The mission statement of the university where I teach includes the goal of empowering students “to become engaged citizens who use their knowledge and skills with integrity and compassion to improve the future of our global society” (http://miamioh.edu/about-miami/leadership/president/mission-goals/). Many high schools, colleges, and universities, both in the U.S. and abroad, hold a similar vision of graduating generations of citizens who understand and appreciate diversity (in all its manifestations) and who are dedicated to revitalizing and strengthening a broad sense of community (in all its manifestations). Yet in many of these educational settings there remains uncertainty about what it really means for students to be engaged citizens, the specific pedagogical practices best suited to this mission—such as internships, volunteering, community service, service-learning, public scholarship, and so on—the training and competency of instructors to facilitate such practices, whether the efforts currently in place are functioning as intended, and how best they should develop over time.

The desirability of an engaged citizenry has been discussed since antiquity. In the U.S., philosopher and education reformer John Dewey (1859-1952) provided the theoretical basis for modern debates about engaged or active learning. At the core of Dewey’s philosophy was the conviction that education must lead to personal growth, contribute to humane conditions, and engage citizens in association with one another (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999, p. 181). By the late 20th century, service-learning had become the hallmark or standard-bearer of Dewey’s philosophy (though he never used the term himself), with the scholarly literature booming in the past 20 years. Throughout the 1990s, what service-learning actually meant was widely debated; almost every book or article published on the subject included a significant section devoted to defining the pedagogy,
because “the term had minimal currency beyond those who practiced it” (Furco, 2009, p. xi). Even today, conceptual confusion abounds. As such, I adopt the strategy of many writers before me in defining service-learning through my home university, as an “experiential practice that uses action and reflection to meet needs and enhance learning through mutually beneficial, reciprocal partnerships” (http://miamioh.edu/student-life/_files/documents/community-engagement/service-learning/service-learning-white-paper.pdf). By the late 1990s, the scholarly literature had shifted away from what service-learning is to what it accomplishes, and by the late 2000s, from a sponsorship or “cheerleader” mode of simply advocating the practice toward more nuanced discussion of “the challenges, complexities, and pitfalls” of engaging in it (Furco, 2009, p. xii).

Today, and somewhat in spite of the explosion of scholarship, numerous questions remain about the aims and practice of service-learning. I identify at least 11 major discussions or debates in the current literature. First, and perhaps most important, should service-learning be reactionary (to restore lost community), reformist (to better extant community), or revolutionary (to wholly reimagine community and community relations)? Which approach holds the most promise in the current educational landscape? Which holds the most promise despite the current educational landscape? Second, while service-learning aims toward mutually beneficial campus-community connections, to what extent are these achieved and/or to what extent are they authentic? As Butin (2010) notes, “the current quality of service-learning teaching varies a lot, so much so that people speak of a norm for community collaboration of ‘do no harm’” (p. xi). Third is a shift toward fully integrating civic engagement into the core functions of higher education: “It is all very well for citizenship/community strategies to feature in strategic and mission statements, but these need to be embedded and mainstreamed in student and academic culture in order for them to deliver” (Bawa & Munck, 2012, p. xvi). Fourth (and related) is the location of service-learning within the academy—academic affairs or student affairs? Discipline-bound (e.g., located in a department of community studies) or discipline-transcendent (see Butin, 2010; Strait and Lima, 2009)? Fifth is the development of a new pedagogy borne at the intersections of three educational domains: service-learning, study abroad, and international education (Bringle & Hatcher, 2011). Distinct from service-learning that just “happens” to take place outside the U.S., the central purpose of international service-learning in the context of globalization is “to advance learning and the understanding of how particular forms of knowledge can be applied to social ends in a cosmopolitan or international context” (Plater, 2011, p. 3), especially given different cultures
of volunteerism and different meanings of “service” worldwide. Sixth is a call to move beyond program evaluation toward more sophisticated theorization and more widespread, systematic, and replicable empirical research on the overall effectiveness of service-learning: for students, communities (both local and global), and educational institutions. Seventh is the longstanding debate over the valuation of service or community engagement in tenure and promotion decisions. Eighth is the question of sustainability in the current economic landscape of higher education, including issues of staffing, transportation, communication, and partnership-building. Ninth is the growing disconnect between trajectories of service-learning in K-12 versus higher education contexts. Tenth is the implications of greater racial/ethnic/cultural/socioeconomic diversity in the students engaged in service-learning, in the community partners/agencies with which they work, and in the communities in which they service. How does this transform our traditional understanding of service and the server-served dichotomy (Mitchell & Donahue, 2009)? Finally is the potential of service-learning in an online context—how would it work (could it work) in a MOOC, for example (Strait, 2009)? (For discussions of these debates, see Bowdon, Billig, and Holland, 2008; Bringle, Hatcher, and Jones, 2011; Butin, 2010; Clayton, Bringle, and Hatcher, 2013a and 2013b; McIlrath, Lyons, and Munck, 2012; Speck and Hoppe, 2004; Strait and Lima, 2009).

