Community engagement, graduate students, and "naive complicity": Service in the university

Jonathan S. Isaac
Purdue University

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By Jonathan Isaac

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Community Engagement, Graduate Students, and "Naive Complicity": Service in the University

For the degree of Master of Arts

Is approved by the final examining committee:

Bradley Dilger
Chair
Jennifer Bay
Patricia Sullivan

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Approved by Major Professor(s): Bradley Dilger

Approved by: Dr. Ryan Schneider

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Head of the Departmental Graduate Program
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, GRADUATE STUDENTS, AND “NAÏVE COMPLICITY”: SERVICE IN THE UNIVERSITY

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Submitted to the Faculty
of
Purdue University
by
Jonathan S. Isaac

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Requirements for the Degree
of
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For my father, always.
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This thesis takes issue with current models of community engagement and service learning that do not take into consideration the constraints imposed upon graduate students or short-term instructors who teach a service learning course or who undertake community-oriented research. Bound up in the long history of academic needs overshadowing or entirely neglecting community concerns, campus-community partnerships involving graduate students are much more likely to maintain, to quote Linda Flower, a “naïve complicity in the social structures that put power and prestige on the university side of the ledger while putting passive need and incapacity on the debit, community side” (105).

While looking to approximate the work done by long-time scholars entrenched in their communities, this thesis also looks to the infrastructural model of a non-profit organization, College Possible, whose workforce is made up of recent college graduates and whose infrastructure allows it to get a lot out of these team members in a relatively short amount of time. By identifying the organization’s practices that allow it to keep community results and success at the forefront of their practices, and by sharing specific stories that ground these practices in lived experience, this thesis argues for a
new practice of short-term service for graduate students that offers them the ability to engage in campus-community partnerships ethically, reflexively, and responsibly.

Finally, this thesis looks to a current First-Year Composition classroom taking part in an oral history partnership with a local retirement community. By triangulating the practices in this classroom with the practices of College Possible and the scholarship on service learning and community engagement, we can begin to see what such a model of graduate student-led short-term service would look like in action. This thesis ends by suggesting further areas of inquiry and study for future projects regarding graduate students and service learning or community engagement partnerships.
CHAPTER 1. THE MANIFOLD TENSIONS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: A LITERATURE REVIEW

In the preface to his collection *The Unheard Voices: Community Organizations and Service Learning*, co-edited with Elizabeth Tryon, Randy Stoecker details the circumstances that led to his now-lifelong investment in service learning and community engagement:

I have been trying to be a useful academic ever since I was brought up short by a community activist more than twenty years ago, when I was just a graduate student. He accused me of being just another exploitive academic, extracting the community’s information to use for my own career advancement rather than for the good of the community. He...taught me how to be useful. It was painful learning, and it gave me an impatiently critical distaste for most of what passes as community engagement in academia. (ix)

The tension described by Stoecker between the agenda of higher education institutions and the concerns of communities is not unique to him—indeed, the search term “reciprocity” yields nearly 100 results in the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* alone. When academics enter communities, whether to undertake research or to guide their students in service learning, they are often acutely aware of the local
history of campus-community partnerships, the tendency for academics to marginalize community concerns in favor of academic rewards, and the role that power and cultural capital play in such relationships.

The reasons that academics leave the ivory tower and venture out into communities vary, though engagement work that takes place in universities and involves university agents has long been tied to issues of social justice by means of both personal and social transformation. Whether undertaking community-centered scholarship or research or client-centered service learning, such engagement echoes Paulo Freire’s invocation of social justice as a means of solidarity in his foundational text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: “true solidarity with the oppressed means fighting at their side to transform the objective reality which has made them these ‘beings for another.’…To affirm that men and women are persons and as persons should be free, and yet to do nothing tangible to make this affirmation a reality, is a farce” (49-50). Transforming “objective reality” and affirming that “men and women are persons and as persons should be free”—*this* is what engagement work from within the university can look like. At the same time, such work is messy, time- and energy-intensive, and difficult.

Before proceeding, a note on terminology: I will be using the terms *community engagement* and *service learning* throughout my thesis in distinct ways with different involved agents. Community engagement writ large is to be understood as an institutional practice that primarily concerns scholar-researchers operating in communities. Though service learning is situated within the field of community engagement, as a standalone term, service learning refers to the pedagogical practices implemented by scholar-teachers who partner their students with community organizations or members to
“simultaneously address disciplinary learning goals and pressing community needs” (Deans 98). Service learning asks students to engage with the communities outside of their home institutions in some sort of collaboration, which can, in composition studies, take the form of literacy tutoring, document design, oral histories, or other collaborations.

Community engagement and service learning are inherently messy endeavors, as they eschew the traditional narrative of scholars in their offices banging away at their keyboards. Such work extends beyond the limits of universities that “sit in isolated relation to the communities in which they’re located—isolated socially and sometimes physically as well” (Cushman, “Rhetorician” 8). The physical and social distance that separates universities and communities, as well as the unique histories of interactions between these two sites, ensure that such encounters are never neutral experiences. Further, engagement work often partners with populations that are culturally marginalized or with organizations that advocate for the “unheard voices” in society. As such, these populations are often unrepresented or underrepresented on college campuses, making campus-community partnerships rife for misunderstandings, miscommunications, or perceived slights. And given the profound imbalance in cultural capital, university agents can often exploit—whether intentionally or not—the time and resources of community partners to further their own agenda while leaving these partners no better off than before. Even the most well-intentioned projects or partnerships can be received skeptically or can “replicate a hit-it-and-quit-it relation” that furthers university ends while doing little for community partners (Cushman, “Sustainable” 41).

I pause here to address the type of academic for whom such a partnership—one that privileges the university side of the ledger—is the path of least resistance: namely,
graduate student instructors. In other words, the “overworked, transitory, underpaid instructors who may not have the luxury of time nor the institutional need to do the kinds of research called for here but who, nevertheless, want to incorporate a service component into their classes” (Cushman, “Sustainable” 50). These instructors may lack the relationships with community members or organizations, institutional positioning, and curricular flexibility necessary to engage in sustainable, social justice-oriented work. And yet, such instructors can nevertheless find themselves in the position of teaching a service learning course, either by institutional or departmental mandate or by personal choice. However it comes to be, these partnerships—often hastily arranged—often lack the benefit of a long-term, sustained trust and mutually agreed upon expectations. Without these foundations, such campus-community partnerships may have the unintended effect of eroding community perceptions of the university and may ultimately do more harm than good to community members.

The role that universities play in community work is itself a contested topic. Some scholars advocate for the necessity of institutions in social change—for example, as a sounding board for redesigning practices (see Grabill and Simmons, Holmes)—while others, like Paula Mathieu, advocate for a “studied avoidance of institutional entanglements” (Flower 26). There is certainly ample evidence of community engagement work with institutional ties that is reciprocal, oriented toward social justice, and that produces real material change in the lives of community members. When such engagement work is able to likewise document success as defined by traditional university metrics—publications and scholarship, student credit hours generated, grants awarded (in other words, prestige)—it is more likely to be given institutional space and
resources to utilize. It should come as no surprise, then, that institutionalization is highly valued by academics and administrators alike. As Barbara Holland writes, “Perhaps it is the long history of grant making and grant management in higher education that has made institutionalization the pinnacle indicator of success for new programs or practices” (85).

At the same time, the institutionalization of community engagement in all its forms—through centers or offices devoted to engagement, among other spaces—can make it difficult for universities and the people within them to really work toward social change, as it can obscure the side-effects of promoting the terms of engagement that structurally benefit universities at the expense of communities. Regarding the institutionalization of service learning, Mathieu writes,

While institutionalization of service learning is not evil on its face, it is risky and not necessarily beneficial, especially when universities institutionalize well-intentioned but top-down relationships. The very advantages of institutional service learning—measureable success, broad institutional presence, and sustainability—create a generic set of needs and priorities that make it difficult to respond to communities’ needs and ideas…What risks do we incur when we seek to create broad, measurable, sustainable programs that claim institutional resources and space? (98)

Service learning began with “huge and often self-sacrificing efforts by individual faculty members” in the 1980s (Herzberg, qtd. in Deans 75). And yet, the top-down institutionalization that universities offer engagement practices can nevertheless undermine these efforts of reciprocity and social justice at the same time that it promotes engagement as a valued pedagogical practice to early career academics who do not have
sustained connections to the communities surrounding the university (Herzberg, qtd. in Deans 75). When gone unchecked, these efforts have the potential to marginalize those whose voices are already at the fringes, as well as forgo the needs and ideas of the communities, in favor of good publicity and institutional rewards. Mathieu goes so far as to call service learning in higher education an “important marketing tool, a ‘unique selling point’ for the institution” (95).

Indeed, for as long as community engagement has been a movement in higher education, critics have decried the means by which engagement scholarship and pedagogy can, if unacknowledged, replicate the entrenched hierarchies of power that position community members and research subjects as passive receptacles of academic expertise. This uneven power dynamic present in some campus-community partnerships can create latent tension or open hostility at the perceived outcomes of engagement and service work: “community partners not infrequently perceive that it is the academic or professional researchers who stand to gain the most from such collaborations, bringing in grants (often with salary support), adding to their publication lists, and so forth” (Minkler 689). This imbalance in power dynamics, reflected anecdotally, pedagogically, and in research, is the impetus for my project. What are the roots of community engagement in composition studies, and how do these roots represent—or not represent—a consideration of the power dynamics latent in their practice and implementation? Where can we look for innovative ways to critique and work against such relationships built on power and expertise, especially for short-term or graduate student instructors who don’t necessarily have the community connections and relationships on which engagement practitioners rely and for which they advocate? How can we “imagine possible other futures for how
service-learning [and community engagement] might be manifest within and beyond institutions of higher learning” (Harper et al. 636)?

To be clear: this is not to say that all community engagement is unfair, imbalanced, or wholly complicit in the power hierarchies that position knowledge exclusively on the side of the university. Nor is it to say that scholars are unaware of the dangers of what Linda Flower calls a “naïve complicity” in an institutional agenda that privileges academic output over community concerns (105). As I will show below, there is both good engagement work being done and scholars who are acutely aware and pushing back against institutional agendas in engagement work. Rather, it is to say that the institutional structure of higher education—including its reward system of promotion and tenure, its distance from the community with which it engages, and its reliance on limited-term instructors—can (and more often than we think, does) lead to an unquestioned and unreflexive advancement of academic ends at the expense of or without considering community needs. It is this agenda—as well as the flaws of institutional critique as a vehicle for social justice that precipitated the implementation of service learning—whose nuances I will be drawing out and challenging in Chapter 1.

In Chapter 2, I will present a case study of College Possible, a results-driven non-profit organization, as a model from which we can glean more effective and community-grounded pedagogical practices for graduate student-led service learning courses. Chapter 3 will conclude by reconciling such a model with my own experience teaching a First-Year Composition course with a service component, as well as with what future graduate student-led service can look like.
1.1 The Origins of Community Engagement in Composition Studies

Community engagement in composition studies grew out of the “social turn” undergone by the field in the 1980s, as well as the movement by some instructors toward “critical pedagogy” that gained popularity with scholars like Ira Shor in the 1980s and 1990s. The social turn constituted a revisioning of composition not as an isolated process, but instead as a more contextual, socially situated one that challenged broadly held views on the nature of knowledge-making. Led by heavyweights such as Patricia Bizzell, Kenneth Bruffee, James Berlin, Shirley Brice Heath, and others, the social turn sought for those in the field to view composition and literacy as social practices, as outcroppings of a collaborative effort in crafting shared knowledge. To Lester Faigley, “[t]he focus of a social view on writing…is not on how the social situation influences the individual, but on how the individual is a constituent of a culture” (535). Mike Rose reminds us in *Lives on the Boundary* that “[w]riting and reading are such private acts that we forget how fundamentally social they are: We hear stories read by others and we like to tell others about the stories we read; we learn to write from others and we write for others to read us” (109-110). This social turn in composition studies embedded the notion of “community” in the act of writing; it set up spaces in which composition students saw themselves not as lone writers, but as beings interwoven in a complex web of relationships that informed how and about what they wrote.

The social turn likewise created space for instructors to introduce critical pedagogy into their composition classrooms. This approach championed the teachings of Freire, whose *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* paved the way for instructors around the world to teach “critical consciousness,” a means by which students begin to understand the
social forces that inhibit prosperity and begin to work against these oppressive forces.

This turn toward critical pedagogy positioned teachers as the change agents, as the ones 
“who liberate students from the error of their ways and reveal how and why students’ 
‘objective interests’ reside in radical social change” (Trimbur 112). It further positioned 
students as receptacles for critical pedagogy, all in the hopes that these students would be 
enlightened by such insights and someday be the ones to change the material reality of 
those around them. Practitioners of critical pedagogy sought to deploy loaded terms like 
community, ideology, and institutions in ways that both supported student inquiry and 
criticized the same social structures under which they lived. Of a classroom that models 
this critical pedagogy, Berlin writes, “Students thus research their own language, their 
own society, their own learning, examining the values inscribed in them and the ways 
these values are shaping their subjectivities and their conceptions of their material and 
social conditions” (26). By steering composition pedagogy toward cultural critique, 
Berlin and others laid the foundation for critical pedagogy to play a significant role in the 
advance of composition studies in the university.

