THE CHALLENGES OF PUTTING COMMUNITY FIRST

Reflections on a University Center's Process

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to share tensions experienced by the Center for Community-Based Learning and Engagement (CU Engage) at the University of Colorado Boulder during its attempts to facilitate social justice–oriented community change. These tensions speak to larger questions about the goals of community-campus engagement (CCE) programs, especially regarding the nature of power, interests, and definitions of community and impact. This paper documents CU Engage's learning process through three illustrative stages: an exploratory community-based project, a qualitative self-study, and a collaboratively generated conceptual framework for public impact. Through this process, CU Engage has begun to develop an approach that applies, extends, and complicates existing frameworks of collective impact and community first. Tensions that arose highlight three imperatives: (1) integration of participatory processes into CCE programs to supplement organizational partnerships with direct community input, (2) attention to power and structural constraints in community-centered work, and (3) creation of conceptual tools that guide collaborative work.

Introduction

The Center for Community-Based Learning and Engagement (CU Engage) was launched at the University of Colorado Boulder in 2014. Prior to this, the university had a number of well-established service-learning programs located in different units across campus; the creation of CU Engage organized them into one administrative and academic unit. The motivating vision was that CU Engage could become more than the sum of its parts; in collaboration with community partners, major impacts could be produced by leveraging existing programs and the broader resources of the university. CU Engage worked toward fulfilling this vision through a deliberate process that involved three separate stages, each utilizing different methodological approaches. First, the center mapped stakeholders, conducted ethnographic research, and held dialogic *cafecitos* with residents in a community-based participatory research (CBPR) project with the goal of understanding the local landscape

and potential partner organizations. Second, CU Engage conducted a formal self-study using semi-structured interviews with stakeholders of existing university programs and affiliated community organizations to assess perceptions of the impacts of partnerships. Third, through iterative and reflexive processes involving staff members, CU Engage developed new practices and created strategies that could increase the effectiveness of its partnerships. The authors of this article combined and synthesized the findings in consultation with relevant community-campus engagement (CCE) literatures and models, drawing heavily from community first (Andrée, 2016; CFICE, 2018), collective impact (Kania & Kramer, 2011), and community-based participatory research (Wallerstein & Duran, 2017).

The purpose of this article is to share tensions faced by CU Engage during its inception and throughout its attempts to facilitate social justice–oriented community change. These tensions speak to larger questions about the goals of CCE programs, especially regarding the nature of power, interests, and definitions of community and impact. In what ways do assumptions about the community exclude certain populations and actors? When working with staff employed by community organizations, how does a CCE program make sense of their claims to represent communities? What are the benefits and limitations of relying on dyadic partnerships versus collaborative networks? This article presents a conceptual map to guide conversations about impact among and across diverse stakeholders in CCE initiatives. Two salient conceptual perspectives, community first and collective impact, are elaborated before turning to CU Engage's process.

Literature Review

Community First

Higher education has long touted its public mission, though the degree to which it actually serves this purpose is contested (Harkavy, 2006). Universities are nexuses for prestige and resources; with this power comes responsibility, especially in a climate of increasing inequality and threats to equity (Apple, 2012; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). Institutions of higher education have been called to do more for their respective communities (Boyer, 1996; Boyte & Hollander, 1999; Kellogg Commission, 2002), and among competing influences (Butcher, Bezzina, & Moran, 2011; Schuetze, 2012), universities have struggled to implement community-centered programs (Brukardt, Holland, Percy, & Zimpher, 2004; Hartley, Saltmarsh, & Clayton, 2010).

Traditionally, CCE programs have been dominated by transactional approaches, with residents of the surrounding neighborhoods treated as beneficiaries rather than active participants (Astin & Astin, 2000; Bortolin, 2011; Butcher et al., 2011; Stoecker, 2016; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000). Over the past two decades, CCE programs that emphasize co-construction with community partners have become more prominent (Beckman, Penney, & Cockburn, 2011; Stoecker, Beckman, & Min, 2010). Variations of service-learning and community-based learning have emerged that integrate critical perspectives and emphasize reciprocity with community groups rather than one-directional charity (Bringle & Clayton, 2012; Mitchell, 2008; Mooney & Edwards, 2001).

Community-based research methods have gained more legitimacy and are supported by an emerging literature and networks of allied scholars (Gutiérrez, Engeström, & Sannino, 2016; Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998; Strand et al., 2003).

The community first initiative of Carleton University was developed in 2008 during this recent wave of community-oriented advancements. Known as Community First: Impacts of Community Engagement (CFICE), the initiative is an action research project that involves over 60 community partners and 30 academic institutions across Canada. Their efforts have successfully yielded new strategies for community-campus engagement and provided a platform for new scholarship in the field (Andrée et al., 2014; Levkoe & Stack-Cutler, 2018; Schwartz, Weaver, Pei, & Kozak, 2018).

