

# Grappling With Complexity: Faculty Perspectives on the Influence of Community-Engaged Teaching on Student Learning

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## Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine college and university faculty members' perspectives on whether and how community-engaged teaching influences their students' learning. We grounded our study in the tradition of interpretative study, as well as the conceptualization of learning put forth by Neumann (2005). Based on interviews with 14 faculty members (across a range of institution type, rank, discipline, geographic location, and demographics) who have conducted community-engaged teaching currently or within the past 5 years, participants' narratives highlighted a metatheme of their students learning to grapple with complexity. Grappling with complexity consists of three subthemes of learning: recognizing the intricacies of applying theory to real-world problems, shifting from deficit to asset thinking, and confronting power structures in society. Implications for theory and practice are included.

*Keywords: community-engaged teaching, student learning, service learning, teaching, qualitative*



**H**istorically, the mission of higher education has included two of several key aims: enhancing student learning and addressing society's needs (Gunn, 2018; Kezar et al., 2005; Liang et al., 2015; Ozdem, 2011; Shaker, 2015; Weerts, 2014). For a significant part of its history, higher education was granted relative autonomy in carrying out those aims (Pallas et al., 2017) and, for the most part, was viewed positively in this light. However, over the past 5 decades, stakeholders and scholars have increasingly questioned whether higher education is effectively enhancing student learning and supporting society's needs (Fitzgerald & Primavera, 2013; Gunn, 2018; Hong, 2018; Jankowski & Marshall, 2017; Pallas et al., 2017). Thus, the autonomy once afforded to institutions of higher education was replaced, in part, by regulations for compliance and mandates for documented outcomes of student learning and community impact (Hong, 2018; Jankowski

& Marshall, 2017; National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, 2016; Pallas et al., 2017).

Some of the shift in confidence is viewed through the lens of the changing knowledge and skills needed by students in the 21st century. With the 21st century characterized as global, diverse, technology- and information-driven, and fast-paced (Society for College and University Planning, 2016), critics argue that current college and university teaching practices are not providing the type of education that fosters skills needed in the current century, or are not reforming quickly enough toward doing so. Facility in communicating and collaborating in diverse settings, proficiency in applying data to solving problems and decision making, capacity to think critically and creatively, and the ability to understand alternative viewpoints, among others (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2013; Global Digital Citizenship Foundation, 2015;

Harris, 2015; San Pedro, 2017; Whitaker, 2018), are now considered essential 21st-century skills for students graduating from colleges and universities.

Another explanation for the shift in confidence in higher education's ability to meet its dual aims of enhancing student learning and addressing society's needs is a critique that colleges and universities increasingly focus on rankings and prestige, vis-à-vis faculty research productivity, rather than on partnerships with communities in need (Boyer, 1990; Calleson et al., 2005). At most types of institutions, the structure for faculty tenure and promotion rewards scholarship and research output and devalues teaching and internal/external service (O'Meara, 2006; Pelco & Howard, 2016; Weiser & Houglum, 1998); this is true even for teaching-centered institutions as they strive to emulate major research universities in hopes of increased reputational rankings (O'Meara, 2006; O'Meara et al., 2015). Consequently, stakeholders increasingly criticize higher education's move away from its historical commitment of applying knowledge and expertise to the real-world problems facing these institutions' local and regional communities, as well as society at large (Saltmarsh, 2010; Saltmarsh et al., 2015; Tierney & Perkins, 2015).

One means of addressing the concern that higher education is not fully meeting its historical mission of enhancing student learning and addressing society's needs is through community engagement, defined as a "collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity" (Driscoll, 2008, p. 39). This definition highlights "a shift away from an expert model of delivering university knowledge to the public toward a more collaborative model in which community partners play a significant role in creating and sharing knowledge to the mutual benefit of institutions and society" (Weerts, 2014, p. 136). In simple terms, both the college/university (i.e., students, faculty, the institution) and its surrounding community (i.e., social service agencies, community groups, neighborhood residents) give and receive in their collaborative partnerships.

Within higher education systems and faculty workloads, community engagement comprises a multitude of forms (i.e., re-

search, service, teaching); one variation is to situate it within faculty members' teaching and coursework, thereby striving for the dual goals of serving the common good and enhancing student learning. "Community-engaged teaching" (a term often used interchangeably with "community-engaged pedagogies" and "service-learning") is typically enacted through service-learning, an instructional strategy connecting the substantive content of a course to out-of-class experiences, community settings (e.g., nonprofits, community organizations, government agencies, advocacy groups, health care centers, etc.). Campus Compact (2018), a national coalition of more than 1,000 colleges and universities advocating for the public purposes of higher education, defines "service-learning" as "incorporate[ing] community work into the curriculum, giving students real-world learning experiences that enhance their academic learning while providing a tangible benefit for the community" (para. 1). In practice, service-learning typically falls into six categories: (a) pure, in which the intellectual focus of the course is service to the community; (b) discipline-based, in which course content is the basis for analysis around community engagement; (c) problem-based, in which students consult with community partners and develop potential solutions to problems; (d) capstone, in which advanced students integrate their cumulative knowledge (across semesters) into service to the community; (e) service internships, in which students work 15–20 hours a week in a community organization with ongoing reflection opportunities; and (f) undergraduate community-based action research, in which students work with faculty on research projects geared toward community concerns (Heffernan, 2001, pp. 3–4).

