METROPOLITAN Universities

OPEN ACCESS

Invited Commentary

Proposing a Scholar-Administrator Operational Paradigm: An Organizing Framework for Community Engagement Administrators

Brenda Marsteller Kowalewski[1]

[1] Weber State University

Cite as: Kowalewski, B.M. (2025). Proposing a Scholar-Administrator Operational Paradigm: An Organizing Framework for Community Engagement Administrators. *Metropolitan Universities*, 36(1), 31-48. DOI: 10.18060/28901

Guest Editor: Laurie Van Egeren, Ph.D. Associate Guest Editors: Andrew Carlson, Ph.D., Paula O'Loughlin, Ph.D., and Deidra Peaslee, Ed.D. Editor: Patrick M. Green, Ed.D.

Abstract

In this reflective essay, CUMU's 2024 Holland Scholar-Administrator describes a framework for organizing, institutionalizing, and implementing community engagement in institutions of higher education and their surrounding communities. Three levels of community engagement are demonstrated using a metropolitan university in Ogden, Utah, as a case study. The three levels of community engagement, although each with its own function, are not meant to operate in silos. The dynamic nature of employing the multi-level framework is explored, and the benefits of operating on more than one level simultaneously are discussed. By engaging on more than one level simultaneously, community engagement administrators are able to nurture deeper relationships, identify and share resources across initiatives, and better sustain the work even when faced with transitions in leadership.

Keywords: community engagement, community engaged learning, anchor mission, community partnerships

Introduction

Community-engaged work comes in all shapes and sizes in metropolitan universities. This is an asset to be celebrated, but it can sometimes be hard to describe, especially as part of a larger, coordinated approach to community engagement. For example, as stewards of place, metropolitan universities are responsible for helping students become civic-minded graduates while also engaging with other anchor institutions in their local communities to address issues of community and economic development. Community anchor work also pushes institutions to examine and change their business practices in ways that benefit the larger community. Rather than see these varied forms of community engagement as disparate activities, I propose a framework that connects them as contributing elements to a singular community engagement narrative.

This framework is informed by my own professional journey in the field of community engagement. Over the years, I found myself well-positioned to shift and evolve with the field. I seemed to always be in the right place at the right time to be part of the movement or ride the wave of the movement as it unfolded. I feel like I have been growing up professionally inside and alongside a maturing community engagement field. In many regards, we have grown up together, this field and I. Because of this, I have developed a multifaceted perspective on community engagement, which is critical for every administrator leading in the field to facilitate their community-engaged work in a truly integrated fashion.

The evolution of community-engaged work in higher education, just in my lifetime, has been remarkable. Something that started as a student-centric pedagogical practice to develop engaged citizens has also expanded to include options for institutions to actively engage in their communities as change agents in their own right. The field of community engagement has been expanding to include not only scholars and professional organizations focused on student learning through service-learning, but also scholarship and leadership on how to apply higher education's "economic power and human capital in a long-term partnership with their local communities to improve mutual well-being" (Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities [CUMU], n.d.).

In this reflective essay, I aim to take you along on my journey, demonstrating not only the evolution of my orientation to community-engaged work but also leaving you with a framework that incorporates the various aspects of this continually evolving field. My hope is to arm community engagement administrators with an operational paradigm that keeps them nimble and agile in their multifaceted work, which seeks to both help students become civic-minded graduates (Steinberg et al., 2011) while guiding the institution's responsibility to the surrounding community.

Gathering Building Blocks Leading to the Framework

We know the philosophy undergirding service-learning is over a century old, with John Dewey (1917) purporting that students would learn more effectively and become better citizens if they engaged in service to the community, especially if the service was incorporated into their academic curriculum. But the term "service-learning" was first coined just over half a century ago in 1967 (Sigmon, 1979), one year before I was born. Even though the practice of service-learning in education started to gain momentum in the 1980s when clearer lines delineating community service from curricular-based service-learning emerged (Hollander et al., 2001), I did not really experience it until graduate school.

