

Laidlaw 2022 Research Report: Community-based learning

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Introduction

This research report summarizes my participation in the Laidlaw Research and Leadership Scholars Program at Cornell University in the summer of 2022. My research is about community-based learning and my mentors are Amy K. Somchanhmavong and Richard Kiely. During the summer, I first attended the CBGL collaborative, then I read some books and articles to gain more background information about community-based learning, and finally, I did some literature review about institutional change.

CBGL Institute

On June 2nd and June 3rd, I attended the Community-Based Global Learning Institute at Cornell. Different speakers gave well-prepared presentations at the institute and I gained a basic understanding of the current state of the field. One takeaway is that I realized the importance of collaboration and connection, especially in the field of community-based learning. Sometimes outsiders can give fresh advice that insiders otherwise won't think about, and it is important to be humble and listen to diverse voices. For example, when designing a program, we can listen to the voices of staff members, faculty members, community partners, students, and administrative staff from other related fields.

Also, I realized that community-based global learning is a dynamic, changing field. People are encouraged to add to the field, unpack and challenge all the principles. As we learn more and practice more, we can contribute more to the shared knowledge.

Another important theme is decolonization. I remembered how one person raised the question about the Ecuador community-based learning program: “are we replacing any Ecuadorian students with U.S. students?” In general, the decolonizing mission is important. The CBGL centers should not only help U.S. students grow and learn but also help local communities thrive and listen to their concerns.

Also, I realized that it is important to integrate resources and share resources in a good way. The website of the toolkit shared during the institute is an example. It’s beneficial: we don’t need to individually pay so much time to design or evaluate a program, we can all use the toolkit.

I also have some reflections about community-based learning in the U.S. and China. Becoming more familiar with the concept of community-based learning in U.S. higher education, I realized that in the U.S. there are so many resources. In China, it is challenging for individual students to pursue such experience as they often need to look for it independently, whereas in the U.S. there are supportive resources and teams, and many more students can pursue such experience. I also feel like the emphasis on global and community engagement is a U.S.-specific thing, and maybe this has political, historical, social, cultural, and economic reasons. Another point is that I know in China, there are similar practices about community-based learning (for example, the innovative school in Dali), but they just do not use the exact term to name it. If we can identify these different practices of community-based learning in different areas and integrate them, the field can be more comprehensive and we can gain new perspectives from different contexts.

I realized that community is everywhere. We are all surrounded by communities. For example, Ithaca is also a community. I was happy to join the walk after the presentations and see the Ithaca parade. I encountered two professors and one friend at the parade. I felt great about

these connections and I want to engage more with the local community at Ithaca. This reminds me of another experience: previously I've been volunteering at a garden south of Ithaca for a week, and I learned so many things about Ithaca and the local farming community from the host. Again, I realize how ignorant I am about my local community!

Also, I realized how broad the field of community-based learning is. It is not only about community-based learning, it's about people and life in general. Community-based learning is related to everything. For example, people talk about how higher education produces injustice and we need to consider how community-based learning can help with that. Also, community-based learning is highly related to inclusiveness inside the school. Community-based learning can also be used to facilitate environmental awareness, advocate for peace, facilitate communication, etc. Furthermore, community-based learning can be integrated with other disciplines. For example, I am interested in the topic of human development and education. Community-based learning can be considered in this topic and see at which stage/circumstance, community-based learning is most beneficial to people. Another interdisciplinary approach is to connect community-based learning with anthropology and sociology. For example, I am thinking about researching an innovative school in Dali, China using the concept of community-based learning next summer. There are so many questions to ask: how does the local school facilitate interactions between students and communities? What is the specific social context that gives rise to these interactions? What institutions and individuals are involved in this form of community-based learning?

Also, I realized that developing CBL programs is a process of trial and error. We need to experiment around, assess our programs, do research, constantly improve our programs and learn from past failures and successes.

In general, the institute gave me a good start in the field and I like the idea of community-based learning.

Background Research

During the first several weeks of research, I read some background books and articles to become more familiar with the concepts of the field. One important book is *Community-based Global Learning: The Theory and practice of ethical engagement at home and abroad* written by Eric Hartman and Richard Kiely. Here are some key ideas:

1. One important value and aim of community-based global learning is to help students develop global citizenship and contribute to global ethics. There are multiple ways/theories/philosophies to justify equal human dignity, and the belief is more important than the justification. In terms of how to achieve critical global citizenship through community-based global learning, there are also multiple, diverse ways to do that. We could pay attention to our personalities and backgrounds, engage in critical reflections, and take action.
2. Critical reflection can help people challenge dominant norms and assumptions. Reflection can help us be aware of how we know what we know. Through reflection, we can be aware of our assumptions, the reason why we think and act in a particular way, and whether we need to change. It is important to engage in reflection activities before, during, and after the CBGL experience. Critical reflection means we need to be critically aware of the existing structures, ideologies, and assumptions.
3. There are three components of intercultural learning. Firstly, we need to understand ourselves as cultural beings. Students can reflect on their own cultural, political, and religious identity and become more aware of their unique biography and worldview.

