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Reimagining Community Engagement Sustainability: Insights for the Postpandemic World

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Abstract

Scholars in the community engagement field have long discussed measures to sustain community engagement on campus. When COVID-19 emerged, however, university operations, including community-engaged teaching and research, had to pivot. The conversation was no longer about sustaining community engagement but about enduring the pandemic for the sake of students, faculty, and community. In order to inform a more durable community engagement strategy for the postpandemic world, we apply a sensemaking approach for the purpose of organizational learning. We collected quantitative data about 40 planned courses and surveyed 22 community-engaged faculty from April to August 2020 (spring–summer academic quarters). In the same period, we gathered qualitative data from 41 respondents comprising 28 faculty and 13 community partners. The quantitative analysis suggested that, overall, faculty maintained a positive outlook regarding the strategies they used to address the needs of students and community partners and regarding their own expectations and innovations. The qualitative data revealed seven themes—loss and challenge, future uncertainty, action strategies, communication strategies, technology, collaborative resilience, and student considerations—that can help us consider community engagement through the lenses of experience, adaptation, and sustainability. The insights provided here offer ways to improve durability within sustainable community engagement practices.

Community engagement has become a staple on university campuses over the last 30 years. In part, the proliferation of community engagement in higher education was sparked by criticism in the 1980s and 1990s that universities held significant resources that could address community issues but that were not being adequately extended (Boyer, 1990; O'Meara & Rice, 2005). As more universities strategically adopted community-engaged activities, a generally accepted definition of community engagement was developed by the Carnegie Foundation: a "collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity" (Driscoll, 2008, p. 39). Higher education's increasing commitment to community engagement has further been recognized in the 359 campuses that, as of the 2020 cycle, have earned the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement.

The heightened work of community engagement in higher education has prompted interest in the development of best practices. While community-university partnerships unfold in different ways (Boyle et al., 2011), the best practices for lasting partnerships are built on collaboration, sharing of resources, communication, and transparent expectations (Holland, 2009). Researchers also note that challenges to sustained community-university partnerships can arise from physical, cultural, political, and economic contexts (Dong et al., 2011). Hence, scholars argue that institutions should not only think sustainably but also consider the durability of their community engagement approach (Vargiu et al., 2019). Given the current pandemic, it is timely to consider what we have learned about the durability of community-university partnerships in the context of crisis events and disasters and how the pandemic may prompt best practices and sustainability strategies for community engagement in the future.

We frame our learning approach as a sensemaking endeavor couched in organizational learning, one that seeks to articulate an understanding of the situation that further prompts action and catalyzes plans for change (e.g., Weick et al., 2005). Sensemaking activities can be helpful in facilitating organizational processes such as changes in organizational mission, organizational learning, and innovation (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). We assert that sensemaking is a particularly relevant process for exploring community engagement during the pandemic because it has the potential to highlight the voices

of the people involved. Researchers suggest that adaptations can be best understood by analyzing the way individuals talk about an experience, the words they use, and their interpretations of the event in question (Gephart, 1992). We specifically gather data from faculty and community partners to learn about their experiences, strategies, and innovations in response to the pandemic.

This work contributes to the sustainable community engagement literature in a number of ways. First, we focus on the experience of the pandemic for faculty and community partners. This approach gives insight into what community engagement means from their perspectives. While faculty can provide one side of the story by sharing university-driven adaptations, the partners' side of the story elevates our understanding of the energy required to make partnerships work and personifies an often-underrepresented voice in community engagement research. Second, as we are still emerging from the pandemic, we recognize the urgency of recalibrating sustainable community engagement. As a result, this paper will discuss strategies from our analysis that can be implemented across institutions to increase and improve the resilience of community engagement amid the pandemic. Researchers note that although the negative events and potential undesirable outcomes of any crisis can be overwhelming, there are positive and opportunistic sides to any crisis, as well (Echterling et al., 2004). We aim to highlight the insights gained during the pandemic that can advance a more durable community engagement strategy. Third, sensemaking is not only a way of understanding a situation but also a means of establishing action-oriented next steps (Weick, 1995). Thus, this study reveals innovations, creativity, and insights that can help institutions support community engagement work now and in the future.

Motivation and Research Questions

Community Engagement Sustainability

Prior to the pandemic, a leading community engagement proponent, Barbara Holland (2009), wrote of the key question for community engagement and institutionalization: "'Will it last?' or 'Will it die out when we have a new leader or when the grant ends?'" (p. 86). While scholars have described a number of best practices for initiating university-community engagement (e.g., Welch, 2016), the work of sustaining community engagement is much more complex (e.g., Burton et al., 2019; Weerts, 2019). Notably, in the model of placement-based community engagement, Yamamura and Koth (2018) wrote about institutions that took from 6 to 29 years to reach the sustaining phase of community engagement. The complexity of sustainment is illustrated not only by the time it takes a partnership to attain a sustaining phase but also by the way energies and contextual factors enable sustainment. Indeed, Bowers' (2017) review of 10 different ongoing university-community partnership models surfaced a number of relevant factors, including the importance of connections, trust, and relationships to successful partnerships and the inhibiting factors of conflict and disagreement in university and partner expectations. As Boyer (1990) indicated, what matters in the partnership context are the interactions of the people that ultimately affect the system.