It was in the early 1990s, while I was pursuing a PhD in sociology, that service-learning emerged into my world and onto the higher education scene as another form of experiential learning. As a sociology graduate instructor learning how to teach for the first time, some of my fellow graduate instructors and I became intrigued by this "new" pedagogy we had "discovered" in the literature. We began teaching introductory sociology courses with optional service-learning experiences embedded, which led us to gather data on the pedagogy and eventually publish it (Cotter et al., 1995; Ender et al., 2000). Additionally, we edited teaching resources and syllabi collections for other sociologists interested in using the pedagogy (Ender et al., 1996; Kowalewski, 2001).

As a newly minted PhD and assistant professor in the mid-1990s, my affiliation with the newly founded Utah Campus Compact in 1996 offered additional faculty development opportunities to hone my use of the pedagogy. That pedagogical focus continued as I progressed through the promotion and tenure process at my institution. Furco (1996), *Service-Learning: A Balanced Approach to Experiential Education*, and Eyler & Giles (1999), *Where's the Learning in Service-Learning?* publications fueled my focus on honing the pedagogy. Enhancing community capacity through students' learning opportunities was the singular paradigm from which I understood community engagement at the time.

However, in the mid-2000s, after a decade of teaching with service-learning and/or community-based research as cornerstones in every course, I experienced a shift in my view of the community engagement field. The shift coincided with my first opportunity as a scholar-administrator, serving as co-founding director of a community engagement center on campus. The role afforded me the opportunity to attend the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU) conference, where I was introduced to the idea that institutions of higher education contribute to economic and community development in their communities in ways that do not involve service-learning at all. My new perspective was further corroborated by understanding the purpose of my regional public university, Weber State University, as a steward of place per the American Association of State Colleges and Universities landmark report

Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place: A Guide for Leading Public Engagement at State Colleges and Universities (2002).

By 2006, my provost encouraged me to write and submit our institution's application for the 2008 Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement. The scope of my thinking about community engagement further expanded while writing the application. I came to understand that community engagement was not just about student learning and enhancing the capacity of the community through service-learning. It was about all the ways the institution and the community are engaged in mutually beneficial relationships. It was about both curricular and outreach activities – both, and not either, or. Driscoll (2009) affirms that the definition of community engagement in the classification "represents broad thinking about collaborations between higher education and the community and intentionally encourages important qualities such as mutuality and reciprocity." My personal participation in the classification self-study process continued to push me to expand the defining elements of community engagement.

That foundational broad thinking about community engagement set me, and my institution, on a course to be open to the anchor institution paradigm (Hodges & Dubb, 2012) when I accepted my second scholar-administrator role as associate provost for high-impact programs in 2016. This coincided with Campus Compact's call to presidents to celebrate the Compact's 30th anniversary by reaffirming their commitment to the public purpose of higher education. Campus Compact challenged its member institutions to write community action plans, which we did in collaboration with our community partners. As far as I know, Weber State University was the only institution to take a community-centric approach to the task. By doing so, it opened the door to participation with The Democracy Collaborative and eventually the Anchor Learning Network (CUMU, n.d.), all of which supported the development of a new office on campus for community development and an anchor institution initiative called the Ogden Civic Action Network (OgdenCAN).

Ultimately, my professional understanding of community engagement moved from only focusing on the students' engagement with the community to a broader definition that included a focus on the institution's engagement with the community as a place of knowledge, wisdom, and expertise. I began to understand that both the student and the institution are active actors in our community. Initiatives involving both types of actors need to be included when telling and facilitating our community engagement story. But describing how these forms of community engagement fit together and interacted with each other was not always obvious until I characterized the work on three distinct levels – one level that focuses on the individual as the active actor with the community (micro-level) and two other levels that focus on the institution as the active actor with the community fulfilling different aspects of its anchor mission (meso- and macro-levels). This multi-level framework is meant to help administrators describe, organize, and facilitate community engagement at any higher education institution.

Multiple Levels of Community Engagement

For the purposes of this essay, I use my current institution, Weber State University (WSU), where I serve as vice provost, as a case study to help describe the framework and illustrate its usefulness to community engagement administrators. For context, Weber State University (WSU) is a public, regional university nestled in the foothills of the Wasatch Mountains in Ogden, Utah. For more than 50 years, WSU has embraced a dual mission of being a regional university *and* offering community college degrees to meet the needs of local industry. Originally established to meet the educational needs of Ogden, Utah, and the surrounding area, WSU's history and existence are rooted in its strong ties to the community. Weber State is proud of its Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement, first earned in 2008 and reclassified in 2015. Far from resting on its laurels, the university continues to find new ways to embody this distinction.

