Original Research

An Engagement of Hope: A Framework and Equity-Centered Theory of Action for Community Engagement

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Abstract

Building upon the proposed concept of an engagement of hope (Green, Stewart, Bergen, & Nayve, 2020) emerging from the exploration of faith-based approaches to community engagement, the authors delve into collaborative inquiry and critical reflection to construct a framework and equity-centered theory of action for community engagement. Drawing from the work of faith-based community organizations and institutions of higher education, and through the lens of a practitioner-scholar framework, the authors present a scholarly approach to collaborative inquiry and exploration into an engagement of hope, responding to the current context of higher education. The development of the engagement of hope conceptual framework emerged with core approaches to community engagement, responding to the current context and seeking to move the field of community engagement to address this context. The five themes that scaffold the conceptual framework are explicated, including challenging unjust structures, the common good, collaborative courage, community-centered, and individual goodness. The implications of this framework and theory of change are discussed as well as a call to re-center relationships in the community engagement field.

Keywords: community engagement, hope, faith-based, practitioner-scholar, critical inquiry

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Introduction

As community engagement scholar-practitioners, who sought to interrogate the intersection of community engagement and faith at urban institutions, we delved into editing a special issue of *Metropolitan Universities* Journal (Volume 31, Issue 3) published in December 2020. Our inquiry into this topic led us to develop an exploratory study based on our work with faith-based organizations and communities, considering our own experiences as community engagement professionals (Dostilio, 2017), and critically reflecting upon how such work is rife with tension, inequities, and systemic injustice. The context of a global pandemic, racial justice movement, and politically divisive environment was certainly addressed during the planning and delivery of that publication, but the deliberation among our co-editing team was more broadly focused on how we, as community engagement professionals, continue to engage in the center of this tension-filled context, as well as beyond it. We were encouraged by the work of faith-based community organizations, non-profits, and higher education institutions, and were especially inspired by faith-based work led by Black churches and Latinx communities. We were also informed by the work of these faith-based organizations in spite of the challenging context in which we were all living and working. Our reflections returned to core questions: How do we continue to do the work of community engagement as we unravel the racial injustice and systemic inequity pervasive in our communities and social structures? How do we keep our focus, returning to engagement work with community partners at the center, in the face of such challenges? And how do we expand from a Judeo-Christian framework of understanding? Taking cues from faith-based community organizations who have worked extensively through this lens of experience, we called for an engagement of hope (Green, Stewart, Bergen, & Nayve, 2020). It is through this recent exploratory study on the intersection of faith and community engagement that we return to our practice and further explore the concept of an engagement of hope. As practitioner-scholars, this exploration serves as a journey of discovery into our practice and leads us to our current line of inquiry.

Our inquiry emerges from the intersectional context of faith and community engagement, as scholar-practitioners and community engagement professionals who all work at faith-based institutions, as well as working extensively with faith-based communities and organizations (e.g. churches, non-profit organizations, community centers, interfaith groups, etc.). As community engagement professionals, we contextualize our roles and practice, extending critical inquiry into community engagement work, given the need for more research since "what needs to be further clarified and promoted is the nature, role, and perspective of the individuals who staff, lead, direct, and advance these [community engagement] spaces" (Dostilio and Perry, 2017, p. 12). From this demand for perspectives from community engagement professionals, we situated our inquiry into our practice, and we explored our context of community engagement. Inspired and informed by faith-based community engagement, our inquiry continued after the publication was released through deliberations and critical reflections, as we continued to interrogate the concept of an engagement of hope. The purpose of our ongoing dialogue and critical reflections were to

clarify this concept, providing both definition and explanation of an engagement of hope. In addition, we sought to honor its emergence from faith-based community engagement work, while also exploring its generalizability to community engagement broadly, building upon and differentiating it from other frameworks.

For example, the concept of hope is complex, and when connected to engagement, it potentially alters the paradigm. Hope is not superfluous, nor a dismissively fleeting aspiration, and as the Slovene poet, Boris Novak, states in his poem, "Decisions:" "Between hope and despair / choose hope / It will be harder to bear" (Novak, 2006).

The final line of Novak's poem demonstrates the gravitas and weight of hope. To hope is to challenge oneself to believe in what one does not know or see. Desmond Tutu has been famously quoted that "Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness" (Tutu, 2016) and Cornel West stated that while he does often feel despair, as a "prisoner of hope," he suggests, "never allow despair to have the last word" (West, 2021). In essence, the concept of hope is not a superficial construct, but rather a complex response difficult to carry, such as virtuous hope emphasizing the goodness of individuals (Pieper, 1997). Freire states, without a minimum of hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle. But without the struggle, hope, as an ontological need, dissipates, loses its bearings, and turns into hopelessness. And hopelessness can become tragic despair. Hence the need for a kind of education in hope (2007, p. 3). We wanted to unpack this tension within the construct of an engagement of hope. Through the lens of collaborative inquiry, rooted in critical reflection as scholar-practitioners, we explore this concept of an engagement of hope, more fully developing a conceptual framework emerging into an actionable theory of change.

Methodology

Our methodological approach to this study involved collaborative inquiry upon the emerging concept of an engagement of hope in the context of our practitioner-scholar research. McReynolds (2015) writes, "Practitioner-Scholars have the unique ability to perceive deficiencies in current theories and practices. Their research and best pedagogical knowledge are needed to challenge and drive the development of a stronger academy" (p.4). Drawing from our framing article in which our call to action included turning toward an engagement of hope (Green, et al., 2020), we sought to critically reflect on this concept in order to describe its meaning in action and explain it in more detail. Our guiding questions included:

1) What do we mean by an engagement of hope collectively?
2) What are 3 - 5 characteristics or criteria that help us define this idea?
3) How do we enact this concept of an engagement of hope in our community engagement work?

4) In the midst of tension-filled, challenging work of facing inequalities and injustice, how do we continue to immerse ourselves in community engagement?

These questions emerged through our discussions and deliberations as we continued to pursue our exploration of this concept. We turned to qualitative inquiry, which focuses on meaning making and understanding through methodological and systematic approaches.

To further explore this concept of an engagement of hope, especially to describe and explain its meaning, we relied on the qualitative approach of collaborative inquiry (Donohoo, 2013). As an inclusive research methodology, collaborative inquiry involves participants as co-inquirers who are experts of their own lives and co-construct the research through active engagement in cycles of reflection (Bridges and McGee, 2011). This approach centers our questions about our own learning experiences in the context of community engagement (Bray, Lee, Smith, & Yorks, 2000). Such a qualitative approach is essential for our exploration because collaborative inquiry:

> ...assumes that understanding and improving the human condition requires an approach that honors a holistic perspective on what constitutes valid knowledge. Effective collaborative inquiry demystifies research and treats it as a form of learning that should be accessible by everyone interested in gaining a better understanding of his or her world. (Bray, Lee, Smith, & Yorks, 2000, p. 3).