Beyond attaining a sustainable program, institutions may also consider whether their program is durable. A study by Vargiu et al. (2019) on the over-50-year persistence of Science Shops in Europe offers some interesting insights into durability. In particular, the authors found that diversity in Science Shops' engagement with community partners and their ability to change focus as interest in science changes over time may have helped them persist independent of institutional and political matters. Indeed, the authors note that Science Shop programs engage a variety of project stakeholders and different numbers of students at different years of study. While the case of the Science Shops exemplifies the durability of programming in the face of mostly internal turbulence, little is known about how community engagement can be sustained when faced with an external crisis or disaster response.

Community Engagement and Disasters

Our focus on crisis events and disaster is timely to the emergent COVID-19 situation. Moreover, while disasters may seem to be infrequent events, research suggests that, globally, disaster events have dramatically increased in frequency and intensity in the past 20 years (National Centers for Environmental Information, 2022). Disasters create a cascade of events that significantly disrupts the functional capacities of regions and institutions (e.g., Choi et al., 2019; Quarantelli, 1998). Data suggest that individuals and communities respond and adapt to crises quickly, rationally, and effectively, whereas bureaucratic institutions, which are designed to be rigid and reliable over the long term, do not (e.g., Quarantelli, 1998). As

institutions of higher education are not often agile entities, it is important to consider how institutions, and specifically institutional programming around community-engaged teaching and research, have responded to the pandemic.

Our work at the intersection of disaster response and community engagement within higher education is motivated by the paucity of literature that currently addresses this topic. Table 1 presents the exemplar literature on this topic. In Evans-Cowley (2006), a service-learning course pivoted to focus on disaster planning for the Mississippi Gulf Coast following Hurricane Katrina. The work provides recommendations and insights about managing a long-distance project and also illustrates the opportunities for mutual benefit in leveraging academic knowledge and student innovation to aid city and zoning administrators. Similarly, Gagnon et al. (2016) shared insights on the process and outcomes of a predisaster planning collaboration with the community of Québec City. Most relevant to our discussion, Grenier et al. (2020) presented best practices for community engagement in service-learning classes during the COVID-19 pandemic and indicated that shared commitment enabled quick action in pivoting courses and moving online. While Grenier et al. presented practices for service-learning partnerships, they did not dive into what the pandemic meant to faculty and partners.

Herein, we build on this work considering disasters and community engagement in universities, in particular the work of Grenier and colleagues, to understand the impact of the pandemic on community engagement work. Further, we broaden our scope to consider cross-campus community engagement experiences, strategies, and innovations in teaching and research that arose during the pandemic.

To address the need for reflection, we apply a sensemaking approach. As explained by Brown et al. (2008), sensemaking involves "processes of organizing using the technology of language—processes of labeling and categorizing for instance—to identify, regularize and routinize memories into plausible explanations" (p. 1055). Through sensemaking, those that have been part of the experience in question are able to learn from their own words (Gephart, 1992). The importance of sensemaking lies not only in developing a shared and overt understanding of the experience but also in building organizational learning that prompts and supports future direction and change (Weick et al., 2005). Moreover, Weerts (2019) has suggested that such activities as sensemaking and organizational learning can create a pathway to institutional sustainability in community engagement. We take this a step further to consider the question of durability

Table 1. Higher Education Literature of Community Engagement and Disasters

Author (year)	Type of disaster context	Engagement	Case analysis target	Findings/ purpose
Evans-Cowley (2006)	Hurricane Katrina's effect on the Mississippi Gulf Coast	Teaching	Service-learning course with zoning partners to create postdisaster community plans	Recommendations for implementing service-learning for distance projects
Gagnon et al. (2016)	Community of Québec City, Canada (predisaster context)	Research	Community-engaged participatory research: Enhancing Resilience and Capacity for Health (EnRiCH) project	Themes reflecting the partnering process and adaptation outcomes
Grenier et al. (2020)	COVID-19	Teaching	Service-learning during COVID-19	Practices for establishing community and anchoring the partnership

in community engagement sustainability plans. To appreciate what can be learned from the pandemic, we consider both faculty and partner perspectives. To ensure a durable community engagement future, it is important to elevate partners' voices in thinking through the mutually beneficial experience of community engagement in research and teaching. Our work is driven by the following research questions:

1. What was the experience in teaching and community engagement research practices by faculty and community partners during the pandemic?
2. How were practices strategically changed to meet the needs and challenges faced by community engagement partners within the context of a pandemic?
3. What tentative innovative and best practices for resilient community engagement programs emerge from the data?