This commitment to community engagement is evident in the university's mission statement, which reads: *We transform lives and communities by educating students of all identities and backgrounds. We nurture student success through a supportive environment, individualized pathways, meaningful personal connections with faculty and staff, teaching and experiential learning, research, and civic engagement* (Weber State University, n.d., *Our Mission*). This commitment is further reflected in the current university strategic plan that focuses on four goals, one of which is the university's community anchor mission, which reads: *We intentionally leverage our intellectual assets, economic influence, and financial and human resources in partnership with regional communities to seek a sustainable economic, social, cultural, and environmental system that provides opportunity for all. We help students learn the skills and competencies to successfully adapt to the challenges of a modern workplace, graduate school, and other opportunities.* (Weber State University, n.d., *Amplified*). By naming the community anchor mission specifically in the strategic plan, the university is owning its long history and current responsibility for working *with* and *for* the surrounding community.

True to the vision of its founders, WSU continues to meet the educational needs of more than 30,000 students today. It is primarily a commuter campus, but offers on-campus housing for 1,000 students. In the 2023-24 academic year, 59% of students attended WSU on a part-time basis. The majority of students identify as white (73.9%), while a growing population identifies as Hispanic (12.3%). In 2024, 26.7% of baccalaureate graduates were first-generation college students, and 53.4% were Pell-eligible. WSU remains an economic and cultural hub for a tri-county area in which more than 75% of its students reside.

As an institution committed to meeting the needs of the region and guided by core themes of access, learning, and community, it is no surprise that Weber State's commitment to the

community is a multi-faceted endeavor. The Levels of Community Engagement framework below illustrates this complexity.

FIGURE 1. Levels of community engagement.

At the micro-level, WSU is student-focused, developing civic-minded graduates through curricular and co-curricular community engagement facilitated through the Center for Community Engaged Learning (CCEL). Much of the effort at the micro-level is on providing transformational learning experiences for students while simultaneously enhancing the capacity of the community. Using Stanford's Pathways of Public Service and Civic Engagement (Haas Center for Public Service, n.d.), CCEL focuses on engaging students in direct service, social entrepreneurship and corporate social responsibility, community-engaged learning and research, policy and governance, philanthropy, and community organizing and activism. As is true for many community-engaged universities and colleges, the center works closely with faculty and staff to embed these kinds of experiences into the curriculum and co-curricular activities through mutually beneficial partnerships with community organizations. At this micro-level, WSU engages with the community through educational opportunities for its students, which also help create the change that community organizations desire.

At the meso-level, the focus is on Weber State University rethinking business practices in hiring, purchasing, and investing to be more socially responsible in the community. At this level, the institution is a social actor in its own right, if you will. The action is focused more internally on operational business practices that also impact the surrounding community. What is most at play in the meso-level is community engagement that aligns with The Democracy Collaborative's community wealth building model (McKinley & McInroy, 2023). The focus at the meso-level is

on how the university, as an anchor institution, plays a vital role in driving local economic growth, which has a direct impact on the well-being of the community (CUMU, n.d.). To that end, WSU created a Changing Business Practices Workgroup tasked with tracking part of the university's strategic plan focused on the improvement of "5 business practices related to hiring, purchasing, and investing to build prosperity equitably across all our communities." Within three years, seven business practices had been improved. WSU has been engaged at the meso-level since joining the Anchor Learning Network (CUMU, n.d.), which was established by The Democracy Collaborative in 2017. WSU began reporting data to the network in 2018 regarding the shared metrics across 33 universities making up the network.

Modifying business practices to benefit local businesses and residents is a powerful way for universities and colleges to take social responsibility for the impact of their own operations in their communities. This type of community engagement at the meso-level is one important part of an institution's anchor mission. Community-engaged work at the macro-level describes another way universities and colleges can fulfill their anchor mission.