As the name implies, community first advocates for community-driven initiatives. Reflecting differences between theoretical approaches in the CCE literature, there seems to be variance within CFICE as to what fulfilling the community first imperative looks like in practice. Some CFICE stakeholders suggest programming should be "100% community driven," others express a commitment to power equalization, and still more describe the need for mutually beneficial CCE partnerships around a shared vision (Andrée, 2016; CFICE, 2018). Although these statements may be compatible in some ways, each may have different implications for implementation (and ultimately impact) of CCE initiatives (Levkoe & Stack-Cutler, 2018). Using the phrase "community first" may help counter the tendency of universities to prioritize their own interests, but it also carries nuanced ideological implications.

The community first approach primarily relies on community organizations as the locus of community-centered work (Andrée, 2016; CFICE, 2018). The CCE literature generally spares community organizations from critique and tends to simplify them into a singular category. However, community organizations are situated within a complex political economy that can shape their function in undesirable ways. For instance, neoliberal marketization of the nonprofit sector has introduced organizational forces that distance nonprofits from the communities they serve (Eikenberry, 2009; Maier, Meyer, & Steinbereithner, 2016; Young & Salamon, 2002). Organizations driven by deficit-oriented narratives can have unintended negative consequences (Baldridge, 2014). Problematic funding regimes may promote community organizations that reproduce systems of oppression (Burton & Barnes, 2017b; Jenkins, 2011). CFICE has navigated challenges associated with these organizational dynamics (Andrée, 2016), but the assumptions that underlie the focus on community organizations warrant elaboration. The ability of CCE partnerships to bring equitable social change depends on the efficacy of the community organizations and their relationships with the community members they aim to serve.

CFICE has recognized the need for a collective approach to partnerships in order to advance solutions to community problems. CFICE dramatically expanded in 2012 after receiving a large national grant. This enabled CFICE to develop five thematic hubs, each focused on a specific community issue (Andrée, 2016). Historically, CCE initiatives have focused on dyadic relationships between a university entity and a community partner, CFICE has adopted collective impact strategies to create networks of community and campus partners capable of addressing complex issues (Schwartz et al., 2018).

Collective Impact

In 2011, Kania and Kramer published a paper illustrating their collective impact model for addressing social problems; their work was enthusiastically received in the philanthropy and nonprofit management fields. Collective impact is characterized by "the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem" (Kania & Kramer, 2011, p. 36). The central premise of the framework is that coordination across various social actors is required in order to solve complex problems, and to achieve this, the current nonprofit funding norms need to shift away from emphasizing isolated impacts of independent organizations. Kania and Kramer describe five necessary conditions of collective impact: a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and a backbone support organization.

The skyrocketing popularity of collective impact attracted critical attention from advocates of community-based approaches (Wolff, 2016). Most critiques of collective impact fall into two categories. First, collective impact tends to imply a top-down approach that may not support participation of communities who are purported to be beneficiaries of the impact. Community members can be intentionally or unintentionally excluded from collective impact processes; for instance, in a collective impact initiative, organizations might view certain community members as difficult to work with, or organizations could simply be unaware that members of the community are not represented or do not have the necessary resources or access to participate (Harwood, 2014; Milnar, 2014). This can have a number of undesirable consequences, such as perpetuating hierarchy in the name of social justice (Le, 2015; Wolff et al., 2017). The collective impact framework builds on a long history of advancements in community engagement and organizing, yet it oversimplifies many processes because it does not acknowledge this corpus; for collective impact to consistently address the root causes of social problems, it must integrate established community-based and participatory strategies (Christens & Inzeo, 2015).

Second, the original formulation of collective impact did not give attention to equity. A conceptual frame can disrupt or reinforce existing power structures (Hand, Penuel, & Gutiérrez, 2012); LeChasseur's (2016) discourse analysis of collective impact found that its central publications tended to reinforce power structures. This jeopardizes the impacts of initiatives; as Williams and Marxer (2014) describe, "without rigorous attention to persistent inequities, our initiatives risk ineffectiveness, irrelevance, and improvements that cannot be sustained." McAfee, Glover Blackwell, and Bell (2015) elaborated why the omission of equity is important to resolve and provided several suggestions of how it could be integrated into the collective impact model.

Generally, the authors of the foundational publications on collective impact have been receptive to these criticisms (Kania & Kramer, 2016), and the model has been modestly amended (Kania & Kramer, 2015; Raderstrong & Boyea-Robinson, 2016; Weaver & Cabaj, 2018), although the fundamental elements of the framework remain the same. Despite these shortcomings, collective impact has provided new avenues for CCE initiatives to challenge traditional philanthropy (Burton & Barnes, 2017a, 2017b). Also, the critical discourse in response to collective impact has been generative; Wolff et al. (2017) created a collaborating for equity and justice framework as an alternative. Similar to collective impact, the goal is to facilitate the development of coalitions that can

effectively address complex social problems, but rather than focus on management and funders, the principles are centered on equity, community, and structural change.

CU Engage's Journey

CU Engage is a university center that houses 11 semi-autonomous CCE programs, all of which are committed to participatory community-based principles (Strand et al., 2003). Since the founding of the center in 2014, the individual CCE programs have accomplished many important projects with community partners, but these impacts tended to be singular and isolated. Moreover, structural differences allowed some of CU Engage's CCE programs to employ community-based practices with more consistency than others. On the whole, CU Engage has struggled to achieve broad and lasting impact in the community.