Critical pedagogy relies on cultural critique as a means of personal and social 
transformation; it takes the institutions and systems in which we live our everyday lives 
and lays bare their inner workings so as to cultivate a certain perspective by which we 
can recognize our complicity in such systems and by which we can work to make such 
systems more inclusive. It is inevitable, then, that critical pedagogy came to center on the 
educational system; after all, the “banking model” of education was one of Freire’s 
strongest critiques. Practitioners of critical pedagogy began to explore ways in which 
literacy and “traditional” schooling embedded within them elitist, capitalist, and
ultimately empty notions of meritocratic advancement that obscured the true mechanisms by which certain members of society advanced and others were left behind. Writes Rose, American meritocracy is validated and sustained by the deep-rooted belief in equal opportunity. But can we really say that kids like those I taught have equal access to America’s educational resources? Consider not only the economic and political barriers they face, but the fact, too, that judgments about their ability are made at a very young age, and those judgments, accurate or not, affect the curriculum they receive, their place in the school, the way they’re defined institutionally… (Lives 128)

By revealing the limitations of the educational model, the university structures, and its internal practices, critical pedagogues sought to empower students and wrest control from the institutions that define them. Rose’s assertion of the fallaciousness of America’s belief in “equal opportunity” undercuts the maxims we have been led to believe are self-evident. In subscribing to a critical pedagogy platform, scholar-teachers encouraged students to understand their complicity in dominant cultural practices and enact “liberatory” responses (itself a contested category) that have the potential to change the material conditions of society.

Nevertheless, critical pedagogy’s setting—the lecture halls and classrooms of universities and the pages of academic journals—belie its true nature: even as practitioners of critical pedagogy encouraged critiques from their students of the social systems under which they lived, scholars nevertheless circled back to reinforcing certain latent authoritarian and institutional practices. As Thomas Rickert points out, “teaching writing is fully complicitous with dominant social practices, and inducing students to
write in accordance with institutional precepts can be as disabling as it is enabling” (290). In other words, any attempts to teach resistance through composition necessarily reinscribes “dominant social practices” that such pedagogy seeks to demystify. Indeed, composition scholars cannot escape the gravity of academia even as they offer opportunities to critique such an institution. There is in this paradox a reality in which, Rickert writes, “every oppositional practice or strategy, to the extent that it defines itself as oppositional, is already structured by fantasy. I do not see how this structure can be dissolved; it strikes me that it is implicit, and hence complicitous, in everything we do and say” (314). Keith Gilyard echoes, “there still is no getting around the double-bind that, whenever we participate in the dominant discourse, no matter how liberally we may tweak it, we help to maintain it” (267-8). In composition classrooms, there is always necessarily an agenda that privileges the university and its curricular aims—at most large universities, First Year Composition is a required course that students must pass in order to satisfy certain institutional standards.

In other words, the thought that we can truly “empower” or “liberate” students—words that Freire cautiously employed, concerned about their inevitable cooptation by academics caught up in institutional bureaucracies and academic theorization (Freire 24-25)—in the composition classroom remains seriously flawed. Says Rickert, “despite the good intentions and soundly reasoned groundwork underlying many of these pedagogical approaches, they can nevertheless produce new forms of power and privilege that in turn produce new resistances; further alienate already cynical students; and (re)produce the possibility of violence” (291). Rickert’s exposing of the flaws of critical pedagogy—that relying on critique as a means of personal and social transformation only produces, in a
Foucauldian sense, different means of control and authoritarian hegemony—takes a theoretical approach to a decidedly pedagogical problem. And yet, all pedagogical practices can and do involve relations of power, whether between student and teacher or classroom and community. Such complicity is inevitable. But as it concerns social justice-oriented service learning, it is instead a matter of how such complicity is brought to bear in classroom conversations and addressed in campus-community interactions.

Though the above critiques are leveled at critical pedagogy in particular, they nevertheless resonate in the way that practitioners position service learning in the classroom. Flower says as much:

> University-based community service has to worry about a naïve complicity in the social structures that put power and prestige on the university side of the ledger while putting passive need and incapacity on the debit, community side. We must be skeptical of this logic, in part because expert, professional, and technological solutions do not have a stellar record of success in meeting urban problems. (105)

One can see Rickert’s critique of critical pedagogy in Flower’s concern for “a naïve complicity in the social structures” of the university at the expense of communities, as well as recognition that complicity is unavoidable to a certain extent. Rather, what Flower and others warn against is naïve complicity—that is, unreflexive practice and methodology that pays no mind to the kairotic and contextual nature of campus-community partnerships. And while the social turn and move toward critical pedagogy paved the way for service learning scholarship, they likewise set up a relationship to the academy that is best summed up by Ellen Cushman: “the theorizing of academics
necessitates a distance from the daily living of people outside academe, particularly those
people we study” (“Rhetorician” 11). In divining the relationship between the world
outside the university and its effect on their students’ writing, practitioners of critical
pedagogy and scholars writing about the social turn could not escape this distance, even
as they sought to connect the composition classroom to everyday practices and rituals.

If social justice is aimed at “affirm[ing] that men and women are persons and as
persons should be free,” and “to do nothing tangible to make this affirmation a reality” is
a farce, then the practice of critical pedagogy does not go far enough. Cushman writes,
“If we let tangible be synonymous with activism, then to what extent is promoting critical
consciousness in our classrooms ‘activist’? My sense is that we’re not doing enough
because we're acting within the role of the teacher that has been perpetuated by the
institution, and thus keeps us from breaking down the barriers between the university and
community” (“Rhetorician” 24). Echoing Rickert and others here, Cushman critiques the
necessarily hierarchical relationship of teacher and student that presupposes critical
pedagogy, suggesting that it is this entrenched relationship from which we cannot break
free that limits any activist or liberatory tendencies in the classroom. Further, such a
relationship is grounded in an agenda that positions students as the primary benefactors
of such work, as the ones who gain “an awareness of the ways that their own lives have
been shaped by the very same forces, that what they regard as ‘choices’ are less than
matters of individual will” (Herzberg 309). The flaws of institutional critique and critical
consciousness as a vehicle for social justice—that it does little more than embed different
hierarchies of power in pedagogical practice—are replicated in the way that community
engagement and service learning can remain naïvely complicit in advancing institutional
agendas. And in the case of service learning, such privileging of university ends can be traced to, among other things, the ways that the field of composition studies enacts the scholarship of John Dewey, one of its legitimating scholarly sources.

1.2 Dewey and “Experiential Learning”

When you’re doing working-class politics, there is a reason and purpose at certain moments to align with the middle class, ala Dewey. But sometimes there’s a reason and a purpose to organize the working class in their own interests, de-centering Dewey’s framework, and see yourself as in a power struggle with folks who want to take your land, as it were. – Steve Parks

Much like critical pedagogy’s application of Freire, composition studies scholars involved in service learning work in the 1990s drew from entrenched academic traditions for legitimacy and institutionalization even as they sought to, at times, critique these selfsame traditions. In particular, scholars looked to the theories of John Dewey in an effort to develop “a clearly defined and commonly shared body of knowledge” (Giles and Eyler 77). Though grounded primarily in action and lived experience, service learning, write Giles and Eyler, needed a “systematic way of generating and organizing our knowledge” (78). Dewey’s corpus, with its emphasis on democratic education and experiential learning, thus provided a theoretical anchor that service learning practitioners could cite when justifying their places in the academy. Further, Dewey’s theories were, in the words of Linda Adler-Kassner, “porous”—they were non-specific and non-contextual enough to fit into a variety of national and local narratives (56). Rather than being viewed as merely a social “movement,” then, service learning could lean on Dewey’s theories as a means to transition to a legitimate academic “field.”
Though Dewey never mentions the practice of service learning by any of its current names, practitioners have been quick to draw from Dewey’s educational philosophy, as much for its prescience as for its perceived legitimating effect in the academy. At its most basic level, service learning is a pedagogical practice that “centers on a dialectic between community outreach and academic inquiry” (Deans, “English Studies” 98). Put another way, this type of engagement values experience outside the classroom environment as a means of growth and knowledge-making. In his 1938 book *Experience and Education*, Dewey advocates for a new, more progressive type of educational system, one that values just this type of “experience” as a core element of learning. He writes, teachers should “know how to utilize the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worth while” (35). Dewey empowers progressive educators and mature community members as the vessels through which students can have these transformative experiences. With this as its theoretical underpinning, then, perhaps it is no surprise that service learning adopted such an approach: positioning students as central to the service “experience.”

Dewey’s notion of “experiential learning” richly complements the intended teachings of critical pedagogy in that both position students as gaining valuable insights in order to go forth in the world and affect change. The marriage of these two practices in composition studies came in the form of Bruce Herzberg’s article “Community Service and Critical Teaching,” appearing in *College Composition and Communication* in 1994. In it, Herzberg articulates the value of teaching “critical consciousness,” justifying it in the following way: “Students will not critically question a world that seems natural,
inevitable, given...Developing a social imagination makes it possible not only to question and analyze the world, but also to imagine transforming it” (317). Here, we see the importance Herzberg assigns to personal transformation, the key component of critical pedagogy—from out of personal enlightenment arises (potentially) social transformation. Herzberg’s students worked with a local adult literacy center as literacy tutors, and he positioned their development of a “critical consciousness” as his primary aim. Though he admits that questions about social structures, ideology, and social justice are not necessarily raised by community engagement, these issues “can and should be raised in a class that is engaged in a community service project” (309). In extending the bounds of his classroom beyond its four walls, Herzberg draws from a tradition of viewing composition as a fundamentally social process, and likewise as a pedagogy with potential for social justice. Community engagement becomes the means by which his students transform society, both by means of cultural awareness and the cultural capital that a college degree bestows on them.

One can easily recognize the institution-centric discourse that runs throughout both Dewey’s text and Herzberg’s article. In attaching itself to Dewey, service learning scholarship positioned itself in precisely the same ways—as concerned with providing “experiences” for students and with situating community encounters within broader course goals and objectives. As Adler-Kassner notes, the broad and theoretical nature of Dewey’s writing, its explicitly non-contextual positioning of the power of individual creative intelligence, “left the narrative embedded in this jeremiad open to a variety of applications” (45). She goes on: the cultivation of critical intelligence
was based on the premise that, guided correctly, everyone’s intelligence could be shaped so as to contribute to the achievement of the American democracy. Educators embracing this approach focused on cultivating community through the development of environments where individuals would come to participate in the values seen as essential for the perpetuation of the progressive narrative. This principle was at the core of Dewey’s thinking… (45)

This is not fundamentally wrong, per se. As Stoecker and Tryon write, “There is nothing wrong with wanting to illuminate college students about the real world before they graduate and venture out into it unprepared, never forced to confront the externalities of the status quo” (3-4). Where such experiences go wrong, however, is when one no longer stops to question the impact of such engagement on “inequality at the community level” (4). Echoes Cornel West, “[Dewey] shuns confrontational politics and agitational social struggle. The major means by which creative democracy is furthered is through education and discussion” (102). Though Dewey does not address the power imbalance that such “experiential learning” can lead to, we can nevertheless see the ways in which such language has become embedded in higher education’s comportment toward community engagement work. Indeed, this unchallenged privileging of university agents explains, in part, how we can get to a point in which service learning practitioners might view community organizations and resources as, for example, “excellent laboratories for demonstrating [to students] how context affects rhetorical strategies” (Rehling 80, emphasis mine). When driven unquestioningly by academic needs and curricular goals,
institutions of higher education “risk becoming benevolent tyrants who injure the community by trying to save it” (Harper et al. 619).

Foundational community engagement scholarship in the 1990s did, indeed, privilege university ends over community ones—Herzberg’s article, for one, paid little attention to the effect of such engagement on the community participants at the adult literacy center, even as it enacted a social justice-inflected pedagogy. His article’s sole gesture to the perspectives of community members comes when he writes, “The tutoring, as best we could determine, appeared to be productive for the learners at the shelter. In many ways, the best help that tutors can provide in such a setting is to come regularly and respond sensitively to the learners’ concerns” (316). This assumption of productivity and usefulness undergirds the university-centric rhetoric that, when unquestioned, is endemic to service learning at the same time that it reinscribes the role that the university has in legitimizing service learning. What is gained by the tutees at the adult literacy center is lost in a greater discussion of the impact that these tutoring services have on Herzberg’s students, the tutors. Further, Herzberg’s throwaway mention of the efficacy of his program indicates the extent to which, as discussed earlier, he prioritizes his students’ acquisition of “critical consciousness” over measuring the progress made by the adults at the literacy center. Indeed, such research “unwittingly replicate[s] the social structures that are part of the problem, defining some people as the knowledgeable servers while casting others as the clients, patients, or the educationally deficient—served” (Flower 96).

Herzberg’s pedagogical practices—inviting his students to question the means by which people become homeless, while doing little to advocate for changes in how the
homeless are treated—run the risk of remaining naively “complicit in whatever that discourse accomplishes with respect to the unjust distribution of goods and services” (Gilyard 268). Though no doubt well-intentioned, positioning service learning in the classroom in such a way has the potential to reinforce the community-as-laboratory paradigm that Rehling invokes above. In privileging student growth and the teaching of “critical consciousness,” Herzberg’s literacy project does grant his students insight into the oppressive tactics that they and social structures perpetuate, but it “offers few strategies for change beyond resisting dominant discourse practices” (Peck et al. 205). If we look to social justice as the overarching aim of community engagement work, then Herzberg’s approach shows little evidence of positively impacting the participants’ material reality. And yet, his project nevertheless satisfies the curricular aims of the university—his students learn to question “the way things are” in the world around them, while he enhances his professional portfolio.

