
“I had a big revelation”: Student Experiences in Community-First Community-Campus Engagement

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ABSTRACT While there is a wealth of literature on community-campus engagement (CCE) that incorporates student perspectives from course-based community service learning settings, the stories of students involved in longer-term CCE projects remain underexplored. This paper addresses this gap by examining the experiences of students working as research assistants (RAs) within a multi-year Canadian CCE project, “Community First: Impacts of Community Engagement” (CFICE). Drawing on interviews with RAs, student insights from a general evaluation of the CFICE project, and the authors’ own reflections, we consider the ways in which meaningful, long-standing engagements with community partners as part of community-first CCE projects provide students with both enhanced opportunities and challenges as they navigate the complexities of intersecting academic and community worlds. Further, this paper identifies promising practices to improve student experiences and the overall impact of longer-term community-campus partnerships and program management structures.

KEYWORDS students, engaged scholars, community-campus engagement, research assistants, higher education

Over the last decade, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) has shifted its funding priorities to encourage research projects in which “researchers and research trainees more readily [share and promote] research knowledge with non-academic sectors” (Niemczyk, 2013, p. 14; SSHRC, 2016). The SSHRC mandate includes calls for “methodologies that engage communities as active partners in the research enterprise” (Niemczyk, 2013, p. 55). These projects must include student research assistantships (RAships) that emphasize training, with the goal to develop “innovative leaders and outstanding scholars” who can make strong contributions nationally and globally (Niemczyk, 2013, p. 53; Niemczyk, 2016).

Despite the often significant roles played by research assistants in community-campus partnerships, accounts of their experiences remain underexplored in the CCE¹ literature (Nelson & Dodd, 2017). Most examinations of student perspectives within CCE work have been drawn from broad survey data rather than from personal narratives and focused on

¹ We use the term CCE rather than focusing more narrowly on community-based research (Franz, 2013) or community engaged scholarship (Nelson & Dodd, 2017) in order to highlight the diversity of students’ engagements in community-campus partnerships.

the shorter-term experiences of undergraduate students within community-service learning (CSL) contexts (Pope-Ruark, Ransbury, Brady, & Fishman, 2014; Willis, Peresie, Waldref, & Stockmann, 2003) or graduate classes (Armitage & Levac, 2015; Levkoe, Brail, & Daniere, 2014). There has also been limited exploration of power dynamics within community-campus partnerships and the related impacts on students (Nelson & Dodd, 2017; Schwartz, 2010).

Addressing this gap, this paper explores student RA perspectives from the first phase (2012-2016) of a multi-year SSHRC-funded CCE project called *Community First: Impacts of Community Engagement* (CFICE). Drawing on interviews with CFICE RAs, student insights from a general evaluation of CFICE, and the authors' own reflections, we consider how meaningful, long-standing engagements with community partners as part of community-first projects shifted students' perspectives as they navigated academic and community worlds within CCE. We argue that an enhanced learning environment emerged from the tensions and complexities of having to negotiate the multiple relationships, obligations, and identities characteristic of research involving both community and academic partners. Students recounted moments of revelation, which often grew out of difficult, uncomfortable, and challenging experiences. While students identify numerous benefits to participating in a CCE research project such as CFICE, particularly one that seeks to build meaningful, mutually beneficial relationships with community partners, they also highlighted a possible tension between the desire to be community-first and the challenges they faced in managing and negotiating power dynamics and conflicting priorities in their role as RAs. Students described experiences of being devalued or excluded within the context of the project, raising questions about how to offer a more inclusive experience for students involved with community-first initiatives while also holding space to experience tensions and learning how to negotiate them.

Our analysis offers a unique student-led perspective on how to strengthen student engagement within the context of commitments to a community-first ethic. In the context of this paper, as in the CFICE project, a community-first ethic refers to a commitment to advancing and prioritizing the needs, perspectives, and contributions of community-based partners. Beyond simply sharing student insights on personal and professional development, this paper offers meaningful glimpses of: a) how student participation within this project contributed toward community goals; and b) the enhanced learning opportunities for students that shifted student perspectives toward a more enriched community-first ethic. Building on this examination of student experiences and associated learnings, we conclude with suggested practices for both students and the structure of CCE programs and practices that can enhance the CCE experience for student RAs involved with longer-term community-campus partnerships.

Student Experiences in RAships and Community-Campus Engagement

RAships are paid work experiences for graduate (and in some cases, undergraduate) students to participate in research and knowledge mobilization activities. They provide students with “direct involvement with [a] profession’s activities, colleagues, and personal meanings” (Laursen, Thiry, & Liston, 2012, p. 74), as well as exposure to “shared informal expectations

and norms” (Laursen et al., 2012, p. 50). Within CCE contexts, active participation in community research offers additional benefits and challenges for student RAs. It can provide students with opportunities to refine research skills, engage with academic and community partners, and cultivate employment prospects, through involvement in real-world research situations (Laursen, et al., 2012; Rossouw & Niemczyk, 2013). Students may also gain valuable research knowledge, receive feedback from community partners, and have opportunities to experience the day-to-day workings of CCE research practice (Stack-Cutler & Dorow, 2012; UBC, 2014).

