

Review Essay

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McReynolds, M. & Shields, E. (Eds.). (2015). *Diving deep in community engagement: A model for professional development*. Des Moines, IA: Iowa Campus Compact

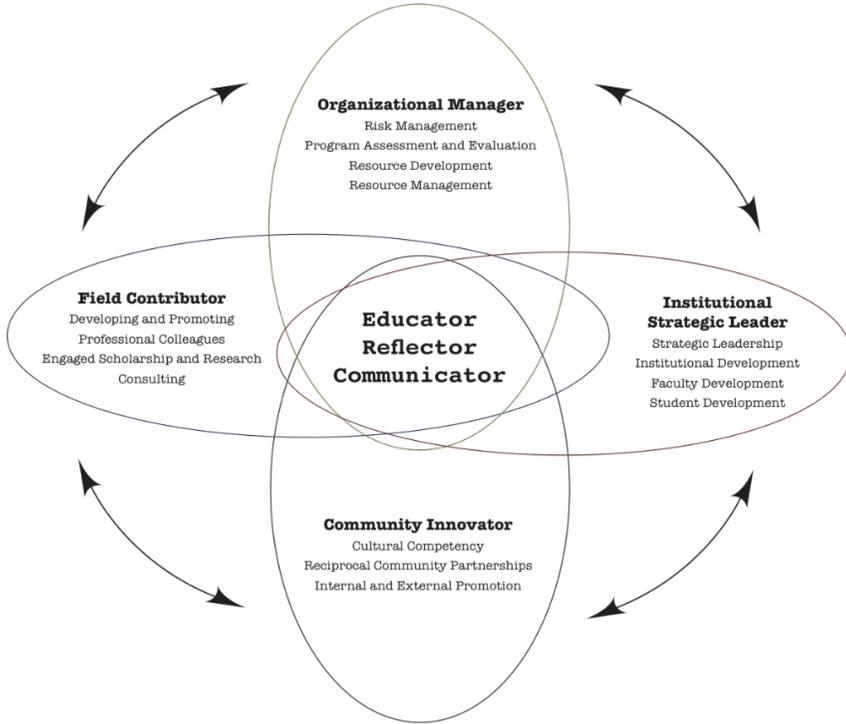
As we look back at decades of work within the realm of higher education civic engagement, one oversight becomes abundantly clear. We seem to have neglected fully defining what it means to be a civic engagement professional. In the book *Diving Deep in Community Engagement: A Model for Professional Development*, Iowa Campus Compact has taken a first step in laying the groundwork for professional competencies for community engagement “practitioner-scholars” (p.10) in higher education settings. Edited by Mandi McReynolds and Emily Shields, this work not only presents professional competencies, but also invites practitioner-scholars within the field to provide their reflections on the relevance of each of the skill sets to their own work and career story. The editors present a model of skill sets organized around four categories of leadership roles that civic engagement professionals play: institutional strategic leader, organizational manager, field contributor, and community innovator. The model lays the groundwork for both current and aspiring professionals with a foundation upon which to grow their skills and realize their aspirations in the field. *Diving Deep* represents an initial step in helping our field define itself as a legitimate career path. As the editors indicate, career paths within the field of higher education community engagement can be varied and defined differently on each campus. Positions could include volunteer or service-learning directors, volunteer program coordinators, and other work titles associated with civic engagement and service-learning. The editors propose that higher education community engagement is a legitimate career field, and they present this book for a variety of audiences. It’s meant for both the practitioners who seek out this career path and administrators who support them.

This publication began as a research project and builds upon the work of the Campus Compact Diving Deep Institutes. The Diving Deep Institute, held annually beginning in 2010, is a three-day professional development retreat for experienced civic engagement professionals. The Institute has the express purpose of providing professional development and supplying the tools necessary to deepen engagement on their campuses and move the field forward (Iowa Campus Compact, 2012). The Introduction section of the book briefly outlines the research process initiated at the 2013 Diving Deep Institute. Data collection included small group discussion combined with information garnered from job descriptions and descriptions of other peripheral career fields, with expert analysis and feedback opportunities.

The data collected resulted in a model of competencies for higher education community engagement. The majority of the book is devoted to presenting the model and the four main roles of community engagement practitioner-scholars. The editors present four “spheres” that represent different competency areas or roles. These included Institutional Strategic Leader, Organizational Manager, Community Innovator, and

Field Contributor. They also identified three cross-sector components of community engagement that impact each of these competency areas. The authors propose that overall, reflection, education, and communication serve as foundational practices that intersect each of the competency roles. These foundational practices are included in the figure below. Figure 1 presents the model of roles and subcategories. This figure is displayed in the Introduction of the book and provides a visual representation of the theory.

Figure 1. Framework of Spheres (Reprinted with permission from editors.)



The editors next detail the action steps that help individuals achieve success in those roles and further their growth and development within each of these four broad themes (institutional strategic leader, organizational manager, field contributor, and community innovator) and each of the theme's subsequent subcategories. A Table of Action is included that details specific action steps corresponding to levels of experience (i.e., novice, intermediate, advanced). The action steps are laid out in much the same way as the *Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners* developed by ACPA and NASPA (2010) with action steps corresponding to increasing levels of experience. Following the Table of Action, further detail is provided in a narrative format with explanation of each of the subcategories, examples of action steps, and suggestions of resources and opportunities for development. Each of these four chapters have been contributed by practitioner-scholars, which lends legitimacy to the

stories and examples offered. Contributions from leaders continue at the end of each chapter with short case studies from other authors and institutions and a critical response from yet another practitioner pertaining to the relevance of the roles presented.