On the one hand, the social turn in composition studies paved the way for service learning; it offered theory, rationale, and institutional legitimacy to would-be service learning practitioners. On the other hand, however, it adopted a position among composition classrooms that could not be easily done away with; it gave permission for service learning practitioners to use community organizations and resources as “laboratories.” That the social turn and the movement toward critical pedagogy coalesced in the composition classroom to inform service learning practice and research evidences the liberatory, but also deeply problematic, roots of community engagement and service learning work in the university.
1.3 Contemporary Criticism of Service Learning

_The Bororos of Brazil sink slowly into their collective death, and Lévi-Strauss takes his seat in the French Academy. Even if this injustice disturbs him, the facts remain unchanged...[T]he intellectuals are still borne on the backs of the common people._

– Michel de Certeau

When service learning in composition studies first hit the pages of academic journals, scholars were lining up to preach its gospel. As Lillian Bridwell-Bowles writes, “With any new initiative in higher education, we typically find essays that contain individual testimonials from those who have tried the innovation, found it exciting, and hope to attract others” (qtd. in Mathieu 22). Indeed, service learning has claimed institutional staying power precisely because of this wave of scholarship that asserts that engagement work can “enrich the goals of a college composition classroom” (Duffy 5), “improve students’ attitudes toward civic engagement and social responsibility” (Kendrick and Suarez 37) and offer a “site for real-world writing” (Dorman and Dorman 122). Its effects on student learning and development have been well documented.

And yet, in those same pages were printed articles questioning the “sacred” status such work is accorded in the university that makes it “neither popular nor politic to raise questions about the assumptions or unintended effects of volunteerism” (Eby 2). From John Eby’s contention that “service-learning is organized to respond to the needs of an academic institution which sponsors it, the needs of students, the needs of an instructor, or the needs of a course” (2), to Flower’s assertion that “When town and gown try to work together, the gowns possess the dominant discourse—and typically assume that their language, concepts, and forms of argument are the most effective for understanding these problems and should be learned and used by everyone else” (102), scholars have
remained vocally critical of unreflexive research and pedagogical methodologies. It is not
the practice of community engagement, per se, that so irks conscientious academics, but
rather the mechanisms deployed by which institutional rewards and agendas obscure the
side-effects of blindly promoting the terms of engagement that benefit universities at the
expense of communities. Indeed, as service learning and community engagement become
more institutionalized and entrenched in higher education, it inevitably becomes more
common to find institutionally mandated service learning courses, as well as short-term
or graduate student instructors who are looking to bolster CVs and gain access to
institutional spaces and resources. Community engagement is challenging and time-
intensive work no matter how you spin it, especially for graduate students who are
“passing through” on their way to an advanced degree or teaching novices who are eager
to advance toward promotion and are unaware of the body of literature that exists on the
topic (see Cushman “Sustainable”).

Stoecker and Tryon masterfully articulate the danger of naively promoting the
terms of engagement that benefit universities at the expense of communities:

In service learning, the focus on student-learning goals, to the exclusion of
any theoretical consideration of community development outcomes, has
created a situation where we don’t know what internal contradictions may
be occurring. For example, we don’t know the extent to which the
development of service learning programs to primarily serve student and
institutional interests may undermine community interests, which may
negatively impact the community and undermine community support for
the service learning program. (8)
Not only can service work easily be categorized as institution-centric, but service learning practitioners can often unintentionally speak for the community organizations they serve. Especially when these practitioners are unreflexive in their practices or when such work is hastily arranged, community organizations can be pushed even further to the fringes of university access. Stoecker and Tryon’s collection, then, attempts to remedy the privileging of university expertise by giving voice to community organization staff members themselves. In this way, it calls to our attention the necessity of re-addressing the problematic potential of service learning models that reinscribe unequal power dynamics.

The Unheard Voices turns a critical eye on the practices of service learning in higher education, bringing to bear the ways in which institutional enactments of service learning have remained “naively complicit” in practices handed down by previous scholars or university agents. In particular, they address issues created by the academic calendar and the shortcomings of short-term service learning necessitated by the semester setup of higher education institutions. What is so rarely discussed in service learning scholarship is the fact that the academic calendar and the community calendar do not naturally sync up. Schools let out during the holidays when community organizations are often in need of increased capacity and resources, and service learning opportunities are often “grafted” onto regular classes, which places pressure on instructors to provide a quick service opportunity in the scope of a larger classroom agenda. In fact, “service learning proponents seem more concerned with protecting the students’ schedules than meeting the community’s needs” (Martin et al. 65). Institutional pressures—the infrequency of certain class meetings, the other classes and extracurricular commitments
that occupy students’ out-of-class availability—obscure the fact that the community
calendar does not operate according to the educational calendar. Especially in
engagement efforts that seek to remedy problems associated with the lack of good role
models and other inconsistent adult figures, “[t]he transient nature of short-term service
learners, added to their potential for unreliability and lack of commitment, only
exacerbates these problems” (Martin et al. 62). To a certain extent, we may expect
community organizations to be cognizant of, and even accommodating with, this fact.
And yet, to ask community organizations, who may already be understaffed or ill-
prepared to deal with inconsistency and lack of commitment, to accommodate student
schedules in this way is potentially problematic.

When one thinks about the sheer number of institutions that engage in service of
one form or another, and the instructors who are institutionally mandated to get students
“out there,” these perspectives and university-centric campus-community partnerships
may seem much more common than we realize. Despite the critiques leveled against
community engagement practices, there is still too much potential for community
engagement and service learning to exist only in service to university ends without
questioning the role that the university or the community play in such work. Mathieu
asks, “How many missed connections or inconveniences happen in a typical day or week
as universities scramble to make new connections, many of which never get off the
ground? How many bridges do universities routinely burn while claiming to serve their
communities?” (87). With a more panoramic perspective, one finds that there are many
ways that we have not progressed—especially in dealing with short-term instruction and
hit-it-and-quit-it service partnerships—beyond the instrumentalizing and essentializing
viewpoint that remains complicit in entrenched relations of power even as these service projects may be attempting to subvert such relations.

1.4 Enacting Community-centric Practices

*If we continue the current model that serves students at the expense of communities, we risk alienating more and more community organizations until the practice of service learning itself is threatened.*

–Dadit Hidayat, Samuel Pratsch, and Randy Stoecker

The position I am coming to is this: it is impossible to break free from the mandates of the university, its reward system, and the implications of teaching critical pedagogy when doing community engagement work—a dilemma which has direct implications for the claims to reciprocity, equity, and social justice. That community engagement will still occur in academia regardless of this conclusion is inevitable. With that in mind, we must acknowledge how best to proceed in order to more closely approach the ideals of community engagement. In my mind—as well as in the work of scholars like Sullivan and Porter, Mathieu, Cushman, Flower, and others—community engagement work must, first and foremost, give voice to, arise from, and respond to community needs. It is only in this way that instructors and researchers can begin to reconcile the unfair privileging attached to academic discourse that necessarily dominates such work, replacing it with a social justice approach to community engagement that can produce real material change without enacting a savior complex. Further, the necessity of remaining reflexive and continually questioning the dynamics of the engagement relationships at play continue to be essential considerations in campus-community partnerships, lest we continue to unwittingly reaffirm the university-centric discourse and practices that are more common in engagement work than we may realize.
In Stoecker and Tryon’s collection, Dadid Hidayat, Samuel Pratsch, and Randy Stoecker suggest three lofty areas of improvement: service learning that serves communities requires that 1) the service learning program operate on the community calendar, 2) such service learning needs to be designed around community issues, and 3) such service learning needs to provide a very different kind of education for students (158-9). Each of these suggestions positions community needs and concerns as central to the partnership, an orientation that overcomes the privileged standing that university discourses and agendas have traditionally held in such partnerships. Of the sort of education that service learning will provide students, Hidayat et al. write, “Communication skills, professional skills, specialized practice skills, and others should not be just two-hour training add-ons, but a part of the curriculum for service learners who are going to do more good than harm” (159). This paradigm speaks to the need for academics and educators to be deeply embedded in the communities with which they partner, as well as a commitment to working with community members to scaffold a service environment that nevertheless privileges community concerns. While the roots of these issues are deeply entrenched in higher education institutions, Stoecker and Tryon paint a picture at the end of their collection of community organizations talking and academics listening in a way that has, to my knowledge, not yet been sustained in composition-based service learning literature.

Alternatively, both Cushman and Eli Goldblatt have argued for enacting activist practices in service learning and community engagement work. Goldblatt writes,

As academics, even if we want to put neighborhood needs first, we cannot but start with the demands of our classrooms or the requirements for
promotion. But what if we start from the activist’s ground in this instance, learning before we act, developing relationships and commitments before we organize classes and set up research projects? When we have established these relationships, we may be able to help the community partners identify problems and transform these problems into issues to act upon, only later considering how students in courses fit in and what university resources could be helpful in addressing the issues. In short, what if we use our research, teaching, administrative, and writing abilities for the sake of the people our students tutor, not only for the sake of the college programs we run? (322)

Like others before him, Goldblatt is concerned here with enacting ethical and reciprocal community engagement practices that prize working with community members on their terms. Goldblatt’s notion of activism, derived from community organizer Saul Alinsky, relies on “disorganiz[ing] old and unproductive ways a community works (or doesn’t work) in order to build a stronger, more participatory organization later” (321). Like Stoecker and Tryon, then, Goldblatt advocates for a deliberate unlearning of past engagement practices that have the potential to simply and unwittingly reinforce the status quo.

In order to unlearn faulty engagement practices within composition studies, we might benefit from looking to fields outside of it. For instance, scholars in public health and business and technical communication have been grappling for decades with the same issues of equitable partnerships and tangible outcomes in community engagement practices. The practice of action research—called variously Participatory Action
Research (see Fals-Borda, Toulmin), Community-Based Participatory Research (see Minkler), and participatory design (see Spinuzzi)—has been employed in academic circles since the late 1930s, when social psychologist Kurt Lewin conducted research in factories and neighborhoods with the workers and inhabitants of these locales as prominent actors in the research process (Adelman 7). Indeed, action research is concerned, first and foremost, with the participation of ordinary people in research that concerns them or their community; it must include “the active participation by those who have to carry out the work in the exploration of problems that they identify and anticipate” (Adelman 9). Beyond this, action research is characterized by “a respect for people and for the knowledge and experience they bring to the research process, a belief in the ability of democratic processes to achieve positive social change, and a commitment to action” (Brydon-Miller et al. 15). Ultimately it takes as its goal the production of knowledge that benefits some nonscholarly community (Blythe et al. 273).

Action research is the embodiment of privileging community agents over university discourse, and it perhaps represents the next evolution of composition studies’ implementation of community engagement work. Action research is what happens when research practices in engagement contexts are continually checked, analyzed self-reflexively, and improved upon. In their book Opening Spaces, Patricia Sullivan and James Porter address the dangers of blindly accepting entrenched research methodologies handed down as “best practices.” Echoing Lorie Goodman’s assertion that “our grounds for action must remain under constant revision” (69), they write, “research methodology should not be something we apply or select so much as something we construct out of particular situations and then argue for in the write-ups of our studies” (46). Unless one is
constantly reflecting upon one’s practices and deliberately making a space for those in non-academic environments to play an important role in research and pedagogy, community engagement work can easily and instinctively return to an unquestioned and unchecked privileging of university discourse. The contention that research methodologies must be situational and socially-informed echoes the sentiments of social turn scholars like Berlin and Bruffee and has broad applicability in the field of community engagement work, as well.

Sullivan and Porter gesture to the ethical considerations of engagement in their study of composition and computers, stating that researchers must: respect difference, care for others, promote access to rhetorical procedures enabling justice, and liberate the oppressed through empowerment of participants (110). In acknowledging situated and community expertise, researchers demonstrate “an openness…to the possibility of difference, a willingness to concede to reciprocity as a critical principle in research relations, and ultimately a willingness to see who the participants are” (112). Of the ethic of care, they write, “The researcher should not proceed primarily out of a motivation to discover new knowledge, but rather should be motivated by a commitment to the participants, a concern for their welfare” (113). So often, researchers widen the gulf between scholarship and the communities they study by treating the discovery of new knowledge as the primary aim of research. Critical research practices, as argued for by Sullivan and Porter, instead recognize the legitimacy of care as an “appropriate ethic” for the researcher (113). By extension, community engagement that is concerned first and foremost with community members should treat social justice, via an ethic of care, as the worthwhile pursuit of engagement work.
Mathieu’s work on institutionalization echoes these considerations of Sullivan and Porter. She worries that institutionalization strips engagement work of its rhetorical and situational exigency, positioning it instead as measurable, sustainable, safe, and beholden to university metrics of success. To this end, Mathieu calls for “a rhetorically responsive engagement that seeks timely partnerships, which acknowledge the ever-changing spatial terrain, temporal opportunities, and voices of individuals” (xiv). Like other scholars attuned to the needs of communities and aware of the ways that university rewards can obscure such needs, Mathieu’s engagement arises from local exigencies rather than institutional pressures. Indeed, such an alternative to the current paradigm of service and engagement work grows from personal relationships and involvement with community organizations—rather than from institutional agendas or curricular aims—and focuses on a project rather than a problem orientation. A problem orientation “respond[s] to problems but determine[s] [its] own length, scope, and parameters, instead of being defined by external parameters” (50).

This sort of engagement work takes time, energy, and effort to enact. It is not something that a graduate student instructor can necessarily pick up and sustain—it requires personal involvement in the community in question, relationships with those involved in the engagement, a demonstrated concern for the wellbeing of the community, and a thousand other time-intensive efforts. Often, instructors enter communities in a short-term capacity, bent on getting their research and getting out or on getting their students involved for a semester. But when community concerns are the top priority, community engagement work can empower community members, defined by Sullivan and Porter as “leav[ing] something behind…that we negotiate through the research
activity to contribute something to the betterment of the group or community we are studying” (125).

In looking at all of the complexities and contradictions of community engagement work, I am struck by how such scholarship raises more questions that it provides answers. Margaret Himley sums it up best in her laundry-list of queries:

-W- hat should we do as community service learning teachers?