The programs within CU Engage encompass three types of CCE: community-based learning, community-based research, and direct organizing. First, the bulk of the center's work is oriented toward community-based learning, which is employed by eight programs. All of these programs aspire to have mutual and reciprocal relationships with community partners, although each program is structurally different (Hildreth, 2018; Kirshner, Pacheco, Sifuentes, & Hildreth, 2017). Five of these programs use undergraduate courses as the primary avenue for organizing community involvement: INVST Community Studies, Leadership Studies Minor, Public Achievement, Puksta Scholars, and a faculty fellowship for a community-based learning program. Three programs—CU Dialogues, Aquetza, and the SWAP Student Worker Alliance Program—use nontraditional mechanisms within the university (e.g., summer programs, work-study) to educate and empower members of the community (Lopez & Romero, 2017). Second, community-based research is supported by CU Engage through two programs: a graduate fellowship program and the Education Research Hub, which facilitate collaborative research with activist groups on local, national, and international levels. Third, CU Engage has one program, the Just Transition Collaborative, which aims to influence local environmental policies by organizing marginalized community members whose perspectives are typically excluded from such processes.

Because many of these programs previously existed independently, CU Engage recently embarked on an effort to increase its impact by fostering collaboration and organizational coherence among its programs and community partners to target community-defined challenges. This process was broad and multifaceted; it included three distinct stages of reflective initiatives. Each surfaced tensions that required extending community first and collective impact frameworks and practices in new directions.

First, in the spring of 2016, CU Engage began a CBPR project to establish relationships with individuals in the community, understand prevailing issues in their lived experiences, and explore the ways they have historically been positioned in the local institutional landscape. This involved interviews and focus groups with 30 Latinx parents as well as a grounded ethnography in school spaces. The project lasted for a year and a half and found that community organizations and community members had very different conceptions of impact; community members felt that many community organizations did not represent or support their needs. CCE frameworks often assume the efficacy of community organizations, but these findings highlight the need to integrate partic-

ipatory practices into CCE programming to assess the organizational landscape and supplement partnerships when problematic dynamics are evident.

Second, CU Engage conducted a formal self-study in response to some staff members' impressions that its CCE programs could have greater community-driven impact. Chris Wegemer conducted 29 semi-structured interviews with CU Engage staff, students, and community partners in the fall of 2018. This study found that community partners were not central to the decision-making of CU Engage's CCE programs. More important, it revealed how touting a community-centered approach can mask power dynamics in ways that hinder the formation of equitable relationships. The findings emphasized the complexities of navigating the constraints and interests of CCE stakeholders and what it means for a university center to put community first (Wegemer, 2018).

Third, CU Engage began to develop new strategies to collaborate with community partners toward the goal of increasing positive impact in the fall of 2018 and winter of 2019. Specifically, CU Engage recognized that dyadic partnerships had limited ability to support broad community change, and a collective approach was necessary. New conceptual tools were created out of practical necessity through an iterative co-design process involving the CU Engage staff. Raising questions about the meaning of impact was employed as a strategy to operationalize existing conceptual frameworks (such as collective impact), adapt them to particular contexts, and bridge the gap between theory and practice. As a result, CU Engage developed a model of impact and a dialogic process to span boundaries and establish an equity-oriented foundation for a network of partnerships.

These stages illustrate CU Engage's ongoing process of navigating conceptual frameworks associated with community engagement. While CU Engage specializes in CBPR, CU Engage draws from a broad range of conceptual approaches in its constant efforts to improve impact. This can entail applying processes and features from other models to the center's programming or using different conceptual lenses for critical reflection and planning. In these senses, CU Engage has encountered the community first and collective impact/collaborating for justice and equity models. CU Engage sees both strengths and weaknesses in these frameworks; the ideas presented this article illustrate some critiques. Lastly, another motivation underlying CU Engage's exploration of conceptual frameworks is to advance knowledge and develop new strategies that will broadly improve community engagement practices. CU Engage advocates for conceptual perspectives that are most capable of facilitating equitable and lasting social change.

The complexity of CU Engage's work cannot be captured by a single publication. CU Engage represents 11 CCE initiatives that involve a large number of staff and community partners; there are many compatible and complementary perspectives that could characterize different facets of CU Engage's approach. The authors have played leadership roles in the initiatives described above, and in this sense, this article represents both our own work within CU Engage and CU Engage's collective efforts. Our insights were generated during weekly meetings of the authors over a period of six months in the fall of 2018. Consistent with reflexive approaches of CFICE (Goemans, Levkoe, Andrée, Changfoot, & Christopherson-Cote, 2018), our self-analyses challenged existing relationships and processes within our own institution and critically considered our own positionality as researchers and program staff. Below, we present our reflections on each of CU Engage's three developmental stages in turn, followed by a brief discussion of potential conceptual interpretations of CU Engage's different roles.

