Community-Engagement in Academic Enrichment Programs: Participant Perspectives
and Considerations for Change

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Chapter One: Introduction

As an aspiring educator, I understand educational spaces that bring together people from diverse backgrounds, as important sites of contact that can potentially alter the course of an individual's life. One of the sites in which this contact occurs are community-engaged spaces. Community-engagement is a broad term that refers to collaboration between individuals, institutions, and organizations to address issues identified of, and by local communities.

Community-engagement has been a fundamental part of my personal development, as well as my academic career. The first time I ever taught a class was as part of a newly established outreach program. This program's focus was to increase the representation of racially-marginalized students in STEM disciplines by developing and administering activities that were low-budget and widely accessible. This program was also built upon the philosophy that *everyone* had something to teach; this included young highschoolers (who acted as the program providers), community members, and me. As a young child who had a special interest in fields such as robotics and 3D animation, it was eventually my turn to share my knowledge with the class. I can't necessarily say that the lesson was well-executed, of course— it was my first lesson ever. However, the experience itself shifted my understanding of education on a fundamental level. In the totality of my educational experiences, I was a passive student waiting to receive knowledge; in this program, I was an active learner *and* teacher. Traditional hierarchies and power dynamics were also flipped on their head; not only was I teaching a class about *my* interests to a group of similarly-aged students, but throughout the lesson, I was also being supported and guided by individuals who were much older than me.

Throughout my educational career, I continued to explore the field of community-engagement through different organizations and roles. For some time, the long-term

aspect of my involvement was something I prided myself on— I was *thoroughly* engaged. As I continued my community work in college, however, I had a troubling realization about my engagement; I had a great deal of difficulty identifying the impact of my community work, especially as it pertained to the structural inequities which created the need for this work in the first place. This is not to say that I did not care to take the time to assess this impact— rather, it was that I did not feel equipped with the tools necessary to do so. On top of this, I am a college student; I represent an institution. Given the history of tensions between institutions and communities, my affiliation with the institution complicated the nature of my engagement. These considerations ultimately led to the question: Was I thoroughly engaged, or was I thoroughly ineffective? This moment was the impetus for this thesis.

The research question explored in this thesis is: What effects, if any, have high school academic enrichment programs had on the perspectives of its past participants? This topic is inspired by my own experiences as an undergraduate who has worked in academic enrichment programs in Poughkeepsie. It was through these experiences that I was introduced to the concept of community-engagement in a more formal context. These experiences also allowed me to gain a glimpse into how community members perceived community-engagement efforts.

When college-students participate in community-engagement initiatives— whether it be to fulfill degree requirements, as a campus job, or out of their own curiosity— they inevitably form relationships with individuals in the local community. As stated at the beginning of this work, I believe that these relationships can meaningfully impact both parties. However, despite community-engagement's overarching principle of serving local communities, much of the mainstream literature primarily focuses on how community-engagement benefits college students. While some research on community members' perspectives is available, much of this

research is conducted within the context of curricular service-learning programs, where college students are engaged as part of a dedicated course. Given that there are numerous forms of community-engagement with varying organizational structures, the dearth of research conducted on engagement within these contexts is troubling, especially when considering that community members are the target population being "served" within these community-engagement programs.

In response to this gap in the literature, this thesis investigates multiple perspectives within the context of high school academic enrichment programs, specifically, (1) community members who were formerly enrolled in a high school academic enrichment program (referred to as community members OR program participants), (2) former and current college students who have worked as program providers (referred to as college students OR program providers). By examining both of these perspectives, I hope to gain insight into how individuals' different roles and social positions affect their lived experiences within their respective programs. Furthermore, what does community-engagement mean to college students, the program providers? How do these definitions of engagement affect the way they operate in shared spaces with local high school students, and how has this impacted the latter group and their own outlooks? Finally, how does the existing dynamic between a college and its local community impact the dynamic between college students and community members at these sites of contact? These queries and my research question will be the focus of this thesis.

Chapter Two of this thesis defines community engagement in more detail, traces its theoretical underpinnings, and delineates some of its various forms. Chapter Three outlines how data collection and analysis was conducted— it also provides an overview of the research sample and the two enrichment programs in my study. Chapter Four explores the impacts of social

identity on the shared spaces between community members and program providers. Chapter Five presents both community members' and college students' conceptualizations of community-engagement, skepticism surrounding community-engagement, and how participants assessed the impact of their respective programs. Chapter Six provides my concluding remarks on this study.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Over recent decades, the focus on civic engagement in higher education has grown substantially. Many institutions of higher education have either incorporated community-service into their curriculum, or joined organizations such as Campus Compact— a national coalition of colleges dedicated to establishing community-service programs (Campus Compact, 2022). Some colleges have even sought to establish community-service as a major of its own (Shah, 2020). This institutionalization of community work in higher education has led to a shift towards what some scholars describe as a "scholarship of engagement," in which campuses and communities communicate among each other more openly and frequently (Boyer, 1996; Butin, 2006). This shift has also led to the emergence of campus-community partnerships— these are initiatives developed by campus-affiliated individuals and organizations, and community members, leaders, and local organizations (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). These campus-community partnerships facilitate structured community-engagement for college students by providing them with a direct avenue for working with community partners. Within the context of this study, the academic enrichment programs in question are both the result of campus-community partnerships.

With this said, the overarching concept of community-engagement is very broad; this is partly because there are so many avenues for community work in higher education— community-engagement can be curricular or co-curricular; some community-engagement work is elective, while some is mandatory in order to complete course requirements. Additionally, the terminology surrounding community-engagement is quite vague and unstandardized. For example, terms like service-learning and community-based learning may *sound* similar or even be used interchangeably, but they are often used to refer to different engagement strategies. Some scholars have noted that this ambiguity of terms leads to a lack of consistency in their usage

across individuals and institutions of higher education (Gafarian, 2023). For the sake of brevity, this literature review will focus on outlining the forms of community-engagement most relevant to this study and their parameters.

Service-Learning

Service-learning is a pedagogical tool that is designed to provide students with real-world context for theory within their respective disciplines (Butin, 2003; Gafarian, 2023). The theoretical roots of service-learning can be traced back to the work of educational theorist John Dewey (1974) and the connections he made between education, personal experience, and action (Gafarian, 2023; Giles, 1987; Mooney & Edwards, 2001). In particular, it was Dewey's belief that genuine education is achieved through real-life experience, specifically through action, application of academic knowledge, and reflection (Dewey & Archambault, 1974; Giles, 1987; Williams, 2017). In service-learning, students are placed in contexts through which they work with or alongside community members, which provides both parties with the opportunity to learn from each other and co-construct knowledge.

The rapid institutionalization of service-learning, along with the broadness of the term, has lent itself to a lack of clarity regarding what service-learning actually entails. A frequently referenced definition by scholars is that "service-learning is a course-based, credit-bearing, educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility" (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995, as cited in Butin, 2003, p. 1676). This definition distinguishes service-learning from volunteerism in multiple ways: it is

tied to a specific academic program, making it a curricular or co-curricular endeavor that can be done for credit; it calls for reflection on the service activity; the work must be on an identified community need (Gafarian 2023). Still, more questions arise— who is tasked with identifying 'community needs'? Scholars have called attention to a lack of incorporation of community members in this process of identification by institutions of higher education (McKnight, 1995; Perrotti, 2023; White, 2012). Furthermore, the reflection component to service-learning is demonstrative of Paulo Freire's theory of praxis within education, specifically in that it creates potential for "reflection and action on the world in order to transform it," (Freire, as cited in Endres & Gould, 2009). In terms of college students' perspectives regarding their work in academic enrichment programs, this reflective component of service-learning is critical in understanding how they interpret their role and their actions as transformative, if at all, of the social issue at hand.

