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Developing a "Sense of Community": Exploring a Cognitive Component of Civic Engagement

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Abstract

Civic engagement has become an important component of higher education practice that assists colleges and universities in fulfilling their civic mission and public purpose. This reflective essay outlines an oftentimes forgotten aspect of that work—how we integrate students into the life of a community and help them develop a sense of interdependence with it. The concept of “sense of community” allows this opportunity and should be incorporated in higher education professions as both a guiding principle and an outcome of engaged scholarship. The author outlines the idea of incorporating the sense of community concept into higher education civic engagement, including its definition, its impact, and implications for current practice. While not prescriptive in its analysis and propositions, the article poses questions for thoughtful reflection on civic engagement in higher education.

Keywords: sense of community, civic engagement, service-learning, higher education, psychology

Some of my most prominent college memories are those of my daily experiences in the local community. Embedded within any perception I developed of the community were the town-gown relations ever present in this beloved locale, a small college town that often seemed overpowered by the behemoth-like local state university. One of my first observations of this community was that there seemed to always be a deep divide between the students and the residents, with ultimate respect for the character f the town residing with the latter. As soon as finals week was over, you could almost sense the town heaving its chest in a collective sigh of relief. When the summer season hit, you would hear residents say, “We finally have our town back” and other such comments expressing a welcome reprieve from the students. These statements, often infused with disdain, were indicative of the relationship between the university and the town at the time. In talking with fellow residents, it seemed evident that this relationship resulted from the everyday behaviors of the students, how they treated the municipality as a temporary home, often disrespectfully, and the fact that they identified more with the college than the town. Not surprisingly, the mention of students was usually attended by discussions of littering, traffic, housing deterioration, alcohol abuse, and overcrowded businesses. The negative town-gown relations have even been portrayed in a major motion picture, *Breaking Away*, now decades old. I moved away from this community to attend graduate school over 10 years ago, and I don’t surmise that the landscape of town-gown relations is still as harsh. However, to this day, friends comment on social media about the town being taken over, using familiar phrases like “they’re back,” as if an alien force were returning to a town that it had ravaged only a few months ago. While these marred town-gown relations may be specific to that time and place, my experiences as a community engagement professional within higher education have nevertheless led me to reflect on how colleges and universities truly integrate students into a community. Are they missing an opportunity to build the cognitive infrastructure of an attachment to localities along with the learning outcomes and skills that serve as such a strong focus on higher education community engagement?

One opportunity for bettering town-gown relations could lie in the ability of higher education institutions to help students connect with and develop a psychological connection to the local community. Universities can be driving forces in communities through their roles as anchor institutions, evident in their strategic roles as employment centers, workforce developers, advisors, purchasers, and land developers (ICIC, 2011; Underwood, 2016). They can also have vast

impacts on communities through civic engagement strategies such as service-learning, volunteerism, and community-based research. In general, through their civic and educational missions, colleges and universities have the opportunity to transform how students affect and interact with communities, thus preparing them for lives of continued engagement and responsible citizenship (Jacoby, 2009).

Much of the focus on the roles of higher education has emphasized activities undertaken by institutions (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). This is evident in the various definitions of civic engagement. For instance, Jacoby (2009) defined the term as "acting upon a heightened sense of responsibility to one's communities" (p. 9), while the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching uses "collaboration" and "mutually beneficial exchange" to capture the essence of civic engagement (NERCHE, n.d.). Each of these definitions brings action to the forefront of engagement. However, one element missing from much of this work relates to influencing cognitions of students outside of traditional learning outcomes. This cognitive component of engagement can be the impetus for or the result of engagement activities.

This article explores the potential to transform the field of community engagement in higher education by including a focus on "sense of community," a cognitive component of engagement. What would happen if engagement professionals worked beyond the traditional anchor strategies and civic engagement endeavors to change the dynamic between towns and institutions by helping students to develop a psychological attachment to the community? Would one still hear the constant rumblings of residents when students returned from a summer away? I propose that colleges and universities can deepen their impact in communities by using the specific activities and strategies of engagement to focus on this psychological component. This can be accomplished by enhancing and slightly refocusing existing civic engagement programming within higher education.

What Is Sense of Community?