Methodology

This research took a mixed-methods approach to data collection. Our data measurement tool—a questionnaire with both quantitative and qualitative questions—emerged through an iterative process. This questionnaire was designed to capture faculty and partner respondents' actions and perceptions with respect to planned community-engaged teaching and research during two academic quarters of the pandemic. The preliminary questionnaire was piloted and revised to improve respondents' understanding of the questionnaire items and to ensure that collected data would align meaningfully with our research questions. The research study (#STUDY00011150) was reviewed by our Human Subjects Division and received exempt status in September 2020. Data collection was launched in October 2020.

We identified teaching faculty for survey requests using the community engagement office course tracking process. Using this data, we sent requests to 29 faculty teaching in spring quarter and 11 faculty teaching in summer quarter. We acknowledge that not all relevant faculty were identified on the community engagement office's list; the community engagement office estimates that approximately 95% of the faculty teaching community-engaged courses in spring and summer received requests to participate. The community engagement office and our research office do not have processes to track community-engaged research projects. For the purposes of this study, these offices compiled a list of 10 faculty actively working on community research projects, but with this tracking limitation, the survey ultimately went out to an estimated 60% of faculty conducting community-engaged research at our campus. Out of 60 faculty members that we contacted 28 responded, including 22 faculty teaching community-engaged courses (15 teaching in spring and seven teaching in summer) and six faculty researchers working with community partners. Thanks to referrals from faculty, we contacted 40 community partners and received 13 partner surveys.

In total, we received 41 responses to the qualitative portion of the questionnaire. The quantitative portion of the survey was not part of the pilot version completed by six faculty and was not relevant for community partners. Therefore, our quantitative analysis was based on a total of 22 teaching and research faculty responses and had missing data from pilot interviewees (n = 6) and partners (n = 13).

Thematic Coding

All qualitative data were reviewed to develop a scheme of contextual codes that encompassed the greatest amount of content in the responses (Bohm, 2004). Three researchers began the coding development process by reviewing the qualitative responses to open-ended questions from six surveys (14% of responses; five faculty responses and one partner response). This initial review resulted in a coding scheme with 16 thematic codes. This scheme was further condensed to seven thematic codes during testing and application to provide greater parsimony and independence of codes. We further grouped these seven themes into three categories that represented the different ways in which participants made sense of the pandemic. Table 2 provides the final coding scheme used for analysis. The three researchers then shared responsibility for coding the final surveys such that each survey had two coders. The coding scheme had acceptable reliability, with a Cohen's kappa value of 0.78.

Results

Structures Assessment

As part of our assessment, we analyzed archival data about the community-engaged courses that were planned, canceled, or continued during the COVID-19 pandemic. In placement-based courses, individual or small groups of students conduct their community-engaged work at an organization or environmental physical site

Table 2. Developed Coding Scheme and Frequency Counts

Thematic code	Sensemaking about	Definition	Example quotes
Action strategies	Adapting	Preparation and adaptation measures that occurred during the pandemic	• "**Reshaping our objectives** slightly" • "First and foremost was **re-working the syllabi** to switch from face-to-face fieldwork to remote fieldwork."
Communication strategies	Adapting	Communication that occurred during the pandemic	• "**Being frank** with students and partners that there will be lots of trials and errors" • "There was **open communication** with the education director of the tribal college. Although we cancelled the program, we did keep open the possibility."
Collaborative resilience	Sustaining	Practices that may support partnerships in the future	• "Reached out two weeks into the quarter **exploring** . . . The purpose of the collaboration was still achieved." • "We learned much on **how flexible all parties were**."
Loss and challenge	Experiencing	The loss and trauma created by the pandemic	• "It was **extremely hard to do** a kind of community activity." • "Having to be remote **dramatically reduced our ability for students**." • "Traditional partners who wanted in person engagements **had to be canceled**."
Future uncertainty	Experiencing	The uncertainty about the future	• "Regarding other changes, I have no idea. I won't be teaching this course until next academic year, and that's **simply too far in the future** to plan how to interact with partners. I don't have a good sense of how to do the observation/prototyping remotely." • "I'm **not sure** any of those [safety measures] will persist postpandemic."
Student considerations	Sustaining	Student behaviors and class management during the pandemic	• "Students **found it difficult** to conduct necessary needs assessments remotely." • "The students **were very creative** and went with the flow." • "I think it would be helpful in the future to provide [students] learning about zoom etiquette."
Technology	Adapting	Use of technology during the pandemic	• "Zoom **helped** a lot." • "**Using Zoom helps** align with community partners' schedules." • "With **no access to the internet and no ability to collaborate** which is the foundation of the course" (Lack of technology)
Other		Other phrases that were outside the scope of community engagement during the pandemic	• "There is a possibility we will work with [our non-profit partner] in Autumn 2020."

for a specific number of hours outside of course time. In project-based courses, students work individually, in small groups, or as a full class on a project or research-based question identified by a community partner in collaboration with faculty. The community engagement structures for teaching are shown in Table 3a, Table 3b, and Table 3c. These data compare the number of community-engaged courses in spring and summer quarters both pre-COVID-19 and during COVID-19. The data show that placement-based courses were reduced by 83% in spring 2020, from 12 to two, and the two courses that continued shifted to project-based community-engaged models. In contrast, spring project-based courses only decreased by 29%, from 17 to 12. Together, the data indicate that over 50% of the community-engaged courses planned for spring quarter were ultimately canceled. This dramatic reduction offers insights about sustaining community engagement in general and also about the durability of project-based structures over placement-based structures.