Community Service Work-Study

College students may also register for community service work study (CSWS, also referred to as Federal Work Study Community Service) as a form of community-engagement. CSWS is a part of the Federal Work Study program, which is a financial aid initiative that allows college students to earn money when employed at a part-time job on-campus or via their school (Federal Student Aid, 2019). Through CSWS, federal funding is allotted to students who do community work at local non-profits or community organizations (Weisman 2023). CSWS programs are designed to help college students to gain experience in their respective fields, such as education or social work, while simultaneously engaging in community service. This structure sets CSWS apart from traditional service-learning; it is a co-curricular activity, students receive

monetary compensation for their involvement, and it does not necessitate some of the academic components of service-learning (such as reflection guided by faculty). Although CSWS is not as readily discussed in literature on community-engagement, many participants within this study were employed as tutors or mentors through their school's CSWS program.

Undergraduate Perspectives on Community-Engagement

A few scholars have taken a look at the perspectives of college students on their work with local neighborhoods and community members. John Cano and Diana Arya (2023), for example, conducted a qualitative study of undergraduate researchers who worked in an afterschool program designed to educate youth about environmental issues. This study took a look at how college students conceptualized the term community-engagement, and what it meant for them to be engaged in their program. The study found that to undergraduates, "engagement reflects a democratic, mindful effort of acceptance and acknowledgement of knowledge and expertise of all others, young and old," (Cano et al., 2023, p. 10). Furthermore, the undergraduates highly valued the real-world relevance of the work they did with community youth, shared ownership over the activities and projects produced within the program, and the ability to foster meaningful relationships with the community members. These stated values shed light on the importance of how academic enrichment programs are administered— elements aside from hierarchies and power dynamics, such as the content of the programming itself, can impact providers' perspectives regarding the program.

Community Members' Perspectives on Community-Engagement

In order to understand community members' understandings of community-engagement, one must first establish what community really *means*. Community is a comfortable term in that it seems straightforward: those who do not represent institutions must, by extension, represent the community and vice-versa. In reality, it is not as simple as this; some scholars problematize the conflation of the word 'community' with 'community organizations' and other nonprofits, arguing that the latter may not actually represent the interests of the community that is supposed to be served; this is because many community organizations and nonprofits *are* institutions, as in they are headed by professionals as opposed to actual neighborhood residents (McKnight 1995; Perrotti, 2021; White, 2012). This discussion can be extended even further to argue that no individual or organization can truly represent a community, as communities are inherently multifaceted; they are composed of many subgroups and individuals with a wide range of perspectives. Nonetheless, community members' narratives are critical in understanding how community-engagement is experienced by non-program providers.

In one study that investigated community member and student perspectives on service-learning at Providence College, Perrotti (2021) noted how some community members felt that Providence's community service programs were transactional in nature (i.e. serving primarily as tax write-offs for the college). Other community members felt that the program design itself allowed for the college students— who, in this case, were predominantly white— to create an insular clique in which they only interacted with other white nonprofit workers throughout the duration of the service, rather than actually engaging with community members. These aspects of the partnership created a sense of 'us versus them,' in which the concerns of the institution were privileged over those of the community. The key takeaway here, is that at the

core of these community members' sentiments is the desire for real, authentic care for the community, rather than transactional, hierarchical relationships. Educational spaces are opportune sites for producing this type of genuine care, particularly within the teacher-student relationship. How care is conveyed within academic enrichment programs in this study will play a key role in understanding the perspectives of both community members and college students.

With regards to what high school students— the community members in this study— want out of their enrichment programs, some research (Shernoff & Vandell, 2007; Stacy et al., 2018) supports the idea that students dislike program practices which replicate the dynamics present in many traditional classroom settings— one of these practices is banking education, in which students are treated as empty vessels waiting for teachers to deposit knowledge (Freire, 2000). Rather, Shernoff & Vandell (2007) found that students— particularly low-income students— valued a humanizing atmosphere and the sense of community fostered within the extracurricular activity, even over the actual learning opportunities offered by the program itself. Furthermore, high school students felt the most engaged when they were able to collaborate with their peers and program providers to shape programming. In order to fulfill students' needs then, program providers must maintain a balance in which they are empowering students and uplifting their voices by affording students agency, while also maintaining focused and effective programming.

Who Really Benefits From Community-Engagement?

More recent literature regarding community-engagement in higher education probes at two important questions: Who benefits from the implementation of these community-engagement programs and in what ways? Oftentimes, this discussion is focused on college students. Many researchers (Astin et al., 2000; Eyler et al., 2001; Giles & Eyler, 1994;

Gross & Maloney, 2012) point to the social and academic growth of service-learning participants as evidence that the practice affects positive change in student outcomes in higher education. For example, students are shown to have better personal and interpersonal skills, a stronger sense of civic duty, better knowledge application skills, and reduced stereotyping of other groups (Astin et al., 2000).

It is also important to consider the manner in which students are engaged within their respective programs. For example, in service-learning, certain factors increase the likelihood of positive outcomes for students (Butin, 2003). Some factors include "quality of the placement, the frequency and length of contact hours, the scope and frequency of in-class and out-of-class reflection, the perceived impact of the service, and students' exposure to and interaction with individuals and community groups of diverse backgrounds" (Butin, 2003, p. 1679). If careful attention is not paid to these factors, however, many of the cited benefits of community-engagement may not come to fruition. Sparse faculty guidance on student reflection, for example, could leave students with some unintended takeaways from their community work experience. Moreover, scholars have criticized the widely accepted notion that the service-learning population is composed mainly of students who are white, middle-class, sheltered, child-free, and between the ages of 18-24, arguing that the student outcomes touted in so many foundational works regarding community-engagement may not even apply to a good portion of students today (Butin, 2006).

One important factor that boosts positive outcomes from service-learning is the level of training that students receive prior to their service-learning experience (Astin et al., 2000). This is a facet of service-learning that my study explores, as the particular context through which I am examining community-engagement is one in which college students' participation extends

beyond repetitive or mechanical tasks. Holding a mentorship role over younger students, especially when they represent different backgrounds than the service-learner, should call for community-engaged learners to be cautious and think more critically about the work they are doing. "How are community-engaged learners positioned to understand the larger context in which they are operating?" is an important question to consider. The aforementioned critique of the assumed, or 'ideal' service-learner comes into play again here, as some scholars believe that if scholarship regarding service-learning centers white students, it is not a stretch to assume that service-learning programs are structured in a way that centers their learning needs as well (Seider et al., 2013) — if this is in fact the case, how are college students' learning needs given attention while also ensuring that communities benefit from the endeavor?

One of the largely cited benefits of community-engagement for college students is that it allows them to engage in border-crossing (Butin, 2003; Hayes, 1997). Border-crossing is a term derived from Giroux's (1991) border pedagogy framework, in which borders "[signal] in the metaphorical and literal sense how power is inscribed differently on the body, culture, history, space, land, and psyche…. [and] elicit a recognition of those epistemological, political, cultural, and social boundaries that define 'the places that are safe and unsafe, [that] distinguish us from them'" (Giroux, 1991, p. 51; Anzalduá, 1987, p. 3, as cited in Giroux). In this framework, sites of contact between college students and community members act as borderlands— spaces where different cultures touch and the distance between them is narrowed (Anzaldúa, 1987). As college students engage with local community members, they ideally begin to transgress borders that are defined by power dynamics— such as college member versus community member or teacher versus student— rendering these borders less salient over time.