A psychological sense of community refers to the perception or feeling that one has of an interdependent relationship with a community (Sarason, 1974; Bivens, 2006). It is sometimes interpreted as a cognitive dimension of social capital, the feelings of trust and connectedness arising from the networks one forms in a

community (Perkins & Long, 2002). According to Sarason (1974), sense of community comprises:

> the perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure. (p. 157)

McMillan and Chavis (1986) refined this definition by forming a theory of sense of community that includes the elements of membership, influence, integration, fulfillment of needs and shared emotional connection. It is a feeling that one experiences in relation to one's community. Being a cognitive element, it is a concept that everyone can experience (Sarason, 1974). Sense of community would be evident in the feeling of belonging arising from developed relationships, the understanding of how one's behaviors are affected by the community, or a simple affinity and affection toward the community. Said another way, it is the cognitive dimension of "caring" about one's community (Goodman et al., 1998, p. 269). This takes the work of engagement professionals out of the realm of activities and into the psychological sphere as it relates to communities.

Sense of community has been examined in a multitude of settings within a variety of different types of communities (Talo, Mannanini, & Rochira, 2014). However, research that examines how higher education partners with local municipalities in fostering a sense of community for students in the local community seems to be lacking from the current literature.

Sense of community is similar to communitarianism in that it focuses on "community spirit and social trust" (Boyte, 2003b, p. 737). McMillan (1996) stated that two elements of sense of community are a "spirit of belonging together" and "a feeling that there is an authority structure that can be trusted" (p. 315). However, sense of community is a cognition, a feeling, not a political theory and not tied to specific acts devoid of political concern—a criticism Boyte lodged against communitarianism (Boyte, 1992, 2003a, 2003b; Boyte & Farr, 1997). Sense of community refers to a bond an individual has with a community. It says nothing about "omitting attention to power, politics, and community impact" (Boyte, 2003b, p. 737). Someone with a strong sense of community can be both a volunteer and a protester (Boyte, 2003b) and does not have to disregard a community's complexities or injustices (Boyte & Farr, 1997). There is no specific practice tied

to sense of community as implied with communitarianism (Boyte, 2003a). Sense of community can be created by or spur action and does not have to be devoid of a political dimension; in fact, it has been linked to voting and participating in political discussions (Anderson, 2009) and proposed as an outcome of collaborative efforts needed for community problem solving (Lasker & Weiss, 2003).

Impact of Sense of Community

While the field of higher education civic engagement has made great strides in engaging students with communities and impacting the world around them through volunteering, conducting community-based research, utilizing service-learning as a pedagogy, participating in the public policy arena, and advocating for marginalized groups, one cannot assume that students feel a sense of connection with the local community through these activities, nor should one push aside the importance of this cognitive construct. Fostering a sense of community has the potential for vast benefits for both individuals and communities beyond traditional engagement activities and must be considered a critical component of civic engagement work. There is no need to give up on current practices, but engagement professionals should consider how students connect to a community as part of these practices in order to realize potential added benefits to students and communities.

Individuals

Many studies have found a connection between positive aspects of individuals' lives and sense of community. These variables have included many aspects of personal and social well-being (Albanesi, Cicognani, & Zani, 2007; Davidson & Cotter, 1991; Farrell, Aubry, & Coulombe, 2004; Peterson, Speer, & McMillan, 2008; Pretty, Conroy, Dugay, Fowler, & Williams, 1996; Prezza, Amici, Roberti, & Tedeschi, 2001). Within the relevant literature, a stronger sense of community has been found to be positively correlated with increased personal well-being components such as happiness, life satisfaction, mental health, and subjective well-being, and negatively correlated with aspects such as loneliness and depression (Underwood, 2010). The New Economics Foundation's *Well-Being Manifesto for a Flourishing Society* (2004) proposed that sense of community is not just correlated with well-being but is a social dimension of it, integral to a healthy and vibrant society. With sense of community's connections to indicators of well-being, a focus in this direction could, as just one example, further the work

on student flourishing began by the Bringing Theory to Practice Project from AAC&U.

