institutionalize community engagement should recognize how this purpose could raise some red flags about an inherent bias in the inquiry activities. In order to prioritize improvement-focused inquiry, we therefore provide CEPs two standards to keep in mind when vetting or planning inquiry activities on community engagement.

First, CEPs must advocate for rigorous and systematic inquiry both within our field and when crossing boundaries into others. As scholars who disseminate findings, provide definitions, outline the methodology, explain decisions made along the way using theory based in the literature, identify limitations, and so on, it is in our interest to address standards of rigor. However, when findings are used solely for communications and marketing purposes, the potential for organizational learning is obscured. For example, numbers within an infographic are not indicators of quality—they are in fact just numbers. Among the potential ramifications of reporting community engagement outputs only for public relations purposes is the risk of delegitimizing the work and, worse yet, opening it up for misinterpretation.

Furthermore, public relations media do not always offer enough space to communicate context or the place-based nature of the work, which hinders the important work of telling the story from the community's perspective. As CEPs we have a responsibility to gather claims or statements of impact that (re)position the university as a contributor *with* community. We must, therefore, continuously contextualize the data or inquiry activities, a goal that also relates to the second major tension in this area.

The second tension that we face with regard to inquiry on community engagement when it comes to the particular area of communications and marketing relates to power and decision making or authority. The role that CEPs play in marketing and communications can come into conflict with such critical commitments as "challenge problematic language use that is paternalistic, dehumanizing, or oppressive" *(Dostilio et al., 2017, pp. 46–51)*. We recognize that to take on inquiry activities in the ways we have outlined is to frame them as institutionally focused. By situating them in this way, it immediately centers the inquiry activities on the institution, college, or campus, not on community—it does not frame inquiry as being *with* the community. It is hard to navigate the structural constraints of the university and the role that we play in providing

data to strengthen institutional support and improvement because the stories we are telling may not be in alignment with our critical commitments. For example, when the campus compiles a list of community partners, who makes decisions about definitions or methodologies (e.g., inclusion/exclusion criteria)? In other words, who determines what constitutes a "partner"? If we rely upon faculty and staff to provide the names of community partners, do we ever consider whether the community organization sees themselves as a "partner"? In this way, if we do not find a way to honor or center our community partners in the inquiry process, then we will not be honoring the critical commitments of our field. It is the same when it comes to communicating the metrics or persuasive messages of community engagement: We must center *with* community and not on how the institution's community engagement had an impact *on* community (its people, problems, issues, assets, organizations, etc.).

Our reflections on these tensions between inquiry and communications, public relations, or recognition have led to two recommendations for consideration. First, campuses should invest in more full-time positions related to inquiry activities within the organizational structure of community engagement (see IUPUI, University of Louisville, Virginia Commonwealth University, Washington University in St. Louis, Stanford University, University of Notre Dame, or Indiana Campus Compact). Staff in these roles will be vital to the implementation of IT platforms used for tracking and monitoring and should have a strong relationship to others on campus who have access to data or manage other data collection processes (e.g., faculty annual reporting).

Second, the need for marketing and managing public perception cannot be ignored, so we recommend being a more active participant. We encourage CEPs to be more proactive by feeding stories to communications and marketing staff—stories that offer the communities' perspectives and send a message that the university is a reciprocal partner. And when we are asked to provide numbers, CEPs should seek clarifying information and offer limitations and caution constituents about misinterpretations. To honor the rigorous research design, we recommend documenting the methodology and findings using an open-source platform (e.g., ScholarWorks) so that when possible, the numbers can be referenced back to an online source and provide a link to or record of the organization's learning over time.

Tension: Tracking Everything While Acknowledging the Horizon Event

We offered an example earlier in this essay regarding language used by accreditation bodies for programs of study or disciplines. The diversity of terms used to refer to transdisciplinary civic learning outcomes is problematic for the activities and roles of inquiry because, as we stated above, CEPs have to find a way to communicate across a variety of disciplinary-based backgrounds that come with their own terminology and guiding theories. In practice, these differences mean that we must engage in inquiry activities (specifically, tracking and monitoring) that are inclusive of all the different manifestations of campus–community engagement (e.g., community engagement, outreach, service, citizen science, applied research, service-learning, participatory research, public scholarship) for inquiry purposes. For example, if the goal of tracking and monitoring is to learn about "everything" that is happening, we should not seek to judge the quality, categorize, or define it—not yet, anyway. Because tracking and monitoring require us to have a "catch-all" approach, we must utilize other inquiry activities to keep up with the demands of our theories, values, and practices surrounding this work, namely "democratic engagement" as outlined by Saltmarsh, Hartley, and Clayton *(2009)*. In other words, CEPs can and should (through tracking and monitoring) cast a wide net and then go through robust inquiry activities (assessment, evaluation, or research) to ask questions regarding how any of those initiatives meet the elements of our horizon event: democratic engagement.