Quantitative Assessment

We conducted a quantitative 5-item online survey to assess respondents' action strategies and perceptions of success in their teaching and research during the COVID-19 pandemic. Frequencies and crosstabs were used to analyze quantitative responses in IBM SPSS version 27. Table 4 shows the frequency (*n*) and percentages of participants' responses on a satisfaction scale from 1 (*Very little*) to 7 (*Very much*). For Q1, 15 faculty reported 5 or higher that they employed strategies to meet the needs of the community. For Q2, 17 faculty reported 5 or higher that they employed strategies to meet the needs of students during COVID-19. For Q3, 15 faculty reported 5 or higher regarding satisfaction in their community-engaged experience. For Q4, 14 faculty indicated 5 or

Table 3a. Community-Engaged Courses by Quarter, 2018–2020

Pre-COVID-19 spring and summer quarters				COVID-19 spring and summer quarters	
Spring 2018	**Summer 2018**	**Spring 2019**	**Summer 2019**	**Spring 2020**	**Summer 2020**
29 courses	10 courses	37 courses	11 courses	14 courses (29 courses planned)	11 courses

Table 3b. Placement-Based Versus Project-Based Courses in Spring 2020

Method of Community-Based Learning and Research	Planned for spring	Course canceled	Course ran as placement	Course ran as project
Placement-based	12	10	0	2
Project-based	17	5	0	12
Total	29	15	0	14

Table 3c. Placement-Based Versus Project-Based Courses in Summer 2020

Method of Community-Based Learning and Research	Planned for summer	Course canceled	Course ran as placement	Course ran as project
Placement-based	2	0	0	2
Project-based	9	0	0	9
Total	11	0	0	11

Table 4. Developed Coding Scheme and Frequency Counts

Question	1 (Very little)	2	3	4 (Neutral)	5	6	7 (Very much)	Missing or not asked
Q1. Strategies employed to meet need of community partner	4 (9.8%)	-	-	3 (7.3%)	4 (9.8%)	7 (17.1%)	4 (9.8%)	19 (46.3%)
Q2. Strategies employed to meet need of students	2 (4.9%)	-	-	3 (7.3%)	6 (14.6%)	8 (19.5%)	3 (7.3%)	19 (46.3%)
Q3. Your community engagement experience	3 (7.3%)	-	1 (2.4%)	3 (7.3%)	5 (12.2%)	4 (9.8%)	6 (14.6%)	19 (46.3%)
Q4. Innovation in community engagement that emerged from COVID	3 (7.3%)	-	3 (7.3%)	2 (4.9%)	5 (12.2%)	4 (9.8%)	5 (12.2%)	19 (46.3%)
Q5. I will permanently make changes to my community engagement	False = 10 (24.4%)				True = 11 (26.8)			20 (48.8%)

Note. *N* = 41. Data reports *n*, with full percentages in parentheses. "Missing or not asked" includes pilot interviewees (*n* = 6) and partners (*n* = 13), who were not asked the quantitative questions.

higher that innovation in community engagement emerged from teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. For Q5, 11 out of 22 faculty indicated that they plan to make permanent changes to their community-engaged processes or practices based on their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, faculty were overall positive in their perceptions of their ability to meet the needs of community partners and students, their own experiences, and the emergence of innovation during pandemic teaching.

Qualitative Assessment

Original qualitative responses were coded thematically and restructured from wide to long in Microsoft Excel. They were then analyzed using IBM SPSS version 27 to restructure data into seven themes and to provide an overview of general frequencies that emerged. Table 5 summarizes the results of a contextual coding of the 41 responses, organized into seven core themes and an "other" category. A total of 170 text segments (*N*) were identified (where the unit of analysis is a text segment); therefore, the sample size (*n*) represents the number of text segments coded for each theme. Of the seven themes, the theme of loss and challenge appeared with the highest frequency.

