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Message from the Editor: Current Issue of JCES Vividly Explores the Lasting Power and Resilience of Engaged Scholarship

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Current Issue of JCES Vividly Explores the Lasting Power and Resilience of Engaged Scholarship

From the Editor

Dr. Nick Sanyal, PhD, Professor of Natural Resources and Society, University of Idaho

Community engagement is the largest public-private partnership process in existence. It is a grassroots movement that has grown to incorporate governments at all levels, academic and philanthropic institutions, religious, service and non-profit organizations and citizens from all walks of life. As growing political arrogance and inaccessibility fuels an increased polarization of society, we must not lose faith in the power and resilience of an engaged community.

Montana politician-scholar-statesman Daniel Kemmis (1995), an early mentor of mine, wrote:

I once heard someone describe what had enabled Athens to make its democratic experiment viable enough for a long enough period that history has never forgotten the lesson. It was not, this student of Athens said, because Athenians agreed about everything; even the relatively narrow circle of those admitted to citizenship disagreed fiercely about all kinds of issues, both domestic and foreign. Rather, democracy took root and flourished in Athens because, on most issues, citizens taught themselves to act and speak “as if they cared more about Athens than they cared about winning” (p. 198).

JCES not only seeks to understand how and why a diversity of caring partners can help strengthen communities but we also seek to make all those voices heard. The contributors to this issue bring that sentiment to life.

In this issue’s lead article, Susan Goldberg and Camille O’Connor at Duquesne University examine the growing need for trauma-informed community development—how to deal with the abuse, mental health issues, and failures in the larger society. They discuss how, with assistance and facilitation, traumatized people created existential meaning and empowerment in their lives. They discuss how individuals’ stories “emerged from larger societal processes, such as racism, discrimination, loss of community, and other impacts of root shock” (p. 9).

They also share the stirring impact of this work in the historic Pittsburgh community known as The Hill on their students.

John Diaz and his colleagues from North Carolina State University take on the complex issue of military-based partnerships for landscape-scale conservation. Using an evaluative framework combining climate, processes, people, policies, and resources, they document how a project metamorphosed into a partnership that leveraged preexisting relationships while simultaneously forging new linkages among all partners to create a diverse partnership that ensured success.

Stephanie Jackson and her colleagues in Albuquerque, New Mexico, address policy at a community level while documenting the power of coalitions to enable social change leading to the creation of a statewide absence policy for expecting and parenting students.

Andrew Hatala and his team, working in Saskatchewan, move us down in scale to examine the interpersonal skills required for successful community-engaged scholarship, and they bring meaning to the words of Diamantopoulos and Usiskin (2014): “We learned quickly that the ‘community’ researched was not a community at all. It was a field of conflicting interests, values, and social forces, neither cohesive nor coherent.” By humanizing the communities and groups they worked with by practicing diplomacy they were able to “...navigate the terrain of social and moral politics that unfold[ed]” (p. 79).

Human migration leads to challenges, opportunities, and sometimes conflict. Connie Clark and Bernita Missal of Bethel University immerse us in the cooperative learning environment of Somali emigrants in Minnesota, and demonstrate how building trust is a slow process of “respect, honor and cultural humility” and how working with children opens the hearts and minds of adults.

Geraint Osborne and Shauna Wilton from the University of Alberta, Augustana Campus, continue

our ongoing examination of the responsibilities of academic researchers and practitioners as public intellectuals. They conclude:

Academics have a responsibility to conduct research, demonstrate to the public the relevance of research for public policy and to criticize irresponsible or harmful government policy that ignores the evidence provided by research. This responsibility can be realized through teaching, but also more broadly through professing in the media, whether it is international, national, or local in scope (p. 78).

With current debate about the adequacy of access to health care academic health centers under constant pressure to demonstrate the effectiveness of their programs, there are no common metrics for evaluating their community engagement. Karen Vitale and her diverse team of academics and practitioners share their two-phase model that identifies and maps "...current community engagement efforts, identify institutional resources and potential gaps in order to set strategic community engagement goals for the future, and describe their community engagement efforts to internal and external stakeholders (p. 82).

Margaret Miltenberger and her colleagues from the University of Virginia Extension Service made an important discovery in their research—that involvement in engagement scholarship carries over into later life. They write: "... as the length of the time period volunteers served for one organization in college increased, the more likely they were to give service later in life, value giving service to others in need, and believe they could make a difference in their community" (p. 91).

Cynthia Gordon da Cruz at St. Mary's College of California presents a most provocative examination of the good we purport to do for communities. She presents a teaching case that "... can serve as a pedagogical device for supporting post-secondary students in questioning their assumptions and thinking critically about inequities. The case is a tool for shifting thinking away from deficit-based ideas, such as 'social problems exist in needy communities,' toward asset-based ideas like 'social problems exist in democracies that disproportionately fund public education, health care, and other human services, and the impacts of these democratic problems are often most readily seen in predominantly racial minority and low-income communities.'" (p. 101).

The Chicago Conservation Corps recruits, trains, and supports a network of volunteers

interested in leading sustainable community-based service projects. Kristen Pratt of the Chicago Academy of Sciences describes a community-based participatory action research project that evaluates the effectiveness and future of the program.

Denise Boston, Phil Weglarz and Batya Ross recognize that "families who live in socioeconomically marginalized urban communities face daunting challenges as they attempt to earn an adequate living, negotiate distressed neighborhoods, and raise their children" (p. 120). Their "Playful Thursday" project harnesses the powerful forces of play and the expressive arts to help develop a culturally responsive collaboration.

Jennifer Marshall and colleagues from the University of South Florida invoke the spirit of Aldo Leopold's land ethic and demonstrate how community gardens are "... hubs of community engagement; they provide opportunities to interact with neighbors and contribute to the development of community assets" (p. 139).

Our final contributors are Naomi Lumutenga and her international colleagues who describe the challenges that women face regarding menstrual hygiene management and the need to address it in order to keep Ugandan girls and women teachers in school and at work. They document a community learning process that combines entrepreneurial skills with a needs assessment and education that battles the twin forces of social stigmas and illiteracy.

Daniel Kemmis (1995) reminds us that "...community is not a commodity.... Regardless of what it is called, the assumption of one's own responsibility for making community happen is its own reward.... And as it is true that without this assumption of responsibility, community itself cannot occur outside of the person, it is equally true that without the more subjective experience of this engagement of responsibility, the human wholeness that community promises must also remain incomplete" (pp. 199–200).

JCES is here to help you make that happen.

References

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