
From the Guest Editors

Transformations through “Community-First” Engagement

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What happens when community-campus partnerships involving diverse communities, community-based organizations, postsecondary institutions, researchers, students, and foundations seek to put communities first in their engagement practices? This is the question that is addressed through a range of perspectives in this issue of *Engaged Scholar Journal*. Across the contributions, we find a common theme: None of our authors would say they have fully realized the community-first ethos, but striving towards this goal has resulted in personal, social, institutional, and epistemological transformations. Just as the process of throwing, glazing, and firing can transform clay into a beautiful mug like the one featured on the cover of this issue—created by our colleague Cathleen Kneen (1944-2016)—so too does striving to put community first reshape the way we work. This ethos challenges us and it *is* changing us, but in many ways, the journey to adopt community-first ways of working together has only just begun.

The content in this special issue was created in the context of the Community First: Impacts of Community Engagement (CFICE, pronounced “suffice”) partnership research project, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada beginning in 2012. As you will see in this short video, our project seeks to develop strong community-campus partnerships “by putting community first”. Over the course of two project phases, CFICE’s overarching goal has been to enhance the partnership policies and practices of community-based organizations, postsecondary institutions, governments and funders to create more effective and valuable community-campus engagement. We define community-campus engagement to include community-engaged research, community service learning, and other ways that postsecondary institutions can have an impact in their communities, such as their potential as anchor institutions for local economies (Dragicevic, 2015).

CFICE was created in the midst of a wave of interest in building stronger relationships between universities, colleges, and the multiple communities within which these postsecondary institutions are embedded. Whether framed in terms of the calls for more “public engagement” in science, deeper “community engagement” by university advancement and government relations offices, or even a supposed need for greater “career readiness” on the part of



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students, the discourses associated with community-campus engagement surround us. But whose interests are being served?

CFICE was a response to the recognition that a great deal of community-campus engagement still tends to privilege postsecondary institutions by paying insufficient attention to the needs, priorities, and expertise of the communities and community-based organizations involved (Bortolin 2011; Cronley, Madden, & Davis, 2015; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009; Ward & Wolf-Wendel 2000). Responding to these critiques, CFICE began by investigating how community-campus partnerships could be designed and implemented in ways that maximize the value created for non-profit, community-based organizations participating in this work. In the second phase of CFICE, beginning in 2015, we shifted to focus on the tools, processes, and networks necessary for embedding a community-first ethos in institutions across Canada.

While intended to challenge exploitative or purely transactional approaches to community-campus engagement, the notion of a community-first approach was never considered radically new or distinct from other critical approaches to community-campus engagement. For CFICE, “community-first” is shorthand for valuing multiple forms of knowledge, committing to the principles of equity and reciprocity, and addressing power imbalances (as best we can) as we do collaborative research and take action on issues identified as priorities by our community partners.¹ This approach aligns with what the National Association of Friendship Centres, through its Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network, calls “community-driven” research, which “begins with Aboriginal communities and ends with an improved quality of life for urban Aboriginal peoples” (UAKN 2014, p. 4). Similar again is what community-based researcher Zusman (2004) refers to as “horizontal” relationships between academics and community-based organization representatives. And in epistemological terms, a community-first approach is one response to the growing chorus of calls for “cognitive” justice (e.g. De Sousa Santos 2007; Davies, 2016; Findlay et al., 2015).

Grounded in the critiques of poor community-campus engagement, as well as a growing community of practice that seeks to do this work more carefully and respectfully, CFICE was intended to “walk the talk,” as the Goemans et al. essay in this special issue puts it. To do so, CFICE’s community-first approach has built on what Community Campus Partnerships for Health (CCPH) define as “principles of partnership.” The CCPH argues that authentic partnerships emerge best in a space that includes four specific elements:

- 1) Guiding Principles of Partnership;
- 2) Quality Processes (that are focused; open, honest, respectful and ethical; trust building; acknowledging of history; and committed to mutual learning as well as sharing credit);
- 3) Meaningful Outcomes (tangible and relevant to communities); and
- 4) Transformative Experiences (at the personal, institutional, community, knowledge production, and political levels).

¹ For more on the practicalities of what we have learned about the community-first approach within CFICE, see its [website](#).

While the pieces in this issue of *Engaged Scholar Journal* demonstrate the ways in which CFICE has implemented and been transformed through community-first “principles of practice”, they also share how far we still need to go.