Communities

In an effort to offer a larger picture of its importance, Sarason (1974) argued that psychological sense of community should be at the crux of social action and that community interventions should be evaluated on the merits of their ability to build a sense of community. This is what colleges and universities are truly looking for in community improvement efforts and the one outcome that indicates success. Moreover, sense of community has been shown to be related to other prosocial dimensions of community such as collective efficacy, neighboring, and participation in neighborhood organizations (Perkins & Long, 2002). Theoretically, sense of community should be tied to many community outcomes since it represents an interdependent relationship one has with his or her community. Interdependence theory holds that the individual’s and the community’s outcomes are linked (Thibaut & Kelley, 2004). The individual’s actions affect the community’s outcomes and vice versa; interdependence dictates not only the individual’s behavior but in turn influences the characteristics of the community. Sense of community has also been defined as a component of community capacity necessary for a community to come together for collective problem solving and development (Goodman et.al, 1998).

Current State of Affairs

Civic engagement has become pervasive throughout higher education. There has been an abundance of growth in both research and practice of civic engagement, with large organizations and networks dedicating themselves to promoting and enhancing engagement research and practices within higher education (Jacoby, 2009; Lambert-Pennington, 2012; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). Civic engagement is a professional field of study and practice possibly representing the best hope for introducing and incorporating a discussion about sense of community. Institutions have taken up a variety of civic engagement activities from volunteerism to curricular engagement to institutional anchor strategies (Martin, Smith, & Phillips, 2005). Within the ebb and flow of knowledge, however, questions still remain. While civic engagement undoubtedly offers positive benefits to both students and communities, it is less certain that students are feeling a healthy interdependent relationship with the community. If, as Sarason (1974) stated, sense of community should be the core of community work, why is it not the main focus of higher education civic engagement?

Relationship to Civic Engagement

Research on sense of community has not reached a consensus around the direction of the relationship between sense of community and civic engagement. Typically, in sense of community research outside of the context of higher education, there is a significant correlation between the two but little evidence of causality. Studies have hypothesized that sense of community is a predictor of civic engagement and vice versa. However, the types of analyses used in this studies have typically been correlational. Participation in community involvement and civic engagement activities could help residents feel a sense of connection to and belonging within the community. However, feeling this same sense of community could increase the likelihood that residents become involved in their community. The direction of causality is therefore unknown. For purposes of simplification, I have chosen to illustrate past research and examples of practice that assumes the correlation flows from activity (i.e., engagement) to sense of community.

Higher Education Outcomes

Given that civic engagement is the primary avenue by which colleges and universities involve students in the community, it seems reasonable to also consider civic engagement as means to foster students' sense of community. While sense of

community in neighborhoods has been well researched and has established a significant correlation between this concept and civic engagement, the connection has not become a focus of attention in the higher education civic engagement field.

Since civic engagement is integral to higher education and to involving students in the community, engagement professional should want to determine its effects on sense of community. Is it a natural outcome of civic engagement or do higher education institutions need to be more intentional about it? Do colleges and universities assume too much about the effects of civic engagement if they characterize it as building a sense of community? If sense of community is an outcome of current civic engagement work, then one would expect it to be presented as an outcome. However, a cursory glance at a few publications many use to set outcomes, including *A Crucible Moment*, Campus Compact's *Assessing Service-Learning and Civic Engagement: Principles and Techniques*, and the AAC&U's *Value Rubrics*, reveals that these resources make no mention of the cognitive dimension concerning students' feelings about their communities.

One might be able to parse out some semblance of sense of community from The Civic Engagement Working Group's civic learning spiral (Musil, 2009). The spiral represents a non-hierarchical model of civic outcomes that can be used across a continuum of engagement from K-12 through college (Musil, 2009). For instance, Musil indicated that one outcome under the public action braid is "understanding of, commitment to, and ability to live in communal contexts" (p. 63). Another outcome under the "self" braid is "understanding that the self is always embedded in relationships, a social location, and a specific historical movement" (p. 62). Interdependence is also included in the assumptions underlying the spiral. Researchers and practitioners oftentimes look back to Eyler and Giles' (1999) work on service-learning which outlined "connections to the community" as an outcome of service-learning and which found that participation in service-learning predicted community connections. However, community connectedness seems to refer more to the students' networks in the community (i.e., social capital), not necessarily to their feelings of belonging and interdependence (i.e., sense of community).