Research that takes place outside of the physical space of the campus often inspires ways of knowing and understanding that are not available within classroom environments (Pope-Ruark et al., 2014; Ramaley, 2011). Within collaborative research settings, students acquire refined social skills as well as greater confidence and pride in contributing to community efforts. These learnings can lead students to an expanded awareness of and interest in addressing wider social justice issues through CCE work (Ballamingie, Goemans, & Martin, 2018; Brody & Wright, 2004; Levkoe, et al., 2014). Within longer-term, individual engagements in community-campus partnerships, students apply their academic knowledge to address community issues, refine practical skills, network with community members, and improve access to post-graduation employment (Pei, Feltham, Ford, & Schwartz, 2015; Schwartz, 2010).

However, these RAships can also offer unanticipated challenges. Students within a diversity of CCE contexts (e.g. as CSL students participating in group efforts or as individual graduate RAs) have encountered challenges with regard to communication and complex power relations within community engagements (Armitage & Levac, 2015; Schwartz, 2010). In addition, research assistants in any setting are vulnerable to power relationships with academic supervisors (McGinn, Niemczyk & Saudelli, 2013; Skorobohacz, 2013). A common challenge faced by students in RA roles is negotiating a sense of obligation to prioritize their RA assignments over other personal or academic commitments in order to secure financial gains or a favourable reputation among colleagues (Benton, 2004; Murphy & Hall, 2002; Skorobohacz, 2013). RAs may also feel compelled to work additional hours, outside the boundaries of research assignments and without compensation (Rossouw & Niemczyk, 2013; Skorobohacz, 2013; Tweed & Boast, 2011). The addition of community partners within a CCE environment adds the tensions and complexities of navigating community-academic spheres and cultures (Diver & Higgins, 2014; Levkoe et al., 2016; Schwartz, Weaver, Pei, & Miller, 2016) and can further complexify, obfuscate, and/or intensify power relations between students and their academic supervisors.

These politics are complicated by students’ intersecting identities and positions as students, assistants, knowledge workers, employees, and community members (Niemczyk, 2016; Skorobohacz, 2013). Insensitivities to cultural difference, as well as changing project conditions or community partner needs may also contribute toward disrupting communication between students and community partners (Grossman, Sherard, Prohn, Bradley, Goodwill, & Andrew, 2012; Kronick & Cunningham, 2013). Students may be required to work within community schedules that do not match academic timelines (Pope-Ruark et al., 2014). A “lowered sense

of power” (Miller, 1997, p. 16) may result for students from these experiences, but there is also a potential for student perspectives to shift towards increased compassion and sensitivity to community issues (Bernacki & Jaeger, 2008). Existing literature suggests that CCE research paradoxically offers the opportunity for both greater benefit and struggle for students engaged in RAships.

The CFICE RAs

CFICE is a multi-year SSHRC-funded CCE project which aims to deepen our understanding of how partnerships and collaborations between community and campus actors can more effectively advance and prioritize the needs, perspectives, and contributions of community-based partners (Aujla & Hamm, 2018; CFICE, 2018). This desire to articulate a community-first approach emerged in response to critiques that, in some cases, CCE leads to inequitable partnerships between community and academic participants and fails to adequately address power imbalances and lop-sided priority setting that values academic needs and voices over those of community. Levkoe and colleagues (2016) argue that despite meaningful progress towards more equitable forms of CCE, concerns remain that CCE continues to privilege academics and students and fails to adequately address the needs of the community partners.

Taking these concerns as a starting point, Phase I of CFICE was organized around a diverse set of multi-year community-scale demonstration projects that sought to experiment, model, and evaluate various community-first approaches to CCE. Each hub focused on a different substantive theme—community food security/sovereignty, poverty reduction, community environmental sustainability, violence against women (VAW), and knowledge mobilization—and was co-led by an academic and a community partner.² Through each of these hubs, academic and community partners asked, “How can community-campus partnerships be designed and implemented to maximize the value created for non-profit organizations?” Students featured prominently in this work, and a large proportion of students were embedded in projects as RAs on a longer-term basis. Indeed, a key objective of CFICE has been to train and mentor students through active involvement in community-based research projects that centre community priorities and work towards meaningful social change. Students contributed in many ways, including working on technical and practical outputs and developing and implementing communication and knowledge mobilization strategies.

The student RAs involved in CFICE efforts came from diverse academic disciplines, including social work, social policy, geography, communications, sociology, and law, and brought a range of expertise to CFICE projects. They were recruited through multiple means including job postings, and through academic supervisors and community partners. Some had experience working with projects in university settings, while others had worked or volunteered in the non-profit sector with NGOs or community-based organizations. Some students came with unique technical skills in areas such as geomatics and computer-based mapping. Others had activist histories, experience in managing projects, or knowledge of action research

² Examples of student engagement in specific hub-based projects have been described in a number of publications including Andree et al. (2014), Ballamingie et al. (2018), Nelson & Dodd (2017), Pei et al. (2015), and Schwartz et al. (2016).

methods and data collection in group settings. As many CFICE students were involved in multi-year projects and provided research assistance over longer-term periods, the roles they held within CFICE were often dynamic, evolving, and multi-faceted. Many students engaged directly with community partners on a daily basis to enrich community research initiatives (through research, administrative, or communication activities), while others were focused on furthering broader hub-level goals.