This Issue

In this issue’s peer reviewed essay section, we have four articles that emerge from CFICE. The first and third come out of the experience of CFICE’s food sovereignty hub. In “Community-Academic Peer Review: Prospects for Strengthening Community-Campus Engagement and Enriching Scholarship,” Levkoe, Wilson, and Schembri begin by exploring what the academic peer-review process can look like when community-based knowledge production is taken seriously. They then highlight the dangers of blindly relying on peer review processes to guide and guarantee research quality and rigour, and caution against using evaluation processes that privilege academic approaches to conducting research and sharing results. In efforts to revitalize higher education and critical research in the interests of “a democratic public sphere that is open, inclusive, and relevant,” they review practices that engage community perspectives in assessing what knowledge does or should count. Drawing on a community peer review pilot project run through CFICE, they reflect on the value, opportunities, and challenges of engaging community-based practitioners in assessment. They also recommend ways to be more democratic and equitable when producing knowledge.

The next article by Przednowek, Goemans, and Wilson, adds a student perspective. There is already an extensive body of literature on student experiences in community service learning (see, for example, Volume 4, No. 1 (2018) of *Engaged Scholar Journal*), but this article offers a fresh perspective by focusing on undergraduate and graduate students working *as research assistants* in community-campus engagement. Grounded in exit interviews with CFICE research assistants, the article explores what student researchers are learning about community-campus engagement, and especially about “community-first” practices. The article reflects critically on how meaningful, long-standing engagements with community partners shifted students’ perspectives as they navigated the complexities of relationships, obligations, and identities, as well as the power dynamics and competing priorities of both academic and community worlds. It offers recommendations useful for both future student researchers and community-campus engagement program developers.

In the third essay, Kepkiewicz, Levkoe, and Brynne share what the leadership and partners of CFICE’s Community Food Sovereignty hub learned through its evaluation processes. Their article is a detailed reflection on the need for community-campus engagement practitioners to both champion and critically reflect on the “community first” approach. Entitled, “Community First for Whom? Reflections on the Possibilities and Challenges of Community-Campus Engagement from the Community Food Sovereignty Hub”, the authors highlight a number of ways they feel the community-first ethos was not realized in how they worked, arguing that “our limitations were rooted both in our own mistakes as well as restrictions imposed within academic structures and systems”. One important lesson we take from their article is that we in the CFICE project should have shifted how we framed (and named) our work as we learned

whether (and how) our research was able to meet the aspirations of putting “community first”.

The final article in the peer reviewed essay section is about transformations in evaluation practices and processes related to community-campus engagement. Entitled, “Learning to “walk the talk”: Reflexive Evaluation in Community-First Engaged Research,” Goemans, Levkoe, Andrée, and Changfoot argue that academic reflexivity in community-campus engagement evaluation is important if the work is intended to break with traditional academic norms and be “community-first”. This article offers as an example CFICE’s project-wide evaluation processes at the end of our first phase of work together, and asks whether or not the academics involved in these processes (including these authors themselves) took the necessary steps to advance specific community-first principles. Specifically, they examine whether and how their participation in CFICE evaluation adhered to the principles of “project co-governance”, “institutionalizing respect”, and “nourishing relationships”. This piece concludes with a response to the article written by Colleen Christopherson-Cote. As a community practitioner in CFICE, she argues that the three principles should be reorganized so relationships, and the need to nourish them, are foregrounded as “an ongoing and never-ending practice in community-first community-campus engagement”.

In our field reports section, we have two contributions: Both reflect on changes in the practices and policies of community-based organizations and their postsecondary partners as they engage in community-campus engagement, and what bringing the community-first approach to the local level means.

In “Breaking Barriers: Using Open Data to Strengthen Pathways in Community-Campus Engagement for Community Action on Environmental Sustainability,” McCarroll, O’Connor, and Garlough share lessons they have learned in the process of co-creating a relationship-brokering tool to strengthen connections among local environmental non-profits and six postsecondary institutions in the National Capital Region (Ottawa/Gatineau). The tool was designed to reduce barriers while improving access to community-campus opportunities in the environmental sustainability field. Building on existing frameworks, the authors share ways to standardize, organize, and sort information to strengthen pathways of communication and connection for user-friendly outcomes. This type of community-based tool, which could be replicated in other contexts and at other scales, offers a practical example of how community priorities can drive future community-campus engagement activity.