This approach to human inquiry is foundational to our study as we sought to interrogate the concept of an engagement of hope in order to gain a better understanding through ongoing reflection. As we each individually and collectively reflected on the engagement of hope within our own universities, communities of engagement, and personal lives, it brought to mind how human inquiry is participative, experiential, political, and action oriented (Reason, 1996, p.15). This concept expands through Reason's work, *Reflections on the Purposes of Human Inquiry* where he states:

> Quality human inquiry starts not with a concern for theory or knowledge but from engagement with the reality of people's lives and how they live and experience them . . . concern for knowledge arises from this practical concern to help people make better sense of their lives and create more and better possibilities in their lives. Although it may be influenced by our own life quest, we must start from questions of experience, need, and practice as defined by the people with and for whom we are working. Human inquiry is thus essentially in-service. (Reason, 1996, p. 20)

This inquiry approach also relied heavily on Rendon's (2014) framework within *Sentipensante (Thinking/Feeling) Pedagogy*, in which transpersonal research deepens the narrative process and positions each author as co-researcher and partner "who turned to each other in truth while we

attempt to open the interhuman nature of the experience" (pp. 52-53). Within a faith-based context, this approach aligns with Ignatian contemplation, as considered by George Bernanos in the *Diary of a Country Priest,* and further emphasized by Modras in *Ignatian Humanism.* Ignatian contemplation:

> …brings all the instruments into a final three-note crescendo [235-7]. First realize that all creation--everything we are and have and see--is given as a token of God's self-gift. Second, realize that God is present in all creation--dwelling in the elements, plants, animals and us. Finally, realize that God is not only present but "laboring" in all that exists--creating, conserving, concurring. In each of the concluding three points of the contemplation, Ignatius writes, "I will reflect on myself." (Modras, 2004, p. 32)

Collaborative inquiry allows the space and necessary reflection to enable deeper considerations of our own relationships with our work; and, Ignatian contemplation invites the consideration of God's presence in our efforts, before it posits the need to reflect on oneself. Further, this reflective practitioner approach emerges from several faith-based perspectives and affirms the need for continued self-reflection and discernment as we engage our communities.

Our reflection questions emerged from our roles as practitioner-scholars of community engagement. Dostilio and Perry (2017) frame the role of community engagement professionals as multidimensional given the complexity of the work, sometimes serving as tempered radicals, transformational leaders, and social entrepreneurs, as we work within our institutions and our local communities. We identify as third-space professionals who often work in the blurred spaces with one foot in the community and one foot in the academy (Whitchurch, 2013). Such roles allow us to cross boundaries between classroom and community, between research and pedagogy, between student learning and community impact, leading to our hybrid roles as scholars and practitioners (Green, Eddins, Berkey, & Meixner, 2018). Thus, our reflection questions emerged from our practice, our professional experiences, and our perspectives on working in and with community organizations.

While there is a considerable amount of excitement and joy in the work of engagement, our experiences connecting and engaging with our communities can be filled with challenges, and we explore how we approach the barriers, challenges, and realities in which we work and live. The source of our inquiry is our practice, and a key function of the practitioner-scholar is to adopt an inquiry stance related to practice (Lytle, 2008). Practitioner-scholar research also connects issues within the practice to the context of the practice and established research methods of inquiry (Salipante and Aram, 2003). Practitioner research is often described as a methodological approach that integrates theory, practice, and research, while also fostering critical reflection on practice through systematic inquiry (Ravitch, 2014). The reflection

questions guided our collaborative inquiry as we interrogated our practice and facilitated a methodological investigation into the concept of an engagement of hope.

We each shared our own stories of engagement within our respective communities which Mezirow (1990) refers to as a process of learning as a way to engage in critical self-reflection, which can lead to personal and societal transformation:

> This process of critical reflection has the potential for profoundly changing the way we make sense of our experience in the world, other people, and ourselves. Such transformative learning, in turn, leads to action that can significantly affect the character of our interpersonal relationships, the organization in which we work and socialize, and the socioeconomic system itself (Mezirow, 1990, p.xiii).

Because we each worked and lived in different cities and states, including Illinois, Wisconsin, and California, we conducted multiple virtual meetings to deliberate and dialogue about this concept. During our meetings, we conducted a thematic analysis of our critical reflections through categorizing and coding our reflections (Clandenin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2012; Rendon, 2014; Green, et al., 2018). We established key themes and identified essential principles that anchor the ideas that emerged. We triangulated the themes, established definitions, and generated a heuristic that represented our findings. We continued to reflect in an emergent, iterative process on this concept. We conducted two virtual feedback sessions for one hour each, both of which were interactive workshops sponsored by professional organizations, the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities and the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities which included professionals in the community engagement field, to identify if the emerging themes connected with their experiences and animated their engagement work. These feedback sessions allowed us to validate the themes with professionals in the field. Our collaborative inquiry process concluded with several professionals requesting information on the concept to foster dialogue, and the affirmative responses confirmed that this concept resonated with other community engagement professionals.

