

Responses to the Call for a National Strategic Plan

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The Service-Learning and Community Engagement Future Directions Project (SLCE-FDP) was launched in 2015. Since then approximately 40 individuals from a wide range of perspectives have come together as contributors of thought pieces that issue bold calls to guide the future of SLCE. In an essay accompanying the ten thought pieces in Fall 2015, Howard and Stanlick (2015) called for the “development and implementation of a U.S. national SLCE strategic plan” (p. 128). Their essay provides one answer to the question of how all of the ideas about the future of SLCE being assembled by the SLCE-FDP – and also being articulated in other publications over the last few years – can become more than individual thoughts, questions, and actions. In this essay we review the highlights of the call for a national plan and then share some of the responses to it as a basis for ongoing engagement with the proposal.

Howard and Stanlick (2015) have in mind “an intentional organizing effort broadly developed by multiple stakeholders . . . [to] move us beyond the current prevalence of independent, individual efforts . . . to a more coherent nationwide collective endeavor” (p. 128). Although the SLCE movement has made strides in the last twenty years, it has primarily occurred at the individual level: individual students, individual faculty and staff, individual courses, individual programs and centers, individual institutions, individual community organizations, individual disciplinary associations, individual regional and national organizations. Howard and Stanlick wonder “what collaborations might evolve if there were a platform to which many SLCE stakeholders and entities could contribute their voices,” and they offer the metaphor of a compass that “not only guides individuals . . . but also synergizes across all levels of organizations . . . and all stakeholders . . . for more lasting civic engagement that has greater impact on social justice” (p. 129).

Their rationale for a national plan for SLCE includes the sheer growth of the movement within higher education, the recent calls among many thought leaders for new ways to think about and implement SLCE, the innovation and synergy that

a national conversation can engender, and the value of greater clarity regarding our ultimate purposes as a movement and how best to advance them. Their sense is that a national planning process is needed to leverage the bold calls for enhancing SLCE being gathered by the SLCE-FDP, providing “the impetus, the structure, and the focus to bring each of them into conversation with other visions and strategies within and beyond this project” (p. 129). Their essay acknowledges several challenges: that the “very idea of a national strategic plan is likely to be contested,” that inevitably some voices will not be at the table, and that reaching consensus on either general directions or specific elements in a national plan will be difficult (p. 130). It asks: “What is the critical mass needed to move forward collectively and how do we best maintain open-ended dialogue around contested ideas?” (p. 131). And it proposes as a first step the identification or creation of a coordinating entity: Could the planning process be driven by a national organizational leader or by a group of representatives from several national organizations and a variety of other stakeholders? However it is coordinated, the authors note, there will need to be a way to engage stakeholders, identify funding, facilitate conversations, and develop and disseminate a product.

Howard and Stanlick summarize their call as follows:

Intended to support the flourishing of the work and its purposes across a wide range of contexts, such a large-scale strategic plan would, of necessity, be grounded in a sense of our ultimate vision(s), emerge from a set of broad goals, be accompanied by illustrative strategies, and point to indicators of positive change – all dynamic and co-created by the SLCE community as a whole We envision a multitude of opportunities for co-creation and collaboration – from conversations to white papers to a finalized strategic planning process. We urge you to become involved and join us. (pp. 130–131)

Building on the invitation to share ideas regarding a potential national plan issued in Howard and

Stanlick's essay, the SLCE-FDP has worked over the last year in a variety of venues to solicit responses to and invite ongoing thinking about the call for such a plan. To investigate interest and investment in the idea of a national plan and to begin gathering suggestions for how a planning process might proceed and what a plan might include, we have hosted in-person conversations, assembled recommendations and concerns from hundreds of individuals at conferences, and solicited the perspectives of national SLCE organizations. In the remainder of this essay, we summarize what we have heard to date; a third essay on the topic of a national plan for SLCE, forthcoming in the Spring 2017 Special Section of *MJCSL* dedicated to the SLCE-FDP, will provide analysis of the conversation to that point and offer substantive recommendations for subsequent action.

