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EDITORIAL

Doing Justice, Loving Kindness, Walking Humbly: Christian Approaches to Community Engagement

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Civic work—both scholarship and practice—has long been central to the purposes of American higher education. Whether cultivating future leaders, advancing knowledge in service to society, or enriching public life, American colleges and universities have been driven by their commitment to the public good to enhance the civic life of local towns and cities, states, and even the nation. One recent expression of this civic impulse, community engagement, rose to prominence in the late 20th century, with programs such as service learning, civic engagement, immersion experiences, participatory action research, placed-based education, and collaborative inquiry becoming embedded on campuses across the country (Welch, 2016).

In recognition of the proliferation of these campus activities, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching created a new institutional classification for community engagement in 2006 (see Swearer Center, 2019). Although this formalization has brought increased attention to civic efforts, some assume that community engagement is largely the purview of public higher education, given that sector’s scale and state-related structure. However, the efforts of private colleges and universities represent an important dimension of postsecondary community engagement in the United States (Hetrick, Katz, & Nugent, 2018). Moreover, although perhaps less visible than their public counterparts, faith-based institutions have a particular interest in community engagement stemming from their unique institutional missions that emphasize service and outreach.

This special issue provides a window on the diverse kinds of community engagement work being done on faith-based college and university campuses by presenting the perspectives of faculty members and scholar practitioners from eight different institutions representing a wide range of religious, geographic, and structural contexts. Of the eight institutions, four are affiliated with the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCU), four are affiliated with the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (ACCU), and each is associated with a different denomination or religious order, including Baptist, Christian Reformed, Church of God (Anderson), Church of God (Cleveland), Jesuit, Marianist, Spiritan, and Vincentian traditions. The articles describe community engagement work being accomplished in urban, suburban, and rural contexts spanning the regions of the Pacific Northwest, the Midwest, New England, and the South. Five of the eight institutions represented in this issue have received the Carnegie Classification
for Community Engagement, although all conduct significant community engagement programs. This religious, geographic, and structural diversity highlights the contextual nature of community engagement work, even as common themes emerge across the cases. Taken as a whole, this special issue illuminates which resources from the Christian tradition can inform community engagement initiatives, how Evangelical Protestant and Catholic colleges and universities have institutionalized community engagement as an intentional strategy to highlight and pursue their unique missions, and what forms community engagement initiatives often take within Christian higher education.

In her lead article to the special issue, “Mission Animation: Christian Higher Education, the Common Good, and Community Engagement,” Jessica Mann argues that the faith-based segment of private higher education “can serve as an exemplar of authentic and thoughtful institutionalization of community engagement for the field at large,” and she sets the stage for the pieces that follow by “map[ping] the landscape of community engagement in Christian higher education” (p. 7). After providing an overview of the historical, philosophical, and theological foundations of Christian higher education and its associated professional networks, Mann traces Evangelical and Catholic approaches to community engagement across three program types: co-curricular, curricular, and degree. These categories serve as a helpful organizer for the remainder of the issue, which consists of conceptual and empirical studies of community engagement initiatives at seven different religiously affiliated institutions.

Noting that many colleges and universities operate as loosely connected federations of silos “rather than as an organic, singular body made of diverse but complementary members” (p. 26), David R. Tillman and Brian K. Foreman present a case study of an interdisciplinary community outreach program at Campbell University (NC) “designed to highlight and harmonize previously distinct community engagement projects and to conceptually frame the projects as enactments of personal calling and coherent organizational commitment” (p. 27). The case the authors describe in “Re-membering the Mission: Institutional Impacts of an Interdisciplinary Community Outreach Project” illustrates the positive effects of intentional alignment and interdisciplinary cooperation not just for colleges and universities, but also for the communities they serve. Tillman and Foreman conclude that when disparate parts of the university are “[c]entered on corporate mission as an expression of personal calling,” the institution as a whole “becomes an accessible partner to the community—coordinated in its efforts, focused in its impact, and accountable to its most noble purpose” (p. 41).