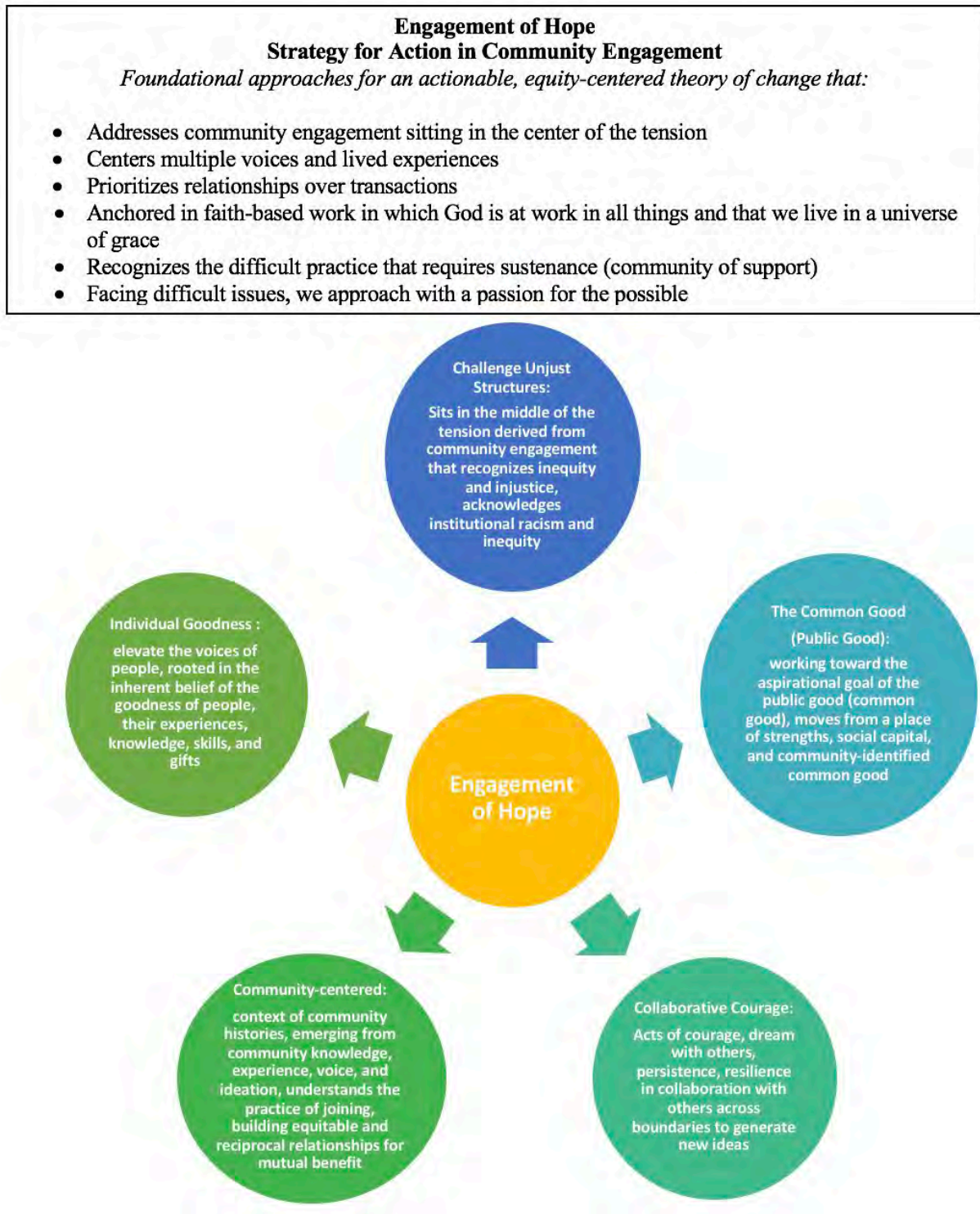**Presentation of a Conceptual Framework and Emerging Equity-Focused Theory of Change**

Our thematic analysis suggested core approaches to community engagement and five key themes that emerged from our critical reflections, deliberation and dialogue, observations working with faith-based community partners, as well as feedback sessions. What emerged was a conceptual framework that elucidated a community engagement strategy for action and emerged into an actionable and equity focused theory of change. Blaxter et al. (1996) explained that the components of a conceptual framework include concepts and contexts that define the scope of the inquiry, while also suggesting methods and theories to apply in the framework. A conceptual framework is historically defined as an iteration of a researcher's inquiry that may evolve as the

inquiry evolves, as well as a structure for organizing ideas (Leshem & Trafford, 2007). In addition, Punch (2000) suggests that such frameworks represent the conceptual status of the topics at hand and their relationship to each other.

Connell and Kubisch (1998) explained that a theory of change is outcomes-focused and evaluation-centered, linking activities, outcomes, and contexts to organizational leadership and strategy (Connell and Kubisch, 1998; Dubow and Litzler, 2018). In addition, a theory of change approach, in relation to community initiatives, focuses on planning and implementation, and a theory of change needs to be plausible, doable, and testable (Connell and Kubisch, 1998). Reinholz and Andrews (2020) define a theory of change, which was a phrase popularized by the Aspen Institute and often utilized in the context of complex community initiatives centered around social change, as "…a tool to help clearly articulate underlying assumptions from the offset. The *process* of creating the theory of change allows a team to reach consensus on its underlying assumptions, which are then codified in an explicit *product* (often displayed as a diagram)" (p. 1).

The engagement of hope model centralizes equity within the theory of change in order to be held accountable to a broad range of stakeholders traditionally excluded in traditional theory of change models. Animated by the *Impact of Community Engagement Model*, developed by Nexus Community Partners, the engagement of hope change model bridges equity and community engagement by including the following values in their participatory change model: culture, spirituality, healing, history, identity, power, relationships, and trust. As scholar-practitioners conducting collaborative inquiry into the concept of an engagement of hope, we analyzed our data from our reflection and dialogue, developed a conceptual framework that defined key criteria, and created an equity-focused theory of change explicitly codified in Figure 1.

Figure 1. An Engagement of Hope Conceptual Framework and Equity-Focused Theory of Change

Engagement of Hope
Strategy for Action in Community Engagement
Foundational approaches for an actionable, equity-centered theory of change that:

- Addresses community engagement sitting in the center of the tension
- Centers multiple voices and lived experiences
- Prioritizes relationships over transactions
- Anchored in faith-based work in which God is at work in all things and that we live in a universe of grace
- Recognizes the difficult practice that requires sustenance (community of support)
- Facing difficult issues, we approach with a passion for the possible

Challenge Unjust Structures:

Sits in the middle of the tension derived from community engagement that recognizes inequity and injustice, acknowledges institutional racism and inequity

Individual Goodness :

elevate the voices of people, rooted in the inherent belief of the goodness of people, their experiences, knowledge, skills, and gifts

Engagement of Hope

The Common Good (Public Good):

working toward the aspirational goal of the public good (common good), moves from a place of strengths, social capital, and community-identified common good

Community-centered:

context of community histories, emerging from community knowledge, experience, voice, and ideation, understands the practice of joining, building equitable and reciprocal relationships for mutual benefit

Collaborative Courage:

Acts of courage, dream with others, persistence, resilience in collaboration with others across boundaries to generate new ideas

To explicate the framework and theory of change, in the next section, we will explain the foundational approaches that serve as core pillars in approaching community engagement that undergird the framework. Next, we explore the five themes and provide definitive characteristics of each theme that scaffolds the conceptual framework of an engagement of hope leading to a theory of change. Lastly, we discuss implications for practice in the community engagement field.

Core Pillars for Approaching Community Engagement

As we continued to deliberate and dialogue on this topic, we also continued to write, iterate, and reflect on the concept of an engagement of hope. Our discussion centered around core assumptions, contexts, and pillars of thought to which we continually returned. We termed these core pillars for approaching community engagement because they were approaches of community engagement that emerged from the study of our practice. Considering approaches of community engagement, an engagement of hope: addresses community engagement that balances the tension of institutional practices and recognizing inequity and injustice; centers multiple voices and lived experiences; prioritizes relationships over transactions; anchors in faith-based work in which God is at work in all things and that we live in a universe of grace; recognizes the difficult practice that requires sustenance (community of support); facing difficult issues, approaches community engagement with a passion for the possible. These approaches of community engagement are further explicated through our critical inquiry and critical reflections below.