Institutionalize long-term relationships with agencies in the community (Flower; Hessler)? Become public intellectuals who conduct their research in the community as collaborative inquiry (Cushman “Sustainable”)? Abolish student-based service learning courses? Replace journals with well-defined methodologies such as case studies and ethnographies and make service learning more explicitly like ethnography? Never have students write about the service experience (Herzberg, cited in Welch)? Always have students write about the service experience (Welch)? (432-3)

As evidenced in the list above, the messiness of engagement and service work speaks to the need for context-dependent and locally-situated campus-community partnerships, partnerships that should arise from community exigencies rather than institutional agendas. Though institutional agendas may be well-intentioned, and though institutionalization creates an easy metric by which administrators can determine the success or failure of its entrenched practices, they nevertheless run the risk of negating the impact of engagement partnerships and overlooking the time- and energy-intensiveness of reciprocal partnerships in favor of assessment and sustainability. And when scholars—namely graduate student or short-term instructors—remain unreflexive
and uncritical of certain practices and perspectives regarding community engagement and service learning, they can unwittingly replicate the social structures and hierarchies of power that put knowledge on the side of university agents and passivity on the side of the community. At the same time, the frameworks for ethical engagement articulated by scholars like Sullivan and Porter and Mathieu are immense undertakings, methods that are difficult and labor-intensive to enact and sustain. In the next chapter, I will look at the framework of service implemented by a national non-profit as an alternative model to those offered up here for graduate student instructors. While this model is not foolproof, it provides some practices that can supplement already-established scholarship regarding an ethical form of engagement that promotes community concerns.
CHAPTER 2. TOWARD A PRACTICE OF SHORT-TERM SERVICE: A CASE STUDY OF A COMMUNITY RESULTS-BASED NON-PROFIT

2.1 Community Engagement and Short-Term Academics

Until this point, I have focused primarily on the byproducts of hastily arranged or institutionally mandated community engagement or service learning work—namely a potential reinforcement of oppressive systems of domination and learned helplessness. And those from whom we have heard regarding what is faulty with much university-based community engagement and the tenets of successful campus-community partnerships are full professors with institutional sway and authority, as well as clout in the field of rhetoric and composition—scholars like Sullivan and Porter, Cushman, Mathieu, Flower, and Goldblatt have all built and sustained relationships in their communities for years, if not decades, and they have the connections to prove it.

But little has been heard from the “overworked, transitory, underpaid instructors” that Cushman identifies— instructors who want to implement service as a pedagogical practice or who want to take part in some sort of community research, but who nevertheless lack the time and relationships necessary to undertake a sustained, studied partnership (Cushman, “Sustainable” 50). In other words, the type of academics who are most likely to engage in the hit-it-and-quit-it engagement work that is so critiqued by seasoned scholars are—because their presence in these communities as a university agent necessarily comes with an expiration date—given little practical and directive wisdom in
such scholarship with regard to how to promote and sustain ethical campus-community partnerships. Because of the nature of higher education institutions, because of the self-serving origins of service learning and its subsequent institutionalization, campus-community partnerships undertaken by these parties are often mandated or hastily integrated, thus giving them little support in avoiding simply reaffirming the community-as-laboratory or academic-as-expert paradigms. To formulate a new model of campus-community relationships that has in mind the needs of the latter while acknowledging the realities of “overworked, transitory, underpaid” early career academics, we might turn our attention to the organizing model for a different cultural institution that employs the same sorts of people: the non-profit sector.

Why look at the infrastructure of a non-profit? The structural model of a service organization outside of academia is pertinent to my work for a couple reasons: 1) I think it is important to shed light on the myriad ways that community engagement comes to exist across institutions writ large—not just within academia but also in the non-profit sector—so as to reflect on different, but no less legitimate or impactful, means of working toward a more equitable society, 2) analyzing the guiding principles of engagement and the social needs that other organizations respond to can help us rewrite how we define meaningful community engagement and service learning work in higher education, and 3) looking outside higher education can provide a way of subverting traditional notions of community engagement or service learning within academia that necessarily respond to its institutional agendas or that don’t take into account constraints of labor or academic position within universities. Higher education is often “counterproductively incestuous, producing scholarship written by and for scholars, and that excludes participation by the
very ‘community’ they intend to serve” (Bortolin 49). With this in mind, looking outside of academia to the non-profit sector might allow us to ground our current visions of community engagement and service learning in composition studies enacted by graduate students in a more impactful, community-based foundation.

College Possible Milwaukee is one particular community organization that follows a social justice mission and privileges community results in its work. College Possible is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that serves low-income, first-generation high school students who do not otherwise have the resources or guidance to earn admission to and graduate from a four-year college or university. It was founded in 2000 in St. Paul, Minnesota by Jim McCorkell, himself a first-generation college student. The organization, which in its first year served 35 students in one school in St. Paul, now stretches across the country in six locations—Minneapolis/St.Paul, Milwaukee, Omaha, Portland, Philadelphia, and Chicago—and has served over 22,000 students.

College Possible organizes itself around a heavily ideological, idealistic mission: to “mak[e] college admission and success possible for low-income students through an intensive curriculum of coaching and support” (“About”). It is motivated by a vision of a world, reminiscent of the one espoused by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in which “the future of America’s children should be determined solely by their talent, motivation and effort” (“About”). This mission statement and ideological ground, bolstered by its reliance on its idealism, attracts recent college graduates from across the country willing to dedicate themselves to a year or two of service. The sacrifices asked of coaches who serve with College Possible are numerous—for starters, it is time-intensive and offers a modest living wage—yet so many recent college graduates apply and serve because the
ideal of educational achievement for all represents an important social issue for this

country moving forward.

It should be noted that non-profits are as rife for critique as universities. There are
inherent problems of worker exploitation and a “savior” complex that arise in looking at
College Possible and nonprofits like it. In her introduction to *The Revolution Will Not Be
Funded*, Andrea Smith addresses the selfish origins of the non-profit industry, formulated
initially as a means for large corporations to avoid taxes: “foundations essentially rob the
public of monies that should be owed to them and give back very little of what is taken in
lost taxes” (9). Regarding small non-profits, the money necessary to stay afloat often
means that the focus of the organization is on fundraising as much as it is on its stated
mission. This necessity forces organizations to cater to wealthy donors, whose money, by
default, dictates the struggles worth fighting for. Writes Smith, “To radically change
society, we must build mass movements that can topple systems of domination, such as
capitalism. However, the NPIC [non-profit industrial complex] encourages us to think of
social justice organizing as a career; that is, you do the work if you can get paid for it”
(10). The contradictions inherent in many non-profits, including College Possible, reflect
Flower’s concern for “naïve complicity” in systems of domination against which such
organizations simultaneously claim to be working.

And yet, what to make of the fact that the work done by College Possible coaches
changes the material and immediate realities of thousands of high school and college
students each year? Juniors enrolled in the College Possible program raise their scores on
the ACT by an average of 20% between the first practice test they take in October of their
junior year and the real deal test in April, and 98% of College Possible seniors earn
admission to a four year college or university. Beyond high school, students in the College Possible program graduate college at a rate of 59%. While this may seem relatively low, by comparison, students in the bottom quartile of income earners graduate college at a rate of only 11%. As College Possible proudly asserts, a College Possible student is twice as likely to go to a four-year institution and five times as likely to graduate as their low-income peers who are not a part of the organization (“Results”).

Looking at an organization like College Possible can help us work toward a model of practice for graduate students or short-term instructors—in other words, people who have not had the time and resources to establish roots and make strong connections in a community—to approach the sort of engagement and service about which Sullivan and Porter, Mathieu, Cushman, Flower, and others speak. Indeed, Cushman’s characterization of certain instructors—graduate students or short-term instructors—as “overworked, transitory, underpaid” is eerily similar to how I felt as a member of College Possible, and Table 1 on the next page illustrates the specific similarities between the two camps.

2.2 Service Practices of a National Non-Profit

I served for two years with College Possible in their Milwaukee, Wisconsin location. Officially, I engaged in direct service as a “high school coach” at Alexander Hamilton High School on Milwaukee’s southside; I worked with a cohort of 33 students during their junior and senior years of high school. I led after-school sessions four days a week that focused on ACT preparation during their junior year and the college application, financial aid, and transition processes during their senior year. As juniors, these students raised their ACT scores by an average of 20%, the largest increase being
Table 1 Comparison of College Possible Coaches and Graduate Student Instructors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College Possible Coaches</th>
<th>Graduate Student Instructors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Recent college graduates who relocate from across the country to a new city</td>
<td>• Often relocate to graduate program from different institutions or employment positions across the country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Given two weeks of orientation—both national and local—before direct service begins</td>
<td>• Often, though not always, given a short orientation to prepare them for instruction in composition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Can serve with College Possible for up to two years, but no less than one year</td>
<td>• Graduate studies varies—from 1-2 years for a Master’s program, from 4-5+ years for a PhD program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Receive a “living stipend” through AmeriCorps that is below the federal poverty limit</td>
<td>• Earn modest wages, usually in exchange for teaching one or two composition courses each semester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Work under stressful conditions to produce results for organization</td>
<td>• Balance instructor responsibilities with coursework and outside commitments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Receive supervision from staff who have spent more time as a member of the community</td>
<td>• Mentored by faculty members who have more know-how of institutional structure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

from an 11 to a 20. As seniors, 31 of 33 (94%) were admitted to a four-year college or university, and collectively they earned over $200,000 in private and state aid. Over half of my students continued on to post-secondary education, where they are currently in the midst of their sophomore year, a crucial year for college persistence.

How does College Possible achieve such results with its coaches, who do not serve with the organization for more than two years? And how does the organization embed community needs in its practices? I’ve identified four organization-wide practices that College Possible utilizes that culminate in a student’s college graduation and that center around student achievement and success:

1. **A vocabulary focused on setting expectations and getting results**
2. **Intensive near-peer mentoring and coaching**
3. **Repositioning strategic failures as tactical successes/long-term goals**
4. *A yearlong commitment to service*

This list—my own—isn’t exhaustive, but I think these principles can help us think of a new model of campus-community partnership that can change the way that university agents—primarily those who do not have the institutional and community legitimacy and reach of full professors—approach these relationships, especially by aligning the educational or research component of community engagement work with the needs that community members articulate and work toward. The above practices orient College Possible toward putting community needs first among its priorities. Moving forward, I will be looking at the above four practices from the high school coach perspective to highlight ways that these coaches “buy in” to the community results orientation of the organization, even when it comes with hefty sacrifices.

A note: In looking outside of the university model for better practices for short-term instructors that nevertheless acknowledge and work toward meeting community needs, I am indebted to the scholarship of, in particular, Eli Goldblatt, Paula Mathieu, Ellen Cushman, Linda Flower, and Randy Stoecker and Elizabeth Tryon. Goldblatt’s work with New City Writing, a Temple University-affiliated institute that focuses on community-based writing and reading programs in Philadelphia; Mathieu’s work with *Spare Change News*, a street newspaper in Boston; Cushman’s work with neighbors and community members in Troy, New York and beyond; Flower’s work with the Community Literacy Center in Pittsburgh; and Stoecker’s and Tryon’s work with community organizations in Madison, Wisconsin all inform my approach to an ethical, community-based agenda that produces real material and social change. Their collective work, which continues to advocate for the privileging of community needs even as it
advances their own professional careers, is always looking for ways to improve upon current university practices of service learning and community engagement.

2.2.1 A vocabulary focused on setting expectations and getting results

On the first day of College Possible orientation, the Chief Program Officer stands in front of the newly-hired coaches and reveals the buzzword that is at the center of the organization’s mission: results. She says, “Remember the College Possible mission and remember our students. You must do WHATEVER it takes to support our students. Results matter more than anything else. You may never have another opportunity to do such meaningful work” (Kirtley). From this day forward, results weigh heavy on everyone’s mind. Results in College Possible terms are measured most visibly along three data points: ACT score increase (for high school juniors), college acceptance and matriculation (for high school seniors), and, ultimately, college graduation.

College Possible sets high expectations, and there is an explicit expectation that coaches will reach the high benchmarks set before them. Like the speech above, the introductory note in the junior year curriculum binder for College Possible coaches evidences this:

Welcome to College Possible, and thank you for your service! Through your efforts this year, you will have the opportunity to play a vital role in achieving our organization’s mission – helping low-income students with potential and motivation to achieve their dream of going to college. Since our founding in 2000, our juniors have achieved more than a 21% score increase on their ACT exams! In addition, 98% of our seniors have earned admission to college. Those truly remarkable results could not have been
achieved without the dedication of AmeriCorps members like you— you have some big shoes to fill in the year ahead! (“College Possible Junior Curriculum”)

The language of this introductory note—early evidence of the challenging year ahead—foregrounds results almost from the beginning; it places the burden of achievement primarily on the coach and sets an expectation of “dedication,” lest they fail to live up to “achieving the organization’s mission.” This note also rearticulates the organization’s mission by means of the social impact that results from such a mission—“helping low-income students with potential and motivation to achieve their dream of going to college”—in a way that makes the coach’s service to the organization and its assumed outcome incapable of being disentangled. In this way, it positions the coach as doubly beholden—to the organization and to his or her students. It suggests that without the coach’s dedication and direct service, the students involved in the program will not achieve their dream and the organization will fail.

The language that College Possible employs—especially its emphasis on getting results—encourages “buy-in” from its coaches, while at the same time positioning community results at the forefront of their service (Their newest slogan reads “15 years of results by degrees”). To begin, they wed the idea of getting results with the solvency of the organization. Results literally ensure that the organization stays afloat—by demonstrating a commitment to and success in getting results, College Possible attracts donors, whose money allows the organization to expand and reach more students. At the same time, embedded in the word “results” is a belief in the transformative power of a college degree; getting results is measured as an ACT score increase or a college
acceptance letter. In this way, the word becomes a placeholder for social mobility and “beating the odds,” ideas that idealistic college graduates can rally around. In a productive way, then, we see that the loaded nature of the word “results” does a lot of the rhetorical work for the organization’s expectation-setting agenda—it envelops both the organization’s long-term prospects and the community’s progress.