Participants and Methods

Building on existing literature, we ask how CFICE's emphasis on community-first approaches to CCE has influenced the experiences and outcomes for student RAs. To answer this question, we draw on qualitative data relating to the experiences of student RAs who were directly embedded in community-based demonstration projects, in roles supporting collaborative work within each broader hub, or at the secretariat level during Phase I of the CFICE project. This includes exit interviews conducted with RAs at the completion of their work with CFICE, reflections from a cross-hub evaluation of Phase I, and the personal reflections from two of the authors who have worked as long-term RAs within CFICE projects.³ Exit interviews with RAs were conducted either by the academic co-lead of the knowledge mobilization (KM) hub or the KM RA trained to do these interviews.⁴ A total of 21 students participated in RA exit interviews; within this group, 19 students were engaged with the project on a longer-term basis spanning between seven and 42 months; two participants were undergraduate students and 19 were graduate students. Any identifying information has been removed from direct quotes and replaced with a pseudonym or number (in the case of individuals, e.g. RA01) or a letter (in the case of organizations, e.g. CBO-A). In addition to the primary data gathered through these interviews, Phase I evaluation data provided a valuable secondary source of data for this paper. The evaluation data were compiled through multiple evaluation methods across the various community-campus engagements during years 1-4 of the CFICE project. Data were collected through focus groups, individual interviews with students, community and academic partners, personal reflections by individual partners, a review of demonstration projects, and a review of research work and presentations submitted by graduate RAs and students in CSL classes.

We employ a practical iterative framework to guide qualitative data analysis (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). Data from the exit interviews and CFICE evaluation activities related to students' engagement were compiled and loosely coded into broad categories of student

³ The first author has been working as the hub-based RA with the Violence Against Women (VAW) hub since 2015, helping to coordinate the logistical efforts for multiple community-based demonstration projects that were themselves each equipped with an embedded RA. She was also involved in data collection on community-academic perspectives on CCE in VAW work. The second author was an RA with the Community Environmental Sustainability-Ottawa hub for three years. She provided research and organizational/logistical support to the neighbourhood organization Sustainable Living Ottawa East. The first two authors were also members of the Evaluation and Analysis Working Group. The third author was involved with CFICE as a Post-Doctoral Fellow and co-lead of one of the Working Groups during Phase II.

⁴ Ethics clearance for the individual student exit interviews was received as part of larger ethics clearance for Phase I of the CFICE project evaluation from Carleton University Research Ethics Board.

experiences. Major themes and patterns were then identified where student perspectives converged, and attention was also paid to divergences in student experiences. Thus, the authors' approach to data analysis hinges on iteration "not as a repetitive mechanical task but as a deeply reflexive process" that is "key to sparking insight and developing meaning" (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009, p.77). In the case of the evaluation data, the data were compiled, coded, and analyzed by the academic partners within each hub, with the support of RAs. The first two authors participated in data collection and analysis for the year 4 evaluation within their respective hub work. The second author was involved in cross-hub data coding and analysis based on all of the Phase I evaluation data. Further, the first two authors were part of the Phase II Evaluation Working Group within CFICE and are very familiar with the cross-hub evaluation findings.

Just as reflexivity has been identified as a key component of effective community-campus engagement, as Goemans and colleagues (this issue) highlight, there is also a need for ongoing evaluation vis-à-vis more reflexive approaches in CCE that actively encourage critical reflection on the positionality of participants in relation to the processes in which they are engaged. As two of the authors are long-time RAs involved in various levels of data collection and analysis within CFICE, their positions align with what Mauthner and Doucet (2003) describe as "the 'embodied' situated researcher carrying out the analysis" (p. 414). The first author contributed (along with her supervisor) toward the analysis and synthesis of the evaluation data collected within the VAW hub. The second author first synthesized evaluation data as an RA within the CES-Ottawa hub, and then analyzed data more broadly across hubs as an RA in the Evaluation and Analysis Working Group. Throughout these activities, the authors employed a reflexive approach and maintained notes on their own longer-term RA experiences. The process of writing this paper required the authors to take a retrospective view on how they themselves had engaged with community partners and how they might engage more meaningfully in future work.

An Examination of CFICE Student Experiences

In this section we analyze the experiences of the CFICE RAs that emerge from the data. We highlight the benefits and challenges of CCE that centres community-first approaches in order to better understand how CCE work can be adapted to both strengthen community-first approaches to CCE work and enhance student experience. Our data affirms certain elements identified in the literature, but also offers insight that expands on these elements. A community-first approach to CCE enhances student capacity beyond instrumental 'job readiness' skills, requiring the development of critical reflexivity and conflict- and self-management skills. At the same time, our data highlights areas where the tensions inherent in a community-first approach to CCE offer challenges and barriers for student researchers.