Some educators who employ service-learning within their classroom curriculum have expressed concerns surrounding the time-frame for community-engaged endeavors like service-learning, arguing that just one semester may not be enough to reach these lofty goals (Philipsen, 2003). This concern is justified, especially as it relates to the potential for border-crossing; while community-engagement often facilitates interactions between college students and community members, this alone does not constitute border-crossing. Giroux argues that "...the concept of border pedagogy suggests more than simply opening diverse cultural histories and spaces to students. It also means understanding how fragile identity is as it moves into borderlands crisscrossed within a variety of languages, experiences, and voices.... Such borderlands should be seen as sites for both critical analysis and as a potential source of experimentation, creativity, and possibility" (Giroux, 1991, p. 26). In essence, border-crossing does not merely refer to any and all contact between college students and community members—it necessarily challenges the borders that divide both parties in the first place, and ultimately creates new opportunities for knowledge production in the process.

One should remember that even within the larger structure of and community-engagement programs, there will likely be individuals who significantly benefit from the interpersonal interactions between them and the other party— let's say, for example, a high school student partners with a college student who puts emphasis on being available, recognizes and respects the knowledge of the high school student, and works to build a meaningful relationship with them. This scenario is not a stretch by any means: some scholars argue that institutions, by their nature, do not care about affecting change, but people care on an individual level (White, 2012). However, while the positive impact that community-engagement within higher education may have on individual students and community members is certainly

significant, to solely point to interpersonal benefits as proof that community-engagement meaningfully achieves its stated goals— to combat existing social issues and assist local communities— is a myopic perspective at best without an analysis of the larger context of power dynamics, how these programs are run, and who is participating in them and why.

Scholars who interrogate power dynamics within the field of community-engagement in higher education have claimed that it often reflects a relationship characterized by "scholarly voyeurism" (Philipsen, 2003; Seider et al., 2013), in which the local community surrounding campus is not perceived as an extension of the college campus itself, but rather as an exotic and alien place— rendering the community members as aliens as well. This position of scholarly voyeurism allows college students and faculty to venture out into communities, extract experience and knowledge, and leave, without having to experience the same realities as those who live within the neighborhood— the community members they work alongside— and by extension, without needing to confront the tangible effects of their community work on the local neighborhood.

Other work that investigates these power dynamics highlights even more benefits for the college and those affiliated with it. For example, one study looked at community service performed by students from a historically white liberal arts college that was partnered with a local middle school (Cann & McCloskey, 2017). The article suggested that while the school district was tasked with covering many of the costs of running this afterschool program, there stood much more to gain for the college, including grants to hire its own recent graduates to run the program, as well as stipends for faculty, with the majority of the money being paid directly to the college itself. Furthermore, beyond being able to participate in the community-engaged experience for academic credit, students were able to list the experience on their resumes as well

(Cann & McCloskey, 2017). The findings of these studies, combined with the understanding that institutions have a history of engaging in scholarly voyeurism, suggest that individuals on the institutional side of these campus-community partnerships stand to gain much more from them than community members.

Dan Butin (2006), extends this discussion by critiquing the claim that service-learning in higher education serves as a transformative tool for social change, arguing that instead, it is "positioned within the binary of an 'oppositional social movement' embedded within the 'status quo' academy," (Butin, 2006, p. 490). Essentially, he places the stated goals of service-learning at odds with the context in which it operates. This is a particularly important point, as many institutional conceptualizations of service-learning and community-engagement fail to take into account a major consideration: How can an institution resolve the social issues and inequities that it has built its foundation upon? With this question, I cannot help but think of the staff members employed at institutions of higher education, for example; are these community members also included in the institution's mission of engagement? This critique harkens back to the concept of false generosity outlined by educational philosopher Paulo Freire (2000) in his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed:*

> *"Any attempt to "soften" the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity; indeed, the attempt never goes beyond this. In order to have the continued opportunity to express their 'generosity,' the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well"* (Freire, 2000, p. 44).

While colleges and universities may forge campus-community partnerships, I propose that their potential for transformative social change is dampened by institutional agendas. This is specifically because the institution's interests likely do not lie in reforming the underlying

structures that uphold systems of oppression— institutions of higher education largely benefit from the inequalities that exist between themselves and local neighborhoods, particularly those which are economically-distressed. Freire's quote characterizes this dynamic— for the oppressor to 'generously' offer their hands to the community, they must uphold the systems of oppression that create the need for generosity in the first place. By extension, the institution's interests are also at odds with the philosophy of community-engagement itself, particularly where it concerns enacting transformative social change. This study couches some of its discussion in how these competing interests manifest within program spaces.

Chapter Three: Methods

Context

As established in the previous chapter, collaboration and co-construction of knowledge, reciprocity, and critical reflection are all crucial aspects of community-engagement. Though successful community-engagement depends on input from both students and faculty— the college— and community members— the community— the voices of the latter are underrepresented in the literature on community-engagement (Shah, 2020). As a response to this, my study aims to present both student and community voices as a means of understanding the impacts of community-engagement, and what this means for the high school academic enrichment programs through which this engagement occurs.

Matriculation Program

Based in the Hudson Valley, the first program (hereafter referred to as Matriculation Program) was founded in 2003 by a liberal arts college (LAC). Matriculation Program is an afterschool, four-year high school enrichment program that is designed to increase local community members' college readiness and academic skills. During program hours, community members are offered one-on-one tutoring, standardized test preparation, and college admissions workshops. These resources are developed and administered by college students from LAC. Some of Matriculation Program's stated goals are to:

1. *Offer community access to [LAC] resources, such as cultural resources, academic support, and technology*
2. *Boost collaboration among higher education institutions, local schools, parents, and students*
3. *Teach [LAC] students to deliver academic support and apply academic work to community settings*
4. *Model high school graduation and matriculation to college to increase interest and opportunity in attending college*

Pre-College STEM Program

The second program (referred to as Pre-College STEM program), is an organization that aims to increase representation in STEM for 'economically disadvantaged students' through after-school activities, competitions, and college application support. Pre-College STEM was founded in 1970 in Oakland, California, but later expanded across a total of ten states throughout the country by partnering with numerous universities and school districts, with the intent to bridge the two. Pre-College STEM is designed to increase access to STEM education for economically-disadvantaged students. While it is possible that each chapter of Pre-College STEM program operates differently from each other, participants from this program worked within the same university-community partnership with Public University.

Research Design

This study was designed with the understanding that institutional interests tend to stand at odds with the interests of local communities they are situated within. With this in mind, I have chosen the term town-gown tensions to describe the nature of this dynamic— this is a term that I initially came across in Cann and McCloskey's (2017) research on community-engaged college students; it refers to friction between institutions and local communities within university towns— or, towns in which the presence of institutions of higher education significantly impacts the economic and social lives of its residents. To further understand how these tensions manifest in community-engaged spaces, I sought out perspectives from (1) college students, (representing 'the gown'), and (2) community members (representing 'the town'). Though the former may *represent* 'the gown,' however, some of the providers' identities, such as their socioeconomic

status and racial/ethnic background, inherently stand at odds with it. These contradictions call into question the roles of server and servee within the framework of community engagement, which some scholars suggest constantly shift throughout community work as it is conducted (S.E. Henry, 2005). Many participants were also former community members in their respective program, who have since rejoined the program as providers (referred to as provider-participants), placing them in a unique position within town-gown tensions.