By calling attention to this gap, I do not mean to suggest a lack of work or any oversight by previous authors. It is merely illustrative of a dimension of community engagement that the field has ostensibly overlooked. As a professional collective, does the engagement field consider sense of community as an implicit outcome of engagement efforts and therefore not measure it? I do not doubt the

student learning and community impact that occurs as a result of volunteerism, service-learning, and other engagement programs. Indeed, the rhetoric in the civic engagement field consistently refers to “preparing our next generation for lives of active citizenship,” “developing good citizens,” and many more hopeful sentiments applied to future generations. However, I wonder if a key component is missing from educating the next generation for participative democracy. Higher education teaches students to serve their communities, but I’m not sure they help students feel an authentic bond with those communities. Are students just trespassers allowed onto town “land” for a limited amount of time with no concern as to how they feel about their community?

Helping students explore their community, value its assets, understand its needs, and feel like contributing members should be a paramount concern of community engagement professionals. Imagine what these professionals could accomplish for university/community relations if they focused on impacting students’ feelings and connecting to the community through the practice of engagement. Would it make them stay after graduation and lessen the “brain drain” experienced in some communities? Would they contribute even more to the welfare of their communities, and would it help educators better their efforts in developing the “whole person”? What would the atmosphere of the small college town look like then? Would students be welcomed by residents with open arms? Would the sighs of discomfort or groans of animosity upon the return of students in the fall semester cease?

Sense of Community in Practice

How would engagement professionals even begin to help students feel a sense of community outside of the institution? First, specific practices can be gleaned from McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) theory of sense of community. The original theory provides further details about each of the five components—that is, membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. According to McMillan and Chavis (1986), membership includes subcomponents of a sense of safety, a feeling that one is part of the group, investing oneself in the group, and an understanding of the common symbols, norms, and rituals of the group. Influence refers to the interdependent nature of communities whereby an awareness exists that individuals and the community as a whole affect one another’s outcomes. Integration and fulfillment of needs refers to the understanding that individuals will be rewarded for their membership in the

community. Finally, shared emotional connection entails an understanding of the group's history and participation in shared activities that foster interaction (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The following is an example of how these elements can work together, based on a modified version of one presented in the original McMillan and Chavis (1986) article:

> A student renter attends a neighborhood meeting to respond to a local noise ordinance complaint she received as a result of a party. By addressing the complaint at the meeting, the neighbors can decide to drop the complaint and rescind the fine (integration and fulfillment of need). The neighborhood meeting attendance is demarcated by particular physical boundaries of the neighborhood, with only residents within those boundaries attending (membership). The participants spend time at each meeting addressing complaints as well as planning an upcoming neighborhood celebration (developing contact through interaction—shared emotional connection) and designing new signage for the neighborhood (shared symbols—membership). The student renter volunteers to lead efforts in designing the neighborhood markers because of her degree in graphic design (influence; investing—membership). She is able to turn her volunteer efforts with the group into an internship for her major (fulfillment of needs).

Based on McMillan and Chavis' (1986) theory and definitions, there may be a variety of ways that the field of higher education civic engagement can facilitate building students' sense of community within the neighborhoods outside of the institution. Past research has not definitively determined causal factors of sense of community or gone so far as to extensively research specific prescriptive activities that build one's sense of community. However, insights into possible antecedents can be gleaned from correlational studies. For instance, activities can be centered on social participation, developed through municipal partnerships, based on community building practices and neighborhood-based engagement, and incorporated into existing institutional avenues for engagement. Each of the following examples and proposed ideas focuses on helping students get to know the community and fostering interaction between students and community members, which doesn't always occur within traditional models of engagement. The suggestions move away from the idea of serving agencies or individuals and instead take up the mantle of more basic interaction with community members. As

McMillan (1996) maintained, "contact is essential for sense of community to develop" (p. 322).

Community Building

The word *community* itself connotes the "experience of belonging" (Block, 2009, p. xii). "We are in community each time we find a place where we belong" (Block, 2009, p. xii). Therefore, activities that build community are typically thought to enhance one's feelings of attachment and connection (i.e., sense of community). While there is no perfect one-size-fits-all solution, many community-building activities could be transferred to the higher education environment. At a fundamental level, community-building activities are designed to foster interaction among residents. They entail practices focused on building social capacity through the establishment of both social and psychological ties (Mattessich, Monsey, & Roy,1997), in which the psychological ties refer to sense of community (Underwood, 2010).. Such practices are about authentically knowing one's community, feeling affected by it, and knowing that one can, in turn, affect it.