The literature on community engagement and service-learning is growing, with a common thread focusing on the outcomes of service-learning, in terms of both student learning and community impact. Past studies have indicated that service-learning improves students' critical thinking, moral development, commitment to service, interpersonal development, and real-world understanding. Moreover, students report high levels of motivation in their service-learning courses, as compared to traditional courses, and greater levels of faculty-student relationships (Astin et al., 2000; Currie-Mueller & Littlefield, 2018; Eyler et al., 2001; Fisher et al., 2017; McGoldrick & Ziegert, 2002).

In agreement, scholars have previously reported positive learning outcomes associated with integrating theory-to-practice in coursework and partnerships (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Fogle et al., 2017; Rizzo, 2018). For instance, Rizzo (2018) noted that community-engaged learning allows students to “examine their own assumptions and to intentionally forge activist alliances with community partners” (para. 1). In developing new perspectives, Valdes (2003) asserts students come to question power structures in society through education as “a form of praxis committed to anti-subordination principles and social justice activism, guided by multidimensional and contextual analysis of law and society, and grounded in critical and self-critical interrogation of knowledge, understanding, and action” (p. 89).

Over the past decade, service-learning has been labeled a high-impact practice (Kuh, 2008). A “high-impact practice” (HIP) can be operationally defined as an activity that sponsors interactions with faculty and peers, promotes high expectations and opportunities for feedback, encourages diverse and inclusive exchanges between peers, and requires substantial investment of time and effort to complete (Kuh, 2008; Zilvinskis & Dumford, 2018). In a report for the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), Kuh (2008) noted participation in HIPs resulted in strong positive effects on student learning and personal growth (see also Eyler et al., 2001). Specifically, students who participated in HIPs persisted at higher rates, received higher or equal grades, interacted with faculty, developed critical thinking and writing skills, and appreciated diversity and alternative perspectives at greater levels than students not participating in HIPs (Brownell & Swaner, 2009). Scholars also affirm significant benefits of HIP engagement for historically underserved students (Finley et al., 2013; Swaner & Brownell, 2009). Although some scholars question whether adequate empirical evidence exists for the positive claims of HIPs (Johnson & Stage, 2018), many institutions are investing in these practices and, in general, view HIPs favorably (Kuh & Kinzie, 2018).

Benefits of service-learning extend beyond students participating in the course. Although not widely studied, scholars report mutually beneficial relationships of learning by students and community members

when engaged in service-learning (Chupp & Joseph, 2010; Roschelle et al., 2000). Reciprocal outcomes are maximized when community members participate “not merely as recipients of the service, but as partners in the design, implementation, and assessment of the activity” (Chupp & Joseph, 2010, p. 209). However, in a review of scholarly work on the community impact of service-learning, Bringle and Steinberg (2010) found several studies describing the advantages and barriers for community partners in community-engaged teaching, but not measurable ways in which the community was improved as a result of such partnership. As community-engaged teaching serves dual purposes in actualizing student and community partner learning, ways to appropriately assess community growth and development remain needed.

Although the extant literature on community engagement is growing, gaps remain in our understanding about connections between community-engaged teaching and student learning, as well as the impact on community, although the latter is not a focus of this study. In this article, we strive to better understand faculty perspectives on how their students’ learning is shaped by community-engaged teaching. Since community-engaged teaching is viewed as one pathway to achieving higher education’s mission of enhancing student learning and addressing society’s needs, we argue that in order to advance scholarship, institutional initiatives for community engagement, and teaching improvement, there is a need for additional studies focused on faculty members’ perspectives on whether and how their community-engaged teaching influences student learning. The faculty perspective is particularly salient because teaching and knowledge creation and dissemination are at the core of faculty work. We thus ask the following research question: In what ways do faculty members who conduct community-engaged teaching perceive that their courses influence their students’ learning?

### Conceptual Framework

As a study focused on whether and in what ways students learn from their experiences in community-engaged teaching, we grounded this study in a conceptual framework of learning put forth by Anna Neumann (2005), in which learning is viewed through a lens of change. Neumann (2005) wrote, “Learning, as changed cognition, involves

the personal and shared construction of knowledge; it involves coming to know something familiar in different ways, or to know something altogether new, from within one's self and often with others" (p. 65). In defining learning, Neumann (2005) consistently referred to several interrelated claims about learning. Specifically, learning is connected to (a) the subject matter, (b) the learner, and (c) the context. In regard to subject matter, learning cannot be separated from the subject matter that is being learned. Learning thus calls on individuals to be exposed to, question, reflect on, and reconceptualize subject matter in ways that build on current understandings and develop new understandings (Dewey, 1902/1974; Neumann, 2005, 2009; Shulman, 2004a, 2004b). Neumann (2005) also stressed that "learning implies a learner (or learners)" (p. 66). She recognized that learning, and the process of learning, is influenced by individuals' frames of mind that have been shaped from their past and current experiences and reflections on those experiences. Finally, context, particularly the context of individuals' communities, shapes learning (Neumann, 2005, 2009).