In “Rooting out Poverty: People, Passion, and Place at Station 20 West,” Erickson, Findlay, and Christopherson-Cote discuss the impact of community-campus engagement practiced within a community enterprise centre focused on poverty reduction efforts in Saskatoon’s inner city. The authors begin by explaining their investment in community-identified principles (“a city that bridges,” “we are all treaty people,” and “nothing about us, without us”) and participatory action research in a place where colonization has left deep scars yet reconciliation efforts are strong. The report then identifies lessons learned about community-campus collaborations at the heart of community activism, learning, and organizing. It emphasizes the role of people, place, and passion; the importance of space and place to cultivating belonging and diverse ways of knowing; the centrality of reconciliation to poverty reduction in their

context; and the critical role of those with lived experience.

The Exchanges section discusses transformations within funding organizations as they learn to better support community-first partnerships for social innovation. In this section, co-editor of this issue David Peacock interviews Stephen Huddart (President and CEO) and Chad Lubelsky (Program Director) of the McConnell Foundation, a historic supporter of postsecondary education across Canada. McConnell's investments in community service-learning, social entrepreneurial, and innovation activities, as well as social infrastructure programs and dialogues, have made them a significant partner for many Canadian postsecondary institutions. Yet not all community-campus engagement scholars and practitioners, nor *Engaged Scholar Journal* readers, may have heard McConnell articulate for itself its aims and goals for Canadian higher education and society. This interview outlines the scope of McConnell's work and interests in community-campus engagement, and sheds light on the actions of an influential private actor in the postsecondary sector.

Finally, in the book review section PhD student and CFICE research assistant Katalin Koller reviews *Trickster Chases the Tale of Education* by Sylvia Moore. In this review, Koller shares Moore's concept of the Idea (i.e. decolonization), and reflects on her use of autobiographical narrative to demonstrate the process of decolonizing one's mind and research practice through vulnerability, the willingness to make mistakes and question our beliefs, and the need to become comfortable with uncertainty about the truth. Koller concludes that Moore's book offers valuable teachings and gives readers comfort knowing that the struggle to decolonize is shared by others. As Koller notes, "it is within those allied spaces of struggle that the Idea of decolonization becomes the reality of Treaty reconciliation."

Next Steps and Questions

One of CFICE's outcomes is the launch of a new national network and community of practice called Community Campus Engage Canada. This network seeks to strengthen Canadian communities by increasing the capacity, infrastructure, and impact of equitable community-campus partnerships of all types, including student experiential learning, community-engaged research, and social innovation.²

In 2018, the network hosted eight regional and three national roundtables that brought together a diverse range of community-campus engagement stakeholders. Out of these consultations came a focus on building a sustainable national organization meant to build capacity in the sector, advocate for stronger "community-first" community-campus engagement funding policies and practices, and develop a graduate internship program for Canada's non-profit sector co-funded by Mitacs through Industry Canada. Given this step forward, it is important to reflect on what we still need to do to live up to the community-first ethos.

We agree with where Kepkiewicz, Levkoe, and Brynne (this issue) are leading us, and encourage more research down this path, specifically looking into questions such as:

²To find out more about Community Campus Engage Canada, go to [all about CFICE](#).

- 1) What are the distinctions (ontological, epistemological and otherwise) between ‘community’ and academic knowledge production processes? How can we work across, and through, these different approaches in a way that enables true dialogue and collaboration?
- 2) Whither community-campus engagement and reconciliation? This is a critical conversation in Canada today, and we’ve only begun to touch on it in various CFICE projects (e.g. Dawn Morrison’s podcast on decolonizing research and relationships³). To address some of the fears of getting things wrong and the feelings of illegitimacy that keep some from the reconciliation journey, questions we might explore together include:
 - How do we avoid the (neo)colonial strategy of erasing differences and instead do justice to the diversity of Indigenous languages, cultures, and worldviews?
 - How do we eliminate (neo)colonial binaries (Indigenous—non-Indigenous; history—story; modern— traditional) that serve to divide rather than bring people together in respectful partnerships for sustainable futures?
 - How do we nourish ethical spaces where we can all learn, grow, and act on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action⁴?
- 3) How does the institutionalization of community-campus engagement happen within the field of higher education in Canada? The CFICE project has made progress, but we clearly have many more steps to take. CFICE participants are now contributing to the development of Community Campus Engage Canada. This is bringing us into close conversation with a wide array of organizations, some of which are strategically positioning themselves as “engaged institutions.” Is it possible to develop a distinctly “Canadian” engagement framework that is sensitive to the linguistic and cultural diversity intrinsic to our provincially anchored postsecondary education system? And if so, would this serve the interests of communities and their socioeconomic and cultural development, or would this instead function simply as another scale to measure postsecondary institutions against one other? One can be skeptical here, of course, yet a community-first ethic requires that community-campus engagement impact our institutions and their ordinary “business,” as well as our partnered communities.
- 4) How do we account for the impacts of community-campus engagement from a community-first point of view? This issue of *Engaged Scholar Journal* has emphasized the *process* of community engagement over specific, place-based research impacts, yet our experiences lead us to believe that the process of