As a mixed woman, I am drawn towards theories of liminality in understanding how marginalized individuals navigate different spaces, particularly those in which one's 'otheredness' is especially salient. To explore the liminality that is experienced by certain participants, such as provider-participants, I have drawn from Anzaldúa's theory of borderlands, which explores how liminality is created as a result of artificial divisions— or borders— that are defined by power dynamics (Anzaldúa, 1987). As discussed in the previous chapter, borderlands are places in which multiple cultures come into contact with each other, creating a space that is in a constant state of flux and transition. This study uses Anzaldúa's theory of borderlands to frame the complex interpersonal dynamics in campus-community partnerships, which create borderlands by placing members of the town and the gown in direct contact with each other. According to Anzaldúa, existence in the borderlands forces its inhabitants to develop a border consciousness, a dualistic perspective that is informed by the many identities that individuals in the borderlands possess. This is a concept Anzaldúa refers to as "la facultad" (Al-hayali, 2022; Anzaldúa, 1987). Marginalized program providers represent institutions of higher education, while situated in community outreach programs where the participant demographic may reflect their identities more closely than their peers on-campus— have they developed a border consciousness? In essence, this study was designed to encourage study participants to reflect on

how their social identities situated them within the larger community-engaged dynamic, especially in relation to 'the gown.'

Sample

A total of 8 participants were recruited using convenience sampling, as well as snowball sampling. The demographics of the sample are as follows: One (16.7%) non-binary interviewee, six (75%) cisgender women and one (16.7%) cisgender man. Furthermore, 87.5% of participants were people of color. Of these participants, two reported that their status as first-generation college students was central to their identity. A table outlining the research participants' program roles is provided below.

Table 1

Participants and their Program Roles

	Program Participant	Provider
Kris		x
Alice		x
Sofia	x	x
Avan		x
Salma	x	x
Morena		x
Brianna	x	x
Lynn		x

Pseudonyms have been assigned to maintain the anonymity of participants.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used in order to gain deeper and more nuanced insight into how participants' perspectives were affected by their involvement in their respective programs. These interviews were conducted either on Zoom or in a private setting in person, depending on the availability of participants. The interviews lasted 30-60 minutes on average. Prior to each interview, participants were provided with a consent form, which explained the purpose of the study, their rights as participants, as well as any potential risks and benefits to their participation. Participants were given as much time as they needed to review this consent form in its entirety, and for the sake of thoroughness, the content of the form was reiterated to them prior to signing.

To account for the different roles of each participant and the status of their program involvement, multiple interview protocols were developed: (1) Current program providers/college students (2) Former program providers (3) Community members. To account for community members who have returned to their program as providers, provider-participants were presented with both sets of interview questions. In the case of interview data that was confusing or unclear, I touched base with the respective participant in order to gain more clarity; this was done in the form of short follow-up questions in-person— interview data was not shared across participants, and the interview transcripts remained untouched.

In order to investigate individuals' perspectives on community-engagement, each participant was presented with one of two definitions of the term, which depended on the type of engagement they were doing. Specifically, college students who were registered through their school's community outreach office as co-curricular service-learners were provided with the definition on the official school website, if one was available. Students who participated through other avenues, such as CSWS, as well as community members, were provided with a more

general definition. This choice was largely a response to the growing sample of participants and the differences between each institution's community-engagement programs. The difference between each definition was mainly based on how critical reflection was conducted (e.g. in the alternative definition, critical reflection was to be done under the guidance of a faculty member). However, the criteria across both definitions were the same—community-engagement calls for: the identification of issues that are relevant to a particular community, collaboration among students, faculty and community members, co-construction of knowledge among participants, efforts towards establishing long-term and sustainable solutions to the identified issue(s), critical reflection, and the formation of meaningful relationships. After discussing the definition provided, participants were asked to describe what community-engagement meant to *them*; this strategy was inspired by Cano & Arya's (2023) research on a campus-community partnership in which they investigate how undergraduate students experience and conceptualize community-engagement. To understand the role that social identity played in their program experiences, participants were explicitly asked to determine the identities they considered most central to them. Finally, this study's participants were then asked to reflect on how these central identities impacted their approaches to program participation and relationship-building.

Data Analysis

In order to identify common themes throughout the interviews, I employed a combination of top-down and bottom-up (i.e. grounded theory) coding methods. Specifically, structural coding was chosen to identify direct answers to the research question, as well as the subquestions outlined in the introduction. Before coding, an initial list of codes was generated based on these questions, some of which are listed below along with their corresponding codes:

Table 2

Subquestion-to-Code Conversions

Subquestion	Code
What encouraged college students to become involved in their respective programs? How were they recruited?	CEL Recruitment/Motivation to join
What effects, if any, did participants' identities have on their experience within the program?	Identity within the program
How do participants define community engagement?	Definitions of Community Engagement
What are participant's perspectives on the impact of the program within the community?	Assessment of impact

Although the chart above shows some of the initial codes that were generated in order to sift through interview data, throughout the beginning of analysis, other deeper subquestions were posed by participants, such as "How do participants define 'the community'?" and "How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact program participants?" These sub questions were also converted into codes and incorporated into my analysis. This list of structural codes was intended to help break up interview data and facilitate further analysis.

Further analysis was conducted using values coding, which drew out the values, attitudes and beliefs (V/A/B) of participants. This coding method was chosen due to the nature of the research question, which asks how participants' perspectives were impacted not only by their experiences within the program, but also how their social identities impacted their participation. Finally, simultaneous coding was used to help identify common co-occurrences between structural codes and values codes. Common or unexpected co-occurrences were analyzed in order to gain insight into how participants' unique social locations, values, attitudes and beliefs informed their answers to the research questions, as well as their dispositions towards the

broader concepts discussed throughout this work. Throughout this process, a separate document of analytic memos was written in order to help organize the data after the coding process was finished.

After these rounds of coding were completed, each code and analytic memo was printed, cut, placed on a tabletop, and grouped in multiple ways, particularly: (1) V/A/B of each individual participant, (2) V/A/B of program providers (3) V/A/B of community members, and (4) larger categories provoked by the codes as a whole. These larger categories (such as Push and Pulls, how power is constructed and reinforced, and definitions of community engagement) were used to identify overarching themes from the data.

Limitations

Though this study aims to present perspectives from both community members and program providers, this does not mean that the community members within this work inherently represent their entire neighborhood. As discussed in the previous chapter, no individual or organization can truly represent an entire community. Because of this reality, researchers must tread carefully, so as not to obfuscate the many nuanced perspectives held by community members and compound the issue of community members' experiences being misrepresented by institutions. This is why I feel it is so important to clarify that the perspectives of those in this sample are not representative of the larger communities in which the programs operate— especially considering that all of them, in some way or another, returned to their respective academic enrichment program as providers. Nonetheless, the students in my sample were once the target population of the academic enrichment programs within this study, and thus, the community members who were being 'served' in this case.

Chapter Four: Identity in the Program Space

Introduction

One of the pertinent questions this study aimed to answer was how participants' identities impacted their experiences within high school academic enrichment programs. Specifically, this study investigated how individuals' identities impacted the relationships they formed with other participants, as well as how they inhabited their program roles. As discussed in the methods chapter, participants were asked to share which identities they felt were most central to them, as well as how these identities impacted their program experiences, if at all. Almost every participant was able to identify how their social identities impacted their own perspectives and program experiences, and in some cases, participants made this connection before explicitly being asked to do so. This chapter explores participants' observations and reflections as to how.

Sense of Familiarity

One of the key aspects of program participation that emerged was a sense of familiarity between program providers and program participants— in fact, this theme was so prevalent that all but one interviewee mentioned it at least once in their interviews. Familiarity was generally established when college students and community members' had some overlap in their social identities, such as their age, socioeconomic status, languages spoken, and racial/ethnic identity.

Closeness in age served as a galvanizing force between program providers and community members, particularly in Matriculation Program. Some providers in Matriculation Program claimed that it felt easier to cultivate more equitable relationships with community

members when they were similarly aged— generally meaning a 1 to 2 year gap between providers and the students. This sentiment was echoed by community members of the respective program, who described their relationships with program providers as being more casual and honest as a result of their closeness in age; the latter of these two qualities held special importance to certain program participants, who felt that program providers authentically conveyed both the 'good and bad' of their college experience. These nuanced accounts helped community members make more informed decisions about where they wanted to matriculate.