The burden of expectation shouldered by College Possible coaches reverberates in relationships throughout the organization, particularly in the relationships fostered between coaches and their students. On the first day of after-school sessions, juniors are reminded of what “the College Possible program want[s] and expect[s] for you and from you” (“Junior Curriculum” 37). These include: “Attend the Baseline ACT, Attend three practice ACTs, Attend the Real Deal ACT…Attend session regularly…Project a positive attitude and image for College Possible” (37). It concludes, “I am aware that I am fortunate to have my school and my community believe in me and my abilities and I will do my best to live up to that trust” (37). College Possible holds its participating students to a high standard, with a not-insignificant amount of Saturday morning obligations organized throughout the school year. Beyond the anticipated benefit of taking part in multiple practice ACTs, the thinking goes that students who demonstrate commitment to the program and who meet the expectations set forth by College Possible will be more likely to persist in a college environment where there is no one physically present to follow up on students. A 2013 report compiled by ICF International, a policy consulting firm that specializes in not-for-profit research, found that “College Possible coaching exerts a significant and positive influence on college success. The more hours of coaching students receive, the more likely they are to enroll in, persist throughout, and
complete college” (1). The language evidenced in the Junior Curriculum, as well as the follow-through enacted by coaches, play a crucial role in ensuring that expectations are understood and carried out across the organization.

At the same time, the language that College Possible employs often ventures into patronization and a complicity in building a relationship on expertise and information-dissemination. In an interview with Minnesota Public Radio, College Possible founder Jim McCorkell speaks of the time and resources that coaches invest in the success of their students:

We never say to a Corps member, ‘We’d like you to work 60-70 hours a week.’ We just hand them a group of students and say, ‘Their lives are in your hands.’ That focuses their attention. And what they do is they treat them like their own children. The language our Corps members use is they’ll talk about their ‘kids.’ And they really get to be like their kids. So in a lot of ways, that’s the role they play. (“Bright Ideas”)

Such language reifies the relations of power that social justice work strives to overturn—it represents the non-profit as the benevolent liberator, positions the high school students as deficient and “in need,” and instills in coaches a paternalistic fervor. This rhetoric epitomizes the “savior” complex that most non-profits affect and that reflexive service learning practitioners and community engaged researchers seek to avoid. Underlying McCorkell’s explanation of the nature of the relationship between coaches and students is a tacit acknowledgment of the exploitation of idealistic college graduates, whose emotional connection with their students obscures the learned helplessness and paternalism endemic to such a relationship. In conflating the time-intensiveness with the
role that coaches are encouraged to take on in their students’ lives, McCorkell’s language does little to disrupt such a narrative, instead demonstrating the ways in which non-profits often reinforce the role of the “savior” whose expertise and cultural capital can lift up the culturally oppressed.

One thing that we see in McCorkell’s language, in Kirtley’s language, and in the College Possible Junior Curriculum is a lack of voices emanating from the students themselves. That is, each of these passages places responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the College Possible coach—“You must do WHATEVER it takes to support our students” or “you have some big shoes to fill in the year ahead.” Part of Eli Goldblatt’s articulation of community engagement work revolves around community organizer Saul Alinsky’s notion of “self-interest.” Goldblatt writes, “The proper function of the organizer, in Alinsky’s view, is to identify problems that affect people individually but help them see these problems as issues they can do something about collectively” (321). This is one realm in which College Possible reaffirms its participation in dominant discourses and relations of power—it places so much emphasis on the role of the coach and does not offer up a space to listen to students’ self-interest for participating in the program and attending college. It does not offer opportunities for students to drop out of the program or to provide feedback that can dramatically alter the practices of the organization. In fact, the program encourages coaches to will students who are unsure about going to college to reconsider, all in the name of the organization’s mission. By doing so, College Possible subjugates students’ self-interest and claims to be operating by what is best for the students even as it doesn’t take into consideration their voices.
Graduate students—whether instructing a service learning course or in a researcher role—must resist adopting a vocabulary that simply reasserts the status quo, a particular danger when dealing with quick-strike engagement opportunities that are institutionally mandated or hastily arranged. Without resorting to shows of paternalism or *noblesse oblige*, service learning and community engagement that is enacted by graduate students—especially work that is oriented toward issues of social justice—must make clear the stakes of such work while at the same time articulating how participation and “success” will be defined. Such definitions should be negotiated between the instructor or researcher and the community partner beforehand. And even though such partnerships “may not turn into close, multi-faceted, ongoing relationships, the limited partnerships are nonetheless mutually significant when they meet articulated goals” (Bringle and Hatcher 511). Indeed, communication is key.

And yet, despite the need for definitions of performance and success to be mutually negotiated in engagement endeavors, it is usually left to the community organization—at least in service learning partnerships—to articulate and reiterate expectations. Stoecker and Tryon speak of the difficulties of developing clear expectations in campus-community relationships; one organization staff member they interviewed says, “Part of me being the heavy is to set the tone of: ‘The learning part of this is between you and the university; we’re participating in this because we need these resources to do the work that we’re doing, there are people counting on us, and if you’re letting us down, you’re letting them down, and we won’t stand for that!’” (91). That the expectations regarding performance and success oftentimes come exclusively from community partners, rather than being foreground in the classroom—whose primary
concern often centers on the learning or research side of the partnership—speaks to the
gulf in communication and mutual concern that can hinder campus-community
partnerships. When service learning practitioners and community-engaged scholars are
uninterested or unburdened by a student’s performance in their service capacity, one
finds that “community organization staff…continually make concessions to serve the
demands of the institution rather than to meet their own needs” (Gonzalez and Golden 91).

I see establishing a vocabulary focused on setting expectations and getting results,
as College Possible does, as a remedy to the “potential for student resentment and less-
than-quality performance” in service learning or to the “historical paternalistic
relationship” of campus-community research partnerships (Martin et al. 58; Case et al.
398). With a clear agenda that arises from community needs, and firm language regarding
how to meet such community-negotiated expectations that is integrated into assessment
metrics or into a memorandum of understanding, graduate students engaging in service
learning or community engagement may be able to resist the institutionally-legitimized
tendency to grab hold of university-based benchmarks for success at the expense of
community needs. With an instructor or researcher who is constantly in contact with his
partner organization and who is, semester-by-semester, restructuring the service
experience so as to respond to “ad hoc ‘projects’ that grow out of the opportunities
presenting themselves in a given semester,” a campus-community partnership can be both
community-centric and outcome-oriented (Flower 27).
2.2.2 Intensive near-peer mentoring and coaching

That College Possible stands firm regarding the outcomes it expects coaches to achieve does nothing to address the stark reality that high school coaches cannot achieve anything until they become a consistent presence in and integrated member of the high school in which they are placed. While I may have had supposed expertise in the college testing and admission process, I had no expertise in the language of inner-city schools, underfunded classrooms, and low-income students, nor in the daily pressures that prevented them from attending after-school sessions or studying for a big test. It was only through my presence at Hamilton High School four days a week from the beginning of the day until well past the final bell, as well as my dedication to my students that came in the form of an open door and a compassionate ear, that I earned the trust and respect of my students. And even then, these were hard-fought battles and hard-earned relationships. I attribute the results achieved to the “near-peer” model of coaching that College Possible employs.

The issue of age differential between students and community members rarely appears in the community engagement literature—most often, a discussion of “age” refers to the age of the students in a service learning course. And yet, age difference is an important factor in the relationships that are developed in campus-community partnerships. Many partnerships speak of literacy tutoring with youth, oral histories with adults or seniors, or collaborations with non-profit organizations often run by young or middle-aged professionals. What is little-discussed is the “near-peer” relationship, one that can much more readily lead to trust, compassion, reciprocity, and motivation.
College Possible coaches are recent college graduates working with high school juniors and seniors, as well as current college students. The age differential between coaches and students is anywhere between five and seven years. They are not exclusively peers, mentors, or teachers, but rather all three. Because of their proximity in age, coaches can occupy this intermediary space in a way that teachers or parents cannot, and this relationship provides coaches with a unique ability to ask of students what teachers or parents cannot. As a first-year coach, I was six years older than my high school juniors at Hamilton, but it had only been four and a half years since I had been in high school. I was both an authority figure and a participant in school life—I used the teachers-only copier at the same time that I ate lunch in the cafeteria with my students. The results that College Possible gets and publicizes are proof of the enduring relationships built between the coaches and their students. And I’d go so far as to say that these results are only possible because of the emotional investment of coaches in the wellbeing and future success of their students.

And yet, despite the familiarity I eventually discovered at Hamilton, my first few weeks as a “near-peer coach” were reminiscent of Flower’s parsing of the term mentor as her students toured the Community Literacy Center (CLC) in Pittsburgh:

you were entering someone else’s dynamic, intact world that did not feel a particular need for you or your gifts. You would not enter as an authority or celebrity but as an outsider. You would be accepted and valued not by your academic, economic, or middle-class status but by your ability to participate in the common life, the common concerns, and the shared struggle as adults and teenagers saw it. (13)
While it is true that my college degree-wielding status provided the impetus for the relationships I developed with my students, I nevertheless had to first justify my presence to my students in a high school existence that, up until that point, had been moving along without me. I had to invest in “the common life [and] the common concerns” of my students, and I was uniquely positioned to do this as a result of my interstitial presence as an advocate, but not strictly an educator, for these students.

Over my two years at Hamilton, I became interwoven into the fabric of the school to the point where teachers, administrators, and parents saw me, and College Possible by extension, as a part of the culture of the school. I received a bulletin board to display college acceptance letters, met with parents at parent-teacher conferences, presented at before-school staff meetings, and chaperoned field trips. My occupation of the interior space of the peer-mentor-teacher triad allowed me to move between worlds as a means of empowering students. Here, I am using Cushman’s definition of empowerment: “(a) to enable someone to achieve a goal by providing resources for them; (b) to facilitate actions—particularly those associated with language and literacy; (c) to lend our power or status to forward people’s achievement” (“Rhetorician” 14). By virtue of my positioning at the high school, as well as my freedom of movement between the school and College Possible itself, my cohort of students had access to a multitude of resources not available to other students at Hamilton. They received free ACT preparation books courtesy of Princeton Review, they participated in overnight campus visits to distant Midwestern universities, they had my letter of recommendation and advocacy in each of their college applications. The near-peer relationship that College Possible employs provided my students with a viable means of achieving their goal of a college education.
When viewed in terms of material benefits, such an analysis of the relationships between my students and me may seem one-sided or may make me seem like “a self-aggrandizing liberator of oppressed masses” (Cushman, “Rhetorician” 17). And yet, I was empowered in many ways as a result of these relationships. My close association with my students allowed me to further the college-going culture of the school, as these students would bring their friends to after-school sessions for ACT preparation or college application help. It allowed me to make special requests of teachers and administrators, who would listen to me because of the resources and legitimacy that College Possible offered the school’s brand and because of the positive impact on the school’s culture made by my students. And it allowed me to document to College Possible the results that were only possible because of my students. In other words, my students “legitimized my presence in their [school and in my workplace]…simply by associating with me” (Cushman, “Rhetorician” 17).

Most importantly, the near-peer model gets results: the near-peer relationship between my students and me embedded trust and understanding in its core. One night, in the fall of my students’ senior year, I was working with a student, Lupe, after her sports practice. All the students who had stayed after school had left the session by that point; Lupe, who had been at school and in the gym for almost 12 hours, came in to finally begin working on her application essay. At first, she was extremely hesitant to begin explaining the circumstances that surrounded her poor grades during her freshman and sophomore years of high school—though she hovered just below a 2.0 GPA for those years, she was bright and had scored a 23 on the ACT. I didn’t understand this discrepancy until we began talking; I learned only then—after over a year of my being
Lupe’s coach—that her dad, the one who had always pushed her in school, was incarcerated at the start of her freshman year. No longer having anyone checking up on her, Lupe started skipping school and failing classes. With tears streaming down her face, Lupe shared the terror and anger she felt the night her dad was arrested and imprisoned. This was an incredibly powerful moment emanating from an incredibly powerful story that indicated that Lupe had overcome significant obstacles on her path to college readiness. The essay, which Lupe and I worked on over the next few weeks, was the cornerstone of her application to a variety of schools around the Midwest.

My experiences with Lupe approximate Flower’s approach at the CLC, where she writes of the practice of seeking out the “story-behind-the story,” a means by which her students who work at the CLC can produce intercultural inquiry that helps the writers there more fully flesh out their thoughts and intentions:

Telling the *story-behind-the-story* is a more specific literate strategy that not only calls forth what teenagers know but also acknowledges the significance of their situated, local knowledge…In telling the story-behind-the-story and revealing the hidden logics and interpretative reasoning behind their actions, marginalized speakers and writers also reveal their own unacknowledged agency…Telling the story-behind-the-story not only challenges stereotypes but also replaces abstractions with purposeful individuals, and it conditionalizes overgeneralized claims with situated local knowledge. (56)

With regard to Lupe and her college application essay, it was an essay that only *she* could write. It realigned the expertise in our relationship at the same time that it empowered
Lupe as a holder of “situated, local knowledge.” Through this experience, Lupe took control over the college application process, which more often than not has the potential to make students feel like just a cog in the machine, as nothing more than a test score and a GPA. *She* was the one who dictated the terms of her application, not the colleges to which she was applying.