At the macro level, universities and colleges not only serve as economic anchor institutions in their communities, but they also have the power to convene other anchor institutions to collaborate in socially responsible ways. Anchor institutions are place-based, mission-driven entities that leverage their economic power alongside their human and intellectual resources to improve the long-term health and social welfare of their communities (Hodges & Dubb, 2012). Weber State University uses its convening power to facilitate collaborations between seven anchor institutions and 20+ community partners to take collective action addressing five key community challenges, including: health, education, financial stability, built environment, and social fabric. This collective is called the Ogden Civic Action Network (OgdenCAN), a collaboration inspired by Campus Compact's call to member institutions to create civic action plans in 2016. Since then, eight anchor institutions have participated and contributed financially to OgdenCAN, including America First Credit Union, Intermountain Healthcare, the City of Ogden, Ogden Regional Medical Center, Ogden School District, Ogden-Weber Technical College, Weber-Morgan Health Department, and WSU. OgdenCAN has become the funder of applied research with and for community initiatives around five key community challenges. To date, 23 interventions and research projects have been funded, totaling $1.3 million. At the macro-level, universities and colleges catalyze anchor mission work among numerous anchor institutions within a community.

Operationalization of the Levels of Community Engagement Framework

Organizing types of community engagement at universities and colleges as levels in a diagram where the levels are stacked on top of each other is useful for: 1) delineating the different types of community engagement and; 2) demonstrating the shift in focus on the student as an active

actor at the micro-level to the focus on the institution as an active actor at the meso- and macro-levels. However, the diagram can be misleading for describing how the levels are operationalized by community engagement administrators. The stacked levels may imply less dynamism between the levels than what actually exists in community-engaged work. To capture the dynamic relationship between and across levels, I offer a different diagram that allows each level of engagement to touch the other two levels because there are opportunities for intersection across multiple levels. It is circular, where each level represents a piece of the larger community engagement puzzle.

FIGURE 2. Operationalization of levels of community engagement.

Community engagement administrators work across, between, and within all levels of community engagement, sometimes focusing on a single level, other times at the intersection of an adjacent level, or simultaneously at all three levels. Think of the operationalization of community engagement work as similar to putting a puzzle with three distinct pieces together. Each piece of the puzzle stands on its own with its own function and purpose (micro, meso, or macro), therefore allowing the community engagement administrator to work at just one level. Alternatively, you can interlock two pieces of the puzzle (micro and macro, for example), where you begin to see a bigger picture emerge, and you are functionally working at the intersection of two levels of community engagement. The most complete operationalization of the framework comes when all three puzzle pieces interlock, functionally working at all three levels simultaneously.

Continuing with the Weber State University case study, let us discuss the operationalization of the Levels of Community Engagement framework by highlighting three benefits of utilizing this dynamic multi-level approach. Specific examples of community-engaged work on at least two levels simultaneously are described to illustrate the integrated nature of the framework with interlocking puzzle pieces.

Benefits of Operating with the Multilevel Approach

There are many benefits to using the Levels of Community Engagement framework for community engagement administrators. The framework's usefulness in naming and categorizing various forms of community engagement within an institution is certainly one benefit. However, there are other benefits to using the framework to advance community engagement work at the intersections of various levels. I highlight three benefits in this case study: 1) deeper mutually beneficial partnerships; 2) diversifying funding sources; and 3) broader campus and community buy-in and participation for sustaining momentum.

Deeper, Richer, Mutually Beneficial Partnerships

The multi-level community engagement framework empowers community engagement administrators to create reciprocal, mutually-beneficial community partnerships that are not bound to exchanges and relationships developed only in one level of community engagement. Rather, the multi-level approach enables partnership organizations to reap the benefits associated with one level of engagement while also giving back at another level. For example, at Weber State University, a strong partnership exists with the Ogden-Weber Community Action Partnership (OWCAP) on both micro- and macro-levels; however, the exchange of benefits does not happen only within a particular level. Instead, OWCAP gives significantly at the micro-level and receives significantly at the macro-level. The opposite is true for the university. WSU receives significantly at the micro-level and gives significantly at the macro-level.

More concretely, OWCAP serves as a co-educator for WSU students in community-engaged learning designated classes. OWCAP's employees mentor WSU students and supervise the community-engaged work each student does at the organization. This level of engagement is clearly at the micro-level where OWCAP plays a significant role in helping develop WSU students as civic-minded contributors to our community. Of course, OWCAP is also benefiting from having the students tutor the children in their Headstart programs, which enhances their organization's capacity. However, perhaps even more beneficial to OWCAP is the significant benefit it receives from partnering with the university at the macro level. At this level, OWCAP is an ally organization to the Ogden Civic Action Network (OgdenCAN) from which they have regularly received funding to support their community initiatives. Of course, OWCAP is giving back to OgdenCAN as well. For example, OWCAP is functionally sustaining a long-term renter

advocacy program that started as a pilot project led by a WSU faculty member and was funded by the university and OgdenCAN.

