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Exploring Community Engagement in Higher Education: Past, Present and Future

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ABSTRACT: This paper provides a comprehensive examination of community engagement in higher education, including its historical context, current status, emerging trends, and potential directions. The study reveals that community engagement has become an integral part of higher education institutions' mission, highlighting the importance of collaborative partnerships between universities and surrounding communities. Successful community engagement programs share common characteristics such as strong partnerships, shared decision-making and mutually beneficial outcomes, while challenges facing community engagement efforts include a lack of funding, resources, and recognition. The research findings underscore the importance of community engagement for institutions and communities alike, as it has the potential to enhance teaching and research, promote social and economic development, and build trust and relationships between institutions and communities. By understanding the current state and emerging trends in community engagement, higher education institutions can develop more effective and sustainable community engagement initiatives, leading to positive outcomes for both institutions and communities.

Keywords: Community Engagement, Higher education, Historical context, Current State, Emerging Trends.

I.   INTRODUCTION

Community engagement has become a vital component of higher education, aiming to address local issues, promote social justice, and enhance student learning. In recent years, community engagement has evolved and gained momentum, with many institutions embracing it as a core part of their mission. This paper provides a comprehensive overview of community engagement in higher education, highlighting its historical context, current state, emerging trends, and potential directions for the field. It also explores the challenges and opportunities facing future community engagement efforts and ways in which higher education institutions can support and encourage community engagement.

1.1 Definition of Community Engagement

Community engagement involves a collaborative partnership between higher education institutions and their surrounding communities to address issues affecting the well-being of those communities, with a commitment to democratic processes, social justice, and the belief in the possibility of change (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Gelmon et al., 2004; Stoecker, 2013). Community engagement has been defined as the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996, p. 9). Gelmon and colleagues (2004) define community engagement as "the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people" (p. 5).

1.2 Importance of Community Engagement in Higher Education

Community engagement in higher education is essential because it helps students develop a sense of civic responsibility and a commitment to social change. Eyler and Giles (1999) argue that community engagement provides opportunities for students to apply what they have learned in the classroom to real-world problems, enhancing their academic learning and personal growth. Furthermore, community engagement is

essential in promoting diversity and social justice in higher education. Boyle-Baise (2002) argues that community engagement can help break down barriers between diverse groups, promote understanding and respect for different perspectives, and foster a more just and equitable society. Lastly, community engagement is critical in addressing social, economic, and political issues facing communities. Gelmon and Holland (1990) argue that higher education institutions have a responsibility to use their resources and expertise to address these issues in partnership with the communities they serve.

1.3 Brief overview of the past, present, and future of community engagement in higher education

Community engagement in higher education has a long and rich history, dating back to the founding of land-grant universities in the United States in the late 1800s (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2016). These institutions were established with a mandate to serve the public and promote economic development through education, research, and outreach. In the mid-20th century, community engagement gained further momentum with the civil rights movement and the emergence of service-learning as a pedagogical approach (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2016). Today, community engagement in higher education has become an increasingly important aspect of institutional mission and identity, with many universities establishing centers for community engagement or offices of civic engagement to coordinate and support community engagement activities (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2016).

Current Status of Community Engagement in Higher Education Boyer (1990) defined community engagement as "the outreach activities of colleges and universities that enhance the academic and social life of their communities" (p. xi). Community engagement encompasses a wide range of activities, including service-learning, community-based research, and community service. These activities can take place on and off-campus and involve faculty, staff, and students.

In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on community-engaged scholarship, which involves partnering with communities to conduct research that addresses pressing social issues (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2016). Community-engaged scholarship has become an important way for universities to demonstrate their commitment to public service and to make a positive impact on society. However, community-engaged scholarship also presents challenges, such as how to ensure that the research is conducted in a manner that is respectful of community partners and that the findings are relevant and useful to the community (Stoecker, 2016). Another trend in community engagement is the integration of community engagement into the curriculum and institutional culture of higher education. Many universities now require students to participate in community engagement activities as part of their coursework, and some have established formal programs or departments to coordinate and support these activities (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2016).