Understanding Local Context Through Participatory Processes

CU Engage's work with Latinx parents around issues of educational equity and access began with an exploratory study in the spring of 2016. As a newly formed center, CU Engage wanted to build community-based collaborations but saw understanding the community as a prerequisite to establishing new partnerships and projects. The Community Foundation of Boulder published a report that highlighted the "achievement gaps" and inequities in education, health, and economics across the county (McMillan & Stutzman, 2015). The report showed that Latinx and low-income students had lower standardized test scores, high school graduation rates, and college persistence rates than their White, more affluent peers. Concerned about such substantial educational inequities in a well-resourced county, the exploratory project was initially driven by the question, How are Latinx families experiencing schools and institutions? A central focus was investigating the ways in which the "achievement gaps" were being framed and who was being positioned as responsible for academic underperformance. Building on CU Engage's existing connections with parents, Jennifer Pacheco began the process of building relationships. These relationships led to larger groups of parents with whom Pacheco conducted informal interviews and conversations to better understand the issues they faced, in their own words (Kirshner et al., 2017). In 2016 and 2017, Pacheco attended local town hall meetings, school events, and parent programming facilitated by nonprofit organizations.

It quickly became clear that many of the local efforts to engage parents followed a similar deficit-oriented paradigm. Organizations frequently operated on the assumption that Latinx parents needed to acquire certain skills to be better parents and that this would, in turn, lead to their children's academic success. For example, one nonprofit offered workshops to teach Latinx parents how to talk to their children about drugs, how to employ mindfulness in their parenting, and why reading to young children is important. While these were not inherently problematic, they illustrated how the organization identified parent behavior as a source of their children's academic struggles rather than looking at how the educational system was failing historically marginalized youth.

In another case, a local organization sought to support parents' involvement in education. Instead of encouraging or supporting direct participation in a school's existing PTA, they created a parallel group for Spanish-speaking parents. They did not appear to be aware of how having two parent groups, separated by language and ethnicity, could marginalize the Spanish-speaking parents. (For example, we heard a person in the organization describe the Spanish-speaking parent group as "cute.") Both of these examples show how local organizations gave less attention to changing existing structures and differentially treated Latinx parents in ways that held them responsible for the challenges that their children faced in inequitable educational environments.

To investigate how inequity was being reproduced in parents' everyday life, Jennifer Pacheco and Manuela Sifuentes organized a series of six *cafecitos*, or group dialogues, as well as individual interviews with approximately 30 parents in the fall of 2016 to the spring of 2018. Issues such as lack of access to advanced courses, discriminatory academic tracking, insufficient translation services, racialized school spaces, and unwelcoming environments surfaced as common themes. It became evident that in the local "community" engagement discourse, much of the community was being left out.

The exploratory participatory parent project made CU Engage more attuned to the problematic dynamics of the local nonprofit environment. With a fresh perspective, we recognized the prevalence of deficit-based narratives and patterns of racist practices that undermined long-term progress (Castle, 2018). Some of the local nonprofit organizations that provided services to the Latinx community did not seem to represent the community members or understand their interests. In some extreme cases, reports of abuse or mistreatment were repeatedly dismissed. Many local nonprofits are run by upper-class White individuals who lack shared lived experiences with the communities they work for and claim to speak for. Despite the presence of well-resourced nonprofits, this local organizational culture has perpetuated power imbalances that undermine progress.

Navigating a Challenging Organizational Environment

Pacheco and Sifuentes's participatory approach helped CU Engage better understand the underlying root causes of problems in the community and the ways in which the deficit-oriented nonprofits were reinforcing historical inequities. The vastly different perspectives that emerged between the grassroots and organizational approaches were related to how "community" was defined. We began questioning how local organizations' definition of community may have influenced CU Engage's partnership building.

Often times, organizations (or the university) may start with conceptions of a problem that are not aligned with the perspective of those most impacted by inequity; because of norms that tacitly dictate who gets to speak and who is heard, community engagement efforts can re-create the common agenda that maintains the status quo. Direct participatory work can help disclose heterogeneity within the community thereby deconstructing the monolithic characterizations of a community (Andrée et al., 2014). In our project, multiple communities became evident, which were differentially represented and served. We also learned how the boundaries between university and communities were blurred, with students and staff often being simultaneously part of multiple communities. We began thinking more deeply about what a process for redefining community would look like, how CU Engage might put those being "impacted" in more direct conversation with those doing the "impacting," and how this would change the university's current community engagement model.

Although we have a strong rationale for adopting a more direct participatory approach outside of formal organizations, it is only the first step. A participatory approach alone is insufficient to address community issues; connections to organizations and institutions are also necessary, although linkages have been challenging to establish. At the organizational level, philanthropy in our region emphasizes collaboration with nonprofits over direct engagement with impacted communities. At the personal level, parents do not always identify (or even seek to identify) the root causes of problems because of the persistence of context-specific narratives or the reluctance to challenge existing power structures due to their repeated experiences of marginalization.

What began as an attempt to listen to community members and critically analyze discourse practices has begun to shift CU Engage's conception of what it means to center the community in CCE programs. Developing a model for integrating participatory projects into existing organizational partnerships remains a work in progress, although the aspiration alone has shaped the types of partnerships and issues that CU Engage addresses.