Neumann's inclusion of learner and context in her conceptualization addressed past criticisms of theories of learning, namely that learning theories often elevated the knowledge and experiences of those in power (i.e., White, cisgendered men) and therefore overlooked alternative perspectives (see Ladson-Billings, 1995; Pallas & Neumann, *in press*, for expanded views on defining good teaching). All three of these elements—subject matter (course content), learner (enrolled students and their prior knowledge and cultural background), and context (community partners and sites and their cultural background)—are significant in community-engaged teaching and, in turn, in better understanding what participating faculty members perceive as their students' changed cognition within this form of teaching.

## Methods

Focusing on the perspectives of faculty members conducting community-engaged teaching, this qualitative study follows an interpretive tradition (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Erickson, 1985) that seeks to examine individuals' experiences and sense-making of their experiences rather than uncovering given facts. The interpretive tradition

was selected as this study's design because it seeks "to understand the world from the subjects' points of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 1). By engaging participants through in-depth dialogue, this research generated information-rich data on their perspectives (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), interpretations, and meanings based on community-engaged pedagogical practices.

This article is part of a larger study that focused on the role of community-engaged work (teaching, research, or service) on faculty members' sense of vitality. Emerging from the larger study was a strong narrative around participants' views on community-engaged teaching and student learning, and thus we returned to the data for further examination in this regard. Next, we explain our methodological steps.

This study's second author conceptualized the initial study on community-engaged work and faculty vitality and collected the data (i.e., interviews, documents). Then both authors collaborated on data analysis and the writing of this article more specifically focused on community-engaged teaching and student learning. Following Institutional Review Board approval, purposeful sampling (Coyne, 1997) was applied to obtain participants; purposeful sampling is a qualitative research technique that intentionally seeks out and selects participants according to two criteria: (a) participants are "information rich" because of their experience with the phenomenon being examined, and (b) participants have demonstrated their availability and willingness to articulately communicate their experiences (Palinkas et al., 2016, p. 534; see also Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The second author contacted 30 members of her personal and professional networks via email, asking for nominations of faculty members who are participating in community-engaged teaching, research, and/or service currently or within the past 5 years. In the nomination email, nominators were asked to suggest faculty members from a range of ranks, institutional types, geographical locations, demographic backgrounds, discipline sectors, and categories of community-engaged work; 57 nominations were received. Next, a matrix on gender, rank, institutional type, and type of community-engaged work (i.e., teaching, research, service, or a combina-



tion) was developed to select a diverse participant pool. Thirty-two potential participants were invited via email, and 25 agreed to participate in the study.

Following participant selection, 60–90-minute interviews with the 25 participants were conducted. The interviews were either face-to-face, over the telephone, or through a virtual meeting platform. The semi-structured interview focused on three key areas:

(a) background information about pathway to academic career and discipline area, (b) discussion of participants’ community-engaged work and their perceptions on impacts and what helps or hinders their work, and (c) discussion of participants’ views on vitality and if, and if applicable in what ways, their community-engaged work has influenced their vitality. For this article, the questions pertaining to section (b) were most relevant. Following transcription

**Table 1. Demographic Information of Participants Community-Engaged Teaching**

<b>Demographic</b>	<b>N</b>
<i>Total Participants</i>	14
<b>Gender</b>	
<i>Women</i>	8
<i>Men</i>	6
<b>Institutional Type</b>	
<i>Research</i>	7
<i>Comprehensive</i>	3
<i>Liberal arts</i>	3
<i>Community college</i>	1
<b>U.S. Geographic Locations</b>	
<i>Northeast</i>	5
<i>Southeast</i>	2
<i>Midwest</i>	3
<i>Southwest</i>	1
<i>West</i>	3
<b>Discipline</b>	
<i>Applied/professional</i>	5
<i>Arts or humanities</i>	4
<i>Social science</i>	3
<i>Science</i>	2
<b>Rank</b>	
<i>Assistant professors</i>	3
<i>Associate professors</i>	6
<i>Full professors</i>	5
<b>Race</b>	
<i>White faculty</i>	7
<i>Faculty of Color</i>	7

of interviews, all of the participants were sent their transcripts for member checking, which enables participants to review, clarify, and revise transcripts if desired (Glesne, 2015). Beyond interview data, we also collected publicly available documents or reviewed electronic sources related to items discussed in the interviews.