Future Prospects of Community Engagement in Higher Education Looking to the future, several scholars have proposed that community engagement in higher education will continue to evolve and expand. Stanton and colleagues (2015) suggest that community engagement will become more deeply integrated into the curriculum and institutional culture of higher education and those universities will increasingly be held accountable for their community engagement activities. They also propose that community engagement will become more diverse and inclusive, with universities working with a broader range of community partners, including those from historically marginalized groups. Saltmarsh and Hartley (2016) predict that community engagement in higher education will become more global in scope, as universities partner with communities around the world to address global challenges. They also suggest that universities will need to develop new strategies and approaches for engaging with communities, such as using digital technologies to facilitate communication and collaboration.

II. PAST, COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Past community engagement in higher education has a rich and complex history, marked by the emergence of community-based learning, service learning, and outreach programs. Key individuals and organizations like John Dewey, Ernest Boyer, and the Kellogg Commission have influenced these efforts. However, early community engagement initiatives faced funding issues, institutional resistance, and unclear goals. Despite these challenges, past community engagement has significantly impacted the role of higher education in society and continues to shape the field today

2.1 Historical context and early examples of community engagement in higher education

Community engagement has a rich history in higher education, dating back to the establishment of land-grant universities in the late 1800s. The purpose of this paper is to explore the historical roots of community engagement in higher education, with a focus on two examples: the cooperative extension system and the settlement house movement.

Historical Roots of Community Engagement in Higher Education According to Boehrer and Gong (2010), the establishment of land-grant universities in the late 1800s marked the beginning of community

engagement in higher education in the United States. The Morrill Act of 1862 provided funding for the creation of land-grant institutions, which were required to focus on agriculture, engineering, and military tactics, but also included provisions for practical education in other fields, such as home economics (p. 4). These institutions were founded with a mandate to serve the public and promote economic development through education, research, and outreach (Boehrer & Gong, 2010, p. 4).

One early example of community engagement in higher education is the cooperative extension system, which was established by the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 (Boehrer & Gong, 2010, p. 5). This system provided funding for land-grant universities to establish local offices staffed by extension agents, who provided education and technical assistance to farmers and other rural residents (Boehrer & Gong, 2010, p. 5). The cooperative extension system is an example of how land-grant universities began to engage with their surrounding communities and address local issues through education and outreach. Another example of community engagement in higher education is the settlement house movement, which emerged in the late 19th century and aimed to address social problems in urban areas (Furco & Root, 2010, p. 3). Settlement houses were typically run by volunteers and provided a range of services to community members, including education, healthcare, and social support (Furco & Root, 2010, p. 3). Settlement houses were often associated with universities, and many universities established settlement houses as a way to engage with their surrounding communities and address social issues.

2.2 Key Individuals and Organizations that Helped to Shape The Field

In the field of community engagement in higher education, key individuals and organizations have played a critical role in shaping the discourse and practices. Ernest Boyer, former president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, is one such influential figure. Boyer's book "Scholarship Reconsidered" (1990) introduced the concept of the scholarship of engagement, which emphasized the importance of service and collaboration between academics and community members (Boehrer & Gong, 2010). This framework has since helped legitimize community engagement as a form of scholarship. Another notable figure is John Saltmarsh, who currently serves as the director of the New England Resource Center for Higher Education at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Saltmarsh's work on democratic engagement in higher education has helped to advance the idea that community engagement is a fundamental part of the mission of higher education (Holland & Ramaley, 2017).

In addition to individuals, several organizations have also played a crucial role in shaping the field of community engagement in higher education. The Campus Compact, founded in 1985, has been instrumental in promoting community engagement in colleges and universities across the United States. This organization provides resources and support to institutions committed to civic engagement and has helped to establish national standards and guidelines for community engagement (Furco & Root, 2010). Another important organization is the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU), a network of urban and metropolitan universities that are committed to addressing the social, economic, and environmental challenges facing their communities. CUMU provides a platform for collaboration and knowledge-sharing among its members and advocates for policies that support community engagement and urban development (Holland & Ramaley, 2017).