Addresses community engagement sitting in the center of the tension

From the beginning, our reflections identified an engagement of hope within the tension derived from community engagement that recognizes inequity and injustice. This was rooted in our prior study based on narrative inquiry: "This exploratory study led us to deeply and critically examine the concept of hope situated alongside community engagement in the context of the institutional tensions, historical legacies of inequity and racial injustice, and the communities' multiple voices." (Green, Stewart, Bergen, & Nayve, 2020). An engagement of hope understands and appreciates the need for tension, one of the most critical aspects of Jesuit spirituality, as defined by Barry, S.J. and Doherty, S.J. in *Contemplatives in Action: The Jesuit Way*. While Barry and Doherty focus on very specific tensions within the Jesuit way of life—trust in God and trust in one's own talents, prayer and action, companionship and mission, obedience and learning from experience, the center and the periphery, poverty and use of the world's goods, chastity and affective friendship—their overall message feels deeply applicable to an engagement of hope. Specifically, "Jesuit spirituality functions best when these tensions are alive, and clearly felt, that is when Jesuits experience themselves in the pulls of both sides of each polarity" (7).

Centers multiple voices and lived experiences

This engagement of hope engages multiple voices as well as a variety of lived experiences which lead to the next foundational approach principle. There are many examples, including other faith based communities, non-profit organizations, universities and community stakeholders/residents, providing an engagement of hope where everyone is invited to sit at the table and allow their voices to be heard. It is reminiscent of African American poet, Langston Hughes, and how he expresses this hope in his poem entitled, "I, Too."

> I, too, sing America
> I am the darker brother.
> They send me to eat in the kitchen
> When company comes
> But I laugh.
> And eat well.
> And grow strong.
>
> Tomorrow,
> I'll be at the table
> When company comes
> Nobody 'll dare
> Say to me
> "Eat in the kitchn,"
> Then
> Besides
> They'll see how beautiful I am
> And be ashamed -
> I, too, am America
> (Hughes, 1994)

The poem reminds us of the stark reality in which many experiences have not been historically recognized, and an engagement of hope challenges us to recognize differences and dialogue across those recognized differences. As Nancy Cantor (2004) stated, "To lead the way toward fulfilling this hope, we in higher education must figure out how to sit together around our table and engage with difference."

As authors and community engagement practitioners, we wrestled with the tensions and questions inherent in earnestly attempting to integrate multiple voices and lived experiences in community-engaged work, and yet realized that we may never fully accomplish this task. In our original article we committed to "[elevating] the voices of our various community partners, as

well as recognize our own privileged voices, we as an editorial team seek to frame this introductory thought piece from the perspective of (1) honoring the variety of faith traditions, (2) our scholar-practitioner approach to this exploratory study, (3) our own faith journey related to our professional role, and (4) our goal to be collaborative co-educators with community members. As co-authors we share a common faith tradition, and therefore, we do not want to speak on behalf of other faith traditions" (Green, Stewart, Bergen, & Nayve, 2020). The contemporary challenge of integrating multiple voices and experiences is not the recognition that doing so is critical to the practice of engagement, but rather the challenge lies in whose voices and experiences are elevated and prioritized over others. The engagement of hope model is an epistemology that is participatory and collective that intentionally integrates an equity-focused theory of change that serves to lift up and recognize multiple voices and lived experiences (Nexus Community Partners).

Prioritizes relationships over transactions

Higher education institutions that foster community engagement within urban communities have to consider whether the partnerships are transformational versus transactional. Enos and Morton (2003) state that transactions are temporary and they originate from the understanding that each partner has something that the other needs, and, therefore, each party collaborates with the other to exchange these resources within existing structures, work, and personnel. Although devoid of commitment, a successful transactional relationship will satisfy some of the needs of all parties. Within a university-community partnership, this often means that each party simply uses the other to meet an immediate need, and then breaks off the relationship when their needs are exhausted. Although short-term partnerships can address acute needs (Bringle & Hatcher 2002, p. 511), from the community's perspective, their needs often remain. These acute community partner needs became painfully evident during the global pandemic. As academic institutions faced uncertain enrollment and declining endowments due to market forces, many universities furloughed staff and cut programs and services. There were numerous examples of academic institutions with transactional community partnerships with their communities providing cursory responses to urgent needs. However, there were fewer examples of transformational campus/community partnerships that truly responded to the societal impacts of the global pandemic and calls for dismantling systemic oppression and inequity. The most powerful stories centered on community-focused mutual aid networks, in which neighbors often checked in on each other and addressed issues of social isolation. This is what the engagement of hope looks like in action.

For many universities who engage in relationships with community partners, community engagement is framed to include the concept of "working with" and not "working for" the community. This challenges the university entering communities with a savior mentality, and encourages an approach to seek the greater good within the community by first allowing the voice of the stakeholders within the community to share their wants and needs. This approach to

community engagement seeks to understand the presence of God in every person, listening with humility, not to advance a particular objective or outcome, but rather to participate authentically in the shared laboring for the greater good. As emphasized in our previous article, Salter-McNeil encourages faith communities to "… come out of their individualism and come together as a community to make and execute a plan based on a united vision for the future." In the context of community, they should find the support, courage, and accountability to imagine and work toward a world different from the one we currently live in (Salter-McNeil, p. 192-193). This defined a foundational principle within an engagement of hope, because it focuses on building relationships for support, courage, and accountability.

In reflecting upon this notion of "working with," or accompaniment with others, our critical reflections invited us into deeper dialogue around the role of our personal and professional motivations in the work of community engagement. One of our community partners reminds us of the need for persistent reflection and discernment as to why we are participating in this work:

> I sit across the table from one of the original NAACP Youth Commandos who led the 1968 Marches on Milwaukee in a bank-building-turned-diner called Coffee Makes You Black. 70 years of life has not dulled his activist tendencies, nor has it stilted his stature. He is a tall, African-American man, with a deep, graveled, voice. We are meeting to discuss his possible participation in an event we are hosting recognizing the 50th Anniversary of the Fair Housing Marches, a key moment in our city's, and nation's history. My intent is to partner with the local coordinating group, faculty members, and students to invite deeper campus discussions and explorations around the history of the movement, and the current moment in our city. The pause comes, and he leans forward. The questions are delivered in quick succession, with an intensity, and honesty that feels deeply personal.

> "What is your motivation? Why are you doing this?"