Other social identities, such as racial/ethnic identity and socioeconomic status, also created a sense of familiarity among program participants. Specifically, two community members from each program reflected on their reactions to meeting college students from similar backgrounds. Some community members viewed these familiar program providers as a positive representation of their own community in higher education. In Sofia's (2024) case, this positive representation encouraged her to apply to one of Pre-College STEM program's partner colleges, while improving her sense of self-efficacy.

> " …it was always really exciting, you know… especially when we had undergraduates
> that we knew had graduated from our high school…. being able to see students who had
> graduated from my high school attend [public university] and say that they enjoyed it and
> that they were being successful— even if it was something that was really challenging—
> that they were making time to then come back, you know, to talk to us. Then it gave me
> hope like, 'oh this is definitely something I can do.' So like, throughout high school, I
> never thought that I wasn't going to attend college." (Sofia, 2024)

In this narrative, it was particularly meaningful that the program providers were from the same school district as Sofia. Seeing someone who was, at one point, similarly positioned as her

have a good college experience allowed Sofia to locate herself within the structure of higher education; these projections made her more confident in her matriculation journey. Another participant from the Matriculation Program describes how seeing people of color reassured her that LAC's students were not all "blonde, white girls and boys on campus" (Salma, 2024). While she does not describe meeting any program providers who were from the same school district as her, the racial diversity of her providers still had a significant impact on her decision to ultimately apply to LAC.

These findings are especially significant as they indicate that familiarity not only facilitated bonding between participants and providers, but that it may have improved program efficacy as well. While one of Matriculation Program's stated goals is to model matriculation to community members, it was not the mere presence of 'just any' college student that made this modeling so impactful— rather, it was the overlap in participant and providers' identities. This is not to say that community-engagement necessitated an overlap in provider and community members' identities in order to be effective, but to highlight how some overlap in identity was a meaningful factor in boosting outcomes for program participants. In essence, familiarity among community members and college students played a critical role in achieving program goals for multiple participants.

Escape from Campus

A sense of familiarity proved to be uniquely meaningful for program providers—a recurring theme for college students, particularly for those within the Matriculation Program, was that they viewed their community-engagement as an escape from LAC's campus. For each

interview in which this theme arose, it was primarily within the contexts of (a) college students'

valuing the opportunity to interact with community members who shared similar marginalized

identities as them, or (b) feeling a sense of alienation or 'suffocation' on their LAC campus as a

result of their social positions, particularly on the basis of their racial identity and socioeconomic

status. These experiences are inextricably linked— they are both premised on the provider

feeling 'othered' on-campus, and they both situate the local neighborhood as a space in which

providers can ease this feeling. Below is an excerpt from my interview with Avan that captures

these sentiments:

> *"...*I didn't go to a place that had a majority demographic until I came to [LAC]. It was
>
> one hell of an experience, walking into my first class and being like, 'Oh, yo. White
>
> people everywhere.' And I think [Matriculation Program] might've helped in some
>
> regards…. A crappy, rundown school building with mainly minority students is not
>
> something that should have made me nostalgic. But it was.
>
> ….even now, when I am more settled into campus, I'm in other orgs and I'm doing stuff, I
>
> think I really do appreciate just going somewhere, and being able to feel like I'm actually
>
> accomplishing something. I think between all the classes and stuff, sometimes it feels like
>
> you're spinning in a circle, right? Here I am, on the other end of the country, still paying
>
> some tuition, just barely as much as my parents can afford. And I'm like, 'Well, what am I
>
> accomplishing sometimes? Why did I decide to come all the way here when I could just
>
> be at home?' And I think that [Matriculation Program] helps provide me [with] a reason,
>
> I guess, for being here. I appreciate it a lot" (Avan, 2024).

It is possible that this longing for familiarity and the feeling of alienation on-campus acted as

push and pull factors in college students' community work; the alienation these providers felt in

school may actually push them further off-campus and more into the program space. Further research on marginalized college students in community-engagement programs could reveal more about how these feelings of 'otheredness' on campus impact the way college students approach their community work.

Shifting Identities and Liminality

While familiarity between providers and community members proved to be a positive force within both Pre-College STEM and Matriculation Program, it also dredged up some complicated feelings for program providers. Three participants spoke to the experience of occupying conflicting or contradictory identities within their enrichment program. Below is an exchange between me and Kris about their perception of Matriculation Program.

> Kris: …I'm cynical about the program because it's very very much just like [LAC] throwing a little bit of its money, like a fucking tiny…percent of its money to a program that only minorly benefits…the smartest like most academically, successful students in the local high school. And it's like they're the only ones that are valuable enough, for that 'community engagement' quote unquote, right?
>
> Researcher: That's interesting. Could you elaborate a bit more on the [phrase] 'valuable enough'?
>
> Kris: It felt like I was contributing to brain drain…I went across the country to an elite college in New York…. and I'm very aware that like, I now have learned a lot from coming here and I'm not bringing that learning back— [pause] back home, right? They won, I got brain drained.
>
> I felt like I was contributing to that, especially after all those kids that I worked with graduated now. Almost all of them… left the state. For college. I can only think of 3 that are still in state for college.

Kris ascribed a great deal of significance to their identity as a working-class, low-income student. Additionally, throughout their interview, Kris expressed a high level of criticality towards their institution and its influence on their respective program, even framing their own

interests as being in direct opposition to those of their institution. In their community work however, Kris was faced with a new role to occupy, and by extension, another set of responsibilities to uphold— responsibilities that serve their college's interests. These inner tensions reflect Byron White's (2019) discussion of the two selves at play in community work: the citizen self, and the institutional self. This theory frames the citizen self as reflection of a more human inclination towards care, whereas the institutional self is a superimposed identity that requires community workers to serve the interests of the institutions they represent. While Kris's involvement in the Matriculation Program was voluntary, it seems that their assumption of this institutional self was not; rather, it was an inescapable reality of their community work through LAC. The two selves can also be understood as contradictory identities that reinforce a border consciousness in college students. Understanding this contradiction as border consciousness means that program providers interpret their experiences through the lens of *both* the citizen self and the institutional self *simultaneously*, as opposed to one or the other at a time (Anzaldúa, 1987).

Extending this discussion, it appears that Kris's citizen self is informed by their privileged and oppressed identities. Kris' identity as a working-class student contributed to their sense of familiarity with community members while simultaneously alienating them from their respective institution. It follows then, that Kris feels a heightened sense of responsibility towards the community members in their program, which is largely composed of low-income students. For Kris, these students represent a broader community to which they hold an allegiance, one that transcends state lines, and is instead bound by social identity. Though Kris feels a deeper connection to the program participants and their needs than they do towards their institution, their responsibility as a community-engaged learner placed them in a position where they felt

they were betraying this community. This potential mismatch of personal allegiances and institutional responsibilities forces marginalized community-engaged learners into a constant balancing act between their two community-engaged selves.

Provider-Participants in particular faced a unique set of challenges and tensions throughout their community-engagement experiences. These tensions largely revolved around the sentiments that individuals affiliated with the partnered college expressed about their local community. Consider this quote from my discussion with Brianna (2024) about her experience in a training session for program providers:

> "...we had always been in [local city] and heard things about, 'oh, it's not the best district,' but then we're sitting in the room and then we heard [administrator] go like, 'Yeah, no, the teaching standards for special ed students are not up to state standards.' And me and [my friend] just look at each other, like 'Oh, that's— honestly, we didn't know that….'
>
> I get that [local high school] is not a school that is really the best, it's not the easiest to talk about in a way where it's like, 'oh, it's a positive environment,' but it's the way that the training kind of presents it as like, 'oh, they're kind of not doing good.' Which, I know that they aren't, but I feel like it could be said in a way that's a bit less like, 'oh guys, we're going to go here and fix it up and all that'" (Brianna, 2024).