Perspectives from National SLCE Organizations

We invited leaders of national SLCE organizations to read Howard and Stanlick's (2015) essay (as well as the Introduction and Framing Essay for the SLCE-FDP, also published in the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, Fall 2015) and to respond on behalf of their organizations to a set of questions we sent them. Our questions addressed six issues:

- (a) their overall reactions to the Howard and Stanlick essay;
- (b) their suggestion(s) regarding the content to be included in a national plan for SLCE;
- (c) their suggestion(s) regarding the process of developing a national plan for SLCE;
- (d) their organization's potential involvement in developing a national plan for SLCE;
- (e) their reactions to the proposed coordinating entity for the development of a national plan for SLCE and their organization's potential role with such an entity; and
- (f) their view of the goals for the SLCE movement in the next two decades.

Five¹ organizations participated: Community-Campus Partnerships for Health (CCPH), Campus Compact, Imagining America, the International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE), and the International Partnership for Service-Learning (IPSL). While they are by no means a comprehensive set of national organizations, their responses offer some key thought leader perspectives regarding the idea of a national plan to guide the future of

SLCE. These responses are summarized below by question, not linked specifically to the respondent organization and in no particular order within each question.

Overall Reactions to the Essay

None of the five organizations objected to the idea of a national plan for SLCE, although they did raise some questions and cautions regarding the timing and the process through which it might move forward. They also wanted to ensure that such a plan would honor the autonomy of each organization to pursue its respective mission. One organization, in the midst of its own planning process, suggested that we should "get everything that can be got out of the current effort before focusing on something else." Another expressed support for "the spirit of creating a national strategic plan for SLCE and much of what it advocates" but was "skeptical about the specific approach suggested"; that organization proposed instead that "we could begin a process to first create a statement of strategic intent, or to craft a shared agenda" as a step toward "achieving a living, generative framework from which to articulate a general direction to pursue and a few basic principles for how to get there." One response emphasized the importance of identifying the best community engagement work and cultivating it through an organizing model. One indicated that developing such a plan "offers opportunity for important self-scrutiny." Another organization's leadership fully supported examining current practices and gathering "stakeholders and thought leaders around the table to discuss our collective future" and also asked "How does one gather the (many) disparate voices that now operate largely in silos?"

Content Ideas for a National Plan

The leaders of all five organizations offered suggestions for topics to be addressed in a national plan for SLCE. One proposed that the plan focus on the faculty reward system, explain social justice and how to measure movement toward it, and address "ways of enhancing the permeability of academic-community borders at multiple levels" (e.g., "entry points for community members to study, teach, engage in collaborative research"). Another similarly shared multiple suggestions: intertwining SLCE with diversity, inclusion, and equity; developing scholars' "epistemic orientation around community engagement"; and focusing on trans-disciplinary and asset-based approaches to SLCE. One response indicated that a "comprehensive vision for engage-

ment” includes approaching engagement “in an integrated way across teaching, research, and functional areas of the institution such as purchasing, real estate, development, human resources, financial aid, and admissions” and “integrating institutions into community ecosystems in ways that promote a more just, equitable, and sustainable democracy.” Another cautioned against creating a perception that the content of any national plan developed has been predetermined, suggested returning to the work begun by Zlotkowski’s focus on SLCE in the disciplines, and called for new research on how two trends in higher education – the rise of adjunct faculty and neoliberalism – may affect SLCE’s future. One organization wanted to ensure that any national plan developed would emphasize the ethical underpinnings of SLCE; its response also questioned whether the academy should be the “de facto delivery model for ethical service-learning practices.”