Considering definitions of community has been a generative exercise. The lessons learned from the parent project provided further evidence that the existing community engagement initiatives of the university were not centering community perspectives and that the traditional partnership model may not be ideal for supporting community-centered work. Moreover, aware of our own complicity in this landscape, as a university center founded by a White male faculty director, we turned our attention to a self-study that would enable us to analyze our own practices and reassess how we could intervene in this context.

Reorienting Towards Community Partners

The participatory project with parents provided vital information that informed CU Engage's work with communities. To explore how the findings could increase community engagement, CU Engage decided to take a step back to examine the current impacts of its programs, look for ways these impacts could be enhanced, and explore possibilities for structural changes to CU Engage that might foster greater collaboration (both between community partners and CCE programs and between various CCE programs within CU Engage). Each CCE program regularly conducted ongoing evaluations of partnerships, but this was often done in such a way that took the terms of the partnership for granted, focusing only on what was going well, what could be better, and how to document the impacts. The CU Engage self-study was spearheaded by the lead author, a visiting scholar from the University of California, Irvine. His outside perspective provided the opportunity to ask deeper questions about CU Engage's relationships with community partners and to critically examine long-standing partnerships in new ways.

Consistent with CU Engage's participatory philosophy, the self-study involved broad engagement with various stakeholders. The input of CU Engage staff, participants in CU Engage programs, graduate students, and community partners was collected through semi-formal interviews in the fall of 2018. In total, 29 interviews were conducted by the lead author, five of which were conducted with community partners. A combination of content and narrative analyses was used to explore a range of topics; the findings were documented in an internal report and used as the basis for professional development with CU Engage staff (Wegemer, 2018).

The vast majority of CU Engage staff and affiliates described students as the primary focus of CU Engage programming. This perception of CU Engage as student centered rather than community centered was validated by interviews with community partners. All of the community partners praised CU Engage and held CU Engage staff in very high regard. However, two of the five community partners were agnostic about whether their collaboration had an impact on their organization or the community. The remaining three described collaborations as having the potential to have an impact on the community, implying this potential was not realized. All community partners expressed an interest in exploring more ways to collaborate with the university. They suggested that community members could play more central roles in framing underlying problems and designing projects with CU Engage programs.

Although the sample size was too small to make definitive conclusions, the results provided evidence that community-centered joint work has not been the dominant form of community engagement within CU

Engage. The community partners interviewed were selected by CU Engage staff; these organizations represented the most robust partnerships. It is reasonable to assume that other community partners would report being less integrated into CU Engage programming.

Complexity of Putting "Community First"

Because CU Engage's mission is to facilitate community-based work, these findings were hard truths for the staff. CU Engage's immediate reaction was that community should be more central to programming; however, the best path forward was not so simple. The study provided valuable insights into what it means to do community-centered work, and the questions that arose from the self-study revealed complexity and nuance: In what ways is it feasible for community members to play central roles in community-university partnerships? To achieve lasting social justice, what roles/responsibilities would be most suitable for the university and what roles/responsibilities would be most suitable for the community members?

The answers to these questions varied greatly by the type of CCE initiative. CU Engage oversees 11 separate programs, each with different systems and needs that constrain possibilities for community involvement. For instance, eight programs are grounded in community-based learning and involve different degrees of coursework from university students; by definition, regardless of the style employed, service-learning focuses on students as agents of change. Conversations regarding positionality and power that define partnerships helped CU Engage to come to terms with the limitations of the university's structure.

Positioned as an "ivory tower" of privilege and exclusivity, universities decide how their resources are allocated and who has access; this dynamic also characterizes CCE programs. The mission of an R1 university (such as the University of Colorado, Boulder) is to conduct research and, to a lesser extent, educate students. Community members are restricted from participating in these functions of the university, and furthermore, these functions are not oriented toward solving community issues. Compared to marginalized groups in a community, a university has substantially more resources, including social prestige and political capital. In the absence of a fundamentally different funding paradigm where community partners and university staff have equal capacity to sustain collaboration, sociopolitical structures will be predisposed toward universities having authority over community-campus engagement efforts.

Regardless of whether CCE initiatives are led by the community organizations or the university, power asymmetries are inherent in community-university partnerships and prevent engagement initiatives from unconditionally centering community partners, whether formal organizations or unaffiliated groups. Simply initiating a relationship with a community partner by asking about the problems they face is laden with assumptions of power. The act of putting community organizations' interests first is itself an expression of differential status. There is a difference between declaring an intention to make community more central in a program and labeling an initiative as community centered; the former is aspirational, whereas the latter ascribes an essence to the program that may obscure existing power asymmetries. Or, in the case of CU Engage, it may lead to an assumption of how the program functions that is not aligned with reality and reinforces practices that are not conducive to attaining the ultimate goals.

Power asymmetries may not inevitably lead to undesirable outcomes; the key is a clear articulation of university's self-interests and a critical acknowledgment of privilege and resources. If they are not made explicit, inequities will be tacitly reproduced and the structural causes of social problems may not be fully addressed. Critical reflection and honest communication are not easy or commonplace practices, as they are not incentivized by university policies; initiatives are typically not critical or reflective about power dynamics.