For analysis, we followed Saldaña's (2012) coding strategies. Because we focused on the narrative of community-engaged teaching and student learning for this article, we included only 14 (of the original 25) participants who perform community-engaged teaching (i.e., service-learning); the remaining 11 participants were excluded from analysis because they pursue community-engaged research or service, but not teaching (see Table 1).

For our next step, we independently read each of the transcripts and then collaboratively determined three analytic questions, grounded in our research question, that we would apply to our first-cycle coding (Saldaña, 2012): (a) Do participants discuss or express involvement in community-engaged teaching? If yes, how so? (b) Do participants discuss or express the ways in which their community-engaged teaching influences their students? If yes, how so? (c) Do and, if so, how do participants describe the role of community-engaged teaching in their students' academic, professional, or personal growth? During first-cycle coding, we coded (i.e., highlighted sections of transcripts responding to the analytic questions) and wrote memos (names and definitions of the different codes, reflective notes about the codes and their meaning) independently at first and then collaboratively discussed our coding and memos; we revised our code memos based on our discussions. During first-cycle coding, we developed 17 codes.

Following first-cycle coding, we next engaged in second-cycle pattern coding (Saldaña, 2012), in which we collaboratively combined similar codes into robust themes. For example, we collapsed the following codes: "theory to practice to theory," "real-world problems," "messiness in translating classroom to field sites," and "ideal versus real" into the one theme of "recognizing the intricacies of applying theory to real-world problems and practices." This process resulted in the 17 codes becoming three robust themes, which are discussed in the Findings section of this article.

In the third phase of analysis, we focused on how our conceptual framework of Neumann's (2005, 2009) work on learning informed, elaborated, or strengthened our analysis, as well as how our findings might contribute to theory-building and the extant literature.

We followed several strategies to protect the trustworthiness of our study. First, we provided member checking opportunities to review and revise transcripts to all participants (Glesne, 2015). Second, we collaboratively maintained and discussed our codebook, thereby allowing us to retrace our thinking and analytical decision points. Third, several colleagues with expertise in community-engaged work and/or teaching at the higher education level served as critical readers of our article drafts. Finally, the full article contains quoted sections from the transcripts so the reader has participants' voices to represent the themes we present.

## Findings

In addressing this study's research questions, all of the 14 participants responded affirmatively that community-engaged teaching positively influenced their students' learning, specifically through a metatheme of grappling with complexity. We define "grappling with complexity" as a disruption to students' original ways of thinking and being, thereby calling into question the efficacy of past knowledge and practices, which aligns with Neumann's (2005) conceptualization of learning as well. The metatheme of grappling with complexity is composed of one or more of the following three subthemes: (a) recognizing the intricacies of applying theory to real-world problems and practices, (b) shifting from deficit to asset thinking, and (c) confronting power structures in society. We next discuss each theme.

### Recognizing the Intricacies of Applying Theory to Real-World Problems and Practices

The theme of recognizing the intricacies of applying theory to real-world problems and practices, noted by all 14 participants, highlights the ways in which faculty participants observed their students wrestling with the challenges and opportunities of applying "clear-cut explanations" of subject matter presented in coursework and texts to "the messy world of real settings." According to

participants, students typically mastered subject matter content (e.g., theories, models, factual material) “in the abstract” but often confronted “gray areas” when the theories “did not fully stand up” or “apply neatly” in practical settings, such as community sites selected for service-learning courses. As our participants noted, these “disruptive” experiences pushed students to rethink the theories and models previously learned, specifically around the theory’s shortcomings and, consequently, ways in which the theory or model could be revised to better serve community practices.

As an example of this theme, we refer to the case of Steven, a business professor who teaches interdisciplinary courses on health care ethics at a private, liberal arts university in the northeastern United States. Steven explained that the majority of his business students arrive in his service-learning course with a “profit-oriented” mind-set, trained on the mantra of “selling as much as we can for as long as we can.” In Steven’s course, students continue to learn seminal business and sales models; however, they are also exposed to ethical issues in health care delivery. Coupled with weekly site visits to nursing homes and adult care centers, Steven’s course asks students to reconsider what is “appropriate care” and, in turn, what is the role of those in “the business” of health care delivery. He recalls how his very students who initially boasted about their abilities to “increase sales and profits” in pharmaceutical sales were visibly shocked by nursing home patients who were “completely zoned out due to over-medication.” Grounded in the experiences of the site visitations, Steven’s course pushes his students to consider “triple bottom line” alternatives in which they move beyond “just profit” and consider “how to treat someone.” In the end, the students’ reflective journals, overall, indicate they are now asking “Is there another way?” to lead a health care-related business while also prioritizing the care of the patients who rely on the system. Additionally, the students’ journals and class discussions also detailed a realization that their nursing home patients could be “someone they love” or “could be one of them in the future.” Thus, the “kind of quality of care” becomes more personal to the students, subsequently broadening their empathy around health care delivery and its “impact on humans.”