As you can see, reciprocity becomes multi-faceted. Mutual benefit transcends levels. The give-and-take in partnerships happens within and between levels. It does not have to happen only within the same level of engagement. This flexibility empowers community engagement administrators to create more dynamic and complex reciprocal relationships that are deeper and richer compared to a partnership created and sustained in only one level of engagement.

Diverse Sources of Funding for Community Engagement

Funding community-engaged work is also enhanced when administrators use a multi-faceted approach to community engagement. As is true in most cases, limiting oneself to a particular paradigm, or level of community engagement in this case, limits one's thinking and opportunities. However, allowing oneself to operate on at least two community engagement levels simultaneously opens up the possibility of funding streams that may benefit work at more than one level. Using a multi-level framework, community engagement administrators help resources flow more easily across levels.

For example, at Weber State University, a revolving fund was created in 2012 to generate money to support sustainable infrastructure on campus as part of the university's goal to become carbon neutral by 2050. This innovative business practice at the meso-level of community engagement used the savings from installing energy-efficient infrastructure to build additional energy-efficient infrastructure on campus (i.e., funding more meso-level business practices). Yet this innovative business practice also inspired the university's macro-level partnership with Ogden City through the College Town Coalition. The coalition was first formed in 2013 when both the city and university signed a College Town Charter committing the city and university "to mutually pursue economic, educational, recreational, social and cultural initiatives together." By 2019, the coalition had established a joint goal to become carbon neutral by 2050.

Some of the funding in the sustainability revolving fund at the meso-level helped hire sustainability experts on campus who shared their expertise with Ogden City to create an Energy Wise Ogden Strategic Implementation Plan as part of the macro-level partnership. Ogden City and WSU have also collaborated to build three net-zero homes in Ogden and jointly lead the city's Natural Resources and Sustainability Stewardship Committee. The resources from this macro-level partnership between the city and university also flowed to micro-level partnerships. For example, the university sustainability experts helped the city identify and secure funding to create a sustainability manager position at the City. The sustainability manager regularly partners with students, faculty, and staff on community-engaged projects at the micro-level to help the university and city achieve their joint macro-level carbon-neutral goal. In this example, funding

flowed from the meso-level to work happening on both the micro- and macro-levels of community engagement.

The multi-level framework is also useful for securing funding from donors. At Weber State University, the framework has been used to help development officers understand the different types of community engagement the university is involved in. The framework empowers the community engagement administrator and development officer to clearly articulate to potential donors the type of community engagement work they can contribute to. Most donors are already familiar with opportunities to support students, faculty, and staff engagement in the community at the micro-level. The framework helps the donors see that there are other options for their funds to catalyze community-engaged work at the university. For example, the development officer knows to ask organizations to contribute as partners, allies, or anchor institutions to the macro-level, whereas s/he can tailor their pitch to individual or family donors toward micro-level engagement supporting students, faculty and/or staff. Even though most donors are interested in supporting students at the micro-level, other donors have shown excitement about the university acting as a convenor of collaborative organizations working toward a larger social or economic good. In fact, WSU has successfully increased the number of anchor institutions financially contributing to the Ogden Civic Action Network (OgdenCAN) at the macro-level using the Levels of Community Engagement Framework to help potential anchor institutions understand the type of community engagement they are contributing to.

Creates Buy-In and Sustains Momentum

Another benefit of the multi-level approach to community engagement is broad campus buy-in and support. Articulating more types of community engagement, represented by multiple levels where both individuals and the institution are active actors with the community, expands the possibilities for more campus community members to be involved. The more members of the campus community who see themselves as contributing to the institution's community engagement commitment, the more momentum for sustaining the work. The bottom line is more champions for community engagement at the institution.

