Chapter 13
The Disciplining and Professionalization of Community Engagement:
The Master's Degree

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ABSTRACT

Efforts are underway to professionalize the field of community engagement and to build the discipline of community engagement. This work requires the articulation of the knowledge, skills, values, and ethical standards that distinguish community engagement from related fields. It also requires cross-sector collaboration and communication as well as valuing community engagement in different contexts. This chapter provides an overview of the Master's Program in Community Engagement at Merrimack College and has been written collaboratively by the director of the program and a student in the program. The authors contend that the disciplining and professionalization of community engagement requires the establishment of academic programs and departments which develop and disseminate knowledge. With the disciplining and professionalization of community engagement, the field will be better positioned to prepare community engagement practitioners equipped with the skills and expertise necessary to engage in communities in collaborative, respectful, and responsible ways.

INTRODUCTION

Community engagement is a growing field of inquiry and practice. This is apparent in schools, school systems, and institutions of higher education across the country and internationally. It can also be seen in sectors such as public health and government.

There are a wide range of professional associations and initiatives, some launched only in the past decade or two, which are focused on community engagement in different contexts and have impressive numbers of individual and institutional members. The existence of these associations and their size and scope provide evidence of the increased attention to community engagement across sectors.

Campus Compact, a national organization comprised of institutions of higher education committed to community engagement, presently has over a thousand member institutions (Members, 2018). Currently, 361 institutions of higher education have the Carnegie Elective Classification in Community Engagement (Carnegie Classification, 2019). Initiated in 2006, the Carnegie Elective Classification in Community Engagement involves a selective application process for institutions of higher education to document and receive recognition for their community engagement practices. The Talloires Network, a global coalition of member institutions committed to the civic goals of higher education, has grown to a membership of over 350 institutions since its inception in 2005 (Who We Are, 2018). According to the Coalition for Community Schools, there are more than five thousand community schools in the US and internationally (Coordinators Appreciation Week, 2018). The emergence of professional associations dedicated to community engagement and the proliferation of institutions and individuals participating in these organizations are evidence of the disciplining and professionalization of the field.

Further evidence of the disciplining and professionalization of community engagement are the growing numbers of academic programs focused on community engagement (Butin, 2010). Alongside formal academic programs, Campus Compact is presently launching a credentialing initiative for higher education community engagement professionals (Professional Credentialing, 2018). Through this initiative, community engagement professionals may apply for micro-credentials through documentation of competencies in community engagement knowledge and skills. The International Association of Research on Service Learning and Community Engagement (IARSCLE), incorporated in 2007, is actively building the profession and discipline of community engagement by promoting research and knowledge generation and dissemination (About Us, 2019). IARSCLE also supports this work by actively engaging graduate students through its Graduate Student Network (Our Committees, 2019).

Graduate degree programming is one important pathway to support the disciplining and professionalization of community engagement. This chapter will provide an overview of the Community Engagement Master's Program at Merrimack College. The chapter provides a general overview of the degree program including concentrations and courses. It also highlights the education and professional development needs of community engagement professionals for work in higher education and schools. It explores necessary next steps toward the disciplining and professionalization of community engagement. Written by the director of the program and a student in the program, the chapter seeks to integrate the experiences and perspectives of both authors.

BACKGROUND

This section describes the scope of community engagement as a discipline; the scope of community engagement as a profession; the evolution of community engagement; the rationale for the disciplining and professionalization of community engagement; and key challenges. This contextual background will provide a foundation for considering the value of Master's degree programming as an important component and step toward the professionalization and disciplining of community engagement.

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