Beyond “triple bottom line” alternative

thinking, Steven’s service-learning course also exposes his students to the reality that the best theories and knowledge espoused in their health and medical courses are not always followed in or pertinent to “real-world situations.” He shared a story of a student who was conflicted during his weekly visitation to an adult care center because his 92-year-old patient insisted they spend their time together outside so she could smoke. Knowing full well that smoking is a habit with well-established negative consequences to individuals’ health, the student initially resisted. However, the patient became increasingly irritated and eventually yelled, “Listen to me, sonny. I do not have men anymore and I do not drink. This is my last pleasure. I am 92.” Going against what his medical theories taught him, he proceeded to spend the next several weeks of his visitations outside with his smoking patient. He went on to journal, “What was I going to do? Deprive this woman of her last pleasure? I know it is bad for her physical health, but maybe it is good for her mental health?” This student’s case demonstrated a tension between what the student learned in his health and medical courses (i.e., smoking is bad and should not be allowed) and the role of the individual patient’s desires and quality of life (i.e., smoking as a last pleasure in a long-lived life).

### Shifting From Deficit to Asset Thinking

A second theme among 10 of the 14 participants’ responses was an observed shift from deficit to asset thinking about individuals and communities with which students had limited prior interaction. According to participants, the vast majority of their students initially held “negative” perceptions of underserved, minoritized populations, often using language such as “rough neighborhoods,” “poor,” and “uneducated” when initially describing populations served by their community partners. Moreover, students also entered into their community-engaged courses with a “savior mentality,” believing they could “swoop in” and “solve all problems with little to no understanding of the community or its needs.” Participants noted many of their students initially voiced rationales such as “saving disadvantaged people,” “pitying poor people,” or “fixing the community” when explaining their motivation for enrolling in service-learning courses.

However, with time and experience, participants observed, via reflective journals and classroom discussions, their students adopted more of an assets lens, rather than a deficit lens, when thinking about the communities in which they engaged. Asset thinking, according to one of our social scientist participants, recognizes the “wealth of knowledge, ideas, and skills that a community holds”; is rarely “tapped into”; and connects with the concept of funds of knowledge. “Funds of knowledge” is defined as how individuals obtain skills and knowledge that are historically and culturally developed, allowing them to function within a given culture (Moll et al., 1992).

The case of Quinn, an environmental science professor at a public research university in the southeastern United States, serves as an example of this theme. Building off networks from past research projects in Kenya, Quinn developed a service-learning course in which her U.S. students virtually teamed up with Kenyan students to explore an environmental issue affecting both locations—that of water conservation. At the start of the project, Quinn found most of her U.S. students espoused the following perspective:

a lot of youths tend to struggle with . . . and by youths, I mean U.S. youths . . . tend to struggle with “[water conservation issues] are problems that happen over there. Our water is relatively clean, the air . . . you know, we can breathe; somebody comes and picks up our trash.” So, they see these environmental issues as, “That stuff happens over there in those other countries” where [the U.S. is] really struggling with these sorts of [water conservation] things too.

Through ongoing virtual discussions between the two sets of students, the U.S. students learned Kenyan students followed a more sustainable daily life than their U.S. counterparts. The Kenyan students thus provided insight and strategies on water conservation, such as developing “water collection sites [or] creating rain gardens, which is just essentially planting indigenous plants to soak up more water.” Because the Kenyan students had more experience and success with water conservation, this project created an interesting dynamic for student learning, as Quinn explained:

[The water conservation collaboration] put Kenyan students in a . . . position of knowers because they were sort of experts in this. And they were able to sort of talk to the [U.S.] students as . . . “These are some of the ways that we’ve been able to solve these problems. You might try these.” It . . . shifted some of that power relationship and really gave the [U.S.] students a broader perspective of “Wow, maybe we aren’t doing everything as sustainable as we could over here.”

Quinn’s service-learning project demonstrated the evolution of her U.S. students—moving from one of deficit thinking of Kenya’s environmental sustainability to one of asset thinking in which they gained strategies and perspectives on water conservation from the Kenyan students’ funds of knowledge.

### **Confronting Power Structures in Society**

Confronting power structures in society is the final theme representing slightly more than half (eight of 14) of the participants’ responses. In this theme, participants asserted community-engaged teaching pushed their students beyond a “shallow orientation of helping” to a deeper critique of power structures that create, maintain, and perpetuate inequities. As previously mentioned, many of the participants’ students entered into their courses with “savior mentalities,” thinking they would volunteer in a community setting for the semester and “solve the problems of the people there.” This philosophy purports that communities’ problems are easy to solve and overlooks the systemic obstacles hindering those without power. However, participants found, via their class discussions and students’ actions, engagement with the community facilitated students’ awareness that there are no “easy solutions,” and instead they developed a “deeper understanding of marginalizing power structures.” In some cases, students moved beyond awareness into the realm of social justice activism (Valdes, 2003), defined as working for transformative change of systems and cultural norms that oppress, exploit, and marginalize individuals.