Community engagement administrators who use a multi-level approach create a collective sense of purpose that is tied to the educational mission of the institution, thus increasing participation and alignment. Because the framework includes three levels that are all interconnected when operationalized, even individuals outside of academic affairs who are doing community-engaged work see themselves in the framework and therefore see how their work is connected to helping students become civic-minded graduates (Steinberg et al., 2011). For example, at Weber State University, a high-ranking accountant was asked to participate in the development of the Ogden Civic Action Network at the macro-level. Although reluctant at first, they eventually agreed, affording them a front row seat to the convening role the university plays in the community.

Suddenly, they understood the collective impact of the anchor institutions involved and Weber State's responsibility to contribute to the collective. Understanding Weber State's responsibilities as an anchor institution legitimized for the high-ranking accountant the use of university resources, (human, intellectual, and financial), to do what they called "the right thing in the community." They were privy to projects led by faculty in partnership with community organizations and supported by students, which helped the accountant see the impact on student learning. These kinds of experiences motivated them even more to continue finding resources to support community-engaged work at all levels of the framework. Therefore, when WSU began work at the meso-level to explore business practices, the institution could change to better serve the community, the high-ranking accountant brought their colleagues from Purchasing, Human Resources, and Accounting to the discussion and helped them understand the importance of the institution's commitment to community engagement.

With broader buy-in, community engagement administrators do not have to single-handedly shoulder the responsibility for institutionalizing community-engaged work. At Weber State University, more pervasive buy-in for community engagement helped codify the university's commitment within the university's strategic plan. Multiple members of the team responsible for determining the strategic plan goals were also involved in work on various levels of the community engagement framework. Therefore, not surprisingly, one of the five goals articulated in the university's strategic plan focused on the "community anchor mission." Within that community anchor goal area, three desired outcomes were articulated, each corresponding to the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of the community engagement framework.

Broader buy-in also makes it easier for community engagement administrators to lead even when faced with leadership personnel transitions. The more pervasive the buy-in, the less dependent institutions are on personalities who are community engagement champions to carry the torch through transitions. Having more champions at various community engagement levels within the framework, across the university, makes it more likely to continue when leadership changes occur. For example, at Weber State University, leadership in the Center for Community Engaged Learning (CCEL) changed. The center facilitates community engagement at the micro-level; however, some of the community partners of the CCEL were also interacting with the institution at the macro-level through OgdenCAN. Therefore, these partners expected the same support and engagement at multiple levels, regardless of who was leading CCEL. The reputation of Weber State University in the community reflects work at all levels of the framework. Therefore, regardless of personnel changes at the university, the community expects engagement on all levels represented in the framework. Articulating community-engaged work as levels in this multi-level framework holds the university accountable for continuing the work on all levels with the community, regardless of who is in leadership roles at the university.

From this case study approach, WSU's use of the Levels of Community Engagement framework is just one example of how beneficial the framework can be in helping facilitate deeper partnerships, generating diverse funding streams, and creating buy-in that helps sustain momentum on campus and in the community. With the framework being used by other community engagement administrators, it will be refined, and therefore, the benefits will be even more robust. A line of inquiry emerges here suggesting further research on how this framework, when applied, plays out in other higher education contexts and what other benefits may emerge.

Organizational Structures Impacting Operationalization of the Framework

The organizational structure of the university or college will most certainly influence the community engagement administrator's application of the framework. For example, situating all levels of engagement adjacent to each other in the organizational structure should facilitate more partnerships across levels, reflecting the integrative nature of the framework. This may be the optimal condition for employing the framework.

Community Engagement Reports to Single Administrator

At Weber State University, there are three coordinating community engagement entities. The Center for Community Engaged Learning facilitates community engagement at the micro-level primarily. The Office of Community Development facilitates community anchor work at both the meso- and macro-levels primarily. And the Office of Community Research & Evaluation facilitates community engagement fairly equally across each of the three levels. These three entities report to a single community engagement administrator. Positioning these three entities together in the organizational structure with a reporting line to the same community engagement administrator allows for collaboration across entities and levels of community engagement. The directors of each entity sit around the same leadership table, making the use of each area's expertise accessible and available to each other. The organizational structure in and of itself helps operationalize the Levels of Community Engagement framework in an integrated manner. Additionally, it creates an opportunity for developing and sharing a community engagement narrative and strategy that reflects all levels of engagement.