Beyond Skills and Career Development Opportunities: Cultivating Reflexivity and Personal Growth

A common observation in the literature is that involvement in CCE provides students

with meaningful job readiness skills (Levkoe et al., 2014; Mitchell, 2008), a fact that was also observed with students involved in CFICE. Students were interested in developing more concrete and practical outputs for the community partners, in contrast to their largely theoretical and abstract academic work. Participating in the community-scale (demonstration or micro) projects enabled students to co-develop a range of outputs such as research, reports, information pamphlets, or events with their community partners. These outputs often fed directly into community action and sometimes larger policy work central to the efforts of the community partners. For instance, activities carried out within the Food Security Hub helped to lay the groundwork for a substantial national-level policy engagement process around the development of a national food policy for Canada (see Levkoe and Wilson 2019 *forthcoming*).

Students also gained experience with a range of communication methods as they mobilized CCE knowledge through varied academic and plain-language means directed at the greater community via reports, blogs, podcasts, and webinars (CFICE Phase I). The majority of these knowledge mobilization tools were shared publicly on the CFICE website and via social media to reach a greater audience. The contributions students made toward community efforts greatly aligned with CFICE's mandate to strengthen public policies and programs in critical areas central to the four sector-specific hubs (poverty reduction, community food security, violence against women and community environmental sustainability). Several students expressed pride in their engagement with diverse members across faculty, community, and policy partners, and in bringing forward their own expertise to help communicate and advance initiatives within CFICE projects.

Our examination of CFICE student experiences further suggests that when students have opportunities to engage with community partners for longer periods of time, they can utilize the unique or novel skills they already possess or skills they are currently honing and put them to use effectively such that communities also significantly benefit. One student recounted how they⁵ utilized their GIS mapping skills to create a visual map that aided in the community's discussion with municipal representatives around a city-scale project (Exit Interviews, RA18). Students in longer term CCE benefit by learning from the community partners, but they can also expose community partners to new and innovative methods. This offers greater potential for what Diver and Higgins (2014) call a "dynamic reciprocity" within engagements (p. 10), where each collaborator benefits from these partnerships in different ways over time, rather than one-way relationships that most often benefit academic rather than community partners.

Weidman (2010) writes that student involvement in CCE contexts offers research experience far beyond that found within typical academic RAships. Our data echoes Weidman's conclusions, as the student RAships with CFICE helped to build competence and confidence, and furthered student commitment to community-first research practices and CCE. The longer-term engagements made available within CFICE, including the informal and formal mentorship they received from both community and academic partners, were especially beneficial for graduate students aiming to pursue academic careers, particularly those with

⁵ The third person plural pronouns (they/them/their) are used in this paper to refer to both individual and group experiences.

an interest in future CCE-based work. Most CFICE RAs were able to apply a range of qualitative and quantitative research methods and embraced opportunities to publish learnings from CCE-based research, which they considered key advantages in terms of future academic careers. One Master's-level student noted that their CCE experience led them to feel more confident in potentially pursuing a CCE-inspired doctoral dissertation (Exit Interviews, RA12).

At the same time, students in RA positions were interested in translating their academic experiences into “hands-on” practice. One student described how their academic work directly fed into their interactions with the community partner (CFICE Phase I); another student noted that CCE work offered the opportunity to contribute broader academic knowledge to a local, tangible project, and to become more actively involved within the community they had been living in for many years and to learn from community expertise (Exit Interviews, RA16).

Beyond skills related to future employment and career development, the in-depth nature of these projects provided the time and space critical for self-reflection and personal growth. As many CFICE students were new to the CCE environment, their involvement in community projects offered opportunities for education and “socialization” into service work and community-based research (similar to observations found in Pei et al., 2015; Savan, 2004; Schwartz, 2010; Ward, 2010). We saw numerous examples of what O'Meara (2008) describes as an ongoing process of socialization during which the RA took “on new characteristics, values and attitudes as well as knowledge and skills that contribute to a new professional self” (p. 29). One student reflected on the invaluable skills that they gained as a result of their work with CFICE community partners, and their shifting disposition toward future work with community partners: “This project has given me exposure to what it's like to work with community members, their goals (vs. just my own thoughts). Those skills are translatable – especially the methods, that interaction between people. That was a valuable skill” (Exit Interviews, RA16).

While many CFICE students found the learning curve associated with new projects to be quite steep, they also recognized that they were being challenged in novel and satisfying ways that differed from previous professional engagements. Students were also exposed to the complexities of decision-making processes within CCE projects, with several noting that these experiences had taught them that meaningful research within community-first environments may sometimes require patience. As one student reflected, “My tendency was to rush into things, but I learned from the people around how I need to take a step back sometimes” (Exit Interviews, RA03).