While Brianna already had an awareness of how members of 'the gown' perceived her and her alma mater, her newfound status as a college student at the time of this training session gave her direct access to discussions surrounding the local community that she may not have been privy to otherwise. This exposure forced Brianna to contend outsiders' perspectives with her own experience as a high school student in the local city. Her narrative here highlights a form

of border consciousness that closely resembles double-consciousness— she is to some extent perceiving and measuring herself through the eyes of this college administrator— through the eyes of 'the gown'.

Overall, individuals' social identities played a major role in participants' program experiences. Familiarity in particular was established along the lines of participants' social identities— this served as a factor that highly influenced participants' experiences— both facilitating relationship-building between community members and providers, while also accentuating the liminal zone that some participants occupied as a result of their strong community ties and unique social positions.

Chapter Five: Perspectives on Community-Engagement and Program Impact

Introduction

This section explores a few conceptualizations of community-engagement delineated by program providers and community members, highlighting the ways in which they overlap, as well as skeptical views of community-engagement programs that were stoked by town-gown tensions. The chapter also provides an analysis of how program efficacy was measured– or not— across both initiatives, and some factors that may have contributed to the development of these methods.

Conceptualizations of Community-Engagement

One of the primary goals of this research was to investigate the perspectives of both college mentors and community members who participated in high school academic enrichment programs. Of particular interest was how each group conceptualized community-engagement. As discussed in Chapter Two, campus-community partnerships such as the ones in this study, provide avenues for college students to directly engage with community members. I wanted to investigate what program participants and providers understood to be meaningful engagement within these relationships, and how these definitions were constructed.

Community Member Definitions:

"Matriculation Program is one of these things— one of LAC's interactions with the students in the [local city] school district… that people don't really realize how beneficial it is to the kids. Because for me, like I said, it's what sold me on coming to LAC. But for a lot of them, it's just nice to know that there are people who aren't really from our community who know about us and care about us— who know about them and care

about them, because I am on the other side of it now. But as I do still live in the area, it's nice to know that there are outsiders who do give a damn about us. We're not just what the news has to say about us, we're actual people with actual stories and we have issues and we have our problems, but we're also [pause].... We are trying our best to be better than the stories that are being told about us, and it's nice to have somebody to listen to that" (Salma, 2024).

"…I mean now that… I work at a school, I realize how important it is for kids to feel like it's a place that they belong. And [to feel] that… there are people that understand them and…. [I] want them to see whatever it is that they want to do for their future, that they will get to meet those goals" (Sofia, 2024).

Both of these definitions of community-engagement are grounded in how community members' perceived the sentiments and motives of community-engaged learners. These definitions— especially Salma's— are reflective of a key desire expressed by community members in other research: for institutions to demonstrate true and authentic care as they engage within local neighborhoods. This finding brings to fore White's (2019) discussion of the caring citizen and the uncaring institution— community members highly valued the care that they experienced from program providers, however, the institutions that providers represent are not equipped to provide this care. Instead, the care that community members experienced by program providers was likely an articulation of providers' citizen selves.

College Student Definitions:

"[Community engagement] means…Like consistency, it shouldn't just be like 'oh this is my job'... or 'this set time' or something like that, like just that consistency and that care that's present…" (Alice, 2024).

You can technically participate by throwing money at various issues and hoping that they

go away, but I don't necessarily count that as community engagement if you're still

keeping a distance. I think the main important part is to actually be there… and to

participate in various community activities. And to just be physically present. Physically

and mentally present, I guess" (Avan, 2024).

For many college students, effective engagement was determined by how *present*

program providers were within the space. The meaning of presence as used by participants

includes mental and physical presence, as Avan articulates above, however it also included

making oneself as accessible as possible. Even for individuals who were uncertain or skeptical

about what the term community-engagement meant, maintaining an active presence that

extended beyond official program hours was an act they valued highly— this could mean

attending student's personal events such as Quinceañeras, graduations, and basketball games.

Not only do these actions demonstrate the sense of community built among program providers

and participants, but it also indicates that program providers were taking extra time outside of the

minimum requirements, potentially leaving their campuses, and engaging with the local

community in a context outside of "serving." Worth noting, is that the emphasis college students

placed on being consistent and fully present aligns with community members' aforementioned

desire for authentic care.

Inhabiting Positions of Authority and Faculty Guidance

As discussed in Chapter 4, proximity in age played a significant role in the way that

relationships formed between program members and providers— the closer providers and

participants were in age, the more equitable and casual their relationships felt. Interestingly

enough, multiple participants from Matriculation Program report how the age demographic of community members— once consisting primarily of upperclassmen— has recently shifted towards freshmen and sophomores, widening the age gap between the two groups. This shift in program participants' ages affected the relationship-building process between them and providers, as well as the general social structure of the program. This shift was of particular interest to Avan, a college student who has worked with Matriculation Program for three academic years:

> "I think when there's a one-year gap between the freshman college kid and the senior high school kid, it's easier to have… it was more friends helping each other. I think it took a bit for us to adjust to the fact that that friend, equal-ground relationship would not work when there's a three-to-four-year gap between us…There's still mistakes we make or mistakes they make, but we have taken more responsibility for the fact that we are in more of a position of authority, I guess, than we're used to being in, and are more responsible for the kids than we were when there was only a one-year age gap, while now it's more two or three" (Avan, 2024).

In this excerpt, Avan expresses how he felt it was easier to connect with community members when the primary demographic of the program consisted of older high school students, likening the dynamic to that of a friendship. Interestingly, this shift in age towards younger participants has pushed him more towards what he describes as a position of authority, one that he expresses some difficulty in inhabiting. This is due in part to Avan's sense of responsibility in developing and administering educational programming that is *also* engaging to community members. And while Avan describes his efforts to experiment with programming administration (e.g. creating activities that allow community members to choose their level of participation,

encouraging more engagement through incorporation of competition, etc.), he does not discuss

any specific forms of intervention or pedagogical tools that he drew upon— in fact, this was the

case with a good number of program providers. While this may be because he was not asked

explicitly to do so, this issue could also be explained by the level of training given to program

providers by LAC, which some participants described as being hit-or-miss— they were either too

infrequent to be significant, and occasionally came across as superficial in their content and

scope to some providers (e.g. training sessions run by college administrators that primarily

covered the demographics of the local neighborhood). This does not necessarily mean that

preparation by the school was completely ineffective; some providers describe having weekly

meetings in which they were able to reflect, plan, and discuss programming in advance. The

absence of providers' descriptions of faculty support is concerning nonetheless, as effective

community-engagement is predicated on robust faculty guidance.

Skepticism on Community-Engagement

Throughout the interview process, some participants questioned the nature of

community-engagement in higher education, usually expressing a degree of skepticism in doing

so. Their apprehensions either stemmed from the definitions of community-engagement they

were provided, or the perceived impact of their community work; of particular interest was how

participants framed their institution's involvement in community-engagement and the power

dynamics of the campus-community partnership itself.

> "I definitely think that Matriculation Program is a good space to build meaningful
>
> relationships. And we did some amount of critical reflection, but I don't think that the
>
> roots necessarily of issues, social issues, community issues were addressed. And I don't
>
> know, maybe this is just me, but I think the mentors, most of the mentors, are trying their

best within the constraints of the program and the amount of administrative support that the program got. So, I think it's, obviously, a lot of long-term issues and inequities weren't addressed, but it's hard to do that when you don't have a good amount of funding. We were only going three times a week for two hours. It's hard to get a lot of stuff done. I just think there were limits" (Lynn, 2024).

