NETWORKS & COLLABORATION

The cover image is of a Healing Place Collaborative network diagram. Members are listed around the outside of the circle and each line between them indicates a collaboration or work done between those two members. Image courtesy of Mona Smith.

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TEACHING AND PRACTICE

NAVIGATING THE ETHICS OF PARTNERSHIP
By Monica McKay

Higher education has increasingly embraced what is variously called public, civic, or community engagement over the past two decades, and more and more students arrive on campus having participated in community service or service-learning as part of their K-12 education. This might seem like an ideal recipe for success for a Center for Community-Engaged Learning that facilitates curricular and co-curricular engagement opportunities for University of Minnesota students. Recent years have indeed seen a steady increase in the numbers of students participating in our programs, but like most blessings, this one is somewhat mixed as we strive to maintain high quality in our work. Engagement means partnering with the off-campus community, but while this work is rooted in values of reciprocity and mutual benefit, there

University of Minnesota students worked with Corporate Accountability International in 2008 to secure a ban on the sale of bottled water in Minneapolis City Hall. With the students in the photo are then-mayor R.T. Rybak (center) and current mayor Betsy Hodges (left), who was then on the Minneapolis City Council. Photo courtesy of Amber Collett.

are – to use a river metaphor – strong currents in academic and American culture that can make our efforts to truly and authentically engage with communities as equal partners and collaborators feel like swimming upstream. These currents require our constant and thoughtful attention as we pursue our own engagement work and, more importantly, as we prepare and coach students to engage as well.

One thing we have to do is get past what can be called, for lack of a more elegant phrase, the academic superiority complex. Because universities are sites of knowledge production, it can be all too easy to think they are *the* sites of knowledge in our society. It's fairly easy to find examples of how this causes us to trip over ourselves in our own language; to cite just one, part of the University of Minnesota's current branding proudly proclaims that we are "solving the world's grand challenges." Granted, this statement doesn't specify that we're doing it alone or preclude the notion of partnership, but it has more than a small note of hubris, and it reinforces a "deficit model" of community engagement – the world has challenges, while we (the university) have solutions, and engagement consists mostly of a one-way sharing of university resources with the community.

"I'm from the University, and I'm Here to Help"

This persistent mindset dovetails nicely, but to negative effect, with a prevailing view in our society that community service means "helping" others who are "less fortunate" than ourselves. This is a common motivation and starting point for students, and in the absence of critical reflection, their K-12 experiences often reinforce this view. In our Community Engagement Scholars Program (CESP), which we describe as an honors-like program that supports and recognizes students who are deeply committed to and involved in community engagement throughout their undergraduate careers, the first of six reflections required of all participants asks them to articulate their "ethic of service" – their philosophy of, motivations for, and expected outcomes from community work. All CESP participants submit a draft Ethic of Service and then meet with a program advisor to discuss it. One of our advisors recently reflected that a majority of the students she meets with talk a lot about "helping" in their first drafts. In one sense these students are acknowledging their own privilege by talking about advantages and benefits they have received that others have not, but as one scholar of engagement stated, "If I 'do for' you, 'serve' you, 'give to' you – that creates a connection in which I have the resources, the abilities, the power, and you are on the receiving end. It can be – while benign in intent – ironically disempowering to the receiver, granting further power to the giver."[1]

Challenging students' heartfelt and noble sentiments requires delicacy, but it's crucial to making sure that our and our students' engagement with the community doesn't play on and thus reinforce existing power differentials. Introducing students to the concept of asset-based community-development and coaching them to identify the knowledge and resources already present in the community are fairly simple ways we can begin to shift the helping frame. Curricular community-engaged learning, when done well, can also help to re-orient students to the community as learners rather than benefactors, but here again

we sometimes get in our own way. Faculty members structuring community-engaged learning components for their courses sometimes note that they want to ensure their students do "meaningful" work in the community. Of course, if a community organization brings in students but consigns them to making copies, filing papers, or doing data entry alone in a room, we wouldn't have high expectations for the students' learning. But we need to be careful not to suggest or ask that our students be given the same type of work typically done by professional staff members with significantly more education and experience, thus devaluing our community partners' expertise. Faculty and community partners need to work

together to structure student experiences that both can achieve course learning objectives and are appropriate to students' levels of skill and experience. Faculty play a critical role here in creating reflection assignments and activities in their classes that will help students draw learning out of their work in the community, regardless of what that work specifically entails. We can work to recast the idea that our students are "helping" the community from a dynamic where they bring the community things that it lacks to one where our students step into a supportive role that frees up time for the community's "experts" to focus on advancing solutions to the challenges at hand.