An equity-oriented participatory approach is grounded in two principles of community engagement: (1) community involvement (in some degree) is necessary in order to achieve social justice goals, and (2) the chances of achieving lasting social change is increased with stronger, more mutual relationships with community partners. These conditions can be met in many ways. The structure of some university programs prohibits community-centered work or makes other forms of engagement more desirable for all stakeholders. Making a distinction between community-centered work and community-initiated work has been useful for CU Engage; community-centered work implies that community actors drive the initiative throughout its duration, whereas community-initiated work centers partners during the framing of the problem and the method, then in good faith, the community partners allow the university to execute the common vision.

Although CU Engage recognizes that its goal of centering the community will always be aspirational in some ways, this does not detract from the imperative to reconcile inequities. At every point, the university (and community leaders) should use their influence to equalize power differentials that could compromise the goals of the initiatives or the integrity of the community-university relationship. Self-aware power negotiation must always be present in community-based processes.

The self-study initiated reflections on community partnerships among CU Engage staff that fostered new perspectives on the nature of collaborative work. CU Engage has begun to recognize that community engagement initiatives are more capable of foregrounding community partners and achieving greater impact if collective networks are formed rather than relying on traditional dyadic partnerships.

Centering Impact as a Strategy to Facilitate Collective Work

Moving Beyond Dyadic Partnerships

Bringing together diverse programs under the CU Engage umbrella was intended to increase cohesion among existing programs and amplify impact. Although stakeholders cited many benefits of having the CU Engage center as a support system, CU Engage's self-study confirmed suspicions that impacts were primarily a product of individual programs and not collaboration between them. The vast majority of community relationships occurred in a traditional dyadic partnership between a single university program and a single community organization. Even when multiple CU Engage programs worked with the same community organization, each main-

tained separate partnerships. These relationships typically focused on one aspect of a complex social issue, and the outcomes of associated projects did not address the root causes of problems.

Realizing that dyadic relationships are insufficient to achieve broad and long-lasting social change, CU Engage has begun to explore ways to move toward a collective approach (Klempin, 2016b). The community-based learning programs are beginning to shift from student-driven projects to longer term campaigns across programs that students join. CU Engage hosted a workshop by Steve McKay, a sociology professor at University of California Santa Cruz, to learn ways to build campaigns across a diverse community combining participatory methods, organizational partnerships, and student learning (Greenberg, London, & McKay, 2019).

One particularly promising strategy that CU Engage has employed is to foreground impact in its conversations with programs and partners. Previously, our partnerships worked within a planning and evaluation model that focused on outcomes. This was useful but typically tended to be within the parameters of the partnership. The concept of impact provided a way to think in deeper, broader, and more long-term ways. Although this shift helped both CU Engage programs and community partners see collective work in new ways, there was wide variation in how each stakeholder defined impact. Therefore, we created a provisional framework to guide conversations. The ultimate goal of community engagement initiatives is not to center the community in university initiatives; rather, the goal is to achieve a common vision of lasting social change in an environment fraught with constraints and power asymmetries. Critical conversations about impact and the implicated roles of each actor can facilitate the creation of equitable relationships among an integrated network of community partners. In this sense, impact functions as both a product and a process.

Co-designing a Framework of Impact Within CU Engage

Across the community engagement literature, definitions of impact vary widely. To begin thinking about impact within CU Engage, the authors of this article created a tentative definition: "Impact is the broad, long-term, lasting result of a social-change-oriented action or intervention." This provided a loose starting point until common characteristics of practitioners' operational usage were identified. Through an iterative co-design approach, Wegemer facilitated conversations with CU Engage stakeholders about their perspectives of impact in the fall of 2018, which was guided by the study team's regular meetings and culminated in group discussions with all CU Engage staff.

Among CU Engage staff and students, conversations regarding impact showed convergence around some connotations of the term. For instance, CU Engage staff used the word *impact* to signify deeper, general results from their programs; rarely were smaller scale outputs considered, such as course projects. Impacts were typically associated with enduring changes across a program's entire target population. Impacts were usually intentional, usually proximal, and direct. Conversations also indicated variance in the use of the word *impact* in some ways. Particularly, the term's relation to social change varied across programs. Some staff considered potential future impacts as part of their program's impact; their program was investing in impacts that would be realized later.

Rather than accept the confines of a single definition of impact, our interpretation of the co-design process

Table 1
Dimensions of Impact

	Output	Outcome	Impact
Time			
Endurance	Transient; may not last longer than a day	Durable; lasts at least several weeks	Stable; lasts at least a year
Necessary input	Not much time required; one semester or less	Requires moderate time; at least one semester	Requires substantial time; one year or more
Breadth			
Scale	Small-scale; e.g., classroom	Medium-scale; e.g., an organization or social group	Large-scale; e.g., a large group of people, community, or institution
Relation to programming			
Proximity	Very proximal	Proximal or distal	Proximal or distal
Direct	Direct result	Direct or indirect result	Direct or indirect result
Intentionality	Intended	Intended or unintended	Intended or unintended
Relation to social change			
Systemic nature	Typically addresses symptoms	Addresses symptoms or root causes	Typically addresses root causes
Power dynamics	Typically involves one-directional service	Can involve participatory or service approaches	Can involve participatory or service approaches
Levels of change	Individual or organizational	Individual, organizational, network, or system	Individual, organizational, network, or system
Type of change	Human development, organizational capacity, policy engagement, or cultural change	Human development, organizational capacity, policy engagement, or cultural change	Human development, organizational capacity, policy engagement, or cultural change
Examples	Evaluating a local nonprofit for a final class project	Adding a new course that uses CBPR approaches	Changing university recruitment policies to increase access for marginalized students