In this excerpt from Lynn's interview, the theme of the citizen self versus the institutional self reappears. While Lynn expressed an inclination to try to address overarching social issues in her community work— such as the economic distress in the local neighborhood that leads to lower matriculation rates, the same rates that Matriculation Program aims to resolve— she ironically views herself as an someone who was limited by her institution rather than empowered by it. While Lynn explains in this quote that she felt limited due to the level of administrative support given to program providers, other interviewees with similar sentiments also attributed this feeling to their position within the administrative hierarchy:

"...I always question the role of [administration].... I would expect… to hear, you know, how things can be changed like, from the 'higher-up', like the level [they're] on or something.... sometimes [program providers] would discuss things like this, but sometimes it feels like we're just the mentors, so it's like 'we can talk about this but, you know, what can really be done from our level?' So, sometimes I do question how things can be changed, since like— you know, it seems like we're just the mentors, like the workers, but there's people who are higher [up], who make those decisions…. [providers] seem to know, I guess, how it is…. it seems like there's not really much that can be done or changed or, I don't know, maybe it's like, people just felt like there's no point in trying and stuff" (Alice, 2024).

Ultimately, Lynn and other providers settled on making the most of these circumstances, and providing solutions that were more palliative than transformative in nature. It is crucial to understand that palliative measures are not inherently less meaningful; no matter what, Lynn's work and the efforts of other program providers has had a significant impact on the program participants— the college students in Matriculation Program genuinely cared for community members, and that care was felt and reminisced upon fondly by the latter group. This is an accomplishment in and of itself, and it may not have taken place in the program's absence. However, the part of Lynn that was naturally inclined towards care— her citizen self— is telling her that more work could be done. Providers' understanding that more could be done, combined with the feeling that they have no agency to actually do so, even led to feelings of resignation as seen in Alice's narrative ("maybe… people just felt like there's no point in trying"). These sentiments were also reflected by provider-participants, who had an interesting perspective as individuals who have experienced both sides of the town and gown dynamic.

"… I felt like there could be more done. And I remember comparing [Matriculation Program] to [other programs], they would have an office within the high school, students could go there during the day and get help. With [Matriculation Program], it's more just… you go after school if you have the time. So it feels more conditional in a way. And it's also just a bit more backgroundy and it's just… It's there if you need it….

I think [LAC] would benefit more [from] being more involved with [local city].… I know it's not necessarily an old program. It's still new and they're still pushing towards more involvement and stuff because [the college] has a very obviously closed off relationship with [the city] that they're still working on… I don't know how long it'll take for them to realize that you can teach about all these values, but you need to actually honor them and

design programs that aren't just more so— I guess, half-assed with their attempt to identify problems and solutions. That's how I feel about it." (Brianna, 2024)

This provider-participant's reflection, as well as Lynn's, speak to the earlier discussion of institutional interests being at odds with the fundamental values of community-engagement (as seen in Chapter Two). While Brianna is able to identify LAC's progressive rhetoric, she draws an important distinction between preaching and optics, versus real, tangible action— action that providers like Lynn felt they could not take due to factors related to administration. These accounts are also very meaningful, given that one of the championed benefits of community-engagement is that it improves college students' sense of self-efficacy. In this case, it would seem that college students' sense of self-efficacy may have improved, but only as far as the constraints of their program would allow.

Despite this, the approaches that some participants took in response to these constraints were fascinating. Kris in particular explained how they felt that if they could not incite transformative change, they could at least use the college's money to help program participants as much as possible— they characterized this as an act of resistance. There is something to be said here about how resources are allocated; the college presented Kris with a budget for Matriculation Program, putting Kris in a position where they were able to influence how much of those funds would be spent and where. In essence, Kris believes that their power lies in this choice— it was one way in which they could resist their school, which they identified as an institution that works to maintain the social issues which affect the community members in their program.

However, while Kris felt that their choices were acting in the best interest of the community, they made those choices without consulting community members first. Kris did note

community feedback on their decisions retroactively (e.g. observing how community members responded to the effects of their budget allocation), indicating that they genuinely cared about how their decisions would impact program participants— but they did not involve community members in the decision-making process. This account demonstrates that even despite good intentions, providers are often primed to believe that they are best positioned to make decisions about communities in their work.

In essence, it seems that participants' skepticism regarding community-engagement and its effect on programming is a manifestation of something larger— it is reflective of their complicated position as individuals who are invested in the community and working towards transformative change, but who understand the role that their institution plays in upholding systems of oppression. More specifically, this skepticism is a manifestation of program-providers' citizen selves and their institutional selves at war with each other.

How is Impact Measured?

One concern that emerged throughout the interview process was how providers of each program measured their impact on participants, as well as on the larger local neighborhood. As discussed earlier, college students and community members alike described the sense of community and formation of lasting relationships as a meaningful aspect of their community work. It is no surprise then, that when discussing how the program impacted them, participants called back to notable moments they shared with other program members. When discussing their perceived impact on community members, program providers most often referred to instances where they felt they had created a safe space for community members to decompress, share about their personal lives and experiences, and ask for help and advice (academic or otherwise).

Beyond this commonality among providers, however, the methods of assessment across each program seemed to vary. For example, one common goal for program providers was to increase community members' sense of agency and self-efficacy, whether it was through pointed activities intended to 'give them a voice', or by orienting programming around community members' requests and needs. The way that some providers in Matriculation Program strove to achieve this goal was through dedicated activities that were intended to shift community members' perspectives, as well as by adopting a more hands-off approach that allowed students to initiate programming activities on their own terms— for example, providers would wait for community members to reach out to them and ask for help, or open the day by having program participants vote on what activities they wanted to do.

When Pre-College STEM program providers described the strategies they employed in order to increase student agency, they usually referred to the assignment of small and concrete tasks. For example, providers like Morena assigned tangible deliverables (e.g. asking participants to write a list of colleges to apply to, having participants schedule meetings with their guidance counselors about recommendation letters, etc), that they encouraged community members to complete on their own time. The differences between providers' reflection on these efforts is striking; whereas Morena, for example, looks on these experiences with pride and certainty, other providers from Matriculation Program demonstrated far less confidence regarding the impact of their programming. It is important to note that Morena had a few more years and experience under her belt than the rest of the participants in this study. Seeing that the approaches she employed were different from those in Matriculation Program, however, this contrast is worth noting. This difference also could be due in part to the structure and academic focus of each program. One program is primarily STEM-focused and teacher-led, whereas the other covers a

broader range of content and is based more on student initiative. On top of this, the content and activities within Pre-College STEM are more rigid and clear-cut, whereas there isn't a distinct curriculum identified by the mentors of Matriculation Program. It could be that the flexibility of Matriculation Program made it more difficult to discern the effectiveness of their programming.

One method that providers in Matriculation Program used to track the effectiveness of their programming involved collecting feedback directly from community members through conversations and feedback forms. Another way they discerned their program's impact was through the number of community members who ended up enrolling at a college or university (as seen in Kris' account on brain drain). This is a logical approach; one of the stated goals of Matriculation Program is to increase matriculation rates. However, increased matriculation rates are more of a long-term and overarching goal, and they do not shed light on the effectiveness of programming on the day-to-day. Below is an excerpt from my interview with Lynn:

> Researcher: Do you feel that your program overall had an impact on the community while you were in it? And why or why not?
>
> Lynn: I'm not sure because I see that a lot of the students who are in the program while we were mentors went to [LAC] and have become mentors, which is a direct impact. And there were also students who got to super elite universities, which is very good, but then also, that's not the only way to measure engagement and change or whatever.
>
> Researcher: What do you feel is another way to measure engagement, and change and impact…?
>
> Lynn: I don't know, because I'm not in Matriculation Program anymore. So, I wouldn't know how the students are doing. [Long pause] Yeah, I don't know, because the first thing that my mind jumped to was academic achievement and continuing to be an [program provider] at [LAC], but that's not the only way. So, I don't know. I feel like I don't know if it's something that can be tangibly measured.