It was also a story that Lupe didn’t think was worth telling; she was content to rely on an easier, less emotionally revealing story if it meant that she could achieve the same results. And looking back, I can’t help but wonder if that same story would have ever seen the light of day had Lupe applied to college with her guidance counselor, a teacher, or even her mother. That I was none of these to her, but rather a confidante and an unflinching advocate, offered Lupe the space to share this story only as she became comfortable enough to share it. In fact, Lupe revealed that she had been avoiding me because she was nervous to share the story; only when she recognized that I was not there to judge or condemn her did she visit my classroom after her sports practice. Echoes Cushman, “There’s only so much we can get to know about our students within the sociological confines of the academic composition classroom…Yet when we approach the community, we maneuver around the sociological obstacles that hinder us in the classroom from communicating with our students in ways that show our identification with them” (19). My role as outside the realm of teacher or educator allowed me to circumvent the power structures embedded in traditional classrooms dynamics and instead “identify” with my student and her situation. I was not there to discipline or assess her; rather, my role was that of a resource. In so doing, she, along with other students, utilized our relationship to our mutual advantage—they had someone in their
life who would unequivocally support them in the college application process and beyond, thus allowing me to demonstrate to the Leadership Team at College Possible that my students were reaching benchmarks such as sending college applications and receiving acceptance letters.

College Possible works with a vulnerable population—low-income, first-generation high school students who dream of college but who have no one in their lives who has been through the process. Many of my students only had one parent in their lives, and these parents oftentimes were unable to offer assistance to their children in the college process. In my cohort of 33 at Hamilton High School, one student had a parent with a four-year degree, and there were four guidance counselors at the school who, in addition to college admissions, were also responsible for general discipline and academic issues for the 2,000 students at the school. Needless to say, there were not many resources that my students could rely on for help in the testing and admissions processes.

College Possible is, necessarily, a didactic organization—in many ways, the achievement of its mission relies implicitly on Friere’s “banking model” of education, which posits that students are empty vessels in which to store information. The information, in College Possible’s case, is not rote academic knowledge, but rather know-how of navigating the world of college testing and admissions. In middle- and upper-class communities, this information is passed down through parents, older siblings or family members, and college counselors. Because of this, College Possible involves a not-insignificant amount of “hand-holding.” As a high school coach, I would often need to locate students outside of their classes to remind them to accomplish the vital tasks set before them, ranging from bringing in a parent’s tax information for filing their FAFSA
to registering for the placement exams at the local state school. Such revelations may seem at odds with the notion of reciprocity for which scholars like Cushman and Flower advocate. Flower and Shirley Brice Heath write that reciprocity is achieved in “recognizing the history and contributions of community institutions, in commitment to a relationship not defined by a one-semester project, and in a respect for community expertise that is expressed in the active practice of dialogue” (47). Though Flower’s form of reciprocity does not account for the complicated web of interconnected players and institutions across which College Possible stretches—non-profit, secondary education (administration, teachers, students), politics (state and federal)—it nevertheless raises questions about the seeming “savior” complex that an organization like College Possible imbues in its coaches and its organizational creed. I don’t have the answers to this, but I assert that the above story of Lupe and her college application essay addresses one of the ways in which students exercise local power and wrest agency from the process in a way that empowers them as students and as human beings.

A near-peer model of graduate student community engagement would allow such students to work with a population of community members who don’t necessarily see them as researchers or as academics or as parents, but as advocates. In this way, the infrastructure of the Community Literacy Center—in which college-age writing mentors partner with local teens to identify contentious topics of interest and carry out projects that will produce movement amongst the community members who have a stake in such conversations—serves as a productive entryway. Peck, Flower, and Higgins write that, initially, “[t]eens in the school suspension project were wary…[and] were equally skeptical that the adult project leaders would or could arrange meetings for teens to
present their ideas about suspension to school administrators” (208). While the organizers and leaders of the project were ultimately able to get all stakeholders in the room together—no doubt partially as a result of their institutional legitimacy—it was the students who participated in the project whose texts dictated the conversation, ultimately resulting in a document that was required reading for teachers and administrators in their school. In this way, university agents are able to get stakeholders talking in a way that community members may not at the same time that community members are directing the conversation to topics of mutual interest.

Though Flower describes the story-behind-the-story as resulting from an “adult-teen” pair, I think that a “near-peer” pair can equally approach such a result. Flower’s description of the adult partner as “not an advisor, guide, or teacher but a supporter whose job is to draw out [the teen’s] expertise and best thinking” approximates my role as Lupe’s high school coach (55). Though it must be acknowledged that Flower and other representatives of her university play a role in sustaining the campus-community relationship here, graduate students who do not have substantial institutional legitimacy or who have not spent years cultivating relationships with community organizations can nevertheless utilize a near-peer model of community engagement. Such a move epitomizes Alinsky’s notion of “self-interest” while eschewing Flower’s “naïve complicity.”

2.2.3 Repositioning strategic failures as tactical successes/long-term goals

In many ways, College Possible Milwaukee implements its model from the top down. It adopts the model and infrastructure developed by the College Possible National office and perfected in the Minneapolis/St. Paul College Possible site for use in
Milwaukee. This, despite the fact that Milwaukee’s public education and state government landscapes could not be more different. For one, many of the Minneapolis and St. Paul schools that partner with College Possible are firmly suburban, meaning that the coaches work in and with schools that have newer facilities and more up-to-date resources. For another, Milwaukee is home to the nation’s oldest and largest school-voucher program, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. This program gives Milwaukee students and their parents the option of choosing to attend any Milwaukee public school—be it open-enrollment, charter, or magnet—that has the capacity to hold them, regardless of the neighborhood it is in or the distance from the student’s home to the school. As a result, many students from the north end of Milwaukee, for a variety of reasons, attend Hamilton High School on the far south side. What this means for College Possible is that many students are unwilling to stay after school because of the nearly two-hour ride home on public transportation.

Without going into too much detail regarding the differences of College Possible’s respective sites, I want to posit that, as a College Possible Milwaukee coach, I repositioned strategic failures as tactical successes, and further that the organization—despite being single-minded of mission—is not wholly averse to looking at failures with an eye to the long-term. The terms strategic and tactical arise from Michel de Certeau’s *The Critiques of Everyday Life*, and are explicitly applied to service learning in Mathieu’s *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition*. As Mathieu explains,

> In today’s colleges and universities, the trend seems to be toward creating long-term, top-down, institutionalized service-learning programs; or to continue with Michel de Certeau’s terminology, universities privilege
strategic rather than tactical service programs (1984). Strategies, according to de Certeau, seek to create stable spaces that can overcome temporal changes. Creating strategies means institutionalizing, creating official spaces, like service-learning offices or university-controlled community centers in local neighborhoods. As de Certeau shows, seeking and creating strategic power has certain benefits: Actions can be calculated, continuity can be assured, and broader spaces can be claimed or controlled. (96)

It is easy to identify the strategic approach that College Possible undertakes in its endeavor to help low-income students graduate from college. It takes a model that has been proven successful in one space and seeks to replicate it in a geographically different space with, at times, vastly different material needs and concerns. College Possible believes that this model can “overcome temporal changes” and assure “continuity” in its practices independent of local differences.

What is missing in this articulation of College Possible is the means by which College Possible coaches often employ hyper-local practices in their partner high schools that respond to the material needs within that space. While experiences between high school coaches are similar—student apathy and success are near-universals—they are nevertheless individual and particular to the schools in which the coaches serve. As a high school coach at Hamilton, I earned the trust of teachers and administrators by, among other things, speaking at staff meetings and being the faculty sponsor for the Slam Poetry Club. I got to know the teachers on a first-name basis and would attend school theater productions and teacher socials. The means by which coaches at other schools
earned the trust of staff members differed based on local needs and roles that they could fill. With regard to operating within the web of relationships at the high school, I “needed to spend time keeping my mouth shut and doing whatever work needed doing before understanding the local setting well enough to help create anything new” (Mathieu 107).

Similarly, the tactics that I used to achieve the goals set forth by College Possible were attuned to the realities of my students, realities that didn’t emerge until I had “kept my mouth shut” and “did whatever work needed doing” to gain the trust and understand the unique experiences of my students. Jeff was a student of mine who was, by his own admission, “not college material.” The only reason that he was in College Possible was because his next-door neighbor was the coach who preceded me at Hamilton.

Nevertheless, he attended after-school sessions religiously and participated in all of the Saturday activities that College Possible asked him to attend—practice ACTs, community service, and campus visits. After receiving his first ACT results, a promising score of 19, Jeff began to rethink his earlier comments about his college readiness. He evidenced a new commitment to his studies and his comportment toward school. Yet by the time his senior year came, Jeff was back to his old academic routine—he began to skip school, get in fights, and turn in incomplete work. Something had changed—an attitude adjustment that I never quite figured it out—but it forced me to reassess my approach to Jeff’s post-high school life, even as it meant veering from the script that College Possible had provided me.

With a strategic approach in mind, College Possible wants each of its students to apply to, matriculate into, and ultimately graduate from college. This is the basis for the “measurable success, broad institutional presence, and sustainability” that College
Possible’s efforts ensure, efforts that Mathieu asserts can be “somewhat generic and not responsive to the particular rhetorical moment” (98-9). Strategic planning, she continues, “means securing stable continuity over time, and in many ways resists local rhetorical responsiveness” (99). And yet, I assert that one of my greatest successes as a coach with College Possible was recognizing the importance of acknowledging my students’ self interest, even when it meant forgoing the organization’s immediate concern with strategic goals in favor of the kairotic, rhetorically responsive needs of my students.

Jeff’s continued assertion that he was “not college material” eventually led to an interest in looking for work opportunities after high school graduation. I convinced Jeff to apply to five colleges just as a back-up, but he and I spent most of our time together applying for Job Corps, a technical training initiative through the Department of Labor that would provide him with free vocational training in northern Wisconsin. While this represented a compromise in the measurable success of College Possible—Jeff would be a student who would count against the percentage of College Possible students who matriculated to college following high school—it nevertheless responded to the local needs that the situation presented. Such a compromise arose from my acceptance of the fact that it was okay to “fail” at the task College Possible set before me, since what came of it was what Jeff thought was best for him at the time. As Mathieu admits, “The freedom for the project not to succeed was important for me, and for the students. I didn’t want us to find ourselves in a situation where we felt we had to” make community members do something they didn’t want to do (108). Similarly, forcing Jeff to go to college just to meet strategic needs as determined by College Possible would have meant putting the needs of the organization over the needs of the students with whom I worked.
The silver lining to this failure is that, despite being at-odds with the mission of the organization, Jeff decided that he wanted to remain a part of College Possible after high school. Though he felt that his decision to not attend college would disappoint me in the present, he nevertheless recognized the advocacy and cultural capital that College Possible offered him, and he didn’t want to let slip this institutional advantage and legitimacy. By remaining a student in the program, Jeff would be assigned a College Possible college coach who would contact him and support him if he ever chose to return to college. In this way, Jeff presciently co-opted the institutionalized, strategic goals of College Possible to work for him, and this maneuver empowered him, again in Cushman’s sense of “enabl[ing] someone to achieve a goal by providing resources for them” and “lend[ing] our power and status to forward people’s achievement” (14).

The supposed failure of the above situation in strategic terms is mitigated by its seeming success at a local level, and this, to me, is an important point of departure from institutional narratives. By allowing for strategic failures to take place—for institutional or curricular agendas to not get promoted—graduate students undertaking community engagement work can reposition such situations as moments of tactical success. Such moments might seem like out-and-out failures at the time—certainly, Jeff’s choice not to go to college was hard for me to swallow, especially because I had spent so much time working to convince him of his intelligence and the merits of a college degree. And yet, such a decision forced me to listen to Jeff and to what he was really saying. I had been blinded for so long by College Possible’s agenda that I hadn’t paid attention to Jeff’s own desires. Here we might again see the necessity of Eli Goldblatt’s invocation of “self-interest” as articulated by Saul Alinsky—Jeff’s self-interest at the time did not involve
getting a college degree, and by circumventing a strategic approach to our relationship, I was able to work with Jeff in other endeavors. As such, a theory and practice of short-term engagement work would be less focused on—but not immune to—strategic goals and more focused on tactical ones. Or perhaps, such short-term work might look to “develop more discrete indicators” of social change or “finer-grained ways of seeing” such a scenario as a success (Rose, Back 14; Flower 60). After all, “analysis, especially the fairly broad kind used in policy making—tallies, percentages, trends—fills in only part of the picture of complex human reality” (Rose, Back 14). In Jeff’s highly-individual case, co-opting the legitimacy of College Possible without caving to its strategic approach served his own self-interest, a position that strategic enterprises often do not—cannot—account for.

2.2.4 A yearlong commitment to service

Amy Martin, Kristy SeBlonka, and Elizabeth Tryon bring to the table the issue of “time” in service learning partnerships. They write that it “is somewhat surprising…how seldom the problem of ‘time’ has been raised in the literature” (57). They conclude, “It may not be practical for all service learning commitments to be a minimum of a full year…but if higher education faculty, students, and administrators at least recognize the shortcomings of short-term service learning, they can work to mitigate them with better planning” (72). Indeed, one of the benefits of College Possible is that its model relies on the post-college “year of service” that President Obama and others have championed. It follows the academic calendar that begins in late summer and concludes roughly one year later. Along with the day-to-day commitment, this model allows for continuity in the college process for the students served.
Community organization staff back up Martin et al.’s contention that short-term service has identifiable downsides: “Fourteen of the people we interviewed agreed that short-term service is often a particularly bad fit or inappropriate for direct service, especially when working with youth” (Martin et al. 62). College Possible, by contrast, requires a yearlong commitment to service, with the option to reapply for a second term of service. As a two-year coach, I worked with students from the beginning of their ACT encounters until their final ACT, as well as from the beginning of the composition of their college application essays until their final selection and enrollment. This yearlong commitment allows coaches to establish trust among students, develop relationships, and invest in student success.

Such a commitment also allows coaches to establish for their students the reliability and legitimacy of College Possible as an organization, which aids in the transition process when a junior year coach does not return for a second year of service. Though I was a coach during my students’ junior and senior years, there were a handful of coaches who did not return for a second term of service. While the students inevitably take longer to warm up to their senior year coach, having developed a close relationship with their junior year coach, much of the work of legitimization is already done because they trust the organization of College Possible and they trust the process. Such relationship-building ensures sustainability in partner schools from one year to the next.