We're in This Together

This reframing can have the additional salutary effect of encouraging our students to think of themselves as members of a team, tempering the strong current of individualism that runs through our culture and both informs and is often exacerbated by academic institutions (consider, for instance, the near-universal revulsion with which students tend to react to group project assignments). In our Community Engagement Scholars Program, one of the final requirements is for each student to complete an Integrative Community Engagement Project with and for a community organization they've previously worked with, and these projects are almost always solo endeavors. In the capstone seminar students take while working on their projects, however, we draw on community organizing techniques to push the students to think about all the stakeholders who need to be "involved" in their projects in some way for the work to be successful and have a lasting impact. All students have to create a power map for their projects, a process that involves three steps: identifying as many individual, group, and institutional

stakeholders as they can; placing all those stakeholders on a grid illustrating each stakeholder's level of influence/authority over the project and their interest in/enthusiasm for it; and finally, linking different stakeholders in a "web" that illustrates relationships and lines of influence between them. After completing and reflecting on their power maps, students must select one individual stakeholder from the map and do a one-to-one with them, ascertain their self-interest or potential self-interest in the project, and reflect on how they can leverage that self-interest to enhance the likelihood of their project's success. Even if this process results just in a student making sure that more people in their partner organization are aware of their project, this can help add context to what might otherwise feel like a solitary pursuit and accomplishment.

Striking a Balance

The community organizing conception of self-interest depicts it as a middle ground between selfishness and selflessness. If we approach others focused either on what we can get from them or on how we can give of ourselves to help them, our collaborations will be unsustainable over the long term – think exploitation on the one extreme, and burnout on the other. If, however, we identify how our goals and aspirations overlap with others', we can harness our shared interests to work together toward a common purpose. Interestingly, the same CESP advisor who noted that a majority of the students she meets with initially frame their work in terms of helping – thus appearing to be driven primarily by selflessness – also shared that many students,

sometimes even the same ones, also talk a lot in their first drafts about what they "get out" of their volunteer experiences, or how those experiences benefit them, which sounds more like the other side of the coin. When we market our office's programs and services to students, we often invoke these benefits: community engagement can help you build your résumé, your professional network, and a host of skills that will make you not only a more well-rounded individual but also a more competitive candidate for jobs. These are, of course, all legitimate reasons for students to engage with the community, but we need to make sure they are not the only reasons – that we, or they, are not putting a thumb on the scale in the direction of selfishness.
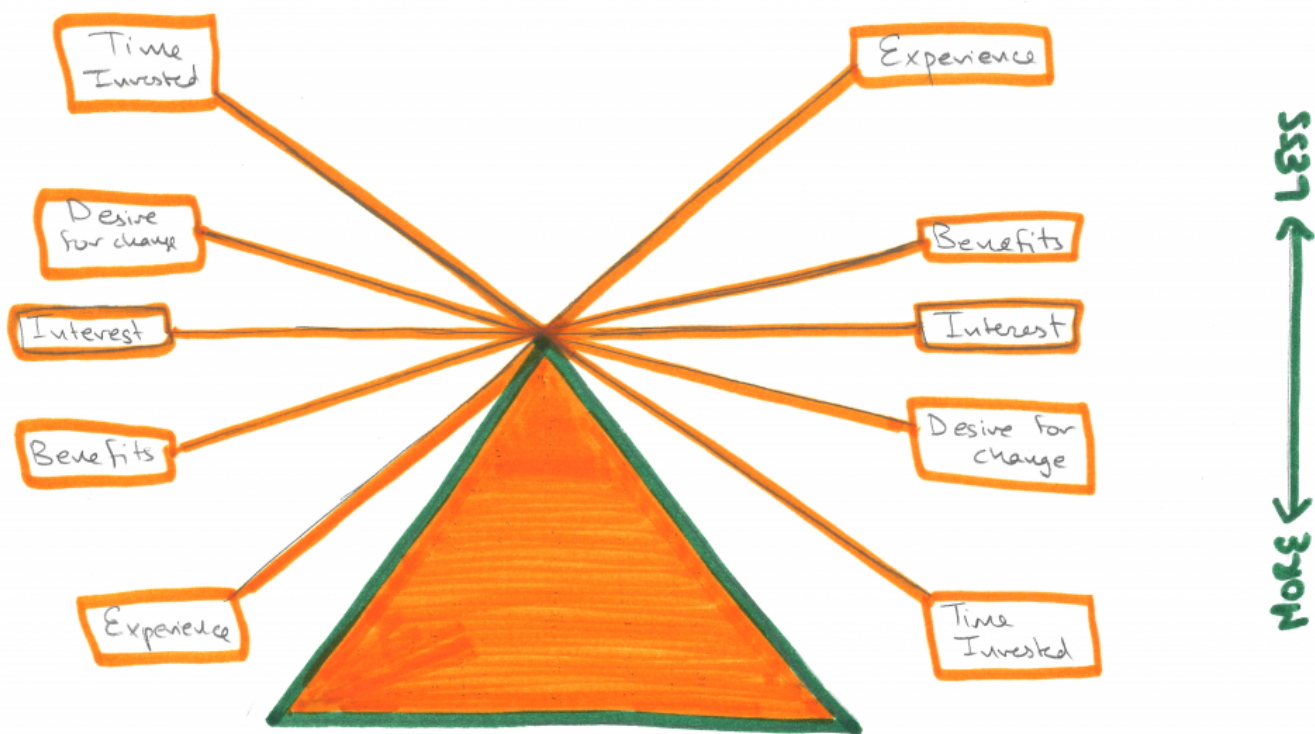
Example of a partnership scale created by a student in the Community Engagement Scholars Program. Image courtesy of the University of Minnesota Center for Community-Engaged Learning.