Secondly, we need to develop cultural humility. An important component of cultural humility is to challenge power imbalances among different cultures and societies.

Thirdly, we need to be able to behave appropriately in different cultural settings. The intervention of educators is necessary to promote intercultural learning. Students can engage in activities that deliberately ask them to step out of their comfort zones.

4. It is important to develop continuous, deep relationships with community partners. There are three dimensions to developing quality partnerships. Firstly, collaboration. People need to understand the values of community partners and listen to their ideas. Secondly, community connection. Students and leaders need to connect with the community. They can develop trust over time. Thirdly, commitment. It's beneficial to set goals (for example, to address important community problems), and take efforts to allocate time and resources to achieve those goals. It needs the commitment to establish a long-term relationship. FTL standards are a helpful tool to develop ethical campus-community partnerships. This chapter reminds me of my volunteer experience in Tianchang (a small city in China) in the summer of 2019. The two leaders grew up in Tianchang and they have special connections to the schools, accommodations, and even restaurants. During the volunteer camp, we not only teach in classes but also spend a lot of time exploring the area. I remember that after class, I walked on the street, and then I suddenly saw one of my students helping her mom make bubble tea at a nearby shop. We spent a lot of time together every day after class, and I think that's helpful for our relationship.

Unfortunately, the camp was canceled for next summer. I think a longer relationship is more beneficial to both of us, and I am regretful that we did not have that opportunity. I think nowadays people (including myself) engage in various volunteer activities, but

maybe it is more beneficial to just stick to one and establish long-term relationships with local people. It is more effective to keep building relationships and accumulating knowledge of the local community, compared to the hit-and-run type.

5. Different institutions work in different ways, and program design and the planning for CBGL varies according to the specific context. When designing the program, it is important to consider the specific policy environment, identify allies, and consider the costs. When planning for the program, we can use the sandwich model to include pre-engagement (for example, plan some team-building activities), community engagement, and post-engagement stages.
6. During the CBGL, we should be prepared to deal with accidents. It is important to prepare for potential risks (for example, become familiar with the available resources in advance and enroll in insurance).

Research Experience

Later I focused researching on the institutional change of community-based learning in universities. I reviewed the special journal issue edited by John Saltmarsh (eJournal of Public Affairs, 8(3).) The author designed a rubric to help guide college-level community engagement practices. They focused on the question of "what an engaged college would mean to be". Four colleges participated in the rubric pilot study: College of Arts and Humanities at Weber State University; College of Arts and Sciences at Rutgers University, Newark; College of Arts and Sciences at Drexel University; and School of Health and Human Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Some common findings are:

1. community-engaged scholarship in a college is core academic work, requires faculty input and buy-in, and can shape the culture of a college.
2. College-level engagement requires administrative leadership from the dean but also associate deans and department chairs.
3. Focusing on the college as the unit of engagement revealed, as one campus noted “asymmetry of structure or fragmentation of efforts between the campus as a whole and the college.” Putting a spotlight on the college catalyzed a re-evaluation of university-wide engagement efforts.
4. Engagement in a college is not a substitute for institutional engagement, but deeper college engagement can enhance wider institutional engagement, particularly if multiple colleges align their policies, practices, and culture with a commitment to community-engaged scholarship.
5. The rubric revealed ways community engagement is evolving, or as one college noted, it "revealed that new types of issues, concerns, and approaches arose."
6. One of those issues is what is often referred to as “alignment”—how college, department, and institutional engagement efforts were aligned across the campus.
7. The rubric highlighted that mentoring is most effective as a college activity, focusing on disciplinary clusters within a college. The distinction here is that many institutional centers have mentoring programs, but often the mentor is from a different college than the mentee.

Another important idea is that colleges within a university may be a powerful place to advance the work of community-engaged scholarship. The authors argue that college-level institutionalization of community-engaged scholarship can be evaluated as a complement to

department- and institution-level efforts. Attention to college-level engagement offers new possibilities for deeper institutionalization of community-engaged scholarship. Researchers in this study developed a College-Level Self-Assessment Rubric. This rubric can help advance a structured conversation about the status of CES on campus and identify the next steps. For example, in most colleges, deans discovered a new role, moving from being supportive to actively working with faculty to advance community engagement. Also, working groups reported that the rubric revealed significant unevenness across departments in a college. All of the colleges determined that they were in the early stages of the rubric, mostly in Stage 1, Emerging. This in itself, for most of the colleges, represented an awakening among the working group members and the deans for a renewed commitment to community engagement and targeted, strategic efforts to advance engagement in the college.

References:

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