Building and Navigating Relationships in CCE Work

A significant outcome of the CFICE RAships was that students often built meaningful, constructive, and often lasting relationships with community partners. Working with multiple partners—who often held varied connections to other community stakeholders—allowed students to hone skills in navigating the not-for-profit sector and build meaningful relationships with a range of CCE practitioners. One student shared how their work with one community partner facilitated an opportunity to get to know a whole network of diverse community

partners:

I got a broader understanding of CBO A in terms of how they are perceived by the community. I learned more about their work; it was an opportunity to hear all of that in a focused way. CBO A is made up of different organizations, each with its own mandate, constituencies, etc. (Exit Interviews, RA11)

CFICE students often noted that they appreciated both the motivation they garnered from being ‘up-close’ witnesses to community activism and the opportunities to learn from the expertise of the community partner. They frequently commented on the meaningful relationships they developed with community partners, connections that were reinforced through processes of iterative and collaborative learning. One student recounted a very positive experience with a community supervisor who had grounded the student in community-based research methods, noting that the non-hierarchical dynamics within this learning engagement seemed very different from typical experiences with academic supervisors (Exit Interviews, RA09). Students also frequently noted that they felt their views were greatly valued as they took part in informing and bridging inter-generational and urban-rural perspectives within CCE work. Community partners positioned students as the next generation that would be taking over efforts that community partners had been involved with for decades, or as key contributors to CBO efforts within their home communities.

Along with the many positive aspects noted by students within CFICE engagements, some students reported experiencing uncomfortable dynamics within relationships with community partners. Several students noted their confusion and unease around how much active leadership over project tasks was expected from RAs, particularly because, as one student commented, “some RAs seemed overworked, and unable to take on extra responsibilities” (Exit Interviews, RA02). In contrast, some students experienced a devaluing of their contributions by community partners. One CFICE student recounted that they felt diminished when their community partner consulted with the academic supervisor rather than relying on the student’s assessment of research results (Exit Interviews, RA09). Other students encountered communication issues within projects and commented that their emails were sometimes ignored by community partners. That being said, while ignoring emails may be interpreted as a power issue, it can also be a sign of community partners being overworked and under-resourced and having to prioritize. One student recalled having to wait to hear back from a community partner, which delayed project progress: “I learned patience. I wasn’t expecting to have to be so patient” (Exit Interviews, RA16).

With regard to relationships between students and academic supervisors in CCE work, students often made note of the positive feedback and encouragement they received from academic mentors. One student reported that the guidance they received was key to understanding the macro structure of the larger CFICE project:

I was very lucky to have such an amazing mentor relationship with Mark who really

let me in on the macro view of the project... helping to develop a knowledge of the entire project structure. I was tasked early on with developing some visuals of the project Log Frame. Mark devoted a lot of time to helping me understand all aspects of the project from a manager's perspective, for which I am eternally grateful. (Exit Interviews, RA02)

Other students appreciated the faculty support they received in writing and presenting at conferences about their CCE experiences. Students also noted some tensions in working with faculty who were dealing with numerous other commitments (including supervision of multiple graduate students), which resulted in less time to engage with individual RAs on CFICE projects. In one case, the RA became the main contact between the CBO and the university, which led to some project delays. In addition, despite fostering strong connections with community partners, students commonly reported feeling isolated as they lacked meaningful interaction with RAs working within other CFICE community-level projects.

Several students also commented that they lacked sufficient opportunities to contribute to wider discussions that took place among CFICE hub partners (e.g. during CFICE Program Committee meetings held several times each year). While project-wide gatherings explicitly emphasized the perspectives and involvement of community partners, students working with CFICE did not have the same level of explicit integration. Some suggested that hierarchical relations between faculty/community partners and students, as well as gender dynamics (e.g. males dominating discussions in meetings), may have been factors in this dynamic (Exit Interviews, RA12). These students commented on the irony of lost opportunities for input from RAs in these contexts, given that joint CFICE learnings were intended in part to inform student involvement within future CCE initiatives. As the embedded RA roles in CFICE were situated within the larger structures of both community and academic worlds, it is not surprising that the students' experiences involved navigating complex power relations with both academic and community partners, even within a community-first setting. These observations underscore the importance of attending to inclusivity and incorporating an analysis of power dynamics on multiple fronts, not solely between community and academic partners, but also between different academic roles.

Negotiating Multiple Obligations, Identities and the Community-Campus Divide

Many students became involved in CFICE projects because of existing familiarity with related community projects and initiatives, to have opportunities to engage with community partners and academics whose advocacy efforts closely aligned with their own core values, and to better understand relevant community efforts at local and national levels. While these motivations helped to create dedicated RAs, they also left students more vulnerable to burn-out and overcommitment. Trying to balance their academic requirements as graduate students with other teaching or familial commitments and with their desire to be deeply engaged in the project and its community often left students feeling overwhelmed. For the second author, the first few months of CFICE work involved a stressful process of learning how to effectively

engage with her community partner while dealing with the substantial demands of her own busy schedule as a PhD student and parent. Other students expressed concerns about the scope of work involved in the CCE projects and worrying whether they would be able to meet project deadlines or adequately fulfill the community's research objectives.