All of this may sound familiar since it employs a vocabulary similar to that of higher education civic engagement. However, transitioning to a focus on sense of community moves practitioners' target from community betterment and addressing social issues to building relationships and strengthening feelings of attachment—potentially a more manageable feat still within higher education's purview of engaging students in the community. This can be enacted in a variety of ways. In *The Great Neighborhood Book* (2007), Jay Walljasper gives examples of activities that foster a sense of community, ranging from simply greeting people on the street to helping neighbors in need to strolling through the neighborhood and enjoying its amenities. Others have suggested getting started with community building through activities that help neighbors interact with and get to know one another (Shaffer & Anundsen, 1993). Such activities could be implemented through off-campus student housing initiatives, orientation activities, or co-curricular programming, for example. These may seem overly simple, perhaps even antiquated, harkening back to a time gone by, but they can produce results nevertheless.

Morton and Bergbauer (2015) examined relationship-building activities at Providence College similar to these previously mentioned community-building strategies. They presented four strategies for connecting students to community

members that were utilized at the college. These included a recreation night, which created a safe space for youth and volunteers to converse and learn from one another; a storefront used by the campus and the community for "any activity with the potential to bring campus and neighborhood people together for conversation and interaction," (p. 25); an alternative college for working adults; and a café that served as a third place and space for community-campus interaction. In all, the college used "shared space and reflection" (p. 25) in order to build relationships through interaction. These strategies help students to meet and interact with community members, not just agencies. Morton and Bergbauer (2015) noted that agencies may not be representative of the community and therefore engagement professionals should find it important to engage students with individual community members outside of traditional "service" that connects students to agencies. While the researchers did not specifically examine sense of community as an outcome of the activities, one can see the crux of community building—interaction—at their core.

Neighborhood-based activities. There are a variety of neighborhood-based, community-building activities that colleges and universities can implement based on findings in the sense of community literature and the theme of interaction. For instance, Bruenig et al. (2010) found that, within leisure activities, sense of community is influenced by group activities such as sharing meals, working together, bonding over social activities, working toward common goals, conquering challenges together, group reflection, and meeting new people. While these activities helped individuals develop a sense of community within small groups, the ideas are translatable to a neighborhood environment. Likewise, other research has shown that the more residents whom the students know by name or consider as friends, the higher their sense of community (Nasar & Julian, 1995). Nasar and Julian (1995) also indicated the importance of spaces for interaction, such as common areas and courtyards, for fostering a sense of community specifically among college students. Condensing this information into one or two themes shows the importance of getting to know one another (interaction) and working together (problem-solving). Research has further illustrated these themes by identifying a positive correlation between sense of community and neighboring or interacting with one's neighbors (e.g., visiting with neighbors, exchanging favors, borrowing items, and generally interacting with neighbors) (Bolland & McCallum, 2002; Farrell, Aubry, Coulombe, 2004; Prezza et al., 2001). Given the importance of contact and interaction, examples of practices within these themes could include:

- inviting all residents (including students living in the neighborhood) to a neighborhood dinner;
- group service projects or problem solving that includes both residents and students working together, not just students serving a community or volunteering with a community agency;
- opportunities for student renters to meet their neighbors (e.g., block parties, carnivals, etc.);
- invitations extended to students living in the neighborhood to attend neighborhood meetings and become involved in neighborhood projects; and,
- residents working together (including students) to develop common areas of interaction within living spaces (e.g., within apartments, streets, or neighborhoods) such as designing a pocket park or community garden.

Students do not always engage in neighboring behaviors on their own, which offers both a challenge and an opportunity for higher education. Research has revealed that millennials are less likely to take part in neighboring behaviors. For instance, the Millennial Civic Health Index found that helping neighbors occurs at a higher rate for youth having never attended college than those millennials who have some college or a college degree (NCoC, 2014). Similar findings have emerged in relation to exchanging favors with neighbors (NCoC, 2014). Researchers have speculated that this difference, based on educational attainment, could be due to college students being new to a particular community while those who did not go on to college "may be more likely to stay in the communities where they grew up" (p. 10) and are already connected (NCoC, 2014). If colleges and universities were more focused on helping students with neighboring, would current trends reverse—that is, would both those who went to college and those who did not exchange favors with neighbors? There seems to be a gap here that could be filled if higher education focused more attention on sense of community and neighboring.