> As a white male, born and raised in a suburb of Milwaukee, the Catholic tradition informed much of my upbringing. I attended K-8 and high school at Catholic schools, and, while my undergraduate and master's degree were completed at two public universities, I had always longed to return to an educational setting that invited the exploration of faith as a component of the whole person. As I completed my master's in Cultural Studies, and was searching for my first position, I was excited when an opportunity opened up at Marquette University, a Catholic, Jesuit institution located in the urban heart of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. My return to Catholic education, and its strong mission-driven orientation, aligned with my values and religious upbringing, but I was unaware at the time how fully the expression of my faith would be ignited through the Jesuit charism and community engagement. The questions posed above by my

community partner resonate at a professional and personal level because they are precisely the place from which I think we should begin our approaches in community engagement, and personal prayer around decision-making. In the Jesuit tradition, when a decision is being considered, the utilization of discernment allows us to more fully enter into and understand our motivations, paying attention to the gentle movements of the Spirit within us. My race, gender, historical background, faith, and institutional affiliation form a context for my motivations in every moment of engagement with this partner. To approach community engagement authentically, I need to continually discern the motivations, and perhaps more importantly, my professional and personal interest in pursuing and forming engaged relationships. [DB] (Green, Stewart, Bergen, & Nayve, 2020).

To fully appreciate an engagement of hope, it is critical to be able to clearly and honestly articulate our motivations, not only for ourselves but for our partners as well. A failure to acknowledge and appreciate our motivations could lead to inauthenticity in our relationships and the subsequent potential for negative or even harmful outcomes. The question is how to intentionally frame these connections and relationships in a way that creates "coherent wholes" rather than atomized transactions (Del Rio, Loggins 2019). In prioritizing relationships in community engagement, we do not seek to ignore transactions, nor demonize them, but rather we acknowledge transactions as necessary aspects of engagement when mutually agreed upon. The challenge is to clearly and consciously articulate our motivations to move toward coherent wholes and relationship-affirming outcomes, acknowledging and moving beyond transactions.

Anchored in faith-based work in which God is at work in all things and that we live in a universe of grace

One of the key components of Ignatian Spirituality according to Modras is engagement with culture: "A God at work in all things can be found on a stage as well as in a sanctuary. . . We live in a universe of grace" (Modras, p. 83-84). If we believe that God is at work in all things and that we live in a universe of grace, then it follows that our engagement should be ignited by hope derived through that faith in God's presence. Our communities comprise broad and diverse perspectives, ideas, religious beliefs, political views, motivations, and interests. Often it can be easier to identify and align with those organizations that most closely reflect our personal or institutional perspectives; however, community engagement often complicates the tidiness of such alignments. In these moments it is helpful to recall that, "for Ignatian Spirituality, nothing human is merely human. And no enterprise, no matter how secular, is merely secular" (Modras, p. 84), God is at work in all things, and grace is ubiquitous.

Recognizes the difficult practice that requires sustenance (community of support)

In considering efforts in community engagement, we must acknowledge that hope gives us sustenance in work that can be considerably difficult. Nouwen states it clearly: "I cannot always

find the light, or walk in the light of God. I need the love and support of my brothers and sisters in the community of faith" (Nouwen, 28). Our reflections and inquiry process included observations that community engagement work is persistent, resilient, and courageous because the focus is on the creation of good emerging from change.

Practitioner-scholars have ample opportunities to access communities of support, through programs or professional organizations committed to community engagement, such as the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU), Campus Compact, the International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE), the Place Based Justice Network, or the National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE). There are also organizations that create a community of mission-aligned institutions that may embrace faith and hope as central to practice, such as the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU). There are other organizations and programs dedicated to creating a community of community engagement professionals, such as the Practitioner-Scholar Community of IARSLCE or the Engaged Scholars Consortium. Lastly, communities of support may emerge from the community-based collaborators and non-profit community organization partners that share faith and hope as motivation. Through these many opportunities, community engagement professionals may find a community of support to sustain us through this difficult work.

Facing difficult issues, we approach with "a passion for the possible"

Steindl-Rast considers the concluding statement, "a passion for the possible," of William Sloane Coffin's autobiography, *Once to Every Man*, as an invitation to consider how we must approach the crucial issues we face every day. Steindl-Rast states,

> As we go forward, the apparent limits of the possible will be pushed back further and further into the region of the seemingly impossible. Sooner or later we realize that the possible has no fixed limits. [...] The exploration animated by a passion for the possible is, of course, our religious quest, spurred on by the restlessness of our human heart. Hope makes our religious quest what it is. The very notion of quest implies hope. (Steindl-Rast, p. 125)

Five Themes of an Engagement of Hope

The following five themes emerged through our collaborative inquiry as we analyzed our reflections, deliberated, and interrogated this notion of an engagement of hope. Rooted in our observations working with non-profit organizations (often faith-based), as well as our professional experiences in the community engagement field, these themes define and shape an engagement of hope.

Challenging Unjust Structures

As stated previously, a foundational principle of an engagement of hope is the tension derived from community engagement that recognizes inequity and injustice. This requires us to acknowledge institutional racism and inequity, to accept our role within the unjust systems in which we participate, and then to challenge them in practice, policy, and position. As anchor institutions we are called to provide educational practices within and outside the walls of our institutions through community partnerships which are mutually reciprocal relationships where faculty, community residents, and community organizations are co-educators to create a just society for everyone.

Rigorous academic experiences should not only enhance the development of all college students, they should also disrupt existing inequalities by bolstering students who have been historically marginalized or excluded from higher education (Bowman and Culver 2018). Increasing social and economic equity is just one way that effectual instructional practices promote the public good. Other societal benefits include improving local communities through partnerships, preparing students to be educated citizens of diverse societies and empowering them to identify and challenge systems of inequality (Trolian and Culver, 2020). This is how universities can provide an engagement of hope which is characterized by the honest and persistent work of faith communities that elevate the voices of people, challenge unjust structures, and integrate community histories with the potential and possibility for a better future.

The Common Good

Community engagement that is anchored in hope is rooted in the inherent belief of the goodness of people juxtaposed with working toward the aspirational goal of the public good or common good. The tension of the individual versus the good of the community is situated not at odds, but through mutual consideration. Faith-based higher education institutions in partnership with faith or non-faith based community organizations are called to serve the public good. Cantor, Englot, and Higgins (2013) have specifically called on universities to consider how to leverage their unique strengths in order to break down university and community barriers. Matthew Kotchen (2012) states, "Pure public goods have two defining features. One is 'non-rivalry,' meaning that one person's enjoyment of a good does not diminish the ability of other people to enjoy the same good. The other is 'non-excludability,' meaning that people cannot be prevented from enjoying the good."