There are vast positive aspects to *Diving Deep* and its contribution to the field of higher education civic engagement. It is accessible, action oriented, and free of jargon that can often get readers lost in theoretical concepts. It has a technical feel, much like a manual or handbook for the community engagement professional. As the editors describe in the section on Intended Audience and Use, there are many ways to utilize this publication for the benefit of both professionals and institutions (p.14-15). For instance, with its listing of concrete action steps in each of the subcategories, one can easily envision its use in drafting job responsibilities, evaluating job performance, and strategic planning for a civic engagement center or institute, all of which are proposed as potential uses throughout the book. In this publication, civic engagement professionals are given a voice and civic engagement is moved into the realm of a genuine academic discipline. Finally, it gives recognition for the civic engagement professionals who serve on the front lines and are required to stretch their skills and abilities to conform to the needs of students, faculty, community partners, other institution stakeholders, and administration.

There are a few main criticisms that come to light when reviewing this book. First, the specifics of how the model was developed was lacking in the Introduction. The description of the data collection methods only provides a small glimpse into the research process. Detailing the research process would allow for replication and further refinement of the model as well as critiques of the conclusions drawn. Second, there is no comparison of the proposed model to others within related fields. The description of the research process indicated that other similar professions were investigated, yet no comparisons or references were made within the remainder of the text. With the profession's emphasis on "community" there could be connections made to parallel community-focused occupations such as community builder or community organizer. The addition of roles and responsibilities for other disciplines could add legitimacy within community constituencies, demonstrating the connection that the profession has to others working in the community.

In a related observation, there could also be more of an emphasis on community-related skills and knowledge, indicating that community engagement professionals can serve as experts in the civic involvement arena and potentially as social change agents themselves. The model includes a "community connector" role, yet there is no mention of acquiring a specific knowledge of the inner workings of communities. This could include a background in such concepts as empowerment, community entry and exit, community building, diversity and inclusion, and social justice, all seemingly potential areas of expertise for community engagement professionals. As an example, the Society for Community Research and Action has developed competencies for practicing community psychologists, who are professionals working within the civic engagement realm (Dalton & Wolfe, 2012). Before moving forward with this work, the professional should determine the weight of the "community" component of community engagement practice. As practitioner-scholars, do we define our roles in the context of such practice as social change, community building, community organizing,

or as service leaders and educators? This will ultimately determine whether more of an emphasis on community-related skills and knowledge are needed.

The final limitation concerns the three foundational practices presented in the model, which include educator, reflector and communicator. Their inclusion and relationship to the leadership roles is unclear within the text. There needs to be further explanation of the practices and how the practices are related to each of the competencies within the various roles. For instance, are there communication skills needed to be a strategic leader that may differ from those in the community innovator role? The book simply states each of the foundational practices and a brief description of how they are part of the practitioner's work. More explanation is needed to clarify how they fit into the model and work in conjunction with the other elements.

Within the foundational practices, there is a possibility of a missing practice. Once the reader peruses the descriptions and examples of each of the four roles, it becomes apparent that another foundational practice could be added to the three presented. Collaboration, while potentially falling within the practice of communication, seems to be a recurring aspect of civic engagement action within each of the roles and the subcategories. Collaboration within the institution as well as outside of it is repeatedly mentioned throughout the action steps and therefore could be highlighted as an additional practice.

While these limitations are present, the usefulness of the publication far outweighs its weaknesses, and each of these limitations could be addressed with future research and follow-up to this seminal work. A reader can make connections easily to future opportunities for research and practice. These opportunities include testing the proposed model, investigating the importance of community practice knowledge, and providing comparisons to other professional fields of work and study.

As Barbara Jacoby outlines in the Forward of the publication, community engagement has steadily progressed over the years and made a name for itself in higher education practice. *Diving Deep* pushes the field further through the claim that community engagement is a true career path deserving of attention to its own professional development. Community engagement is a vast field with professionals serving in many different roles with a variety of responsibilities spanning numerous constituent groups, all of which make developing essential competencies difficult. However, the editors and contributors of *Diving Deep* have laid the groundwork to overcome these limitations and legitimize the profession. They have provided a mechanism upon which we can all "reflect on the complexities and dilemmas of our work" (p.3). Much in the same way that *Learning Reconsidered* (Keeling, 2004) set forth a clear vision for student affairs professionals, *Diving Deep* does the same for community engagement professionals. One can see that these practices, roles and suggested action steps represent not only where the civic engagement field stands for the current practitioner, but also where the field needs to be 10 years from now. It helps us "ensure that community engagement maintains a high standard of quality" (p.135) which we have come to expect.

References

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Author

Tabitha Underwood, Ph.D. serves as the Executive Director of Missouri Campus Compact, a membership association of college and university presidents established to further the civic mission and public purpose of higher education. Immediately prior to joining Missouri Campus Compact, Tabitha served as the Assistant Director of the Office of Student Leadership and Service at Meredith College. In this role, she fostered student civic engagement and prepared students for leadership within their communities. She has also supported civic engagement efforts with nonprofits and local government. Tabitha holds a BS in Psychology from Indiana University, and a MS & Ph.D. in Community Psychology from North Carolina State University.