Sustainability is a major centerpiece in service learning literature—Mathieu, for one, questions whose needs get prioritized when sustainability is the aim, while Cushman advocates for professors to create sustainable partnerships that respond to stakeholders’
needs by treating service sites as places of research, teaching, and service. On sustainability in community literacy initiatives, Goldblatt writes,

the traditional approach may not be the most suited for the needs of adult learners in a neighborhood literacy center or children in an after-school program. They need teachers who are not just passing through and programs that do no appear one year and evaporate the next. They need literacy programs that take into account the array of demands on a stressed community. Most of all, they need tutors who see individual learners as whole people and university partners sensitive to the entire missions of local agencies, not just researchers studying subjects in sites or educators supervising students in field placements. (316)

Goldblatt is not the first, nor will he be the last, to lament the “traditional approach” to community engagement—otherwise notated as a “hit-it-and-quit-it” approach to service. Indeed, such an approach is a serious concern with campus-community partnerships, as it eschews a genuine acknowledgement of the problems of sustainability caused by short-term service. These are problems that “risk alienating more and more community organizations until the practice of service learning itself is threatened” (Hidayat et al. 160).

Developing a yearlong campus-community relationship is perhaps the best way to combat this “traditional approach,” and it is easiest to accomplish when there is a tangible, definable goal in mind. To this end, it might be best for short-term community engagement to be oriented around mutually negotiated projects rather than direct service like literacy tutoring. The ways in which graduate students enact such a project is
inevitably situational and context-dependent, but we can turn to Adler-Kassner’s employment of interest-based organizing as a potential model. Adler-Kassner writes that such organizing relies on identifying issues, not problems: “Issues…emerge from relationships…[I]ssues are definable, specific things that can be changed. This is distinct from problems, the kinds of big picture issues…that are certainly there, but are headbangingly frustrating…With an issue, it’s possible to identify a goal, a definition of what success will look like” (100-1). By establishing a project based on an issue rather than on a problem and around which the class (in the case of service learning) or the graduate-student-cum-researcher can rally—a project nevertheless established primarily by and with approval from the community partner—graduate students might mitigate the issues associated with the “traditional approach” to engagement work, planning relationships that instead are attuned to how the needs or projects of the organization may change from one month to the next. Of her work at the Community Literacy Center, Flower writes, “Each new CLC project tried to build on methods and successes from the last…It took a fairly systematic problem-solving stance to articulating goals, planning an action, and then reflecting on the outcomes, before leaping once again (with what was learned) back into the stream” (27).

In shaping partnerships and articulating goals not necessarily around the academic calendar but rather around the community calendar, instructors can bypass issues involving such calendars being continuously out-of-sync. Indeed, evidence of such yearlong service engagements that are written into the university’s institutional structure can be found at Trent University in Ontario (see Martin et al. 72). By developing projects that are tapped in to the needs and the calendar of the organization, rather than defining
the terms of the encounter by the university semester system, graduate student instructors can approximate the ideals of service for which scholars like Stoecker and Tryon, Mathieu, and Flower strive.

2.3 Doing the Most Good While Doing the Least Harm

In many ways, College Possible deviates from the higher education narrative of community engagement in that it foregrounds results in its mission and creates spaces for its coaches to subvert expected outcomes in favor of locally-situated needs. It provides an outlet for driven students who have few people in their lives with knowledge about the college process and creates changes in these students’ material realities by giving them the resources they need to exceed in college and ultimately graduate. It utilizes its idealistic recent college graduates to create impactful relationships and to produce assessable results that ensure their students are meeting certain benchmarks on the way to college success. And it does it all at a much more efficient cost than comparable college access programs.

At the same time, College Possible’s practices maintain “naïve complicity” in the social structures that hinder the same population of students that they are trying to embolden. It replaces authority figures like parents and teachers with a recent college graduate who nevertheless is granted expert status by association with College Possible and higher education in general. Further, the singular focus on results has the potential to reduce students to numbers to be crunched, while simultaneously obscuring the organizational agenda and profit-making that comes with documenting success. To a certain extent, I think that College Possible sees this as the price of doing business. Like academics who are institutionally mandated to engage in or who hastily arrange campus-
community partnerships, non-profit organizations like College Possible are largely complicit in a capitalist agenda that does little to alter policy and advocate for widespread social change, and that instead assures the continuance of the status quo by positioning coaches as “experts” and students as “in need.”

Nevertheless, as I addressed earlier, that community engagement will still occur in academia and in non-profits regardless of this conclusion is inevitable. As such, College Possible’s practices offer unique insight into the workings of a national non-profit that can provide means for graduate students to enact community engagement work aimed at social justice within the university setting and with the temporal and spatial constraints associated with their station in the university. These practices still take significant time and energy, two valuable resources that not all academics—especially new academics—have in ample supply. In looking to the service model of a non-profit like College Possible—a non-profit that takes recent college graduates and quickly attunes them to the needs of their organization before setting them on the path to working toward social change—to inform the engagement practices of graduate students and short-term lecturers, I hope to produce an ethic of “doing the most good while doing the least harm.” That College Possible’s team and the makeup of graduate students share similar qualities—amongst them being “overworked, transitory, [and] underpaid”—only highlights the potential to glean practices from the non-profit organization.
CHAPTER 3. TOWARD A PRACTICE OF SHORT-TERM SERVICE: IMPLEMENTATION IN A FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

3.1 Service Learning and First-Year Composition at Purdue

With this in mind, perhaps it is now time to see the practices elaborated upon in the previous chapters in application. Since the Fall semester of 2015 at Purdue University, I have been teaching English 108: Engaging in Public Discourse. The course is offered as an “accelerated” First-Year Composition (FYC) class; students with an ACT English score above 30 or who “usually try to exceed [their] instructor’s expectations” are encouraged to enroll (“Student Guide to ICaP”). English 108 meets less frequently than its FYC counterpart, English 106—in particular, the “conference” aspect of English 106 is omitted from English 108, as students are expected to enter English 108 with greater writing proficiency and a more firmly established writing process. Most importantly for the purposes of this thesis, students are informed that they “can expect to engage in some local community activities outside the classroom” (“Course Information”). As an FYC course with a service component, English 108 meets a variety of institutional and curricular needs—it promotes “active learning, student-centered learning, cooperative learning, lifelong learning, cross-cultural understanding, critical thinking, authentic evaluation,” all of which “are built into the very blood and bone of most community-based academic projects” (Deans 98). Such consciousness-building and
collaboration are also valued for their ability to eschew “empty assignment syndrome” (Brack and Hall 143) and “unreal rhetorical situations” (Heilker 71).

In some ways, English 108 fulfills the mission of Purdue—a public, land-grant institution—to truly be a university for the public. As such, it has the potential to go beyond simply privileging university discourses like assignments and assessment by working with community partners and designing mutually beneficial partnerships and projects. Community partners in the past have ranged from the ACE Campus Food Pantry to the Tippecanoe County Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Office to Purdue’s LGBTQ Center, and the composition-based service projects have ranged from public document design in the form of publicity materials and flyers to one-on-one writing consultations. The diversity of the community partners and the projects enacted alongside such partners are just some of the many strengths of English 108.

As an English 108 instructor, I have and am currently partnered with Westminster Village, a retirement community in West Lafayette that counts among its residents former Purdue professors and staff, as well as prominent community members. Prior to my own involvement in this partnership with Westminster Village, there was an existing relationship between Westminster Village and the ICaP program, making the facilitation and introduction of the project easier to broach with the volunteer coordinator. The continuation of a relationship with a community organization fostered by previous faculty or instructors is the case for many of the partnerships undertaken by graduate students teaching a service-based FYC approach. The partnership between my class and Westminster Village focuses on composing oral histories with partner residents—my students produce interview questions, twice interview and record the conversations with
their resident, and create a cohesive narrative from the interviews that nevertheless remains faithful to the original telling. Adding ambient music and cleaning up the audio with audio-editing software, students see themselves as the producers, while their partner residents are the stars.

Oral history as a pedagogical practice accomplishes a number of curricular aims: it acclimates students to a primary research practice (interviewing), it forces them to communicate across generational divides as they shape and reshape their interview questions, and it asks them to compose multimodally with audio rather than print. Beyond this, the oral history project likewise benefits partner residents in a variety of ways: it produces an audio document whose contents can be distributed to loved ones as a lasting remembrance, it provides them the opportunity to engage with current college students, and it offers them the chance to “fashion the past in the practice of their social identity” (Friedman 853).

My approach to the class has been grounded in an exploration of narrative theory, asking the question, “Why do we tell stories?” Equally important, I am concerned with the relationship between communities and memory making—in other words, how community members situate themselves in stories about their communities and how communities pass along stories to future generations. For the first assignment, students are asked to produce a four to six minute audio narrative that, in addition to acclimating them to the audio production technology that will be vital to their oral histories, tells a story exemplifying their connection to or distance from a community that is important to them. In this assignment, students align themselves with geographical, racial, ethnic, and academic communities, grappling with issues both of storytelling and of community. To
this end, we read from excerpts of Thomas Deans’ reader *Writing and Community Action*. Additionally, we spend time with Hayden White’s “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” a dense article of narrative theory that grounds narrative in the act of “moralizing,” or an identification of the social structures that define our systems of morality. With these articles, students are better able to understand their own reasons for telling stories of alienation to or acceptance in the communities they write about. They then move on to the oral history project, where issues of community memory and audio production coalesce in a service partnership.

3.2 A Model of Graduate Student-Led Service Learning at Purdue

Graduate students overwhelmingly comprise the body of instructors of English 108—in the 2015-16 school year, all nine sections of English 108 were staffed by graduate students. And yet, scant literature explores the role of graduate students teaching service learning—the scholarship that does exist on this topic primarily examines motivations for graduate students who teach service learning, rather than infrastructural models, pedagogies, or labor issues associated with service learning (see Garrison and Jaeger). This reality calls for a closer examination of the nature of campus-community partnerships sustained by graduate student instructors, both as it relates to the comportment of these pedagogies toward community concerns and to the constraints and affordances of graduate student-led community engagement or service learning. To that end, I have identified three characteristics of my partnership with Westminster Village that I see as necessarily entangled with the idea of graduate students undertaking engagement or service work:

1. *An institutionally sustained campus-community partnership*
2. *A yearlong partnership*

3. *A direct service project model of engagement*

I will look to reconcile these characteristics of my experience as a graduate student instructor offering a service-based course with two other points of interest from this thesis: 1) College Possible’s model of service, and 2) Hidayat et al.’s three areas for improvement regarding community-focused partnerships in service learning. By looking both at my own pedagogy in current practice and in consideration of future service learning partnerships as it relates to these models, I hope to contribute to a conversation of service learning in universities that has, for too long, neglected to address the impact of temporary instructors like graduate students teaching service learning courses.

3.2.1 An institutionally sustained campus-community partnership

As mentioned above, the relationship between English 108 instructors and Westminster Village has existed since 2010, when Assistant Professor Kendall Leon first approached Westminster Village about a potential partnership. Leon’s iteration of the oral history project focused on audio production, whereas graduate student Alexandra Hidalgo’s iteration the following semester utilized film production techniques to compose the oral histories. Since then, graduate student instructors teaching English 108 and partnering with Westminster Village have oscillated between print narratives and audio narratives. Having thus cultivated a relationship with English 108 instructors, Melissa, the retirement community’s volunteer coordinator, was not entirely surprised by my cold-call about a month before the start of the fall semester.

A model of graduate student community engagement that is rooted in institutionally sustained partnerships between faculty or previous instructors and
community organizations has its advantages. To begin, such partnerships avoid the scenario in which “someone who [does] not know local organizations [has] to create multiple community connections, making it possible—and perhaps necessary—that some connections [will] fall through the cracks or be deemed irrelevant” (87). A sustained partnership allows short-term instructors to pick up where another instructor left off—or to be recommended through the intervention of an engaged faculty member—without the drawn-out procedure of community organizations “feeling out” the reciprocal inclinations of the university agent. In these cases, the institutional history of such partnerships—when previously arranged to the community partner’s satisfaction—often transfers trust and goodwill where instructors might otherwise be met with hostility and skepticism. Likewise, such partnerships, I would argue, give more leverage in the relationship to the community partners, who have the opportunity to dictate the terms of the partnership to the new instructor. The partnership with Westminster Village had lain dormant for about six months prior to my contacting Melissa, yet the ease with which she picked up the partnership—and the confidence she felt in defining the terms of the arrangement—is a testament to the role that institutionalized partnerships can play in graduate student engagement endeavors.

The role that mentorship plays in Purdue’s English 108 instructors’ conception of campus-community partnerships is equally important. Graduate student instructors teaching English 108 are required to first enroll in and complete English 680: Experiential Learning and Engagement Theory, a course that both focuses on the scholarship of experiential learning and engagement and requires that students in the course participate in a service learning partnership that has been fostered and sustained
by the professor. As graduate students instructing their own service learning courses, students in English 680 are able to take part in a rhetorically responsive project that meets community needs at the same time that they are introduced to the sorts of tensions and conflicts that their own English 108 students inevitably face over the course of a service project. By modeling the role that a participant in a service learning course plays in a campus-community partnership and producing a project that is needed and perhaps outside the scope of the community partner’s expertise, graduate students in English 680 learn the ins and outs of instructing a service learning course by participating in one that focuses on community concerns.