As old debates continue to rage and new ones emerge, it is heartening to remind ourselves of the breadth and depth of the conversation devoted to the role of education in civic engagement. For example, National Campus Compact, founded in 1985 and the largest national organization of college and university presidents and chancellors (1,100+) pledged to the public purpose(s) of higher education, announced in their recently issued 2014 Strategic Plan and Beyond that they are bringing added focus to several core priorities over the next five years. Specifically, they aim to

- “Establish meaningful, reciprocal community partnerships—support and highlight strong, sustainable, democratic partnerships between higher education and community organizations for positive impact on society”;

- “Improve college access and retention—demonstrate that civic engagement is a vehicle for positively impacting an individual ability to access and achieve post secondary education”;

- “Enhance college readiness in K to 12 education—im-
prove and strengthen young people’s ability to have successful college careers”; and

- “Better prepare college students for their careers and for society—educate the next generation of citizens to be active and responsible participants in our democracy” (www.compact.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Campus-Compact-Strategic-Plan-Executive-Summary-1.15.14.pdf)

This special issue of the *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching* advances our knowledge of civic engagement and service-learning by addressing the debates summarized above and/or the strategic priorities of Campus Compact.

**Biswas** explores the role of ethical behavior in citizenship development, noting that despite the many messages students receive about the self-governing nature of academic culture, there has been a notable decline in student integrity, as evidenced in recent cheating scandals and other violations of campus codes of conduct. Through analysis of collective writing models, the author demonstrates how student collaboration can be transformative in fostering ethical community behavior.

**Yaghi** and **Alibeli** focus on student engagement in real community problems through examination of new teaching strategies in seven public affairs courses in the United Arab Emirates. More specifically, they analyze the design and implementation of a problem-based (rather than lecture-based) pedagogy in the context of specific desired student learning outcomes. Finding desired learning outcomes achieved (e.g., improving students’ awareness of public affairs; changing students’ attitudes toward policy) and strong student satisfaction with the pedagogical approach, the authors ultimately aim to transform the role of college professors toward problem-based teaching.

**Terry, Smith,** and **McQuillen** explore the role of evidence-based practice (EBP) in service-learning courses, emphasizing that successful utilization of EBP can enhance the quality of educational and service practices. Using the specific example of a reading intervention project for middle-school students, the authors illustrate the efficacy of EBP while cautioning that investment in faculty or community mentor development may be necessary to implement the pedagogy fully.

Shifting the focus to at-risk youth, **Wasburn-Moses, Fry,** and **Sanders** explore youth mentoring relationships in an undergraduate service-learning course. Relying on both qualitative and quantitative methods to understand student motivation for enrolling in the course and the overall
impact of the course on student learning, the authors find tangible, positive outcomes: improved communication skills, enhanced appreciation for diversity and for the complexity of at-risk youths’ lives, and students’ willingness to challenging themselves both personally and educationally. Given that these students self-selected for the experience, it is unclear how successful assigned placements might be in this learning context.

Continuing the theme of engaging with diversity, Saleh and Hamed examine the potential benefits of high school/university partnerships through examining the design and delivery of a health workshop series to a predominantly minority (Hispanic) population of high school students. Testing four constructs in the college student population (academic, civic responsibility, career, and empowerment) and three constructs in the high school population (self-efficacy, active learning strategies, and science learning value), the authors find considerable promise in such partnerships to advance larger community aims. They specifically point to the value of having college-aged role models in improving the learning experience for high school students.

Vázquez further engages diversity by exploring the power of theater as a social justice-oriented change strategy. Rooted in the principles of critical pedagogy and aiming to contest various mechanisms of social pressure and intimidation, Vazquez’s study analyzes the results of bringing together two distinct audiences (university students and elementary students enrolled in ESOL [English for Speakers of Other Languages] programs) in a service-learning project on the adaptation and performance of children’s theater. Ultimately, the author concludes that theater in second language classrooms can become a transformative space for building community and enhancing respect for difference.

Rice and Horn address the under-theorization of service-learning as a technique to teach students about diversity through a pilot study on a specific sociology course. Theoretically rooted in the work of Paulo Freire, the authors use an integrative praxis approach to design a course requiring student engagement with diverse populations (the students themselves were ethnically and racially diverse), critical self-reflection, and critical application of core sociological theories. Through analysis of student surveys the authors find that the course improved students’ perceptions of diversity and enhanced their sociological knowledge. The authors conclude by suggesting that their findings are not discipline-specific and that such an approach can foster compassionate citizenship across the academy.

Finally, Ramson explores the use of service-learning to foster workplace competencies in two community college paralegal courses. Noting the limitations of internships in developing all of the skills required in a
21st-century economy, the author examines the experiences of economically disadvantaged students enrolled in two different law courses with a service-learning component. Drawing on participant observation as well as student surveys and reflective essays, Ramson finds evidence of career competencies enhanced through service-learning: being able to transform knowledge acquired in college to employment settings, understanding the realities of the workplace, and developing global citizenship (regarding issues of immigration, for example). Corroborated by community partners, these findings point to the value of service-learning in navigating the education-to-employment transition.

In sum, this special issue offers unique insight into the current practice and future potential of service-learning partnerships specifically, and engaged teaching and scholarship more generally. Happy reading!

References


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