What is evident in this excerpt is that Lynn understands there are likely more methods for assessing program impact, however, she can't pinpoint them and therefore feels unequipped to do so— this, paired with other providers' uncertainty about their impact, suggests that there is no

established method for measurement among providers and participants within this program. One thing was clear, however— most providers felt that their work *did have* some impact on community members— the only catch is that they did not always know *how*, or what indicators of program impact to look out for.

Engagement Beyond the Classroom and Asset-Based Approaches

Another distinguishing between each program is how each locates and utilizes institutional and community resources. Both participants from Pre-College STEM program explained that many members of the community beyond the program's target population (i.e. district boards, and parents) were encouraged to become involved in program organizing and activities, partly because the providers actively sought out these connections to the larger community— furthermore, the program itself expanded in response to the broader community's participation in program efforts (e.g. opening workshops to family, hosting family events). As such, when reflecting on their impact, these participants called back to times where they worked with other community members, and how this engagement with the larger community both increased the program's reach (the amount of people it engaged) as well as strengthened its internal sense of community:

> "[Pre-College STEM] was very well-known in our district and very welcomed. The district loved to have us present at the school. I remember even getting a little award at the board meeting for contributing to the district. The staff knew us, the parents were very grateful of the work that [Pre-College STEM] did for the students. They would come out when we had family events, like family nights where they would come and learn about what they needed to do or how they could support their students in getting into college" (Morena, 2024).

It is unclear, possibly due to the sample of this study, how the broader community is engaged in Matriculation Program— there is also no information available on how administrators and program directors work with other community members beyond the program's target population. There was one instance in which a provider-participant described her sister's past involvement in Matriculation Program, explaining how this encouraged her to join and demonstrated the program's intergenerational impact on her. Beyond this account, however, participants not only failed to mention instances where they engaged with the larger community but also struggled to assess the broader impact their program had within it. In fact, Avan, who has been involved in his program for most of his college career, stated, *"my only real experiences with the community is through [Matriculation Program] and through the students. So I know about that one specific narrow community."*

This is an interesting finding; it does not rule out the possibility that broader community-engagement is taking place, however there is something to be said about engagement beyond the immediate target population of a program— especially considering the impact that doing so had in the eyes of participants from Pre-College STEM. Specifically, this finding prompts a discussion about asset-based community engagement, a framework developed by John McKnight (1995). Asset-based community engagement is an approach to community work that focuses on galvanizing and mobilizing existing assets within a community— namely individuals, (i.e. community members or leaders); associations, which are formal or informal organizations that are run by the community's residents (i.e. local businesses, clubs, organizations); and institutions, which differ from associations in that they are controlled by professionals as opposed to residents of the community (i.e. nonprofits, schools) (Kretzmann, 1993; McKnight, 1995; White, 2012).

An asset-based approach to community-engagement focuses on strengthening the collaboration among these assets as a means of positive community-development, as opposed to fulfilling community needs perceived by outsiders (such as most of the program providers within this study). The latter approach takes a deficit-based approach to community-work, framing institutions (such as colleges and universities) as the only asset equipped with the power and resources to affect change within communities. This approach actually *weakens* communities; it directs community members towards institutions to address social issues, rather than encouraging them to look inward and utilize the assets they already possess.

Asset-based community development is relationship driven, necessitating a constant building of relationships among individuals, associations and institutions. Thus, if a community-engagement program primarily works with one particular group within a broader community without regularly engaging other assets, it runs the risk of being primarily palliative, and benefits to the community are largely dependent on institutional involvement. When the institution withdraws its support, the community is not equipped with the resources or the knowledge necessary to maintain the benefits from the campus-community partnership— the community is left in the same position, with the same resources it started with prior to the institution's intervention. Given this understanding, it is critical that the programs and institutions within this study ensure they are effectively building relationships with and among the broader community.

Chapter 6: Concluding Thoughts

This study was conducted with the purpose of investigating different perspectives of community members and college students in the field of community-engagement, particularly within high school academic enrichment programs. Specifically, I wanted to make sense of the dynamics within these program spaces, where both the institution and the community meet. The findings of this study demonstrate just how complex these dynamics are, and by extension, just how critical it is that community-engaged programs are administered with intention.

Below are the key findings in relation to how participants' social identities affected their experiences:

- o Overlaps in social identities between college students and community members created a sense of familiarity among them

- o Familiarity with community members and/or community members' circumstances rendered the program space as liminal for certain program providers, namely for provider-participants and for those who felt a strong connection to their marginalized social identities

- o Familiarity also played a significant role in increasing community members' sense of self-efficacy

These findings demonstrate that social identity played a significant role in shaping participants' program experiences. It also suggests that college students, particularly those with marginalized identities, may need better support throughout their community work in order to make sense of the contradictions that they experience. This support could be provided through guided reflection by faculty with their peers and community members.

Below are the key findings regarding how participants conceptualized community-engagement and assessed the impact of their respective programs, both on themselves and the community:

- o To be engaged means to convey genuine, authentic care.

- o To be engaged means being physically and mentally present.

- o Program providers in Matriculation Program felt that institutional barriers and their role within the administrative hierarchy placed some limitations on their ability to develop impactful programming

- o Some providers were uncertain about the impact of their program on community members, as no clear method of measuring impact was established

These findings demonstrate that ideal community-engagement is more than a transactional process— it is a deeply humanistic endeavor. They also point to the importance of establishing clear ways to measure program efficacy for program providers; this could aid every party involved in community-engaged work, such as: administrators, in their decision-making processes regarding programming; community members, as programming is incrementally improved by this evaluative process; and providers, as they are better able to understand the impact of their community work on a day-to-day basis.

While many powerful narratives emerged in this study, there are a few limitations with regards to the study itself. First, most of my interviewees identified as low-income/working class, or racially marginalized, making it hard to compare and contrast perspectives from individuals that represent other backgrounds. While there is some insight into this subject, as much of the current literature that assesses community-engagement centers white and middle-class students, more information on this would have been worthwhile. Furthermore, all of

this study's interviewees were enrolled in college at some point, including community members— this is not representative of all of the community members who participated in the program, as it only represents one avenue that the program participants could take post-graduation.

If I could repeat this study, I would have probed more about the academic component of participants' experiences— specifically, the application of academic knowledge to community work. On top of this, I would have altered my research design and expanded my sample to answer some of the questions that were provoked by this study, such as: what perspectives are held by the program administrators who work directly with the institution's resources? How do community members who did not matriculate reflect on their time in these programs? These questions, and many more, are worth exploring in future research.

At this very moment, I am sitting outside of Finish Strong Wellness Center, an organization I have worked with for almost half of my undergraduate career. The school year is just coming to a close, and the summer is fast-approaching. I am writing this concluding chapter during a time of many other endings: the end of my time at Vassar College; the end of my time with Finish Strong. Although I stayed until the very last minute of programming had passed, I can still see students leaving the building— some whom I've known for years, others that I have just started getting to know— people I've formed meaningful relationships with. Despite my apprehensions about my own community work— the feeling that I wasn't doing enough, that I was *ineffective*— seeing these students once more reminds me of why I continue to engage. These folks, along with the many other lives who have touched mine and vice-versa throughout my community work, have taught me invaluable lessons about myself, and about what it means to be a teacher. They have taught me how to be a better teacher, learner, and listener; a better

person— I dedicate this thesis to them. While this is a season of many conclusions for me, I am certain of one thing; my time as a community-engaged learner isn't over, and it won't be for a very long time.

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