2.3 Challenges Faced by Early Community Engagement Efforts

Community engagement efforts in higher education have faced numerous challenges throughout history. One of the initial difficulties was the lack of institutional recognition of service as a legitimate form of scholarship (Boehrer & Gong, 2010). This was due to the emphasis on research and teaching as the primary focus of universities, while community service was not valued as a significant contribution to the academic mission. Another challenge was the establishment of effective partnerships with community organizations and stakeholders, as they were often hesitant to work with universities (Ehrlich, 2000). A lack of funding and resources was also a significant challenge for community engagement programs (Butin, 2006). Without adequate financial support, universities found it difficult to establish and sustain partnerships with community organizations or develop successful community engagement programs.

Language barriers and cultural differences posed challenges to community engagement efforts, especially in diverse communities (Stanton et al., 2002). Without a thorough understanding of the cultural and linguistic diversity of the community, it was challenging for universities to establish trust and build productive partnerships. Additionally, the lack of faculty support and engagement was a significant challenge for early community engagement efforts (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). Many faculty members viewed community engagement as a distraction from their primary academic responsibilities and were unwilling to participate in service or engagement activities.

III.   PRESENT COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

This subsection's discourse on Community Engagement in Higher Education has been organized into three main subcategories, namely: the Current State of Community Engagement in Higher Education, Examples of Successful Community Engagement Programs and Initiatives, and the Emerging Trends and Issues in Community Engagement.

3.1 Current State of Community Engagement in Higher Education

Community engagement in higher education has undergone a significant transformation in recent years, with a renewed emphasis on partnerships, collaboration, and social responsibility (Holland & Ramaley, 2008, p. 27). Universities are increasingly recognizing the importance of community engagement to their academic mission and are incorporating it into their strategic plans and institutional priorities (Eyler & Giles, 1999, p. 9). This renewed interest in community engagement is reflected in a variety of forms, including service-learning, community-based research, and other forms of engaged scholarship (p. 9).

Technological advancements have played a vital role in facilitating community engagement efforts, with universities utilizing digital tools and platforms to connect with community partners and support collaboration (Bringle et al., 2015, p. 266). Social media, online collaboration tools, and other digital platforms are being leveraged to support community engagement efforts. Incorporating community engagement into the curriculum is also gaining momentum, with a focus on community-engaged learning that provides students with real-world experiences (Battistoni, 2010, p. 44). Experiential learning, service-learning, and other forms of community-based learning are being embraced by universities to offer students opportunities to apply their learning in practical settings. Diversity and inclusion are central to community engagement efforts, with universities placing a growing emphasis on promoting equity, inclusion, and social justice (Bringle et al., 2015, p. 267). This includes working with marginalized communities, addressing social and economic inequalities, and promoting diversity and inclusion in all aspects of community engagement.

3.2 Examples of Successful Community Engagement Programs and Initiatives

The Bonner Scholars Program is a successful community engagement initiative that provides scholarships to students who commit to at least 10 hours per week of community service during the academic year (Eyler & Giles, 1999). The program, which is now offered at more than 60 colleges and universities, has been shown to increase students' civic engagement, leadership skills, and commitment to social justice (Eyler & Giles, 1999).The Community Engagement Classification of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching is a successful program that recognizes and promotes excellence in community engagement among colleges and universities (Holland & Ramaley, 2008).

The classification is based on a rigorous review process that evaluates institutions' commitment to community engagement, institutionalization of community engagement, and collaboration with community partners (Holland & Ramaley, 2008). The University of Wisconsin-Madison's Morgridge Center for Public Service is a successful community engagement program that provides a wide range of opportunities for students to engage in community service, service-learning, and community-based research (Battistoni, 2010). The center has been recognized for its innovative approaches to community engagement, including its community-based learning courses, student-led initiatives, and community partnerships (Battistoni, 2010).

The California State University system's Graduation Initiative 2025 is a successful community engagement initiative that seeks to increase graduation rates and eliminate equity gaps among underserved students (Gasman, 2018). The initiative includes a focus on community engagement, including partnerships with K-12 schools, community colleges, and community organizations, to support student success and promote educational equity (Gasman, 2018). The University of Michigan's Detroit Neighborhood Entrepreneurs Project is a successful community engagement program that provides business training and support to entrepreneurs in Detroit's low-income neighborhoods (Bringle et al., 2015). The program, which is collaboration between the university's business school and a local community development organization, has helped to support the growth of small businesses and promote economic development in the city (Bringle et al., 2015).