Process Ideas for a National Plan

The leaders of all five organizations offered suggestions for how the process of developing a national plan for SLCE might best proceed. One response indicated that any process would need to “support existing organizations pursuing complementary objectives.” Two organizations did not explicitly answer this question, but process suggestions were embedded in their responses to other questions. One of them suggested producing “a roadmap and suggested milestones for the journey . . . in order to ensure accountability, mark progress, and make appropriate adjustments along the course”; articulating a “problem statement”; and developing a “conceptual framework for what such a plan might address, as well as a vision for how that plan might be articulated, disseminated, implemented and ultimately evaluated.” The other noted the difficulty and importance of “identifying the many actors in service-learning and in inviting them to participate in a way that serves not only the field, but the communities we purport to serve” and emphasized the importance of “open dialogue.” One organization suggested that a national planning process be considered as “a collective, movement-building activity, not only a strategic plan but a ‘theory of change’ – this could focus attention on the long-term outcomes and how to achieve those outcomes.” Another response supported the idea of a coordinating entity but not the notion that it be composed of and led by representatives of existing SLCE organizations, proposing instead locating leadership of the planning effort in a cross-cutting body (specifically, the Academy of Engaged Scholars (ACES) serving as a convener and secretariat).

Potential Organization Involvement in Developing a National Plan

Responses from four of the five organizations indicated readiness to be involved in developing a national plan for SLCE; the fifth indicated not knowing what their role might be until after their organization’s planning process is completed. One organization expressed the desire to be represented on a coordinating entity and indicated that it could “help conceptualize and guide the steps needed to develop and advance the plan.” One indicated wanting to “remain in dialogue with the process as it unfolds.” Another proposed being a “core association involved in this endeavor.” Another indicated willingness to “commit resources to an open dialogue” around content areas that fit their mission (e.g., ethical underpinnings of SLCE).

Reactions to a Coordinating Entity and Organizational Role Therein

The responses to the idea of a coordinating entity to guide the development of a national plan varied from suggestions for specific organizations to take on the role to important considerations for the formation of such group, including who should be involved. One, as mentioned above, proposed a crosscutting body such as ACES to serve in a coordinating role. One organization leader noted that any new structure would require resources that “existing organizations have no surplus of.” Another indicated that a coordinating entity “as a coordinating GROUP is required” because “this is too large a task for one organization and there is tremendous value in getting broad buy in through contributing to plan development and feeling ownership . . . result[ing] in a stronger plan . . . more likely to be used as a guide to change.” Another suggested strongly that community members must be involved with a coordinating entity to avoid the process of developing a national plan being an “‘about them, without them’ exercise.” One pointed to Campus Compact’s 30th anniversary gathering as an example of providing space for many organizations to showcase their work – noted as an essential step in movement building – and wanted to see more opportunities to work across organizations to build a movement.

Goals for the SLCE Movement

The set of responses about goals for the next two decades of the SLCE movement is multifaceted. One organization noted that its answers to the preceding questions reflected the goals of SLCE (e.g.,

equitable resource distribution, social justice). One response indicated: “We need higher education collectively to reclaim its public purposes by organizing all of its activities in ways that maximize public goods.” Another suggested the purpose is social justice and specified that “the goals must include statements related to reducing/eliminating racism and discrimination, building community capacity for advancing community-defined social justice goals, and redistribution of power to promote equity.” Another organization saw SLCE as “representing more of a struggle for the soul of higher education, its potential for racial and social justice, its promise of addressing social and economic inequality, and the explicit recognition that this is a political struggle – for the distribution of resources, for power and authority, for institutional policies and structures”; it proposed “an alliance between diversity, inclusion, and equity, and student success, and community engagement” and highlighted as a goal “the emergence of community engagement as an explicit and critical alternative to neoliberal logic – and an alternative future for higher education that emphasizes its public and democratic aspirations and purpose.” Another organization was reluctant to specify goals, given concerns about traditional strategic planning processes, but noted “We are very concerned about the growing schism between (a) neoliberal values that have infiltrated the SLCE movement and (b) the democratic values that encourage education for education sake as a means to promote critical-thinking, justice-minded, responsible citizens who are engaged with their communities.”