Table 5. Total Percentage and Frequency of Text Segments From Participant Responses (*N* = 170)

Thematic codes	*n*	%
Action strategies	28	16.5
Collaborative resilience	8	4.7
Communication strategies	10	5.9
Future uncertainty	20	11.8
Loss and challenge	36	21.2
Other	26	15.3
Student considerations	13	7.6
Technology	29	17.1
Total	**170**	**100**

Question-Specific Qualitative Results

Coded responses from the five open-ended questions were analyzed in SPSS. Results reported in Table 6 show the distribution of codes by question and respondent type. Research and teaching faculty were asked Questions 1 and 2, while research faculty, teaching faculty, and partners were asked Questions 3, 4, and 5. In Question 1, faculty were asked to describe the intended outcomes of the partnerships for their community-engaged course/research and if they were altered in significant ways by the pandemic. The majority of responses to this question were coded with the action strategies theme (25.8%), followed by the loss and challenge theme (19.4%), as faculty described the adjustments they made to their course or partnership during the pandemic. In Question 2, faculty were asked to report why their partnership was or was not implemented during the quarter. The faculty responses reflected a tie between the themes of action strategies (11.1 %) and technology (11.1%). In Question 3, to capture challenges, we asked faculty and partners what needs and challenges they faced during COVID-19. Over half (58.8%) of the responses were coded with the loss and challenges theme. In Question 4, which asked about how well respondents accommodated for COVID-19, and in Question 5, which asked about strategies used, the most often reported theme was technology, with 29.4% and 34.3% of responses coded for technology, respectively.

Discussion

The pandemic created challenges and opportunities for community engagement in the higher education context. Although we are still emerging from the pandemic and grappling with its repercussions, it is important to capture these responses at the moment of change as a sensemaking exercise, to acknowledge where we fell short, and to identify the mechanisms that led to our success. We structured our data capture around research questions that could inform our university and others about community engagement in terms of experience, adaptation, and sustainability. Moreover, by gathering responses from faculty and partners, we note our shared circumstances and what they mean for students, projects, and future university-community collaborations. We discuss these stories of change to learn to move forward and reimagine community engagement in a postpandemic world.

Table 6. Cross Tabulation of Text Segments by Respondent and Question (*N* = 170)

Coding categories	Number of responses (*n*)	% of total sample	Teaching faculty (*n*)	Research faculty (*n*)	Partner (*n*)
Q1: Describe intended outcome	*n* = 31				
Action strategies	8	25.8	7	1	0
Future uncertainty	0	0	0	0	0
Loss and challenge	6	19.4	5	1	0
Collaborative resilience	2	6.5	2	0	0
Student considerations	1	3.2	1	0	0
Technology	1	3.2	1	0	0
Communication strategies	0	0	0	0	0
Other	13	41.9	0	0	13
Q2. Partnership executed	*n* = 36				
Action strategies	4	11.1	4	0	0
Future uncertainty	7	4.1	7	0	0
Loss and challenge	3	8.3	2	1	0
Collaborative resilience	1	2.8	0	1	0
Student considerations	3	8.3	3	0	0
Technology	4	11.1	2	2	0
Communication strategies	1	2.8	0	1	0
Other	13	36.1	0	0	13
Q3. Needs or challenges faced	*n* = 34				
Action strategies	5	14.7	2	0	3
Future uncertainty	1	2.9	0	1	0
Loss and challenge	20	58.8	11	2	7
Collaborative resilience	2	5.9	0	0	2
Student considerations	3	8.8	2	1	0
Technology	2	5.9	1	1	0
Communication strategies	1	2.9	1	0	0
Other	0	0	0	0	0

Table 6 (*continued*)**.** Cross Tabulation of Text Segments by Respondent and Question (*N* = 170)

Coding categories	Number of responses (*n*)	% of total sample	Teaching faculty (*n*)	Research faculty (*n*)	Partner (*n*)
Q4. Accommodate challenges	*n* = 34				
Action strategies	8	23.5	2	3	3
Future uncertainty	1	2.9	1	0	0
Loss and challenge	5	14.7	3	0	2
Collaborative resilience	2	5.9	0	0	2
Student considerations	4	11.8	3	1	0
Technology	10	29.4	5	1	4
Communication strategies	4	2.4	2	0	2
Other	0	0	0	0	0
Q5. New strategies used	*n* = 35				
Action strategies	3	8.6	1	1	1
Future uncertainty	11	31.4	6	1	4
Loss and challenge	2	5.7	2	0	0
Collaborative resilience	1	2.9	1	0	0
Student considerations	2	5.7	1	0	1
Technology	12	34.3	5	3	4
Communication strategies	4	11.4	1	0	3
Other	0	0	0	0	0

Sense of Experience: Loss and Challenges

A theme shared by teaching faculty and partners was *loss and challenge*. Responses coded with the loss and challenge theme relate to the trauma created by the pandemic. For example, a geography faculty member responded:

> I consider my approach to [community engagement] is a place-based [community engagement]. So, without being "in" the community (both place and people who live there), in my case, the community residents in [a local] community, it was extremely hard to do a kind of community activity, in particular, community mapping, that I wanted to do.

A human-centered design faculty member indicated:

> Having to be remote dramatically reduced our ability for students to observe the partners doing their normal work in their normal places of work. That eliminated a key source of data that is at the center of what it means to do robust human-centered design.