The challenge in this organizational structure for community engagement administrators is successfully facilitating collaboration with other community engagement entities situated in other divisions across the university. This is not an insurmountable challenge, as those in the community engagement field already know how to cross boundaries. It simply means the community engagement administrator needs to be intentional in their strategies to pull other community engagement entities into the Levels of Community Engagement narrative at the institution. And, the community engagement administrator needs to recognize the time it takes to

build those relationships across divisions. Patience and persistence are both critical to the successful operationalization of the framework within this particular organizational structure.

Community Engagement Reports to Multiple Administrators

Other institutions may be organized in a way where the coordinating community engagement entities report to different administrators leading different units or divisions rather than a single community engagement administrator. In this case, the Levels of Community Engagement framework can still be operationalized but only if all the administrators see themselves and their work supported by the framework. The work of creating buy-in for a shared community engagement narrative informed by the framework may be more challenging in this organizational structure at the outset. However, once the shared narrative is solidified, there will likely be more opportunity to build broader buy-in across the institution more quickly. In this particular organizational structure, the dynamic integrative nature of the framework will take intentionality on the part of all administrators involved. They will have to build mechanisms that facilitate clear and open lines of communication to enable community-engaged work at the intersections of levels to actually occur.

Ultimately, the framework helps administrators facilitate dynamic, integrated community engagement regardless of the organizational structure within which they are working. For this to happen, key members of the campus community must understand the type of community-engaged work occurring at their institutions and how it aligns with the levels of community engagement framework. Even a basic level of understanding will broaden community engagement perspectives, enabling fluidity between levels.

Conclusion

My professional journey in the community engagement field has led me to the conclusion that community engagement administrators need to think and act on multiple levels to successfully lead at their campuses and in their surrounding communities. As a scholar-administrator, it is essential to think, strategize, and plan at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels.

The Levels of Community Engagement framework that emerged from this journey is meant to help administrators organize and lead various types of community engagement facilitated at universities and colleges. At the micro-level, the focus is on actions that help students develop into civic-minded graduates. At the meso-level, the focus is on business practices that the institution might modify to economically benefit the community. At the macro-level, the focus is on the convening power of the institution to bring other anchor institutions together to collaborate on community challenges. The framework both honors and celebrates the complex,

multidimensional structures of higher education, as well as the multiple stakeholders involved in community engagement.

Although each level is named to distinguish it from the other levels, in operation, the levels are rather fluid and interactive with each other. The operationalization of the framework is meant to encourage community engagement administrators to engage at more than one level at a time to give their institutions more opportunities to have mutually beneficial relationships with community partner organizations that transcend more than one level of engagement. By engaging on more than one level simultaneously, community engagement administrators are able to nurture deeper relationships, identify and share resources across initiatives, and better sustain the work even when faced with transitions in leadership.

Some institutions are operating with only one level of engagement as their focus; however, other institutions operate on multiple levels simultaneously. The framework is not meant to rate the depth of engagement on any particular campus. It is meant to help campuses describe the type of work they are doing, recognize opportunities for growth or reduction, and explore potential interactions between levels. However, several lines of inquiry for future research and scholarship around deepening the institutional practice of community engagement are worth exploring.

First, the framework could be used to facilitate an institutional self-study of community engagement, not only describing the type of engagement at each level and intersection of levels, but also exploring the depth, pervasiveness, and integration of community engagement at each level. This type of inquiry aligns with the self-study framework used for the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement, which calls for evidence of "institutional commitment and excellence demonstrated through systems and structures that are deep, pervasive, and integrated" (American Council on Education, n.d.). The Levels of Community Engagement framework may offer an opportunity for a nuanced analysis that illuminates the systems and structures at work on each level.

Another line of inquiry could test an assumption of the framework itself. The Levels of Community Engagement framework assumes that partnerships that participate at more than one level are more likely to be stronger and more sustainable than partnerships operating at just one level. The assumption is rooted in the understanding that working across or between levels requires greater collaboration and intentionality on the part of the partnering stakeholders. Comparing and contrasting the strength and sustainability of partnerships that occur at just one level of engagement to those occurring at two or more levels of engagement would help refine the framework by testing this assumption.

Additionally, studying the impact of various levels of engagement on campus and community stakeholders may help institutions determine where best to expend time and resources.

Comparing the return on investment of engagement occurring at only one level compared to engagement that occurs at more than one level could also help inform administrators' strategies for deepening the institutional practice of community engagement on their campuses and in their communities.