Perspectives from Individuals and Other Organizations

In addition to gathering responses from national organizations about the idea of a national strategic plan to guide the future of SLCE, the SLCE-FDP also collected ideas from other organizations and individuals throughout the past year, primarily (although not exclusively) at conferences. In these sessions, we asked for feedback from potential stakeholders on both the process of creating a national plan and the content of such a plan. These discussions proved to be fruitful, with contributors candidly sharing opportunities, concerns, and critical feedback on the prospect of creating such a plan. Here we share a few preliminary themes emerging in each of these three areas, some of which overlap with the responses from the national SLCE organization leaders.

Overall, the feedback from individuals and organizations supported the development of a shared plan. Comments noted that this kind of plan is “timely and urgently needed” and that “it is clear

that acting in unison on this topic would be of great benefit to the SLCE movement as it would be for any national movement.” There was a broad base of interest to participate in the process, provide feedback, and in some cases take on an organizing role. Those who did not express full support of a shared plan mostly cautioned regarding timing and potential duplication of work (e.g., with Campus Compact’s Campus Action Plans).

When asked to provide thoughts on a process for a national plan, the majority of the respondents provided feedback on the coordinating entity and method of a plan and the stakeholders/participants to be included. The following ideas about the coordination of a planning process were suggested:

- Grassroots organizing methods
- Neutral convener/facilitator
- SLCE organizations, consortiums, or regional partnerships
- SLCE-FDP independently
- Third-party organization not tied to SLCE
- Communities of practice around content areas

Echoing the emphasis on including a diverse range of stakeholders from the national organization leaders, specific ideas regarding who should be involved in the development of a national plan converged around the following:

- Government (local to national)
- SLCE community partners and other practitioners of SLCE in communities (e.g., non-profit agencies, non-government organizations, faith-based organizations)
- All types of educational institutions (4-year institutions, community colleges, K-12)
- Students, administrators (including chancellors and presidents), faculty, staff
- People from underrepresented cultures and backgrounds
- Diversity of disciplines

Feedback cautioned against assuming that a single individual can speak for an entire stakeholder group and also urged the use of technology to include those who cannot travel to conferences or other convenings.

A wide range of topics were proposed as potential content for a national SLCE plan. Specific suggestions for what such a plan should speak to included, for example: faculty salaries and compensation for community partners, the ethics of responsible engagement, relationships between SLCE and other fields or movements (e.g., civic education in K-12, Black Lives Matter), decon-

structing academic-community borders and power structures, assessment, intercultural understanding, and working both within and across disciplines. Broader ideas for how to determine the content of a national plan included, for example: dream big but be realistic, provide examples and case studies, name the role of neoliberalism in higher education, push for better practice, incorporate contested ideas and values, list overarching goals for the movement, use language that works for all stakeholders, focus on social justice, and speak to the full range of where campuses and communities are in their journeys with SLCE.

Two opportunities for thinking about the possibility of a national plan for SLCE were somewhat in-depth and, in addition to highlighting some of the same issues noted above, generated questions and tension points for further consideration, a few of which follow. There was general agreement that the SLCE movement should better articulate shared ends or purposes that transcend individuals, programs, organizations, institutions, and national associations; but there was less consensus on whether those ends are already established (e.g., social justice as the ultimate goal of SLCE) or should emerge organically through ongoing conversation about what we do and do not share in terms of our sense of purpose. Several participants in these discussions noted that how we think about a national plan and whether and how we proceed to develop one depends on whether SLCE is a “field,” a “movement,” both, or something else entirely. Relatedly, the question arose of whether we ought to be envisioning the future of SLCE (whether as a field or a movement) or of the world more generally. Echoing some of the thinking of the national organization leaders, one issue identified by several participants concerned the danger of losing SLCE’s radical nature; one example was the question of how, assuming a plan will likely speak to civic skills, that be done through a broad-based national conversation in ways that maintain a critical edge? Some pointed to the range of barriers to having a voice in a planning process as a significant challenge to the development of a vision and strategies that are truly shared; the SLCE-FDP itself was discussed in these terms, with some individuals suggesting it is too academic to be truly inclusive. Use of the term “strategic plan” was also questioned as the most appropriate representation of what it might mean to generate and document a strong sense of direction for SLCE and guidance on how we might move forward together. And the distinction between developing a plan that is “strategic” and one that is “tactical” in orientation arose – the suggestion being to try to achieve shared understanding, purpose,

principles, and goals but not to try to reach consensus on specific methods.