Consistent with the research of Armitage and Levac (2015), CFICE students “inevitably develop[ed] some attachment and sense of responsibility, not only to the success of the project, but also the community itself” (p. 15). For instance, one student talked about the challenge of presenting their thesis research, which related to personal CCE experiences, in ways that would not violate the trust of the community with whom they had become so deeply involved (CFICE Phase I). In their desire to see community objectives through to fruition, students found themselves volunteering their time beyond the scope of their research contract. While this type of arrangement may be appropriate if it suits the interests and availability of the student (as was the case for several CFICE RAs), it should not be an expectation, either explicit or implicit. Students need to be given the space to speak up about their needs and limits, and they themselves need to take or make the opportunity to do so.

The added commitment to a community-first approach can exacerbate common challenges faced by students working as RAs. Collaboration between community and academic partners hinges on building relationships that are respectful and mutually beneficial, which may require negotiation and sharing of resources and time (Altman, 1995; Warren, Park, & Ticken, 2016). Many CFICE RAs felt that they had to make significant efforts within the initial stages of the project to orient themselves to established community partner processes of research and advocacy, as well as the position of community partners within the broader political landscape.

Students also noted a number of challenges related to the practical aspects of working within the overall structure of CFICE, where smaller community-based demonstration projects were embedded within a broader pan-Canadian CCE initiative. Within their unique positions at the intersections of community and academic perspectives, CFICE students were often witness to community-academic tensions. One of the most commonly cited issues by students was their concern with the sometimes significant delays experienced by partner CBOs—whose members often lived at modest income levels—in receiving reimbursement for CCE project expenses from the host institution for CFICE, in comparison to quick funding turnarounds for students (CFICE Phase I). Students also noted discomfort in situations where graduate RAs were paid at rates higher than average CBO staff wages. They perceived this discrepancy to be contrary to the values of a community-first CCE model.

Some CFICE students noted hurdles in aligning research objectives and priorities between community and academic partners, which in some cases were never adequately resolved over the longer-term of the project. Students noted that community partners did not appear to regard academic foci within CFICE—such as longer-term efforts toward influencing wider policy change on community issues—as relevant to more urgent community needs and opportunities for action (Exit Interview, RA15). Rather than experiencing their needs as privileged, CFICE students felt caught in the dissonance between the differing needs and goals of community and academic partners.

Students were not always fully able to grasp the roles they were expected to take on within demonstration projects or within the wider CFICE initiative (Exit Interviews RA02, RA09, RA16; CFICE Phase I). This sometimes led to concerns about duplicated efforts or wasted time, particularly during periods of project orientation or transition (for example, when a new supervisor joined a community project). Students reported that academic and community partners sometimes held differing perspectives regarding student involvement in CCE work. As one student reported, “Am I expected to be in Ottawa? (a long drive...). This was unclear. I got conflicting answers – yes from some; no from others (wanting us to participate)” (RA Exit Interview Summary).

These issues align with similar concerns raised by other CCE scholars who suggest that unfamiliar research methods, working independently for extended periods of time, or taking control over portions of projects can compound the uncertainty and discomfort that students experience in trying to embrace their roles in CCE projects (Levkoe et al., 2014; Pei et al., 2015; Stack-Cutler & Dorow, 2012; Tweed & Boast, 2011). However, over the course of the project, most CFICE students shifted into a better understanding of the CCE environments and community needs, resulting in greater commitment and effort on their part.

Shifted Perspectives toward an Enriched Community-First Ethic

Within some CFICE projects, and for students who came to CFICE with previous community experience, deep engagements with community partners resulted in more extended and nuanced learning. One student noted that their approach to critical analysis was significantly sharpened while working within a project that took a critical approach to the issues facing the communities they were representing at a multi-scalar level: “My feminist analysis has really sharpened. Also, I know more about VAW movement across Canada, the issues, struggles concerns...It was great to learn more about all this” (Exit Interviews, RA04).

One student reported how engagement in community-campus partnerships allowed them access to the rich stories of community members working toward a common cause:

It was so good to revisit how rich the stories were in creating the network where people worked and making them feasible. It helped me understand – their lives. It gave me the longer-term timeline that made these organizations. Same with types of projects they do. It helped me understand how things happen – something starts small (a student project) and then two years later, someone gets interested and it goes to a new place. It was really interesting to learn about the ways that community research fully involves community development. The process in communities that allow the research, the organization to be created and to thrive. (Exit Interviews, RA21)

Exposure to new learnings and community perspectives within CFICE translated into transformative growth for many students. For the first author of this paper, attending a conference on CCE and hearing the perspectives of community partners representing the voices of diverse communities across Canada ‘up-close’ were significant to enhancing her

understanding of critical service learning and critical CCE approaches using a social justice lens. This experience deeply magnified the author's learnings from her engagement with the community partners at the VAW hub level and her understanding of how certain issues—such as the current scarcity of resources experienced by community partners working to address critical social issues—transcend sectors and require comprehensive and multi-scalar solutions (with CCE being one of them).