CEPs will encounter similar challenges when working to develop outcomes for community engagement *(Kezar, 2002)*. Most campuses are merely capturing outputs (e.g., number of courses, number of students, number of hours) and perhaps the impact of service-learning on student learning and success. However, there is a growing trend to measure other outcomes and impacts *(Norris & Weiss, in press)*. This is challenging because most campuses do not have the systems and processes in place for robust tracking and monitoring. However, with time, talent, resources, and a commitment to develop robust tracking and monitoring, CEPs can take an inquiry-based approach to articulating diverse and applicable outcomes. The future of higher education depends on our community engagement practices and programs, but just having these things (i.e., counting how many service-learning courses were offered) is not sufficient and may be doing more harm than good. However, by engaging in all of the inquiry activities we have outlined above,

CEPs can provide compelling evidence of higher education's value to and contribution with our communities and society.

Closing Thoughts

In summary, our purpose here was to illustrate the role of inquiry for CEPs. As we have outlined here, inquiry involves multiple tasks: tracking, monitoring, evaluation, assessment, and research. Further, we have articulated how CEPs' inquiry activities can contribute to and build capacity for learning at the individual level and group level, as well as how inquiry is essential for organizational-level learning and change. Finally, there is not a critical mass of CEPs who have roles primarily focused on inquiry activities or have the capacity to facilitate the systematic inquiry practices necessary for being a knowledge worker for organizational learning. In regard to being systematic, there are plenty of internal and external pressures that emphasize "systematic" as an essential component of measuring the performance of our institutions (e.g., accreditation requirements, Carnegie's Elective Community Engagement application, campus strategic plan metrics, and implementing campus-level or system-level IT platforms). We encourage campuses to develop a plan for systematic inquiry on community engagement that aligns with institutional plans, priorities, or mission(s) and demonstrates a need for more CEPs with explicit responsibilities related to inquiry on community engagement.

We offer the following recommendations for not only developing systematic inquiry processes, but also for being or becoming a CEP who is a key knowledge worker for organizational learning:

- *Develop a long-term plan for inquiry.* Consider your campus strategic plan goals, the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement requirements, accreditation needs, community priorities, and campus context. Invest in data collection that leverages existing systems and processes while also allowing you to supplement your tracking and monitoring to explore the deeper, more meaningful questions that will lead to evidence that supports changes in policies, programs, and practices *(Norris, Wendling, & Keen, 2017)*.
- *Build cross-campus partnerships.* Identify those across campus responsible for achieving campus goals (e.g., research and creative activity, global learning, faculty and staff development, economic and community develop-

ment, enrollment management) and learn what their priorities are, what data they are collecting, and how you can work together to achieve common goals.

- *Build your capacity for inquiry.* Community engagement conferences, although welcoming and helpful, are not enough to develop one's capacity for inquiry. Look for workshops and conferences that your assessment or institutional research faculty/staff attend. Websites for the following organizations are a good place to start: Association for Institutional Research (AIR), Assessment Institute, Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education, National Institute for Learning Outcomes and Assessment (NILOA), Indiana Campus Compact's BPACE program.
- *(Re)Consider your audience(s).* Develop a communications plan and reconsider who needs information from you, what type of information is appropriate, and how to best provide that information. Do you need a formal annual report? If you want to change policies, programs, or practices, what evidence do you need to support your case? Who needs to know? What is the best way to communicate with them? Is your current inquiry leading to better practice?

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About the Authors

H. Anne Weiss is the director of assessment for Indiana Campus Compact, and a doctoral candidate at Indiana University. Her research interests center on the connections between institutional, student, and community success. She received her M.A. in applied communication from Indiana University.

Kristin E. Norris is the director of assessment for the Office of Community Engagement at IUPUI. Her research and professional interest include working with stakeholders (internal and external) to track community-engaged activities in order to conduct assessment, evaluation, and research that transforms higher education and demonstrates how IUPUI's community-engaged activities (e.g., programs, pedagogies, research, initiatives) support the institutional mission, demonstrate progress toward the strategic plan, and inform decision making. She received her Ph.D. in education administration from Indiana University.