An engagement of hope is characterized by the honest and persistent work of faith communities that elevate the voices of people, challenge unjust structures, and integrate community histories with the potential and possibility of a better future. Our critical reflections revealed examples of faith-based organizations who exemplified this engagement approach:

As we think about the public good, I am reminded of a Chicago urban community on the Westside of Chicago called North Lawndale. Lawndale Christian Community Church (LCCC) has been the beacon of hope for a once-plighted community filled with poverty, lack of medical care and affordable housing, high rates of recidivism, and food insecurities. In 1978, members of Lawndale Community Church surveyed a group of Lawndale residents about their greatest needs. The residents listed the following: inexpensive health care, basketball gym, improved housing, and competent and affordable legal services. The voice of the people was heard and the following engagement of hope was fulfilled:

- Lawndale Christian Health Center from hope to possibility to reality in 1984.
- Lawndale Christian Development Center was established in 1987 to provide economic development within the community - affordable housing, restaurants, etc. In 2006, they developed the Dr. King Legacy Apartments, Museum, and commercial corridor on the land where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. lived while fighting for housing and workers' rights in the 1960's.
- Hope House was established in 1995 as a place of refuge for men reentering society from prison to break the cycle of recidivism and provide shelter and job readiness skills. In the same year, Lou Malnati's Pizzeria, a sit-down restaurant opened which provides employment for local residents and Hope House residents.
- In 2003, the first ever Hip Hop Church was established for the youth in the community and in 2007, the church purchased and renovated an old firehouse and developed an arts community center providing culinary arts, dance and music studio, and workforce development.
- In 2010, Lawndale Christian Legal Center was established providing free legal services for youth and young adults 24 years of age and younger.
- In 2012, to continue to combat health inequity in the community an additional health clinic, fitness center, conference center, and sit down cafe was built.
- In 2019, with a partnership with Chicago Botanical Gardens, Lawndale Health Center built the Farm on Ogden which provides urban agriculture with fresh vegetables for health patients and community residents as well as food security and job placement for youth and formerly incarcerated men and women. In the same year, just a block away, the Lawndale Senior Health Center was built to specifically serve senior residents providing healthcare services and day senior programming.

This example, of a faith based organization who for over 40 years have been intentional about their engagement of hope when they allowed the voice of the residents to dictate

how they would serve the community for the public good. [Critical reflection of Cynthia Stewart]

During one feedback session, this example was presented and a few of the participants commented on what a joy it was to hear good things happening in Chicago in spite of what they hear from the national media about the increase of violence and lack of resources in urban communities.

Collaborative Courage

Community engagement is an act of courage in and of itself, as it relies on hope for a better future. In his consideration of the value of the community of the church, Ronald Rolheiser references Edward Shillebeeckx: "what we dream alone remains a dream, but what we dream with others can become a reality." Rolheiser goes on to consider the church community in the following way: "Alone, standing apart from community, I am no more powerful than my own personality and charisma, which in a world of six billion--[now closer to 8 billion]--people, will not make much of a difference.[...] The first thing I should do, if I hope to help bring about some justice and peace on this planet, is begin to dream with others within a world-wide body of persons committed to the same dream" (Rolheiser, p. 138-9). The imperative seems clear: we must dream with others through an engagement of hope. Community engagement is collaborative in nature, requiring individuals in different sectors, organizations, communities, and backgrounds to generate, create, produce, and develop together. As previously stated, an engagement of hope is persistent, resilient, and courageous because the focus is on the creation of good; it exemplifies grit.

Faith-based institutions are significant influencers in the community both as institutional structures and the degree to which they develop coalitions in the community. Engaged institutions partner with communities in order to collectively meet both parties' needs, hopes, and desires. Engaged universities embrace communities as equal partners who work with, not for, universities in a mutual exchange to discover new knowledge and promote and apply learning (Karasik, 1993). This collaborative paradigm redefines universities from curators of knowledge to dialectic partners who must reconsider how they operationalize teaching for the benefit of all (Torres, 2000)—"a successful collaborative process [that] enables a group of people and organizations to combine the complementary knowledge, skills and resources so they can accomplish more together than they can on their own" (Center for the Advancement of Collaborative Strategies and Health, 2002, p. 2).

Community-Centered

An engagement of hope is community-centered, emerging from community knowledge, experience, voice, trust, and ideation. Such engagement recognizes community histories and honors them with a seat at the table. Because such engagement is consistently working toward the aspirational goal of the common good, the community is the center point and anchor to ground engagement in form, practice, and delivery. Leiderman and colleagues (2002) found that a commitment to ensure mutual benefit leads to the development of trust and accountability in a community partnership. Trust is a critical component of community partnerships, and Schulz and colleagues (2003) consider the role of mutual trust in assessing the effectiveness of participatory research partnerships. These relationships are built on a two-way exchange that explicitly seeks mutual benefit and, ultimately, transformation (Dostilio, p.169). Our critical reflections animated this as we explored this theme of community-centered from the lens of an engagement of hope:

> Jennifer Turner, affectionately known as Mama J, is an iconic culture bearer, historian, and storyteller for over three decades with the Community Book Center (CBC) in New Orleans. Hundreds of university students have visited the CBC and Mama J often will ask them, "What do you get, and what does the community get?" Her question echoes sentiments from community voices who have grown weary of the expression of mutually beneficial relationships without experiencing the embodied actions and behaviors of true reciprocity.

> An equity and community-centered theory of change understands this polarity and approaches it like the "practice of joining" developed by Esteban Del Rio and John Loggins are critical to creating social cohesion to enact and embody change (Del Rio, Loggins 2019). The practice of joining draws from critical service-learning in that there is an attentiveness to both pedagogy and a reflective process (Mitchell 2008). Del Rio and Loggins suggest that a joining practice must integrate mindfulness in order to be fully present and accepting of what emerges in community engaged work (Del Rio, Loggins 2019) and they suggest the following process:

> - Reflect on the habits and assumptions, conditions, and purposes that guide individual and institutional actions, attitudes, behaviors
> - Discern which of those support the anchor mission and those that undermine the anchor mission
> - Identify changes necessary in strategy, but also in work routines and mental frameworks (personal and professional habits and assumptions that inform individual and collective work, and the conditions and purposes of that work)

- Commit to collectively setting the purpose and creating the conditions for culture change. Do so by empowering faculty, staff, students, and most importantly, community partners
- Assess: it is most useful to discern outcomes and assessment of critical commitments as part of the normal assessment procedure
- Repeat: this last point returns to the beginning of the cycle and closes the loop for what should be an ongoing process. People always make meaning, and as flexible and mutable as culture can be, it also persists through the routines of everyday life. (Critical reflection of Chris Nayve)