As an example of this theme, we discuss the case of Robert, a professor of educa-



tion at a regional research university in the midwestern United States. Robert recalls how he shifted to community-engaged teaching after an “epic failure” in which his “best and brightest” student lasted only five months as a high school principal situated in a Native American community. Realizing his department was “missing the boat,” Robert developed a principal preparation course (and program) coupling coursework with a year-long practicum in a Native American school. The year-long practicum consisted of two key components: (a) authentic, problem-based experiences in Native American schools that augment and/or problematize what is learned through traditional coursework and (b) opportunities for aspiring school leaders to engage with and learn from Native American community leaders, students, and families.

Throughout the years of leading his course/program, Robert found his students shifting from “emphasiz[ing] school improvement to emphasiz[ing] social justice,” meaning his students first recognize schooling inequities and second, in some cases, strive to address social inequities by dismantling structures that discriminate against and hinder minoritized populations. As an example of his students’ engaging in social justice action, Robert created a professional learning community among his aspiring principals and current principals in the local area. Through conversations in their professional learning community, Robert’s students learned that the school administrator professional organization in their state—a powerful research and advocacy body—rarely focused on issues affecting Native American schools and their students. Consequently, the leaders of Native American schools did not attend the professional organization’s meetings or conferences, thereby constraining their input in the organization’s governance, research agenda, and policy initiatives. Realizing the current structure of the state’s professional organization was a structure disenfranchising Native American schools, the students wrote a proposal initiating a Native American schools division, something that would come to fruition after much advocacy and effort on their part. Robert discusses the outcome of his students’ social justice work:

Now Native American school leaders are attending the [name of the professional organization in the state]

. . . which has resulted in better communication about the [Native American] communities . . . and . . . [the Native American division] created a voice . . . and that voice then will benefit . . . it has benefitted the community. By bringing people together, by acknowledging a different viewpoint, a different perspective and looking at the ability to refocus on assets as opposed to deficits. It’s been, you know, traditionally defined as, “The school is low-performing . . . it’s a deficit.” Well, what are the assets that the school possesses? And the leaders of other schools and the community members across the state who are working with [the Native American division] who are not familiar with the context, now have a better insight and understand more about the assets that the community brings.

By implementing community-engaged teaching after realizing his traditional principal-preparation methods were “falling short for our Native American schools,” Robert’s case highlights how his students not only recognized inequities facing minoritized groups, but also confronted one structure that perpetuated these inequities. From their engagement with Native American communities and schools, Robert believes his students learned “whose voices get heard; whose needs get met”; they also learned “how to be activists” against the structures of power that “silence voices.”

### Discussion/Significance

In this article, we studied 14 faculty members who are currently participating in or have in the recent past participated in community-engaged teaching to learn more about their perspectives on whether or not and, if applicable, in what ways community-engaged teaching influences student learning. All of the 14 participants agreed that community-engaged teaching positively shaped student learning, particularly around the learning that takes place when students grapple with complexity, a metatheme of our findings. We define “grappling with complexity” as a disruption to students’ original ways of thinking and being, thereby calling into question the efficacy of past knowledge and prac-

tices. Per our analysis, it consists of three subthemes: (a) recognizing the intricacies of applying theory to real-world problems and practices, (b) shifting from deficit to asset thinking, and (c) confronting power structures in society.

Grappling with complexity resonates with Neumann's conceptualization of learning when she speaks to individuals "coming to know something familiar in different ways, or to know something altogether new" (Neumann, 2005, p. 65). In line with Neumann, our participants highlighted how their students saw subject matter knowledge in new and/or different ways as a result of their engagement with and in communities. Steven's students came to know business and medical models in a different way when empathizing with the people on the receiving end of these models. Quinn's students came to know environmental conservation in different ways when recognizing the assets of their Kenyan counterparts' advanced efforts in this area. Robert's students came to know organizational structures in different ways when they lobbied for greater representation of Native American voices in a statewide professional organization after recognizing systemic disenfranchisement. In these three cases, as well as in the larger narrative of all 14 participants, grappling with complexity through the integration of subject matter, learners, and community contexts propelled students to see the nuances of subject matter—nuances disrupting their current, often unidimensional understanding—and forge new, multilayered lenses in which to view subject matter.

The type of learning described by Neumann (2005) and the cases in this study align with calls for reforming higher education for the 21st century, a time period characterized by fast-paced, technologically driven change, globalization, and knowledge-centeredness (Society for College and University Planning, 2016). Over the last several decades, higher education experts and stakeholders have advocated for colleges and universities to elevate skills needed for the complexity of contemporary society, such as the ability to manage, interpret, and apply information for decision making and problem solving; the capacity to think critically and creatively; and the facility to communicate and collaborate with others (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2013; Global Digital Citizenship Foundation,

2015; Harris, 2015; Whitaker, 2018). Other researchers have noted that the capacity to understand others' viewpoints and experiences is significant for contemporary and future societies. San Pedro (2017) speaks to this by writing:

Rather than centering safety, I argue that multiple truths should have opportunities to come into contact with others' truths. When our knowledges come in direct contact with those who may not fully share our reality, we have greater openings to learn with others the ways they have come to understand their realities. (p. 102)

In this study, participants perceived that their community-engaged teaching fostered 21st-century skills—particularly by enhancing students' capacity to face complexity, to confront the uncomfortable in hopes of "coming to know something familiar in different ways" (Neumann, 2005, p. 65).