Other students commented that they appreciated discovering new methods of more intentional and meaningful interaction within communities. One student noted, “I learned... how to proactively work in collaboration. More than before—with intention, including everyone, making space for all contributions. Always thinking about diversity, who is included, who is not around the table” (Exit Interviews, RA04). Another student recounted how over time they had learned that centring community needs, and priorities was essential to their involvement in CCE work:

In my head, as a researcher, I was going to tell the community what they should do (e.g.: tactics to use to lobby government). Then [I had a] big revelation—the community does know what they want, they have this information, they know what they should do, what is effective. (Exit Interviews, RA16)

Yet another student commented that witnessing the efforts of community members, who showed deep levels of integrity and commitment to their activist work—spanning over decades and often within constricting institutions—led them to significantly reconsider their own personal and professional values and question the costly compromises we sometimes tend to accept in the fight for sustainable social change (Exit Interviews, RA04).

Our findings are consistent with the CCE literature in illustrating how community-campus projects facilitate opportunities for students to begin to learn role expectations and associated CCE process-focused competencies. However, the CFICE student reflections and Phase I evaluation data point to a deeper transformation in student values, resulting in greater tuning-in to community-first approaches and practices. Their exposure to and engagement with community-first practices led some students to embrace these in their own work. CFICE RAs understood their positions within CCE projects as (modest but impactful) contributions to larger community agendas.

Suggested Practices to Enhance Student Involvement in Community-First CCE

In this final section, we build on the themes above and propose a series of practices for future community-first community-campus partnerships to help enhance student experiences. Current literature offers several suggested practices to increase the likelihood of positive and effective RAships including these: establishing clear expectations between students and community partners at the beginning of student involvement and maintaining ongoing conversations to ensure that the expectations set out by both are being met (Savan, 2004; Stack-Cutler & Dorow, 2012; Levkoe et al., 2014). Stack-Cutler and Dorow (2012) also suggest

that university and community partners need to provide feedback and share what they have learned about making student engagement work. Our analysis builds on these contributions by outlining a number of suggestions directed at students and those who coordinate or structure CCE projects to enhance student involvement in longer-term CCE RAships and maximize student learning through practice and reflection while centering community progress.

Ensure adequate orientation prior to active RA involvement

Student learnings in RAships within CFICE were typically advanced through informal instruction, observing, reflection, and mentoring. Students had limited opportunities to engage in formal learning through undergraduate/graduate courses about operational structures or research paradigms typically associated with community-campus partnership work. This sometimes resulted in a steep learning curve associated with entry into community projects/environments, and delays in students grasping their roles and understanding the processes associated with the project.

Consistent with suggested practices in the CCE literature (Armitage & Levac, 2015; Levkoe et al., 2014), CFICE students would have appreciated having a better understanding, early on in their involvement in the project, of the issues that CBOs address and of how to engage with community partners (Exit Interviews, RA09; CFICE Phase I). They suggested that some of their concerns could be addressed at the outset through an information or orientation package that could explain the larger CCE environment and students' roles in it. A number of students further suggested that having an actual orientation in addition to an orientation package ahead of active involvement in the project could help reduce students feeling overwhelmed.⁶ For instance, in the transition to her RA position, the first author greatly benefitted from reading a CCE literature review prepared by the outgoing RA in her CFICE hub (VAW); this review included a history of CCE in VAW movements, and examined common barriers to successful CCE work including the impact of power differentials between funders, university administration, university partners, community partners, and the communities served by the community partners.

Map out project details, timelines, and specific RA roles

Our findings suggest that discussing student issues around work-school-life balance during the first weeks of a project, as well as providing some flexibility in weekly hours spent on RA work, may help to address challenges for students in balancing commitments. For example, the second author found that developing a workable schedule for all community partners involved identifying and respecting periods of intensity related to student academic commitments and/or CBO project goals. While this degree of awareness often comes with experience and is not always available to students new to CCE work, supervisors can assist students from the outset to anticipate and address the ebb and flow of projects and student priorities.

⁶ The CFICE project did develop an RA Orientation Package in 2016; however, it is not something that was referred to in the data. Some of the student RAs included in this research began their RAships prior to its development. It is unclear whether all RAs in fact received this Orientation Package from their supervisor(s).

Students also suggested that project supervisors be clearer about the expectations of how students should participate in the project and what they should be involved in. One student stated, “If RAs are brought into the conversation, it should be clear why” (RA Exit Interview Summary). As much as possible, student role and student engagement should be part of initial project planning. The first author found that attending an initial meeting with all of the academic and community partners offered opportunities for discussion about how their student role corresponded with community partners’ priorities and expectations; in particular, how students’ research interests, history of activism, or specific organizational skills could be employed in furthering the objectives of the CBO. We encourage students to discuss with their academic and community supervisors what they would like to learn or achieve from their involvement in CCE work; for example, gaining specific research experience, expanding professional networks, or furthering specific environmental or social advocacy efforts. We also encourage supervisors to make space for these issues in their work with students and to prompt students into these reflections.