3.3 Emerging Trends and Issues in Community Engagement

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the significance of community engagement and the importance of institutions being adaptable and responsive to the evolving needs of their communities (McKiernan et al., 2020). Scholars have called for leveraging technology to expand the reach of institutions and facilitate virtual engagement, while also prioritizing equity and inclusion in community engagement efforts (McKiernan et al., 2020). Community-engaged research has gained increasing interest as a means of engaging community members as partners in the research process and addressing pressing social issues through collaborative inquiry (Israel et al., 2018). Scholars have emphasized the importance of building trust, sharing power and resources, and addressing power imbalances in community-engaged research (Israel et al., 2018).

Integrating community engagement more fully into the core missions and operations of institutions, including teaching, research, and service, has been identified as a need (Holland & Ramaley, 2008).

Scholars have called for developing more robust infrastructure to support community engagement, including staffing, funding, and recognition systems (Holland & Ramaley, 2008). Measuring the impact of community engagement has been recognized as important for accountability purposes and understanding the outcomes and benefits of engagement for communities, institutions, and students (Reeb & Folger, 2018). Scholars have highlighted the need for rigorous evaluation methods that capture the complex and multi-dimensional nature of community engagement (Reeb & Folger, 2018). Global community engagement, which seeks to build bridges across borders and address global challenges through collaborative partnerships with communities worldwide, has gained growing interest (Bringle & Hatcher, 2011). Scholars have emphasized the need for institutions to engage in reciprocal and sustainable partnerships with communities in other countries, as well as to address issues of power and privilege in these partnerships (Bringle & Hatcher, 2011).

IV.   FUTURE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In this scholarly discourse, the Future of Community Engagement in Higher Education was scrutinized through a multi-dimensional lens, namely: Prospective trajectories for the field of community engagement; Obstacles and prospects confronting forthcoming community engagement initiatives; and Approaches, that can be employed by higher education institutions to bolster and foster community engagement.

4.1 Potential Directions for the Field of Community Engagement

Potential directions for the field of community engagement include the development of more meaningful and equitable partnerships with communities, with a focus on addressing issues of power and privilege in these partnerships (Gaventa & Barrett, 2010). Scholars have emphasized the need for institutions to prioritize community voice and leadership in their engagement efforts, as well as build community capacity for engagement (Gaventa & Barrett, 2010). Cross-disciplinary collaboration and integration is essential for the advancement of the field, with a call for bringing together diverse fields such as public health, environmental science, and the humanities (Holland & Ramaley, 2008).

There is a need to better integrate community engagement into the academic curriculum, including through the development of more community-engaged courses and majors, providing robust pathways for students to engage in community-based learning and research, and facilitating opportunities for reflection and critical inquiry around issues of power and privilege (Stoecker & Tyron, 2019). The field of community engagement could benefit from a greater focus on social justice and equity, including the identification and dismantling of systems of oppression and inequality (Mitchell & Donahue, 2019).

Furthermore, scholars have called for institutions to prioritize marginalized communities in their engagement efforts and to address issues such as racism, sexism, and homophobia through their work (Mitchell & Donahue, 2019). The field of community engagement could benefit from a more explicit focus on sustainability and environmental justice, recognizing the interdependence of social, economic, and environmental systems (Chapman & Farrell, 2013). Scholars have emphasized the potential for community engagement to address environmental problems and promote sustainable development while engaging communities as partners in these efforts (Chapman & Farrell, 2013)

4.2 Challenges and Opportunities Facing Future Community Engagement Efforts

Challenges and opportunities facing future community engagement efforts are multifaceted and complex. One major challenge is the need to address power imbalances and ensure that community partners have a genuine voice in the engagement process (Butin, 2010). Scholars have suggested that institutions should engage in more equitable partnerships with communities and recognize the importance of community leadership and ownership in the engagement process (Butin, 2010). Another significant challenge is the need to evaluate the impact of engagement activities and programs effectively to demonstrate their value and improve their effectiveness (Stoecker & Tryon, 2019). Scholars have emphasized the importance of developing more robust evaluation frameworks and methodologies and prioritizing ongoing reflection and learning in engagement efforts (Stoecker & Tryon, 2019).