The partner respondents also expressed loss and challenge. This resonates with the mutuality of partnerships as outlined in the Carnegie Foundation's definition of engagement (Driscoll, 2008). For example, a community partner in the restoration field indicated:

> The University put a stop to [partnership] team field work shortly before or at almost the same time as the city stopped allowing volunteer events. The result was that the team was not able to complete clearing work or other phases of implementation such as mulching and planting …. Not having the team available for physical work will delay implementation considerably on the team's site. That could be for more than a year.

Faculty and partners' perceptions of loss and challenge reflect the meaningful community engagement that was happening before the pandemic.

Sense of Experience: Future Uncertainty

Another theme that emerged in faculty responses was *future uncertainty*. Responses coded with the future uncertainty theme relate to the challenges of uncertainty during the pandemic. A human-centered design faculty member shared uncertainty about how their course and community-engagement work would adapt in the future:

> Regarding other changes, I have no idea. I will not be teaching this course until next academic year, and that's simply too far in the future to plan how to interact with partners. I don't have a good sense of how to do the observation/prototyping remotely.

In addition, a restoration ecology faculty member imagined socially distant community engagement policies in the future but also recognized that these would not persist postpandemic:

> The protocols for work will include things like requiring mask wearing, maintaining 6' distances, no shared tool use, no food or water offered, sanitizing tools, limiting group size, requiring prior registration, encouraging bringing own gloves and tool, and shortening duration. I'm not sure any of those will persist postpandemic.

This also aligns with findings from the quantitative analysis; when asked if they would permanently make changes to their course or research based on their experiences during the pandemic, faculty responses were almost equally divided between true and false. This may reflect the uncertainty and desire to hold on to the past and restore a sense of prepandemic normalcy.

Sense of Adaptation: Action Strategies

Our item analysis shows that, overall, faculty respondents felt that their success in meeting the needs of their community partners was relatively high. Faculty realized the need to pivot their objectives to make a community engagement experience possible online in spring and summer. The ability to react suggests that faculty were, to some extent, empowered employees that could take action to cope with their situation (Callan, 1993). Responses coded with the *action strategy* theme, which referred to the preparation and adaptation measures that faculty took during the pandemic, illustrate this. The following response from a nursing faculty member exemplifies this adaptive nature:

> Of course, we were not able to be in the community and work "with" our partners in that way. Yet, the course was successful I think because of reshaping our objectives slightly and focusing on what we can do … what we can learn.

Another health studies faculty member spoke to the work that went into pivoting the class:

> At the onset, first and foremost was re-working the syllabi to switch from face-to-face fieldwork to remote fieldwork. Being frank with students and partners that there will be lots of trials and errors as the course was not initially conceptualized as a remote course. Working 24/7 to field questions from students who often need clarity as to the expectations.

These two faculty reshaped learning objectives and assignments in their courses to adapt to the remote realities caused by the pandemic and to meet the needs of their community partners.

Community partners' perspectives of community engagement during the pandemic also show that action strategies were effective in helping them adapt to the changed context. For example, a K–12 school partner reported:

> There was no in-person community engagement. The partnership had to pivot and there were many challenges to engaging health care institutions during the pandemic. My role in the project was serving as a community partner and mentor for [the university] student nurses. The student nurses were broken into three

> separate groups that focused on either care continuity, care of the medically fragile, or immunization compliance. Regularly scheduled recurring Zoom meetings facilitated the information flow and brainstorming on how to best meet both goals. The student nurses grew their skillset and knowledge base by learning about state law requirements, informatics, community outreach, and engagement with local and state organizations. It was a terrific collaborative and symbiotic effort.

The management of partnerships exhibited in this response and others suggest that management strategies called for clear communication and collaborative goal setting between faculty and partners.

Sense of Adaptation: Technology

Our item analysis shows that, overall, faculty felt that the innovation in community engagement that emerged from COVID-19 was moderate. However, their perceptions of their success in employing strategies to meet the needs of students and their feelings toward their overall community engagement experience were relatively high. Research faculty shared how *technology* enhanced their community-engaged research. For example, a geology researcher explained that technology meant a "lot more Zoom meetings with partners." An educational studies researcher also indicated the effectiveness of "Zoom chat while viewing video clips of reading instruction together online. This was a great way to see what my students were noticing and having questions about while viewing, making connections to readings and best practices." Another researcher in physical sciences stated, "We can reach new and diverse audiences through online events." These researchers used technology to strengthen communication with partners and explored new ways of knowing. However, not every community engagement partnership felt the benefits of technology. An interdisciplinary arts faculty member who partners with a regional incarceration facility noted:

> This course is taught within the prison, and 50% of the students are prisoners with no access to the internet and no ability to collaborate which is the foundation of the course. Because of Covid [*sic*], access to the prison was not possible, and the course was cancelled.

This example highlights the dependency on and vulnerabilities of internet access as a core component of community engagement durability within the context of the pandemic.