Even in a field that prides itself on the ability to cross boundaries between campus and community, practitioners, scholars, and administrators often choose to focus on, or operate in, one particular segment of the broad community engagement field. However, as administrators, we need to have a way of organizing the various forms of community engagement occurring at our institutions. The Levels of Community Engagement framework can help administrators map and articulate the landscape of community engagement work at their institution.

References

American Association of State Colleges and Universities. (2002). *Stepping forward as stewards of place: A guide for leading public engagement at state colleges and universities.* https://aascu.org/resources/stepping-forward-as-stewards-of-place-a-guide-for-leading-public-engagement-at-state-colleges-and-universities/

American Council on Education (ACE). (n.d.). *The Elective Classification for Community Engagement. 2026 Carnegie Community Engagement Reclassification Guide.* https://carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu/elective-classifications/community-engagement/resources/?type=guide-books

Cotter, D. A., Ender, M., Gindoff, P., & Kowalewski, B. M. (1995). Integrating community service into introductory college courses. *Journal of College Student Development,* 36(1):87-88.

Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities. (n.d.) *CUMU Anchor Mission Initiatives.* https://www.cumuonline.org/cumu-programming/anchor-mission-initiative/

Dewey, J. (1917). *Democracy and Education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. Macmillan Company.

Driscoll, A. (2009). Carnegie's new community engagement classification: Affirming higher education's role in community. In L. R. Sandmann, C. H. Thornton, and A. J. Jaeger (Eds.), Institutionalizing community engagement in higher education: The first wave of Carnegie classified institutions (pp. 5–12). (New Directions for Higher Education, Number 147). Jossey Bass.

Ender, M. G., Kowalewski, B. M., Cotter, D. A., DeFiore, J., and Martin, L. (Eds.). (1996). *Service learning and undergraduate sociology: Syllabi and instructional materials*, American Sociological Association.

Ender, M. G., Martin, L., Cotter, D. A., Kowalewski, B. M., & Defiore, J. (2000). Given an opportunity to reach out: Heterogeneous participation in optional service-learning projects. *Teaching Sociology*, 28(3), 206–219.

Eyler, J. & Giles Jr., D. E. (1999). *Where's the Learning in Service-Learning?* Jossey-Bass.

Furco, A. (1996). Service-Learning: A balanced approach to experiential education. *Service Learning*. 128. https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slceslgen/128

Haas Center for Public Service. (n.d.). *Pathways of public service and civic engagement.* Stanford University. https://haas.stanford.edu/about/our-approach/pathways-public-service-and-civic-engagement

Hodges, R. A. & Dubb, S. (2012). *The Road Half Traveled: University engagement at a crossroads*. Michigan State University Press.

Hollander, E., Saltmarsh, J., & Zlotowski, E. (2001). Indicators of engagement. In L. A. K.

Simon, M. Kenny, K. Brabeck, & R. M. Lerner (Eds.), *Learning to serve: Promoting civil society through service learning*. *Outreach scholarship series* (Vol. 7). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4615-0885-4_3

Kenny, M. E. & Gallagher, L. A. (2002). Service-Learning: A History of Systems. In: M. E.

Kenny, L. A. K., Simon, K., Kiley-Brabeck, K., & Lerner, R. M. (Eds.). *Learning to serve: Promoting civil society through service learning. Outreach scholarship series* (Vol. 7). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4615-0885-4_2

Kowalewski, B. M., Ender, M. G., and DeFiore, J. (Eds.). (2001). *Service learning and undergraduate Sociology: Syllabi and instructional materials* (2nd ed.). American Sociological Association.

McKinley, S. and McInroy, N. (2023). *Action guide for advancing community wealth building in the United States*. The Democracy Collaborative. https://www.democracycollaborative.org/whatwethink/community-wealth-building-action-guide

Sigmon, R. (1979). Service learning: Three principles. *Synergist*, 8, 9–11

Steinberg, K., Hatcher, J. A., & Bringle, R. G. (2011). Civic-minded graduate: A north star. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 18(1), 19-33.

Weber State University. (n.d.) *Amplified: A 5-year plan for growth.* https://www.weber.edu/strategic-plan

Weber State University. (n.d.). *Our Mission.* https://www.weber.edu/accreditation/mission.html