Individual Goodness

An engagement of hope clearly focuses on the experience, knowledge, skills, and gifts of the individual. It elevates the voice and experience of individuals, and it is rooted in the inherent belief of the goodness of people as well as working toward the aspirational goal of the public good or common good. The emphasis on individual goodness stems from the early work of McKnight and Kretzmann (1993) who coined the term Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) in the late 1980s. While service providers and academics went into urban communities plagued with poverty, disinvestment, poor health, racism, oppression, crime, and lack of resources, their response was to provide a need-based approach, which focused on what communities lacked, deficiency, scarcity, and need. This approach did not provide hope, but continued the cycle of shame and hopelessness within many urban communities. McKnight and Kretzmann's ABCD model of community engagement changed the way that service providers and academics entered into urban communities, and they shifted the focus on the assets, including the knowledge, skills, and gifts of the residents within that community. Luther Snow (2014) in his chapter *Assets, Innovation, and Academia*, reflects on McKnight and Kretzmann's concept of framing good in urban communities as assets, rather than deficiencies:

> They noticed the good in communities. They observed that sometimes residents were getting things done together that the outside professionals could not accomplish. They saw community-based organizing, economic development, health promotion, teaching and learning, sharing and networking. And wherever something good was going on in communities, they realized that folks were not focused on needs. Instead, they focused on assets. They reflected on their gifts, passion and talents, rather than their deficiencies. They took the reins of their associations, groups, and organizations, instead of depending on outside agencies. They appreciated the physical and economic assets in their communities, and figured out what they could do by connecting those assets in new ways. (Snow, p. 33)

An engagement of hope elevates this critical shift to not only recognize the goodness of individuals within communities, but also the experience of individuals living in the community.

For example, Mitchell (2008) challenges us to move toward critical service-learning pedagogy because it raises a critical consciousness of the individual learner in the community as well as the experience of individuals living in the community:

> Critical service-learning pedagogy fosters a critical consciousness, allowing students to combine action and reflection in classroom and community to examine both the historical precedents of the social problems addressed in their service placements and the impact of their personal action/inaction in maintaining and transforming those problems. This analysis allows students to connect their own lives to the lives of those with whom they work in their service experiences. (p. 54)

The tension, or polarity, of the common good juxtaposed with individual goodness is not elements that are at odds within community engagement, but rather elements that are both important and ideals of engagement. Critical service-learning pedagogy captures this as it "encourages contemplation on both personal and institutional contributions to social problems and measures that may lead to social change" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 54).

Faith-based non-profit organizations and churches lead in this area of honoring individual goodness through their programs and services. Our critical reflections demonstrated many examples to animate this work:

> The work of Taller de José in the Little Village community of Chicago, a primarily Latinx community, often referred to as "Little Mexico," demonstrates how a faith-based non-profit organization models and emphasizes the goodness of individuals in the community. I have learned so much working with them. Supported by the Congregation of St. Joseph, this organization focuses on accompaniment -- walking with individuals in the community to address their needs and connect them to the resources required to meet those needs.

> As I reflect, I am reminded that their model of accompaniment is a way to address and elevate individual goodness. The mission of this organization states it clearly: "Taller de José accompanies individuals, serving as a bridge to connect them to the health, legal, and social services needed to achieve their goals. As a member of the Congregation of St. Joseph Mission Network, we create more connected communities." (Taller De José) The vision statement, however, articulates an emphasis on both social justice and elevating the dignity of each individual:

By fostering the model of accompaniment, Taller de José:

- Challenges social structure in order to create a culture of inclusivity and mutuality
- Creates, maintains, and supports just relationships with individuals and organizations
- Seeks to create systemic change to promote a more just and equitable society
- Cultivates a consciousness of the inherent worth of each person
(Taller De José)

The staff of this organization (called companeras/os) literally physically and emotionally walk alongside community members as they navigate complex systems (legal system, hospitals, immigration, social services) and connect the community members to resources. As they support each individual that comes to their doors, they approach them as the "dear neighbor" -- a core value of the sisters who comprise the Congregation of St. Joseph-- and honor their individual experiences, priorities, issues, and strengths. They walk with them, wherever they may need to go. They wait with them, sometimes for hours. They translate for them and help them find the buildings and offices in this large, complex city of Chicago. And most of all, they listen to each person - for what they want and need, for what they hope and dream. Their work and the impact they have on the Chicago community - one person at a time- reminds me to center individual goodness in my work every day. The work of Taller de José, and the sisters within the Congregation of St. Joseph, who founded it, remind me there is an actionable way to center individual goodness too - we merely need to walk alongside and accompany each other. [Critical reflection of Patrick Green]

It is the work of many faith-based community organizations that serve as models and activate these five themes through their programs and services.

Implications: Moving the community engagement field

The engagement of hope is a conceptual framework and equity-focused theory of change model rooted in faith-based work, and reflexively moves beyond community engagement at faith-based institutions. It is applicable to community engagement approaches at all institutions, public or private, community college or four-year universities. It builds upon past and current community engagement frameworks, but responds to the current context of higher education. In effect, an engagement of hope framework proposes that we learn together and develop shared understandings within the complex contexts of our practice, whether that be faith, social justice, urban, rural, or constituency-based.

The community engagement field has long been focused on institutionalizing the work in the higher education sector. In an effort to legitimize service-learning and community engagement, early adopters demonstrated its effectiveness through evidence-based studies, built a canon of literature throughout the past several decades, fostered numerous resources for practice, and developed professional organizations. A second generation of scholars have emerged, and a third generation of early career scholar-practitioners have now contributed extensively to the field. Yet the focus on institutionalization, organizational structures, and higher education course development has long been the point of entry. This surfaced during both of our feedback sessions with professionals in community engagement, and the focus has historically been on the service activity. The feedback from professionals during these sessions was not only affirmative validating the resonance of this framework, but also noted how this framework changes the narrative of community engagement. For example, in one of the interactive feedback sessions, distinguished scholar of community engagement, Barbara Holland noted the engagement of hope framework alters the interpretation of community engagement:

> "From the early beginnings of higher education engagement in community partnerships, campus-based organizers tended to focus mostly on the details and stresses of launching and delivery the activities. The necessary attention to preparation, logistics, and delivery could be overwhelming, leading to a view that a completed activity was a successful activity. The incredibly thin staffing and budgeting for community-based student learning programs certainly did not provide much of a base for critical assessment or formal research on the impacts on students or communities…good, bad, or indifferent. Without a formal and ongoing campus/community dialogue, engagement was largely supported by interested faculty with a particular passion for engagement. This framework, by introducing hope and faith into the dialogue between higher education and communities, describes a potential path that may lead to new methods of campus/community dialogue that lead to specific initiatives that aim to create lasting change and improvements in communities. The focus on the essence of hope may help lead higher education engagement practices to be more successful in creating engagement initiatives that are co-developed in ways that fulfill the visions and goals of all involved." (CUMU Learning and Sharing series: Expanding Your Work through an Engagement of Hope Interactive Workshop, May 13, 2021; personal communication, June 28, 2021)

As Holland notes, emphasis has traditionally been on institutionalizing the activity of community engagement. This may emerge from a service-learning course or a community engagement program at the institution of higher education. The location of community engagement has been from the institution to the community, although many place-based community engagement initiatives have tried to challenge this approach. The conceptual framework and theory of change evolving from an engagement of hope, with its emphasis on co-development, is a departure from this common point of entry; it is not, however, a side door or alternative gateway. It is a different

place, rather, a new location; a community engagement of hope is seeking a new landscape, altogether, in the blurred spaces between communities and institutions.