Municipal and neighborhood partnerships. I recognize that many of the previous community-building suggestions are not solely the responsibility of colleges or universities. Many of the practices listed could be organized by residents

or community organizations. However, there is an opportunity to involve higher education institutions through service-learning courses working within particular neighborhoods, residence-life departments educating students on responsible renting and how to become involved in their neighborhoods, civic engagement centers working with municipal departments to better engage students in community building and neighborhood improvements already occurring throughout the community. Municipalities typically focus on services, infrastructure, and facilities within neighborhoods. They can serve as natural partners for including students in the life of the neighborhoods since many municipal governments already facilitate neighborhood engagement with residents.

Municipalities can also work with higher education to better understand student off-campus housing and activities in order to create an environment that fosters a sense of community. Cheng (2004) found three aspects of a campus environment related to students' sense of community on campus. These included fostering a caring environment in which students are accepted as members, combatting loneliness, having a rich social life through "programming and organized social opportunities" (p. 228), and providing opportunities for students to be involved in rituals and traditions (Cheng, 2004). Each can be applied to a neighborhood environment and facilitated by existing neighborhood services-programming managed by neighborhood groups and municipalities. For instance, neighborhood groups and municipalities can make a concerted effort to invite renters to be a part of neighborhood activities to help all residents feel that they are members and matter to the functioning of the community. Loneliness can be combatted by facilitated neighboring. As an example, welcoming committees, which are established in some communities to welcome new homeowners, can extend their reach to welcome new student renters. Building a rich social life and involving students in rituals and traditions can be accomplished through the organization of neighborhood activities such as festivals and celebrations, clean-ups, neighborhood yard sales, etc. By creating an environment that is caring, creates connections, and has plentiful activities, neighborhood groups and municipalities can work toward fostering a sense of community for residents, especially student renters.

Third places. Another community-building strategy involves Oldenburg's (1999) idea of third places—"public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of

home and work" (p. 16). These places foster conversation and sociability, are accessible and accommodating, and provide a "home away from home" (p. 38). Much like the café developed by Providence College (Morton & Bergbauer, 2015), colleges and universities can create their own third places such as coffee shops or bookstores near campus that facilitate interaction and conversation among students and community members.

Social Participation

Although the field of higher education civic engagement has not outlined sense of community as an outcome, positive correlations have been found between sense of community and various types of social participation such as civic and political engagement and involvement in community and social activities (e.g., Peterson, Speer, & McMillan, 2008). Within higher education, a study of university students found a significant positive correlation between social involvement activities and sense of community. The activities included traditional civic engagement realms such as volunteering and political participation as well as social, recreational, cultural, and religious activities (Cicognani et al., 2008). Another study involving high school students also found a positive correlation between sense of community and social involvement. Specifically, it was positively associated with participation in formal groups (e.g., religious or sports organizations and groups), political participation, fundraising and giving, and involvement in social activities such as cultural and leisure events—all of which were significantly positively correlated with sense of community (Albanesi, Cicognani, & Zani, 2007).

As evidenced by these findings, there is a multitude of opportunities to help students build their sense of community. Examples include:

- connecting the institution's campus activities board with leisure activities in the community instead of planning all events on campus;
- introducing students to community groups during orientation;
- combining recreational activities with city recreation clubs; and,
- engaging students in traditional civic engagement activities (civic, electoral, and political voice; e.g., Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, & Jenkins, 2002) but with an added intention of fostering sense of community through interaction with individual community members.

Existing Institutional Practices

Colleges and universities could begin fostering a sense of community among students by working through existing structures within the institution. Much in the same way that learning outcomes are infused throughout a course and drive the activities of that course, sense of community can be an essential outcome (along with community impact) for an institution which could drive cross-campus, community-focused activities. As with any successful and prudent engagement programming, it must be designed in conjunction with the community, following best practices of university-community partnerships.