### **Grappling With Complexity in Practice: Pedagogical Approaches**

What pedagogical approaches or tangible teaching practices did participants follow in order to shape their students' learning through community-engaged teaching? First, all 14 participants described the process of community-engaged teaching using words such as "long-term" or "authentic commitments," meaning they spent considerable time cultivating relationships with community partners, deeply studying the community context, and reflecting on how the community context interacts with the core concepts of their courses' subject matter. By coming to deeply understand the community context, participants could design learning experiences that integrated theory-to-practice, as well as address common conceptual errors or assumptions that hinder learning and reinforce negative stereotypes about community partners.

What did this long-term relationship-building look like in practice? Some participants collaborated with community partners on research or service projects for years prior to embarking on a teaching collaboration; others developed service-learning course ideas and then employed their professional and personal networks to identify appropriate community sites and spent time (usually months or years)

“getting to know the community” and its potential as a site for student learning; still others relied on their institutions’ community engagement centers, when existing, to establish and develop community–higher education relationships. Regardless of the point of entry, all participants highlighted that successful community–engaged teaching requires an established and trusting relationship with the community partners and a full understanding of the context of the community site and its interaction with the course’s content.

In addition to establishing relationships and understanding community contexts, participants also highlighted the importance of connecting subject matter learning to the community context. All of the participants crafted syllabi, selected course readings, and created assignments that aligned foundational ideas in their disciplines (i.e., theory) with practical learning opportunities (i.e., practice) afforded through their community partnerships. In order to connect theory and practice, participants enacted many of the following teaching practices: (a) selecting texts that draw awareness and multiple theoretical perspectives to challenges facing a community context, (b) providing guided reflection questions grounded in course–based theories and concepts pre and post community site visit, (c) assigning journaling exercises calling on students to connect theory–practice–personal reflections on what they see and do in their community settings, (d) facilitating difficult, but supportive, classroom discussions around students’ reflections and awareness of their theory–to–practice experiences, and (e) coordinating and, when necessary, educating community partners on theories relevant to their work so the partners infuse references to theory while the students are on site.

In the aforementioned practices, participants noted another significant aspect for student learning: the balancing act of pushing student learning in new, sometimes uncomfortable, ways while also supporting and nurturing students throughout their personal and educational growth. Referencing an analogy of muscles, San Pedro (2018) coined the phrase “culturally disrupting pedagogy” (CDP) as a counter to the normalization of dominant narratives (i.e., Whiteness; p. 1221). He wrote: “In order for muscles to grow stronger, they must undergo small ruptures and tears in the fibers in order for new tissue to form as

it heals. CDP creates such ruptures (zones of contact) for new knowledge and new identities to take hold” (p. 1221). In this context, participants emphasized the value of classroom spaces that advanced trusting and authentic, yet challenging, dialogue for students, especially in light of the nature of the questions and discourse emerging from community engagement, particularly around race, gender, and class inequity. San Pedro (2018) referred to these spaces as “sacred truth spaces” in which “the goal . . . is creating a dialogic space between one another to share our truths and to listen and learn the truths of others” (p. 1207).

To promote trusting and challenging classroom spaces, participants invested significant, up–front time around community–building activities for and among students enrolled in the course, including following research–based curriculum or bringing in facilitators with expertise in holding challenging conversations (e.g., national programs, inclusion offices on campus). Further, most participants engaged in individual interactions with students, whether through one–on–one meetings or written exchanges in journal entries. The key for participants was to hold regular check–ins with each individual student so as to gauge their current learning, as well as their readiness for learning in deeper ways; the individual exchanges were seen by participants as part disruption of ways of knowing and part nurturing encouragement to continue grappling with complexity.

Beyond individual faculty members’ efforts, how might institutions support faculty in developing effective pedagogy for community–engaged teaching? In response to this question, we acknowledge community–engaged teaching requires resources, as this type of teaching and its coordination can be time consuming. Although a few of this study’s participants worked at institutions with centers for community engagement that assisted with the logistics of service–learning, the vast majority of the participants conducted their community–engaged teaching alone and with little to no support. If higher education endeavors to fulfill its public mission of serving its community, and if our educational system strives to enhance student learning for the 21st century, it behooves federal and state policymakers and higher education stakeholders to pursue and support community–engaged teaching. Although these types of support

are not widespread, some institutions and policymakers have, for example, provided seed grants or course releases for faculty to develop and lead service-learning courses; created centers for community engagement that provide networking, logistics, and advocacy for working with community organizations (e.g., campus-based centers, Campus Compact); and redefined the role of community-engaged work in tenure and promotion criteria (Aldrich & Marterella, 2014; O'Meara, 2006). As an example of these forms of support, the Faith Justice Institute at Saint Joseph's University (SJU), a classified Community Engaged University per the Carnegie Foundation, provides a myriad of resources for faculty interested in community-engaged teaching. The supports include (a) expert-and-peer mentoring for course development (e.g., constructing a syllabus, aligning course content to communities, and facilitating student reflections), (b) opportunities to observe and be observed by veteran service-learning teachers and personnel, (c) learning communities composed of new and experienced faculty, and (d) a full-time administrator responsible for facilitating community partnerships and managing student placement logistics and clearances.