³ For Dawn Morrison’s podcast, see <https://carleton.ca/communityfirst/2017/podcast-decolonizing-research-relationships/>

⁴ http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf

engagement cannot be disentangled from the impacts of our collaborations⁵. Renewed relations between postsecondary institutions and communities are social outcomes that are desirable and often a necessary, if insufficient, condition to achieving sustainable outcomes in our communities. This question of impact thus deserves more detailed exploration—both in terms of how to measure and how to report on community impact within our partnerships, and to governments and other funders.

We would like to thank the hundreds of people and organizations who have been involved with the CFICE partnership project over the last six years, whether as students, representatives of non-profit organizations, academics, partnership brokers, professional staff, consultants, or others. In particular, we thank Nicole Bedford (CFICE project manager and communications coordinator) and Genevieve Harrison (CFICE project administrator) for their work as the backbones of the CFICE project since 2015. We also extend our gratitude to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding this project. We hope you enjoy this special issue of *Engaged Scholar Journal*. For CFICE participants, the transformative journey continues...

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⁵ For a webinar in which CFICE participants begin to explore these issues, see <https://carleton.ca/communityfirst/cu-events/webinar-evaluating-impact-in-community-campus-engagement-towards-a-community-first-approach/>

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Dedication

The life of Cathleen (née Rosenberg) Kneen (1944 to 2016), to whom we dedicate this issue, offers an example of how a deep commitment to community development, and later to community-campus engagement, involves a transformative journey that can bear rich fruit. Cathleen created the mug we see on the cover of this issue of *Engaged Scholar Journal* while gazing across the commercial sheep farm she and her husband Brewster owned in Nova Scotia in the 1970s. While tending sheep in rural Nova Scotia, Cathleen was confronted by the reality of violence against Indigenous and non-Indigenous women, and began organizing with her neighbours to create the first rural women’s shelters in that province. Cathleen also worked with Brewster and others to start an annual sheep fair, a marketing co-op, and the ‘Rams’ Horn,’ a newsletter of food system analysis. Cathleen continued with her works on violence against women and food system analysis in subsequent moves to Toronto in the 1980s, and then to British Columbia in the 1990s.

In British Columbia, she founded and was the first coordinator of a provincial network for food system issues, called the BC Food Systems Network. The experience of building that provincial network led Cathleen to take on the challenge of leading an emergent national network (Food Secure Canada), dedicated to achieving zero hunger, healthy and safe food, and sustainable food systems. When the CFICE partnership project began to take shape in 2011, Food Secure Canada was still an underfunded national organization based out of Cathleen’s home, with her as its voluntary chair. Through Cathleen, Food Secure Canada became a core partner in the Community Food Security (later renamed Food Sovereignty) Hub of CFICE, grounded in the idea that the Hub would create initiatives that would strengthen the ability of Food Secure Canada to build its national network and engage in policy conversations at the federal level in Canada. This goal has been more than achieved over the last six years, as revealed in a number of CFICE publications (e.g. Andrée et al, 2014; Levkoe et al., 2017, Levkoe et al., this issue; Kepkeiwicz et al., this issue). This has also been demonstrated in the recent special issue (vol. 5. no. 3) of *Canadian Food Studies* on Building an integrated Food Policy for Canada, which emerged out of the CFICE/Food Secure Canada partnership.

Through CFICE, Cathleen channeled her passion for community organizing into the growing field of community-campus engagement. For Cathleen, a “community-first” ethos meant “build community first”. From her perspective, we must begin by building relationships among the non-profit organizations, researchers, students, and others involved in community-campus engagement partnerships *before* discussing what we can all do together. Cathleen also

became a staunch advocate within CFICE for working in community-first ways with Indigenous communities. In one of her presentations on CFICE, Cathleen stated the following:

We have learned about the absolute necessity of genuine respect in partnerships with Indigenous people, recognizing the history and current reality of colonialism. Such elements as research methodologies, data ownership and outcomes must be negotiated from the outset with open minds, and revisited regularly to ensure they continue to be acceptable to the Indigenous partners.

Cathleen's journey of community development and community-campus engagement reveals a lifetime of commitment, respect, learning, and transformation enriching us all. We dedicate this special issue to Cathleen's memory.

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