suggested that highlighting various dimensions allowed for more nuanced meanings and mutual understanding. Based on cycles of conversations with CU Engage staff, we identified several dimensions that consistently produced generative dialogue. Borrowing from Beckman et al. (2011), we distinguished between outputs, outcomes, and impacts to highlight differences in time and breadth: outputs are the immediate result of specific actions, and outcomes are larger scale changes in the medium-term, whereas impacts are broad community level changes in the long-term (and may be the accumulation of outputs and outcomes). A justice-oriented perspective of social change provided an underlying foundation for our conceptualization of impact. An initial heuristic differentiated four categories of social change: human development, organizational capacity building, policy engagement, and culture change. Through our co-design process, we concluded that social change can be accomplished on several different levels: individual, organizational, network, or systemic. CCE initiatives may vary in the degree to which they target root causes of social problems (as opposed to addressing symptoms of social problems) and to what extent they engage the community in mutual participation (as opposed to one-

directional charity). Furthermore, impacts can be intentional or unintentional, direct or indirect, and proximal or distal from the initiative being considered. Table 1 organizes several important dimensions of impact. Intentionally, this conceptualization leaves some ambiguity but provides enough form so that impact can be a meaningful object of discussion. Iterative cycles of theorizing, dialogue, and synthesis among CU Engage staff have ensured that the concept of impact remained relevant and produced conversations capable of building relationships and advancing community-oriented goals. From our co-design process, we found that a multi-dimensional model provided space for practitioners to locate their work within a continuum of possibilities, and meanings could be more accurately understood and communicated between stakeholders. CU Engage plans to extend this process to community partners more broadly. Once this model has been operationalized more fully, we intend to evaluate the successful use of the framework (and process) by assessing the degree to which it has been helpful to practitioners in consolidating their thoughts and making sense of their work. This strategy has the potential to facilitate the development of new systems-level tools to achieve impact goals at CU Engage (Lawler, Landers, Minyard, Fuller, & Branscomb, 2018) and, more broadly, may contribute to evaluative strategies for CCE initiatives (Hart, Northmore, & Gerhardt, 2009).

Impact as a Collective Boundary Object

Community engagement requires joint work across boundaries; some stakeholders in the university and community need to negotiate between contexts that are imbued with different perceptions, social norms, practices, and expectations (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). Akkerman and Bakker (2011) applied the idea of a "boundary object" to educational settings, describing the potential for objects to help establish a bridge between partners and facilitate mechanisms of learning and interaction across different contexts. Defined in their work, boundary objects:

> inhabit several intersecting worlds and satisfy the informational requirements of each of them. . . . [They are] both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. They are weakly structured in common use, and become strongly structured in individual site use. (Star & Griesemer, 1989, p. 393; as quoted in Akkerman & Bakker, 2011, p. 134)

The intentional use of boundary objects may help establish effective practices for negotiating work across boundaries (Penuel, Allen, Coburn, & Farrell, 2015). In this sense, a model of impact can serve as a boundary object and there are several functions that CU Engage has recognized.

A framework of impact can be helpful for establishing a system of understanding. A common language of action is necessary in partnership networks, and grounding this language in social change creates a goal-oriented discourse. As a boundary object, an impact model serves a similar purpose as a "common agenda" in the collective impact literature; a common agenda is considered a necessary starting point (Kania & Kramer, 2011). A

co-created model of impact frames a common understanding of problems being addressed and becomes operationalized by establishing a theory of change. It clarifies each stakeholder's intentions and adds precision to the goals of the collective. The multidimensional quality of impact productively accounts for the heterogeneity and dissonance within and between stakeholders.

As described above, a framework of impact implies certain ongoing processes. The process of revisiting a co-designed object helps clarify relationships, reaffirm motivation, and realign actions. Community engagement models are rarely generalizable or transferable between contexts; adoption typically involves tensions and significant adaptation. A framework of impact helps stakeholders embrace the messiness of employing borrowed concepts to build an approach that works for a particular context. Conversations of impact can help make steps toward aspirational goals seem more tangible and achievable. Impact becomes a single node that contains goals, processes, and an object, which becomes capable of democratizing joint work in a way that can ensure compliance with community-based approaches.

Centering impact may help avoid the potential pitfall of conceptual overreach. When defining impact, it is necessary to be conscious of how broadly the term is employed. A "horizon of responsibility" is what a program can realistically accomplish and what it can claim credit for. The broader the conception of impact, the greater the tendency may be to step beyond the horizon of responsibility. (This is further justification for synthesizing practitioners' use of the term with abstract definitions of impact.) When using this framework, stakeholders should reflect on whether they are referring to aspirational impacts, actual impacts, normative impacts, or possible impacts. Conversations of impact also allow for the identification of common patterns of failure.