### **Grappling With Complexity in Practice: Faculty Knowledge and Learning**

The theme “grappling with complexity” is not only illustrative of student learning but also of teacher knowledge and learning. Participating faculty members explained that their effectiveness in facilitating the three forms of learning highlighted in this study's findings depended on their understanding of how students learn subject matter and how that learning is shaped by the specific contexts of a community partnership, all of which, in and of itself, is complex. Participants warned that without this understanding service-learning courses could, very simply, be void of authentic connections to the subject matter and/or reinforce negative stereotypes about marginalized populations served by community partners. For instance, without Robert's intentionally designing his course in ways that highlighted the structural inequalities of state-level professional organizations (i.e., theoretical examinations of power in education settings, reviews of organizational charts, discourse analysis of topics at conference presentations, reflective discussions with Native Americans served by the

schools), his students might have left his course thinking that the blame rested more on the administrators who failed to attend state meetings rather than on the marginalizing power structures that dissuaded their attendance.

How do faculty members develop their own understandings of connecting their course's subject matter with student learning in community settings, and how might institutions contribute to these efforts? In response, we first must acknowledge that conversations around what teachers know about their students' learning are overlooked or disregarded, typically by prioritizing standardized, quantitative metrics of teaching outcomes or characterizing teacher perspectives as conjecture or lacking validity. We therefore advocate for approaches to teaching improvement in higher education that, first, elevate and honor teacher knowledge and, second, provide space for faculty-driven conversations and initiatives that build on, deepen, and revise faculty members' knowledge of teaching and student learning. Although not solely focused on community-engaged teaching, Metropolitan Colleges Institute for Teaching Improvement (MetroCITI), run by Anna Neumann at Teachers College, offers an example of supporting faculty members' learning in their teaching. MetroCITI is a professional development program for faculty members teaching in high-access urban colleges serving large numbers of first-generation students. Throughout the year, MetroCITI participants engage in a learning community focused on teaching improvement, grounded in both the participants' current and evolving knowledge about student learning and in the extant literature on learning sciences, pedagogy, and discipline-specific areas. Moreover, MetroCITI participants develop a teaching improvement project for one of their current courses, all while receiving feedback from MetroCITI peers and facilitators, as well as engaging in reflective opportunities on the process. At the completion of their MetroCITI experience, participants are charged with creating similar learning communities at their home institutions. MetroCITI serves as a valuable model for how institutions might support a similar learning community around community-engaged teaching/service-learning, especially considering the extant literature that notes that institutional investment in faculty improving their scholarly expertise



and teaching is worthwhile in terms of faculty satisfaction, vitality, productivity, and retention (O'Meara et al., 2017; Terosky, 2018).

### Recommendations for Research

As with all research studies, this study has limitations that could be addressed in future research. First, we strongly believe the perspectives of faculty—the very people entrusted with teaching students—constitute an important contribution to teaching and learning reform in higher education. Thus, we implore additional studies on faculty members' perspectives on the role of community-engaged teaching in student learning, perhaps also with larger sample sizes. Additional studies further exploring this study's metatheme of grappling with complexity through its three subthemes—the intricacies of applying theory to practice, the shifting from deficit to asset thinking, and the confronting of power structures—would be helpful. Likewise, we suggest that research methodologies that combine interviews of faculty and observations of classrooms and service-learning settings would deepen conversations on how participants' espoused views on teaching and their enacted practices interact. We also recognize that studies from the perspective

of the student and how they view the role of community-engaged teaching in their learning would strengthen the literature; a similar need is to better understand the perspectives and experiences of the community partners working with and alongside students.

### Conclusion

Colleges and universities are charged with a mission to serve the public good and to enhance student learning. In this study, participants highlighted that community-engaged teaching achieved two goals: (a) serving the institution's public good mission and (b) enhancing students' learning for the 21st century through the metatheme of grappling with complexity. By grappling with the complexity of knowledge situated in communities, participant data reflected that students learned how to navigate through the intricacies of applying theory to real-world challenges, shifting their worldview from deficit to asset thinking, and confronting power structures in society. As the world becomes increasingly complex, students will have to grapple with this complexity. Based on this study's findings, community-engaged teaching is one effective pathway to achieve just that.



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