In terms of co-curricular programming, off-campus housing could help students understand ordinances, neighboring, and involvement with neighborhood councils in their area of residence as they begin to evaluate moving off campus. While most engagement professionals have organized one-time, limited-commitment service projects at their institutions, they should rethink the focus of these programs. Instead of sending students out to volunteer at social service agencies, colleges and universities could coordinate walking tours of local neighborhoods near the institution during which students learn about its history, its residents, and its future. They could meet with local business owners, experience a neighborhood gathering, or utilize neighborhood amenities. An example of incorporating an experience of the community alongside traditional one-time service opportunities occurred at Guttman Community College, where students were encouraged to explore a variety of amenities in the community, such as museums, transportation options, and performances (Naish, 2015). The day could also be spent entirely at a local coffee shop getting to know the regulars to foster an understanding of how people feel about their community and how they interact within it, much in the same way Providence College utilized spaces for campus-community interaction to foster conversation and understanding (Morton & Bergbauer, 2015). Students would potentially find themselves enthralled in a locally focused conversation with town residents and develop a longed-for attachment to place.

Practices related to building a sense of community could also be incorporated into the curriculum. Service-learning projects within courses could be transformed from a focus on addressing a community need or direct service to discovering the assets and resources of a community. For instance, classes across the disciplines could facilitate student-asset mapping projects in which students go

out into the community and systematically uncover the vast array of resources that a community has to offer. The lens of the assets could pertain to a variety of disciplines such as biology and environmental responsibility, human behavior and interaction, space planning, nonprofit management, and many more. Courses themselves could highlight community assets; this could be accomplished through engaged courses that utilize and celebrate the community as both a teaching tool and a co-educator. For instance, a literature instructor could invite local writers to his or her course to teach one of the lessons and connect with aspiring writers or certain classes could coincide with local author events at a locally owned bookstore. Another option could be to create a "Neighborhood 101" course that would teach students the principles and practices of neighboring and integrating oneself into a community, offered through general education or first-year experience programs.

Engagement professionals can transform their work into relationship building through the programs they already coordinate. Building a sense of community can be infused throughout the institution much as many hope civic engagement is today. For instance, colleges and universities could incorporate community-building principles and activities into the first-year experience, building ever-increasing intensity and leadership throughout the students' multiple years in college. Then activities could be incorporated into capstones, internships, or senior-level courses.

Measurement

If engagement professionals are to consider sense of community as a viable component of engagement to pursue, they should also consider how they will measure it. In order to evaluate programming and assess outcomes, they will need to find benchmarks as well as measure improvements. Within quantitative methods, there have been a variety of scales developed for measuring sense of community, many of which have been validated in multiple studies. The following are a few examples of these quantitative scales:

- Sense of Community Index 2 (Chavis, Lee, & Acosta, 2008)
- Brief Sense of Community Scale (Peterson, Speer, & McMillan, 2008)
- Sense of Community Within Sphere of City (Davidson & Cotter, 1986)
- Neighborhood Cohesion Scale (Buckner, 1998)
- Collegiate Sense of Community (Lounsbury & DeNeui, 1996)

- Sense of Community Scale for Adolescents (Chiessi, Cicognani, & Sonn, 2010)

While researchers and practitioners use quantitative measures most often, qualitative measures, such as interviews and focus groups, have also been implemented to measure this construct (e.g., Breunig, O'Connell, Todd, Anderson, & Young, 2010, Brodsky, 1996; Plas & Lewis, 1996). Using existing quantitative and qualitative measures, sense of community can easily be incorporated into existing assessment techniques and structures for community engagement, along with current student assessment indicators (see Gelmon, Holland, Driscoll, Spring, & Kerrigan, 2001 for assessment guidance and templates).

Changing the Nature of Civic Engagement Work

For those working in the field of civic engagement, helping students build a sense of community is of vital importance. In his foundational work, Sarason (1974) made the following statement: "The absence or dilution of the psychological sense of community is the most destructive dynamic in the lives of people in our society" (p. 96). This is still true today—even more so as people become divested from local communities, replacing face-to-face interaction with an online version, and continue to live in a fragmented society (Block, 2009). Referring to McMillan and Chavis' (1986) definition, what if higher education institutions could help students feel that they belong in a community, that they are influenced by it and their behaviors influence it, that they have an emotional connection to the community, and that their needs are fulfilled by that community? How might that change the work of engagement professionals and institutions' overall relationship with the community?