Perhaps most important, a model of impact can be used to cultivate coherence across a collective. It can be used as a justification for expansion beyond dyadic partnerships and as a tool to build a network of stakeholders. Impact conversations highlight who is driving the impact and how, which helps make power dynamics explicit. An impact model connects organization-level problems (which dominate bilateral partnerships) to community problems. Using a social justice model of impact can ensure that equity is established as a central priority in collective efforts, both equity of process (who participates and how they participate) and outcomes.

Conclusions and Implications

CU Engage encountered three tensions while exploring strategies to increase its impact: (1) disconnect between community members and the organizations that purportedly represent them, (2) programmatic constraints and power asymmetries between community partners and university initiatives, and (3) limited ability of dyadic partnerships to achieve broad and lasting social change. The elaboration of these conceptual struggles do not undermine but complicate the notion of "community-centered" work; toward its own goals, CU Engage uses this term aspirationally with tempered realism. Successfully operationalizing CCE principles has been defined not by whether the structure of CU Engage matches an objective model but by whether CU Engage sustains a critically reflective effort to improve community engagement and positively impact issues raised by the community.

Navigating these tensions has led CU Engage to assume different roles that invoke separate models community-

based participatory research, community first, and collective impact/collaborating for justice and equity. This illustrates how CU Engage uses the lenses of different conceptual frameworks to critically reflect on its practices. First, CU Engage has played the part of an organizer of participatory action projects; in our particular context, direct engagement with community members is a necessary supplement to organizational partnerships. Strand et al. (2003) describe several models of community-based research, along with the advantages and weaknesses of conducting work at the organizational and grassroots levels. As an organizer of participatory action research, CU Engage adapts functions from university-led community building approaches (Rubin, 1998) and comprehensive community initiatives (Chaskin, 2001).

Second, CU Engage has acted as a broker of community-campus relationships. Of the many responsibilities implicated in this role, we have emphasized the brokerage of power as essential for establishing equity in partnerships and identifying actors' positionality. Power dynamics have been recognized as a key feature in establishing effective relationships (Schwartz, Weaver, Pei, & Miller, 2016), and investigating power asymmetries clarifies the challenges of facilitating community-driven work in "community-university-based brokering initiatives" (Levkoe & Stack-Cutler, 2018). The role of a broker establishes CU Engage as the central boundary spanner (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010), and in this sense, CU Engage is responsible for being attentive to power differentials across boundaries (e.g., being aware of contexts being bridged, the positionality of each person, and how relationships are negotiated). This manifests in all areas of CU Engage's work, including direct engagement and convening a collective network. Even as CU Engage aspires to achieve the goals of the community first framework, it is mindful of these structural relations.

Third, CU Engage has operated as a "backbone organization" within the university (Kania & Kramer, 2011; Turner, Merchant, Kania, & Martin, 2012) and a "convener" for community organizations (Wolff et al., 2017). CU Engage is beginning to fulfill these roles in an attempt to move beyond dyadic partnerships and build a networked approach toward social change. Several academic institutions have endorsed collective impact and university centers have been considered backbone organizations by some scholars and practitioners (Gillam & Counts, 2018; Schwartz et al., 2018), although the collective impact framework was not designed with attention to higher education and has been contrasted with community engagement initiatives (Smith, Pelco, & Rooke, 2017). The structure of a university center allows CU Engage to avoid some of the challenges of establishing systems for a coalition (Klempin, 2016a, 2016b), although CU Engage must still adjust its processes toward common outcomes. Recent developments in the collective impact literature are more aligned with CU Engage's approach than the original formulation; the backbone organization has been positioned as a facilitator of a community movement (Weaver & Cabaj, 2018) and a catalyst for change-making (DuBow, Hug, Serafini, & Litzler, 2018) rather than as a top-down administrator. These perspectives have been complemented by the collaborating for justice and equity framework, a community-based alternative to collective impact (Wolff et al., 2017). CU Engage has experimented with foregrounding a social justice model of impact as a boundary object capable of doing some of the heavy lifting required to reconcile differences between actors in order to establish an equity-oriented network.

The central tensions that arise from this work are interconnected, as are the strategies and roles that CU

Engage has employed to try to address them. Focusing on the interplay of these roles and their integration into a coherent model is the subject of future work that may deepen our understanding (and application) of existing conceptual frameworks. In some ways, this article is a response to Wolff et al.'s (2017) "call to action"; the community engagement field has made progress, but more work is necessary to establish a model of networked collaboration capable of integrating participatory practices, attending to power dynamics, and supporting collective approaches to achieving equitable social change. CU Engage does not offer solutions but exploratory strategies (and remains skeptical of generalizable solutions across diverse CCE contexts). The practical demands of our mission require the development of conceptual frameworks that support CU Engage's work. In a broader sense, this article represents an engagement with the larger collective of CCE professionals who seek to positively impact the idea of community engagement. We present our experiences in the hope that they will usefully inform the progress of other CCE programs.

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