However, even when centered on their historic missions and working toward a common goal, faith-based universities can still experience tensions in the application of their sponsoring traditions to community engagement initiatives. In “Reconciling Structural and Personal Expressions of Justice in Jesuit Education,” Brian W. Sokol, Leah Sweetman, Bobby Wassel, Christopher Franco, and Tim Huffman explore the ways in which the dual expressions of Jesuit justice education—the personal modality that “involves recognizing the inherent dignity of the person and treating individuals with respect and care,” (p. 45) and the structural modality that involves the “creation of social conditions and societal structures that allow people to thrive together as a community and to achieve their full potential” (p. 45)—are embodied by two co-curricular, student-led food justice programs at Saint Louis University (Missouri). After detailing
the Campus Kitchen’s structural approach and the Labre Ministry’s personal approach to combating hunger in the local community, the authors describe one example of how the tension between personal and structural modalities was resolved when both programs brought together their unique contributions to address a local emergency. They conclude from the experience that “our hearts and minds are more closely aligned in God’s love when faith and service are treated as mutually supporting each other and when we seek to reconcile structural and personal dimensions of justice into a more unifying vision” (p. 57).

When community engagement efforts honor institutional mission while driving institutional innovation, the result can be “reciprocal partnerships that address local problems in pursuit of social justice” (p. 60). In “Pursuing Social Justice through Place-Based Community Engagement: Cultivating Applied Creativity, Transdisciplinarity, and Reciprocity in Catholic Higher Education,” Brian LaDuca, Charlie Carroll, Adrienne Ausdenmoore, and Justin Keen describe how the University of Dayton (Ohio) has activated the institution’s “inherent creativity, capacity for transdisciplinarity, and [commitment to] iterative progress” (p. 60) through the creation of the GEMnasium (Growth Education Mindset), a “‘collaborative hands-on ‘test lab’ that provides spaces for [University of Dayton] students, faculty, staff and regional partners to prototype new teaching and learning models for servant-leadership and social innovation,” (pp. 63–64). Informed by the university’s Marianist tradition, this inventive initiative has produced a generative and shared space for community engagement and local problem solving. The authors detail the experiences of stakeholders from one community partnership emerging from the GEMnasium, the Freedom Enterprise, which is “a prototype network of hospitality and service-centered enterprises providing developmental support and opportunity for individuals reentering society from addiction and incarceration” (p. 65). Their experience reveals how “Christian education can use community engagement approaches that draw on traditional ideals of faith, community, and the common good in order to innovate in ways that are vital to the communities they serve” (p. 73).

Service learning is one of the most widely recognized co-curricular forms of community engagement in higher education, and Carolyn Dirksen explains how Lee University (Tennessee) has integrated the approach throughout the institution in “Community Engagement for Student Faith Development: Service-Learning in the Pentecostal Tradition.” Using the developmental theory of Sharon Daloz Parks (2011), Dirksen details “how service-learning programs designed to shape students’ sense of responsibility for the common good can also foster their faith development” (p. 78) by helping students move from fragile to confident “inner dependence” within the context of a supportive mentoring community. Dirksen notes three tensions that can challenge the successful implementation of service-learning programs at faith-based institutions – Academic tensions: Are we serving or learning?; Theological tensions: Is this service or evangelism?; and Cultural tensions: Are we serving or saving? Although these tensions are ultimately “iterative” and not “to be resolved once and for all” (p. 89), Dirksen concludes that Christian colleges and universities are “uniquely prepared” to “mentor students through their developmental journeys even as they model faithful service to the world” (p. 90).

Community engagement programming can also take curricular forms, as demonstrated by Christopher D. Tirres and Melanie C. Schikore in “Faith in Action and Community
Engagement: Realizing Mission through Immersion Experiences.” Proceeding from the belief that “[c]ommunity-based learning experiences can help the institution to actualize its mission and also provide opportunities for students to engage mission in ways that may inspire and even surprise them” (p. 92), Tirres, a philosopher of religion at DePaul University (Illinois), and Schikore, Executive Director of the Interfaith Community for Detained Immigrants, describe how they partnered to offer a community-based immersion experience as part of an introductory religion course using Clingerman and Locklin’s (2016) model of civically engaged learning. Qualitative analysis of student reflections revealed that the immersion experience simulated the “unfamiliar and uncomfortable space of having little to no (direct) agency” (p. 102), which taught students “how to accompany those who suffer,” helped them “grow in empathy,” and “inspired them to act” (p. 102). Speaking to the larger significance of their study, Tirres and Schikore note that “[n]o mission … can actualize itself,” and argue that “religiously affiliated institutions of higher learning with missions that are laser-focused on faith in action” not only exhibit “a clear identity and raison d’être,” but also provide “a clear demonstration of why the institution is relevant to the wider world” (p. 106).