Maintain frequent communication and recognize opportunities for reflection and learning

Ongoing relationships with community partners within longer-term CCE projects are strengthened when students make time to consider community partner expectations and norms, reflect on how academic and community partner languages may differ, and foster sensitivity to cultural difference within communities. One CFICE RA noted that they kept a reflective journal to help them consider how their daily work connected to broader community objectives (Phase 1 Evaluation). They shared the journal with their supervisor on a weekly basis as a way of recognizing positionality, engaging with and embracing a community-first ethic, and maintaining common understandings with the community partner regarding the purpose of their RA efforts as well as larger community goals.

In general, we recommend that continued and open dialogue take place within CCE projects to ensure that students (in addition to community partners) are getting what they need from these engagements (McGinn et al., 2013; Skorobohacz, 2013). Our findings reinforce those from the CCE literature that students have a responsibility to “seek out assistance, advice and training as needed to fulfill [their] multiple roles and responsibilities” within both academic and community settings (Skorobohacz, 2013, p. 213). While we acknowledge that navigating power relations within the community-campus divide can bring a lot of discomfort to students, and may place limits on what they feel able to do, we encourage students to voice their concerns to supervisors in cases such as where students are required to work beyond an RA contract or if interactions between community partners and students lack respect.

Reflect on, document, apply, and share knowledge and skills gained

The completion of students’ involvement in CCE projects offers opportunities to take stock of what students have gained from their experiences, which is often much more than was originally anticipated (Levkoe et al., 2014). As demonstrated in the student perspectives explored in this paper, and consistent with the CCE literature (O’Meara, 2008; Levkoe et al.,

2014), reflection is central to enhancing student learning within CCE engagements. Students had opportunities to reflect on their CCE experiences as part of the CFICE RA exit interviews or through the evaluation of Phase I of CFICE. Within these reflections, they recognized how their community-based efforts also augmented other academic pursuits (e.g. graduate thesis research) and stimulated personal growth. As O'Meara (2008) notes, more effective learning takes place when students integrate reflection and action.

Several CFICE students noted a desire for established and regular venues for knowledge transfer between CFICE RAs, and/or better communication of experiences among students participating in other CCE projects (e.g. through project reports or wider online forums). These could have helped students better navigate challenges within community projects, particularly during periods of transition such as staff/supervisor transfers or the introduction of new projects. These suggestions align with the CCE literature that encourages students to share their insights with others regarding the realities of participating in CCE initiatives (Stack-Cutler & Dorow, 2012). CCE learnings can also be effectively disseminated by students through academic venues such as journal articles and conference presentations. Beyond the obvious benefits of adding to student authorship of academic publications, this approach establishes points of connection to other students' perspectives in the wider literature on engaged scholarship, helping to advance understandings of how students can meaningfully participate in and strengthen community-centred partnerships.

Conclusion

Embedded RAships in CFICE projects placed students in dynamic positions as they negotiated complex power relations with and among community and academic partners. Students dealt with concurrent academic and personal obligations, intersecting identities, and the larger community-campus divide as they sought to fully embrace a community-first approach to CCE work. The student experiences described in this paper are neither exhaustive nor generalizable to all students' experiences in long-term CCE; rather, they offer a glimpse into the possibilities, impacts, and complexities that students experience in CCE work. The "reflexive iteration" (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009, p. 77) used for the data analysis revealed that the benefits and impacts experienced by the students did not come without associated uncertainties and feelings of "discomfort." For some of the students, working within and through these tensions and discomforts was transformative, leading to enhanced learning opportunities and an enriched community-first ethic.

CFICE student perspectives extend the insights gained from the broader literature on the experiences of research assistants and other students involved in longer-term CCE work (Levkoe et al, 2014; Niemczyk, 2013; Pei, et al., 2015; Savan, 2004; Schwartz, 2010), and further inform practical suggestions for enhancing student engagement in community-first CCE projects. A community-first approach provides student researchers with expanded opportunities for critical reflection, capacity building, and relationship development, while at the same time forcing students to contend with challenging power imbalances and conflicts borne out of navigating complex political and interpersonal terrains. We encourage students

and community/academic partners to work towards open and honest dialogue about the role of students in CCE projects and how it may be maximized to benefit student learning and community partner progress alike.

The student perspectives explored in this paper help build a more nuanced awareness of the many ways that CCE can contribute toward meaningful student learning and socialization. This paper focused on students' perspectives in long-term CCE RAships, as the CCE literature had not yet explored the student experience from this vantage point. However, it is important to add that it is not the sole responsibility of the students to make CCE projects work. Our suggestions for practice should be considered in conjunction with other recommendations in the literature on how to strengthen community/academic partnerships and students' roles within them. Additionally, future studies should put students' experiences in dialogue with the reflections and experiences of the community and academic partners in order to provide a dialogical perspective on long-term students' engagement in CCE. With better understanding, community and academic partners in CCE projects centring the needs of CBOs can build pathways toward improved options for student learning and future careers, and through purposeful supervision build on the vast experiences and expertise that students bring to CCE efforts.

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