Much of the higher education civic engagement rhetoric includes concepts related to addressing particular social issues or working with particular community agencies. As a field, it tends to focus on direct service, particular community issues, building networks, or enhancing student learning, while neglecting the idea of how students feel about the community. Some have characterized this work as "sending students of the university out into the community" (Bruning, McGrew, & Cooper, 2006, p.128). However, with a heightened focus on the civic mission and the importance of the community for higher education, one must not forget the psychological component to students' lives within communities. With a focus on sense of community, the activities and strategies so often cataloged as

demonstrating progress (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011) will be a means to reach sense of community, much in the same way that the activities are a means to achieve community impact and student learning outcomes. Instead of a concern for increased engagement activities, engagement professionals should focus on fostering a sense of community, which has been proposed as the core of community work (Sarason, 1974). This would lead to the creation or enhancement of activities that reach this outcome, adding increased intentionality to programming.

In focusing community engagement efforts on helping students develop a sense of community, town-gown relations could become more positive. Imagine a time when higher education personnel didn't utter the words, "We struggle to get them outside the [insert college name] bubble." A more intentional focus on building a bond between the student and the community would do just that.

Transiency and the Local Student

One argument against focusing effort and resources on students' sense of community could be that students often live a transient life, one of constant mobility during and after college. However, adults are expected to develop a connection with the community or at least try. Shouldn't this be what is expected of students as well? Picture this: A young professional buys a house in a traditional neighborhood, one with a variety of single-family homes, a neighborhood association, and a fair level of neighbor interaction. One would expect that individual to integrate him or herself into the life of the neighborhood, developing an attachment to their neighbors and feeling as if they were members of that community. It all adds to that individual's quality of life—a right no one would deny that person. However, do colleges and universities expect the same of students living off campus? While the atmosphere of traditional neighborhoods often excludes renters and students in particular, it seems the duty of higher education to lend a hand to help students integrate themselves so that they can acquire that same feeling of belonging. What is expected of adult populations should also be expected of college students in order to prepare them for life outside the comfortable and supportive confines of higher education.

Another concern is that students who attend college in their home communities may already have a strong connection to that locality. In 2014, a study by Niche found that about 30% of youth attend college within 25 miles of their home community. The dataset included students attending private, public, and

community colleges (Niche, 2014). With many students staying near their homes to attend college, it is important to understand the ramifications for fostering a sense of community.

Simply because students may have grown up in the community within which they attend college does not mean that their sense of community with that locality cannot increase. Cicognani, Menezes, and Nata (2011) found that students who were native to their college's location experienced an increase in sense of community from freshman to senior year, indicating that they had not reached their peak level of sense of community within their home locality just by growing up in that community. In other words, there is always room for growth. Those who were not native to the locality experienced a decrease in sense of community with their hometown, having replaced it with an attachment to their new home (Cicognani, Menezes, & Nata, 2011). Sense of community is also an important factor in encouraging students to remain in their home community to attend college. A preliminary study of youth sentiments toward their home community found a positive correlation between sense of community and rural youth's intention to stay in their home community for college or employment (Pretty, Bramston, Patrick, & Pannach, 2006).

Conclusion

Moving away from how researchers and practitioners have always formulated engagement toward helping students build their sense of community helps to retain, if not reinvigorate, a focus on the education and development of students as responsible citizens. It also leads engagement professionals away from the helping paradigm and traditional experiences of servanthood (McKnight, 1989). Higher education institutions have a vested interest in keeping students in the community. Working to build sense of community along with other efforts to root students could turn this potentially transient group into a group of committed citizens. As community engagement professionals, we should contribute to this goal by facilitating students' interdependence with the communities in which they live.

In my small college town, I can imagine conversations about the university sounding quite different if students were truly connected to the community. Instead of mentioning the looming behemoth next door, one would hear stories of pleasant encounters with students or, better yet, stories of upstanding community members

which did not distinguish whether they were students or not. Students would become fellow residents instead of a destructive force descending upon the town every August. The “us and them” rhetoric would dissolve, as would the disdain for what students do to their communities. The relationship between the university and the community would be celebrated, and students would become welcome into the fabric of community life. The environment would be forever altered, but the relationships built would be transformative and lasting.

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