As with the national organization leaders’ responses to our questions, we recognize these ideas from individuals and other organizations about a potential national SLCE plan are not comprehensive. Although hundreds of people have provided process and content suggestions, they are by and large faculty and staff who participated in the conference sessions we facilitated this past year. Many more perspectives, especially from community members and students, are needed, as are more opportunities for in-depth discussion. The input we have gathered to date does, however, begin to suggest the variety of visions our SLCE colleagues across the U.S. hold for a national planning process and document. At the very least, we are beginning to build out a set of issues that will require careful consideration as this conversation proceeds.

Now What?

We take this full set of input – preliminary as it is – as support from the SLCE community to continue the conversation about and move forward on a national plan for SLCE. Certainly this past year’s conversations have helped bring into focus some of the central challenges associated with conceptualizing, developing, and using such a plan. Questions remain about process, including timeline, coordination, and participants. Yet it seems to us that beginning to move forward in accordance with a few of the process suggestions we have received may be in order. Specific ideas around distributed leadership for the next phase of this process have emerged, for example in the form of organizations that have expressed interest in convening SLCE colleagues around particular aspects of the plan. Even though it is unclear where the funding – that clearly will be needed to facilitate a broad-based and in-depth series of discussions – will come from, we are hopeful that the past year has nurtured a sense of commitment to and investment in the idea sufficient to bring forward the needed resources.

The SLCE-FDP leadership team makes four commitments at this time: (a) to following up with several individual and organizational participants in the conversation to date in the hope of formalizing their roles as supporters of an ongoing process; (b) to facilitating several additional conversations in the coming months that will be designed to yield substantive and diverse input regarding the future of SLCE and how we might best move forward together to advance a shared vision and strategies; (c) to collaborating with new and continuing contributors to publish more thought pieces that call atten-

tion to particularly important future directions for SLCE; and (d) to produce an analysis of the ideas gathered by the SLCE-FDP as of 2017, two years after our launch, as a basis for determining the future of the project overall and of the proposal it has generated for a national plan.

Equally if not more important, however, is the question of what thought piece contributors, readers, and other SLCE colleagues on campuses and in communities will commit to regarding the development of a movement-wide vision for SLCE. To that end, we ask you as a member of the SLCE movement to consider the following questions and how you might engage with the project in order to envision that future together.

Will you be part of building on past work that has brought us to this place of readiness and need for a collective focus on our future? If so, how?

Will you comment on this essay on the SLCE-FDP website?

Will you participate in virtual gatherings to continue the conversation about the process and content of a national plan?

Will you be part of analyzing the first rounds of thought pieces and thereby helping ensure the ideas developed there will be brought forward and built on at the movement-level?

Will you offer to convene in-person gatherings to advance work on a plan? To fund them? To fund the SLCE-FDP more generally so that it can continue to hold open what seems to be a useful space for national and international idea sharing?

Will you bring the SLCE-FDP to your campus, community organization, or association and thereby make explicit to your colleagues the invitation to contribute their questions, ideas, and concerns to the conversation about the future of our work generally and a potential guiding plan in particular?

Will you develop your own thought piece or blog post for the SLCE-FDP website in response to the call for a national plan and the conversation around it to date?

This is an open call to anyone and everyone involved in SLCE to (paraphrasing Alice Walker) create in the present the future we wish to see. What are your thoughts on a national plan? This process needs your input. In the spirit of the original proposal for a national strategic plan, we must think beyond our own individual and organizational contexts and reach out through dialogue and action across the SLCE community to continue to advance our movement with enhanced intentionality, integrity, and impact. Please join the conversation on www.slce-fdp.org or email us at slce.fdp@gmail.com.

Note

¹ Two other national organizations were invited to participate but declined.

References

Howard, J., & Stanlick, S. (2015). A call for a national strategic plan. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 22(1), 128–132.

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