Opportunities also exist for community engagement efforts to enhance their effectiveness. One such opportunity is the potential for technology to facilitate and enhance engagement activities, including through the use of digital platforms and social media (Holland & Ramaley, 2008). Scholars have highlighted the potential for technology to increase access and participation in engagement activities and promote collaboration and communication across diverse communities (Holland & Ramaley, 2008). Another opportunity is the potential for engagement to contribute to broader social and political change, including through the mobilization of community members and the promotion of social justice and equity (Mitchell & Donahue, 2019). Scholars have

called for institutions to recognize the transformative potential of engagement and to support community-led efforts to address systemic issues and promote social change (Mitchell & Donahue, 2019).

Effectively engaging with and addressing the needs of diverse communities, including historically marginalized and excluded communities, poses both a challenge and an opportunity for future community engagement efforts (Chapman & Farrell, 2013). Scholars have advocated for institutions to prioritize inclusive engagement practices and recognize the unique needs and perspectives of diverse communities (Chapman & Farrell, 2013). In sum, addressing power imbalances, evaluating the impact of engagement efforts, leveraging technology, promoting social change, and prioritizing inclusive engagement practices are among the key challenges and opportunities facing future community engagement efforts (Butin, 2010; Chapman & Farrell, 2013; Holland & Ramaley, 2008; Mitchell & Donahue, 2019; Stoecker & Tryon, 2019).

4.3 Ways that Higher Education Institutions can Support and Encourage Community Engagement

In order to foster community engagement, higher education institutions can employ a range of strategies. First, they can establish a culture of engagement that prioritizes community partnerships and recognizes the importance of community involvement in teaching, research, and service (Holland & Ramaley, 2008; Chapman & Farrell, 2013). This entails integrating engagement into the institutional mission and vision, and providing faculty and staff with training in engagement practices (Holland & Ramaley, 2008). Additionally, institutions can develop sustainable and equitable partnerships with community organizations that are based on mutual trust and respect, and prioritize community leadership and ownership in engagement activities (Chapman & Farrell, 2013).

Second, higher education institutions can recognize and reward engagement activities in faculty tenure and promotion processes, which will help to incentivize engagement and promote its integration into institutional culture and practice (Butin, 2010). Third, they can prioritize community-engaged research that addresses pressing social and community issues and recognizes the value of research activities that are driven by community needs and perspectives (Stoecker & Tryon, 2019). Fourth, institutions can promote student engagement and leadership in community-based activities and programs, by providing opportunities for students to engage with diverse communities and perspectives and develop skills and knowledge relevant to community-based work (Mitchell & Donahue, 2019). Taken together, these strategies represent key ways in which higher education institutions can support and encourage community engagement, and contribute to the development of more equitable and sustainable communities.

V.   CONCLUSIONS

In summary, this study highlights several key points that institutions can adopt to support and encourage community engagement. Firstly, institutions can create a culture of engagement that values community involvement in teaching, research, and service, and prioritize faculty and staff development in engagement practices. Secondly, developing sustainable and equitable partnerships with community organizations, built on mutual trust and respect, is crucial for successful engagement. Thirdly, recognition and reward of engagement activities in faculty tenure and promotion processes is important to promote integration into institutional culture and practice. Fourthly, institutions should prioritize community-engaged research that addresses pressing social and community issues, and recognize the value of research activities driven by community needs and perspectives. Finally, institutions can promote student engagement and leadership in community-based activities and programs, providing opportunities for students to engage with diverse communities and perspectives, and develop relevant skills and knowledge.

VI.   IMPLICATIONS

The adoption of community engagement in higher education has far-reaching implications for both institutions and society as a whole. Firstly, by prioritizing community engagement, higher education institutions can become more relevant and impactful in addressing pressing social issues. This, in turn, can create closer connections between institutions and the communities they serve, leading to a stronger relationship and increased trust between the two sectors. Secondly, community engagement in higher education can help students develop a deeper understanding of social issues and the skills needed to contribute to their resolution, leading to enhanced civic engagement and active citizenship. Finally, community engagement initiatives can improve the quality of life in communities by addressing local needs and promoting well-being, creating a positive impact on both the community and institutions. Overall, these implications demonstrate the power of community engagement in creating positive change in society, and institutions can harness its potential to build stronger relationships with communities, promote active citizenship, and contribute to resolving social issues.

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