Community partners also frequently referenced technology in their responses. For example, one partner wrote:

> We learned much on how flexible all parties were. Zoom helped a lot and actually might have been a better tool to engage the workers at the food bank. It enabled students to assess the staff and access information but didn't impede the staff from doing their jobs.

Technology served as a tool to allow partners to continue their work in the community and maintain the connection and collaboration process with faculty. This may represent an opportunity to strengthen connections in new and less obstructive ways that may not have been considered before the pandemic.

Sense of Adaptation: Communication Strategies

The focus on communication and expectation has also received attention in best practices reports for effective partnerships, which recommend forming reciprocal relationships with codeveloped plans, goals, power, and resources (Holland, 1999). Responses coded for *communication strategies* relate to faculty communication in the faculty-partner relationship. In survey responses, multiple faculty mentioned successful communication tactics that helped them keep in touch with their partners during the pandemic. One faculty member said, for example, "Bringing in partners for remote chats instead of scheduling them to come to campus is something I'll likely keep up with." Another faculty mentioned "being frank with students and partners that there will be lots of trials and errors as the course was not initially conceptualized as a remote course." Still another noted, "Regularly scheduled recurring Zoom meetings facilitated the information flow and brainstorming on how to best meet both goals."

Interestingly, faculty noted that open communication at the onset of the pandemic helped assess whether partnerships should be continued or canceled: for instance, "There was open communication with the education director of the [partner] tribal college. Although we cancelled the program, we did keep open the possibility of running it again in the future." These faculty and

partners employed individual communication strategies that enabled their community engagement to continue and, in some cases, thrive in new ways; communication also enabled trust in these partnerships even with a potential pause in community engagement. This outcome suggests that communication, and technology as a means to achieve it, may be continued as a future practice strategy postpandemic.

We also note that at the institutional level the community engagement office employed systematic communication tactics to support partners and faculty through active and consistent blanket email correspondence and individualized communication. We suspect that the combination of strong communication at both the individual faculty-partner level and the institutional level helped to support the durability of community engagement between the university and regional partners. Tentative best practices that emerge from this data are specific communication skills and tools that can be shared with faculty through faculty development programming in addition to an intentional community engagement crisis communication strategy that could encourage communication between the university and partners at multiple levels (institutional and individual) during times of crisis.

Sense of Sustainability: Collaborative Resilience

Considering the data in Tables 3a and 3b, project-based community-engaged teaching methods seem to be more durable in the face of pandemic disruption than placement-based methods. Placement-based community engagement provides rich learning experiences for students; faculty mentioned the desire for students to "be 'in' the community," to "observe community partners doing work," and to conduct "physical work" like mulching and planting. At the same time, placement-based engagement can create obstacles for students related to transportation, time commitments, physical accessibility, family responsibilities, and the like (George-Paschal et al., 2019). An increase in or sustainment of project-based community engagement warrants further consideration for universities. That is, by developing project-based community-engaged teaching methods and institutional support structures, community engagement may be better poised to persist and be able to pivot when needed.

In the qualitative analysis, *collaborative resilience* was not a substantial theme, yet several of respondents' comments can contribute to our understanding of current and potential resilience. Collaborative resilience responses relate to best practices or practices learned that may apply in the future. A faculty member noted:

> Community engagement essentially came to a standstill. We worked diligently with our partners developing COVID-19 prevention plans and were at the ready when given [the] green light just recently to start up our Garden Stewards program at a very limited basis. No more than 4 volunteers working with a coordinator at any one time. We also have been able to designate many of our [university] Dedicated Independent Gardener volunteers as CRITICAL to our operations.

A community partner described resilience this way:

> [We] paused on community engagement with [the university] to set a foundation for successful online learning. 2 quarters into online learning, [our organization] is ready to bring [the university] back and merge into a virtual partnership with various job descriptions, online orientation and training, and projects.

Sense of Sustainability: Student Considerations

Another theme that helps us think about community engagement sustainability is *student considerations*. Responses coded for student considerations relate to student behaviors and class management during the pandemic. While not high in frequency, these comments provide a unique point of impact around sustainability. For example, one researcher described:

> Mostly, at least initially, uncertainty about what was allowable activity. The ongoing problem is the need for students to travel individually to the site. Students without cars can't participate because we can't carpool, and students with cars end up using extra gas.

A teaching faculty member noted:

> The course assignments were altered to focus solely on archival materials to accommodate students not being in class due to the pandemic. It worked for me when students did the research and put

> the time into their work, which many did, but others didn't engage, and I think part of it is online use with technology and another part is summer 2020!

A partner stated:

> The [university] students engaged in this project are already licensed nurses and have a strong knowledge and experience base to bring to the course. Due in part to this background and experience, this fresh and diverse perspective brought great new ways to brainstorm solutions to the project and develop practical and successful solutions to best serve the community.

As such, it is important to recognize that student needs and challenges were taken into consideration in order for community engagement to persist during the pandemic.