At the same time, institutionally sustained campus-community partnerships are not neutral encounters, and as addressed in Chapter 1, they have the potential to remain overly general and maladapted to current local needs. Mathieu reminds us that, in strategic partnerships, “[t]he very need to repeat service projects in many different course sections, semester after semester, may predetermine what kinds of projects are created. To decide a year ahead…makes it more likely that the projects will be somewhat generic and not responsive to the particular rhetorical moment” (99). While I would argue that the oral history project has a very clear exigency—especially in light of the fact that one of the participating residents passed away just a few weeks after her oral history was completed—it nevertheless can be replicated ad infinitum. In this way, it doesn’t necessarily respond to a kairotic, in-that-moment need by Westminster Village, but rather to a continued, more sustained concern—that of “provid[ing] permanence to information that might have only been conveyed orally and eventually lost” (Hidalgo and Leon 52). My partnership with Westminster Village complicates Mathieu’s idea of tactical
partnerships in that it doesn’t “devise new time- and space-appropriate methods for how we plan and evaluate our work,” but it nevertheless “view[s] the community as a source of expertise, foreground[s] specific community needs, [and] involve[s] students in work that has specific rhetorical exigencies” (17; 110).

Indeed, in the debate here between strategic and kairotic service learning partnerships, we see playing out the exact tension evidenced in Mathieu’s questions regarding the value of institutionalization: “[W]hat values are we institutionalizing? What needs are we prioritizing? What risks do we incur when we seek to create broad, measurable, sustainable programs that claim institutional resources and space?” (98). It may be the case that graduate student engagement work inherently privileges a form of service learning that does not seek a kairotic response to a pressing social issue, but rather, one that is institutionalized and, thus, easier to implement and execute. Because of the time constraints on graduate students’ stay in their communities, it may be that such engagement work is simply the best way to acclimate graduate students to service learning—indeed, my partnership with Westminster Village, though it is community-oriented and follows the lead of the partner residents’ wishes, is nevertheless a partnership that is “somewhat generic.” To counteract this, and to privilege a kairotic campus-community partnership, graduate student engagement work might benefit from inheriting the partnerships, but not necessarily the projects, from already engaged faculty members. In this way, graduate students can listen to the needs of community partners in that moment, rather than simply replicating a previously completed project.

I see the infrastructure of College Possible resonating with the role that sustained partnerships play in graduate student engagement work. Like these partnerships, College
Possible achieves its results because of the strong foundations that it lays in the city schools with which it partners. The sustained presence of College Possible in these schools—as well as the organization’s logo being ever-present on coaches’ clothing and in hallway signs—allows the organization to mitigate the impact of coach turnover from year to year. Indeed, such a sustainable partnership means that school administrators, as well as students and teachers, have a clear understanding of the organization’s mission and impact in their school. And it means that new coaches are able to establish trust and immediately work toward setting expectations and getting results. It also has in place an orientation—a shortened version of the mentorship practicum in place at Purdue—that acclimates coaches to the expectations of service learning partnerships and introduces them to the terms of engagement.

As addressed, it is possible for an institutionalized campus-community partnership to “be designed around community issues” (Hidayat et al. 158). Further, it is possible for these partnerships to be “designed and scheduled not a year before they are offered, but only one to a few months before, as the severity of community conditions and issues shift without warning” (158). This, however, would require that graduate student instructors be flexible and adaptable to the needs of community organizations, something that first-time service learning instructors may be hesitant to do. Nevertheless, by inheriting sustained campus-community partnerships that have already established lines of trust and communication, graduate students can work toward implementing *kairotic*, rhetorically responsive service projects that affect material change in the goings-on of community partners.
3.2.2 A yearlong partnership

My partnership with Westminster Village has lasted for an entire academic year, from Fall 2015 to Spring 2016. Although the projects each semester have looked fairly similar, the longevity of the partnership has allowed for increased buy-in from the residents of Westminster Village and for a smooth relationship between Melissa and me. Further, it has legitimized my students’ presence at the retirement community, and it has instilled in my students during the Spring semester a belief in the viability of the project, which is especially important as the project nears its conclusion and due dates surrounding the project inch closer.

A yearlong partnership also allowed Melissa and I to experiment with different means of achieving a stronger, more communicative, and more community-oriented partnership with improved results for the participating residents. In a one-off service partnership, any bumps in the process are not necessarily reflected on and iteratively adapted for the partnership’s benefit, but in our case, we were able to make adjustments in the second semester to improve the overall process of implementation and execution of the partnership. As one example: in the first semester, I did not require all groups to meet with their residents before submitting their final copy to check for transcription errors, though most groups did. One group, however, did not, and their resident was displeased to find that in her final draft, among other things, her name was misspelled and her children’s birth order was transcribed incorrectly. This required additional delays, as the group hurried to fix the corrections and bring the new print version back to the printers for binding. During the second semester, I required that all groups meet with their residents prior to submitting the final draft.
College Possible’s model likewise operates on a yearlong model of service, with the option for coaches to extend their service to a second year. Such a model aligns with the high school calendar, and College Possible’s curriculum is attuned to the cyclical pressures of ACT season, college application season, and financial aid season—in this way, the organization ensures that students will always have a definable and tangible goal set out before them. Second, the yearlong model of service—along with the attendant man-hours spent in the high schools—allows coaches to invest in their relationships with students and with school staff. Knowing that the same coach will be with the students throughout the academic year allows both students and school staff to better incorporate College Possible into their daily goings-on.

If graduate student-led service learning courses were implemented on the assumption that partnerships would last for a minimum of one year, it may encourage community partners to be more ambitious in what they ask of university agents. Though the body of students may change from one semester to the next, the carryover in institutional memory would insure that the instructors could be tasked with catching students up, rather than relying on community partners to do so. Indeed, as addressed earlier, community partners are often relied upon to train students and acclimate them to the nature of the partnership—with a yearlong partnership, however, graduate student instructors in the second semester would be able to spend more time engaged with their community partners. As Martin et al. write, “building those relationships between faculty and community allows an easier replication of projects because ground rules have already been established and therefore some of the advance work can be cut down” (71). Though we want to be careful of a mindless “replication of projects,” as evidenced in the previous
section, a yearlong model of service learning can contribute to more work ultimately being done by service learners for community organizations and partners.

3.2.3 A direct service project model of engagement

The merging of a direct service model of engagement with a project model similarly presents a unique opportunity for graduate student instructors to foreground community needs in their partnerships while avoiding distancing students from the social issues on which such partnerships center. Usually, such models are distinctly separate—students may work in a direct service capacity volunteering with a community organization or tutoring clients at a local literacy center, or they may engage in project-based service where they interact with the staff members at a local community organization as they set out to create materials for the community partner. My partnership with Westminster Village benefits from its orientation as a “direct service project.” That is, my students work directly with the partner residents at the same time that they work towards the completion of a mutually negotiated project. This has a number of benefits. First, it has a specific start and end date and a tangible final product: an oral history, both in print and on CD/USB drive, for participating residents to keep or share with loved ones. What’s more, this project offers a solution to concerns of memory loss and social isolation that Westminster Village staff, by themselves, do not have the “knowledge or infrastructure to embrace” (Hidalgo and Leon 52). While direct service models themselves are problematic—Martin et al. interviewed one community organization staff member who did not want to have “students come in, meet with [the community partner’s clients] for a few weeks, then start to get connected and…drop off the face of the planet” (62)—combining direct service with a specific project may help redirect the focus of the
partnership toward the completion of a task or goal. In this way, community needs remain at the fore, yet the short-term nature of the service is taken into account.

Shannon M. Bell and Rebecca Carlson, in Stoecker and Tryon’s collection, indicate that project-based service learning works well because the community organizations “would not have to expend the resources to create something for the service learner to do” (30). In our case, Melissa, who was always looking for ways to connect residents of Westminster Village to the larger Purdue and West Lafayette communities, saw this oral history partnership as yet another way to bridge that divide. Further, that there was a clear exigency and a clear benefit for the residents made such a partnership even more attractive. In the past, Purdue-Westminster Village relations had operated more along the lines of an expert-client model, where residents were asked to complete surveys or perform tasks that would be studied by university agents with little perceived benefits for themselves (Hidalgo and Leon 44). By reversing the dynamic and offering residents the opportunity to leave the partnership with memories and with a history to pass along, my partnership with Westminster Village more closely approaches the sort of relationships for which Sullivan and Porter advocate: “Caring for participants as individuals, and out of a spirit of concern and commitment, is how we should construct our ethos as researchers” (113).

That English 108 students often develop personal relationships with the residents they interview suggests that, rather than removing affect or bias from the partnership, “the caring ethic” becomes an integral part of the partnership (Sullivan and Porter 113). In other words, the relationships fostered by this project inform the students’ perception
of the project’s value, as well as their perception of what they themselves take away from
the partnership. Echo Hidalgo and Leon,

Because students developed relationships with their audiences—and they
valued the knowledge they learned from them—they cared deeply about
the final product. They wanted to produce good projects that would be
pleasing to their audience, not because they wanted to win them over, but
because the relationship itself had value to them. In this way, students also
cared about the process…[T]he choices students made as composers had
consequences outside the classroom for people with whom they had
developed bonds. (46-7)

This is certainly what all service learning practitioners dream of—students wanting to
produce good results not for a grade, but because the relationships they’ve developed
through the partnership are important to them. By combining the direct service model of
service learning with the project-based model, this oral history assignment connects the
emotionalism associated with the direct service component to the finished results desired
by the partner organization.

College Possible works much the same way—the relationships developed
between coaches and students position coaches to go the extra mile not for themselves,
but for their students, because “the relationship itself [has] value to them.” In fact, as
mentioned earlier, I would argue that the results that College Possible achieves are only
possible because of the relationships established between coaches and students. Though
the relationships between students in English 108 and residents at Westminster Village
cannot be labeled “near-peer,” such bonds nevertheless return us to a conversation of the
“ethic of care”—and the potential for service learning partnerships to emanate from this ethic—as a valuable centerpiece of such partnerships. Without overextending themselves or their students, graduate student instructors can utilize the in-between positioning of a direct service project to replicate College Possible’s vocabulary of expectation and results—and the furthering of a results-based model through emotional buy-in—while avoiding the nebulous model of assessing community impact like in Herzberg’s service-based course. While it is unrealistic and exploitative to expect service learners to commit 60-70 hours a week to their service partnership, as College Possible does, a direct service project like my own with Westminster Village is nevertheless able to foreground the expectations of the project and emphasize the tangible results that arise because of the partnership by developing a relationship grounded in emotional connections and a “shared possible goal”—a goal that is attuned to both resident needs and curricular aims (Martin et al. 65). Further, by structuring such a direct service project around community issues, graduate student instructors can approximate Hidayat et al.’s vision regarding campus-community partnerships, though more kairotic projects can and should certainly be devised.

There are, of course, concerns with such a model. The distinct start and end dates may allow students to divorce themselves from the ongoing social issues that necessitate the partnership, as they may see their role as “finished” once the project ends. Further, they may not devote themselves wholeheartedly to the project, knowing that it has an expiration date. With careful post-project planning and instruction, graduate students can mitigate such concerns by extending the issues that arise as a result of the project into further assignments or units. Following the conclusion of the oral history unit, students in
my course write white papers that center on issues of aging, memory, and medicine. They identify stakeholders in these conversations and advocate for a certain solution to issues that inevitably accompany the aging process in America. In this way, they remain tapped in to the sorts of conversations that we have in class and that they witness firsthand at the retirement community; they are able to bring some of their concerns or reflections to bear in a legitimate way that nevertheless keeps them invested in the issues of aging. Likewise, on the final day of the semester, my students research and present on service organizations that they can apply to serve with post-college. Though the idea of and dangers in service are ongoing and ever-present conversations throughout our semester, this culminating activity reminds students that the opportunities to engage with their communities do not cease upon graduation.

3.3 Where We Go From Here

Community engagement in higher education is not going away anytime soon. In fact, an uptick in scholarship and institutional spaces devoted to community engagement suggest that it will only grow, as colleges become more concerned with providing “real-world” applications to learning and producing engaged, career-ready students. By focusing on service learning partnerships led by graduate students and other short-term instructors—a not-insignificant portion of the population of service learning instructors—we can arrive at a more fully-formed understanding of the complex interplay of community partners and university representatives. Current literature largely focuses on partnerships coordinated with tenure-track or full-time faculty, a reality that obscures the constraints of labor and longevity imposed upon graduate students who also want to undertake service learning or community engagement.
One way to begin thinking about graduate students and community engagement is to focus not on graduate students’ motivations, but rather the institutional models (or lack of models) that support these students as they undertake such work. Looking across higher education institutions, we may be able to track the positioning of community issues in these models and the sorts of projects or relationships that such models produce. At Purdue, the model supports sustaining partnerships and passing them on from one instructor to the next, though there are certainly exceptions to this model. A study that traces the mentorship of graduate students across the partnerships that these students ultimately undertake would allow us a glimpse into the impact of institutional mentorship on the practices of service learning instructors.

We also need to keep in mind the way that community organizations are written into or written out of the model of graduate student engagement. Most service learning scholarship, including this chapter, does not offer much, if any, commentary from the community partners themselves. Involving them in the process of graduate student-led community engagement would allow them to offer feedback from the other side of the aisle. Indeed, by involving community partners in the conversation, we may begin to better understand the benefits and drawbacks to short-term service from their perspective. While Stoecker and Tryon’s collection begins this conversation, more work can be done regarding issues of graduate student labor and resources.

Lastly, we need to continue striving to use our resources and cultural capital for good, and we need to remain reflexive regarding the ways in which community engagement that involves university agents often maintains a “naïve complicity” in the structures of power that encourage learned helplessness by community members. Indeed,
such complicity is easily obscured by the rewards system inherent to higher education, which often acknowledges publications and grants awarded but does not recognize work that addresses community concerns. While some universities have begun reexamining and rewriting tenure guidelines to account for this move toward community engagement, many still trail behind. There is still room to grow. And while the tide is turning on community engagement and issues of reciprocity, more can always be done.
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