Speaking of scales, one of the in-class activities in the CESP capstone seminar uses this exact image to encourage students to reflect on what they and their community partners are both giving and receiving from working together. We instruct students to draw a scale that depicts their partnership with their community organization, with possible "weights" on each side including things such as time and energy invested in the work and benefits received from it. Students can thus visualize and think about partnership dynamics; for instance, some students will draw multiple lines to show that on different measures there are "imbalances" between them and their partners that, on the whole, tend to even out. In discussion we also bring in the element of time, noting that an apparent imbalance in a partnership at any given moment is not necessarily a bad thing; again, it's only when it remains one-sided over time that it becomes unsustainable. In fact, we often point out that the scales students draw in this exercise look like seesaws, which, if they are perfectly balanced – or if one person is always up while the other is always down – are not much fun at all.

Activities such as these can be quick and useful ways for all of us who do engagement work to remind ourselves that we are always working in networks of committed individuals, each of whom brings resources, knowledge, and skills to the shared collective task of creating change on issues we all care about. In an ideal world, these networks are characterized by the constant exchange of these assets. The longtime coordinator of the CESP has noted that when she has met with students to discuss their Ethic of Service reflections, it has been rare to have a student who, in their first draft, talks about their community work in collaborative terms, as something they do with others in the community, as partnership work. In fairness, for this reflection students are asked to write a personal narrative, and among the prompts we offer to stimulate their thinking is one about what outcomes they expect from their work, so when they discuss what they get out of community engagement, they are answering a question we asked. This is why the advisor meetings are so important, so we have a chance to nudge these students to think about if and how their work benefits their community partners as well, and if and how their work situates them on a team of individuals and organizations working toward a shared goal.

These are some small ways that, here in our small corner of our campus, we swim against the currents of academic superiority, deficit-based approaches to community work, and individualism that can inhibit our and our students' abilities to work in true partnership and collaboration with community members. Or perhaps I should say we paddle against those currents – as I reflect on these ideas myself, my own academic training in Minnesota history calls to mind the fur trade period and the complex networks of exchange at work all along the highways of the time, rivers. Of course, over time, the structural inequities that underlay relationships between European/Euro-American traders and Indigenous peoples ultimately caused them to break down, often with devastating consequences, and naming and facing up to the dynamics of identity, power, and privilege in our own engaged work are crucial to achieving better outcomes (and a topic for another day). For now, we focus on the fact that none of us is an island, and we need to cultivate humility, openness to learning what (and how much) we don't know, and awareness of our own and others' self-interests in order to be good partners.

Footnotes

[1] Pompa, L. (2002). Service-learning as crucible: Reflections on immersion, context, power, and transformation. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 9(1), 67-76.

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Monica McKay has worked in community engagement at the University of Minnesota for over fifteen years. She is currently the assistant director for engaged learning, training, and assessment in the Center for Community-Engaged Learning. She has taught for many years in the field of religious studies, and is actively involved in Indigenous language revitalization.