The implications of this theory of change is moving the community engagement field to build upon its current strengths and to re-center its focus addressing community outcomes and impact and de-center the activity. It is important to frame this article within the context of the global health pandemic, current racial justice movements, and deepening challenges to democratic structures in society. While these social issues have long plagued society, it is clear we are in a unique moment in history where the intersection and impacts of these social issues have very real immediate impacts, and unforeseen generational consequences. For these reasons, the engagement of hope framework and theory of change rooted in equity is explicitly focused on justice (social, economic, racial, and environmental), and it anchors the community at its core. It challenges traditional notions of knowledge, as community members are elevated as knowers and generators of knowledge. It is boundless, as it challenges us to dream and vision in and with community members. Through this lens, the point of entry is the community, not the academy. Given the new landscape in the community, there may not be a clear map, but there are many guides as our community partners walk with us, and we walk with our community partners.

Conclusion: Re-centering Relationships amidst Polarities in an Engagement of Hope

In addition to the new point of entry, this theory of change radically centers the individual experience through relationships in community engagement. As practitioner-scholars situated in professional positions related to community engagement, we spend a considerable amount of time listening to faculty, staff, students, and community partners, reading about and researching best practices, and engaging key leaders in the field. Together, each year, we facilitate hundreds of meetings with various key stakeholders, review dozens of books and articles, and engage with expert consultations. Through consistent efforts to create a strategy for more fully institutionalizing community engagement across our institutions, the return to common questions arose around more formal rewards and incentives structures, centralization of departments and offices, broader promotion of initiatives, and additional resources along with staffing to support and elevate the work within the university. In short, the institution is commonly centered on the evolution of the practice, or activity, of community engagement, and thus defined as the entity that needs to evolve and change in pursuit of doing community engagement work better.

The institutional work focused on the activity, systems, structures and/or practice can sometimes slow or deter the relationship work we do and practitioners are called to do. As reflected through our writing process:

> We are facilitating programs, supporting engaged faculty, meeting with community members and residents, and cultivating awareness around historical moments in the city. At the same time, we are laughing with local pastors, crying with residents who are grieving the loss of community members, experiencing resolute anger with local activists, and considering how to move forward the greater good in relationship with others. I find myself reflecting upon the gifts, talents, and influence I have to enact change alongside the gifts, talents, and influence that others bring. Structures and systems can sometimes discourage me; and, people make decisions that disempower some and empower others. The push and pull of the institution and the individual can leave me feeling tired and overwhelmed. And yet, like many of my colleagues, I return. I return to the meetings, the discussions of rewards and incentives structures, the events, the programs, the coffee shops, the planning and the executing. I do so because of the relationships I have developed. (Critical reflection of Dan Bergen)

As noted in this critical reflection, there exists a tension between the individual relationships we cultivate in community engagement work and the institutional systems and structures we attempt to address. During our feedback sessions, multiple community engagement professionals identified how the engagement of hope framework emphasizes intentional interactions. Such intentionality challenges us to focus on relationships in a new way.

Similar to Doherty and Barry's concept of tension in Jesuit spirituality, an engagement of hope "functions best when these tensions are alive, and clearly felt, [...] when [we] experience ourselves in the pulls of both sides of each polarity" (7). The engagement of hope framework moves to a theory of action as we enter into this tension, experiencing the push and pull of such polarities as individual goodness and the common good. If it seems like an oxymoron to center the individual within efforts of community engagement, it is essential to clarify: this is not about centering the power of any one individual, but rather about centering the individual experience while we work toward the public good.

Our inquiry approach became one akin to how some educators consider a problem through "human-centered design thinking." Just as some of the fundamental tenets of this process warrant spending time with people in the environment, resisting being restricted by your own knowledge, considering the whole journey of the relationship or product, and persisting through prototyping, or utilizing collaborative courage in recognizing it takes time to evolve these relationships, our approach centered the human experience of relationship (Human-Centered Design Thinking, September 2, 2021). Our goal in this exploration was to diminish the temptation towards "transactionalism" derived out of a need for efficiency and, subsequently, to further explore the emphasis on relationship.

Scholarly efforts to "institutionalize" community engagement have shifted the focus from the moment of relationship to the institution. This article argues for a radical re-centering of the individual experience of relationship in community engagement. This re-centering is based on the premise that it is time for the community engagement movement to stop trying to justify itself within the constraints of higher education institutions often facing what Andrew J. Hoffman defines as a crisis:

> "Academic research is becoming increasingly irrelevant as the work becomes too insular, the language too opaque, the journals too inaccessible, and the cultural norms of disciplinary boundaries too balkanized. We need to break out of our siloed research communities and bring our work to a world that needs it." (Hoffman, 2021, p. ix)

While engaged faculty members are working to advance their research agendas in partnership with local organizations, it is most often the relationships they discuss when articulating their work in dialogue with others. Our experiences working with faculty and community partners consistently reveal it is the network and connection to one another that proves valuable, whether connecting to other faculty or to community members and organizations.

In other words, an engagement of hope begins with the fundamental calling to serve one another and to be in relationship with each other. As a theory of change, an engagement of hope centers the moment of relationship between two individuals, while holding space for the tension, the push and pull, of the institutional and individual experience, of the common good and individual goodness. As U.S. youth poet laureate, Amanda Gorman, shared in her inaugural poem, "The Hill We Climb," we may all ask "where can we find light in this never-ending shade?" as we have "weathered and witnessed," and more so:

> That even as we grieved, we grew
> That even as we hurt, we hoped
> That even as we tired, we tried

Yet Gorman (2021) reminds us of hope as an actionable theory of change, as she concludes:

> For there is always light,
> if only we're brave enough to see it,
> if only we're brave enough to be it.

Such hope informs, inspires, and catalyzes community engagement work toward outcomes and impact beyond our current measures. In that moment of relationship and connection with each other, and amidst the space for tension, an engagement of hope emerges and has the power to transform us.

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- Lawndale Christian Community Church Hope House