Moving from discrete curricular experiences in community engagement to integrated degree programs, Cassie J. E. H. Trentaz uses self-study methodology to examine the major she directs at Warner Pacific University (Oregon) in “What Does it Mean to be an Engaged Institutional Neighbor?: A Self-Study of an Undergraduate Program in Ministry and Community Engagement.” After describing her institution’s Wesleyan-Holiness roots and local context, Trentaz evaluates the undergraduate program in ministry and community engagement using Yamamura and Koth’s (2018) five principles of place-based community engagement. She notes that successful engagement with community partners often requires colleges and universities to adjust their rhythms and expectations: “We have learned … to work at the pace of relationships and trust in order that the work is in fact both sustainable for the longer-term and mutually beneficial” (p. 121). Returning to her initial question, Trentaz concludes that being an engaged institutional neighbor means, in part, “to pay attention to when relationships are transactional or extractivist” (p. 126) and to recognize “our neighbors as sources and generators of critical knowledge and power and as co-producers with us” (p. 127). Rather than wonder “who would miss us if we were no longer there,” she suggests that perhaps universities should ask instead, “What life is trying to live in our neighborhood?” and “What is our role in nurturing that life?” (p. 127).

Degree programs can themselves be used as community engagement strategies when they are extended to nontraditional student populations, as evidenced by the article “Equipping Students for a ‘Specific Uprising’ Toward Justice: Lessons Learned from a University Prison Initiative,” by Todd Cioffi, Andrew F. Haggerty, and Jeffrey P. Bouman. Observing that “educating incarcerated individuals in a broad, Christian, liberal arts tradition may be one of the most important new opportunities for focused citizenship education in twenty-first century America” (p. 132), the authors detail a prison initiative sponsored by Calvin University (Michigan) through which inmates at a local correctional facility can eventually earn both an Associate’s degree in Ministry Leadership and a Bachelor’s degree in Faith and Community Leadership. The course curriculum is designed to equip inmates for “moral and spiritual leadership within Michigan’s prisons” (p. 137), and the program beautifully illustrates that “the freedom
suggested in the root *liber* of liberal arts has application in hearts and minds as well as in bodies. One does not have to be free in one’s body to be free in one’s mind and spirit” (p. 145). Moreover, the authors note that community engagement programs such as the Calvin Prison Initiative challenge those of us in the academy not “to use our capital… to build isolated locales of scholarship and pedagogy,” but rather “to extend, in partnership, into our local communities, embarking on a shared pilgrimage toward the transformational and redemptive power of embodied kingdom citizenship” (p. 146).

This special issue concludes with two book reviews curated to align with our theme of community engagement in Christian higher education. Jennifer Scott Mobley of Grove City College (Pennsylvania) explores how the lessons learned from *Place-Based Community Engagement in Higher Education: A Strategy to Transform Universities and Communities* (Yamamura & Koth, 2018) might empower Evangelical Christian colleges and universities to “navigate the tenuous space between disruption and transformation,” (p. 148) so that they might “reclaim their historic mission and identity while developing new points of access that will make higher education more adaptable in meeting the needs of current and future students and families” (p. 149). Upon reviewing *Reconceptualizing Faculty Development in Service-Learning/Community Engagement: Exploring Intersections, Frameworks, and Models of Practice* (Berkey, Meixner, Green, & Eddins, 2018), Daniel J. Bergen of Marquette University (Wisconsin) concludes that the book will resonate with practitioners at Catholic colleges and universities by reminding them that “community engaged professionals serve as … ‘contemplatives in action’” whose “roles can support others in deepening their relationship with God and the communities with which they partner” as they “operate[e] within an environment that wholly embraces the call to engage” (p. 153).

Speaking collectively, the authors in this issue provide a multifaceted framework for understanding community engagement in Christian higher education, one with applications for multiple audiences. For Christian colleges and universities that have not yet developed community engagement initiatives, these articles elucidate the connection between various programmatic approaches and the mission and identity of Christian higher education, as well as the adaptability of community engagement strategies to meet the needs of local contexts. For those within the community engagement movement, the issue points to the substantive contributions of Christian colleges and universities in this area, as well as the voice these institutions should have in ongoing discussions regarding the future of community engagement in American higher education. For American higher education writ large, the examples posed by the issue harken back to the public purposes of postsecondary institutions, encouraging consideration of how a recommitment to community engagement might serve to re-center the work of colleges and universities within a larger concern for the public good. And for the general public, the stories told in this special issue move discourses regarding the value of college beyond a simple consideration of financial return on investment to a broader reckoning of the academy’s contribution to society at large.

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