Practical Implications

Next, as a culminating outcome of the sensemaking activity, we translate the knowledge we've gained into suggested next steps. We share four implications. First, have a community engagement emergency management plan. We encourage other universities to host or enable a reflective space once the worst of the pandemic has passed. While our initial insights reveal a stage of grief, the near future may allow us to move beyond that stage to plan for the future. As part of a plan, it may be important to emphasize empowering action strategies. Our data collection shows that across respondent types, action strategies served to change or reframe community engagement courses/research. Finally, we acknowledged in our discussion that certain types of partnerships, specifically those that are placement-based, were the hardest-hit by the pandemic. For this reason, universities may wish to conduct a strategic assessment to understand the degree to which partnerships are diversified and sensitive to various disruptions (e.g., internet access vulnerability, place-based engagement, transportation needs, etc.).

Second, act with sympathy to the lost experience. In part, faculty and partners may have seen the survey as a way to share their grief, anxiety, and sorrow at the way the pandemic has played out. While we recognize that some partnerships needed to pause or cancel community engagement activities, many respondents were able to still make community engagement happen. These respondents acknowledged that while the experience was different, there were some positives as well. That is, faculty were able to reframe the loss of the "typical" experience and pivot to offer a different, but still meaningful, community engagement experience. Although we do not have clear data on student perspectives, the recognition of student effort by faculty and partners provides an initial indication that students were not necessarily aware of what they potentially missed or did miss due to the pandemic. Thus, the burden falls on those with the partnership history. Taken together, our insights promote developing a support plan that can help both faculty and partners cope with the loss of "normalcy" and also think creatively about how they can assist each other through the crisis.

Third, be flexible to partners' needs and changing situations. Faculty's ability to be present and adaptable despite changing circumstances and needs can allow the partnership to continue to evolve and innovate. Disaster response theories debunk the popular opinion that affected populations succumb to hysteria, panic, and irrational "fight or flight" reactions during disasters. Instead, sociological disaster studies show that despite individuals and communities experiencing deep feelings of loss, anguish, anxiety, and fear during a developing crisis, they tend to act in organized, rational, and adaptive ways not only to aid in rescue and recovery paradigms but also to keep everyday life functioning normally (Rodríguez et al., 2016). These "emergent organizations" can accomplish their common goals by remaining nimble teams that emphasize ad hoc improvisation and timely responsiveness over bureaucracy and rule following (Quarantelli, 1985). This flexibility makes it possible for subgroups of institutions to maintain important community engagement programs and relationships and even "strengthen community identification" (Quarantelli, 1993). However, flexibility also comes with the price of higher instability, unpredictability, and possible inefficiencies of scale as well as the potential for exacerbating existing disparities.

Fourth, prioritize the enduring relationship with the partner. While the project may not run during the disaster, maintaining supportive communication that cultivates both the relationship with the partner and the partner's interests in the project itself may sustain future partnership work. We found in survey responses that faculty repeatedly spoke of their "connections" with their

partners. As such, even for those engagements that changed partners or canceled courses, there seemed to be trust between the faculty and partner that the partnership could be renewed after the pandemic. These indicators suggest that the institutional culture of engaging partners may have helped faculty be durable, continue courses/research, and plan for future partnerships. Therefore, our final recommendation is to work toward this level of understanding and commitment.

Limitations

While many of us are not disaster researchers, others have noted that because of the continued occurrence of natural and manmade disasters, faculty may find themselves "unexpectedly thrust into the arena of disaster-related research" (Richardson et al., 2009, p. 3). We wanted to understand the situation that we are living in and how we can move forward. While our purpose was to take a qualitative and quantitative approach, we acknowledge that there are limitations to our analysis. First, we realize that we use the academic quarter system versus the semester system. Many universities on the quarter system experienced the start of the pandemic landing between winter and spring quarters, whereas semester institutions experienced the pandemic's start in the middle of spring semester. As such, community engagement may need to pivot differently depending on the academic structure. Second, we also acknowledge that the qualitative analysis identified themes developed in our university context. The culture of our university and region therefore influenced the responses received. And, while these thematic codes provide inductive insights to our research questions, the analysis was limited by the nominal and ordinal data. A next step would be to extend these methodologies and approaches to provide more robust revelations into themes across higher education.

Conclusion

Using a sensemaking approach, we learned what community engagement during the pandemic meant for faculty and partners. Moreover, we uncovered insights about practices that can help sustain community engagement in a durable way after the pandemic. While there was some expectation that our results would reveal considerable accommodations during the pandemic, we did not expect that faculty and partners would experience a sense of loss related to the collaboration and the grief of a pandemic such as COVID-19. This speaks to the level of investment and effort that faculty and community partners invest in community engagement collaborations to benefit community outcomes and student learning, which may be underestimated by community engagement administrators and offices. Although we are still reflecting on our experience with the COVID-19 pandemic, the process of thinking critically and proactively about community engagement and its durability is essential to thriving partnerships in the future.

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