

An Exploratory Community-Engaged Framework to Operationalize Building Bridges between Public Library Education and Praxis

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ABSTRACT

This article explores an exploratory/emerging framework collaboratively developed by a public librarian and [library and information science \(LIS\)](#) educator to operationalize community-engaged programming through critical autoethnographic reflections from Williams (first author) doctoral journey. The authors propose a novel framework, emphasizing elements crucial to a community-embedded approach, and employ a critical autoethnographic methodology to provide a nuanced understanding focused on generating community impact. The findings apply elements of a community-engaged framework in relation to both authors' contributions with regard to the performance of their roles as a public librarian (and doctoral student) and LIS educator respectively. The discussion critically addresses the emerging challenges and presents opportunities with potential implications for LIS education.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Community engagement; underserved population; operation framework; impact assessment & evaluation; library education.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Praxis and theory; community engaged scholarship; bridge building; underserved community.

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Public libraries have increasingly incorporated community engagement into their programming in recent years (McCook, 2004; Mehra and Rioux, 2016). However, many public libraries do not have a systematic approach with regard to the “how to’s” of operationalizing community engagement activities into their everyday work (Mehra and Irvin, 2023). As a result, it is imperative that contemporary public library community engagement initiatives are based on a solid theoretical framework that can effectively represent and guide effective community-engaged programming (and more) (Mehra and Robinson, 2009; Mehra and Srinivasan, 2007) (Lopez et al., 2023). This paper highlights key semi-autoethnographic glimpses from the first author’s doctoral journey Williams where she integrated community-engaged activities in her courses in order to generate meaningful impact at the branch library where she is also currently serving as a branch manager. Courses taught by the second author provided an opportunity for Williams to build bridges between public library theory and practice embedded in community context (Mehra, 2021). This paper highlights select milestones achieved during the journey in order to illustrate key elements in a community-engaged framework. The research aligns with critical perspectives in library and information science LIS, thereby addressing the limitations of hegemonic “whiteness” discourse and providing an alternative perspective on community-engaged initiatives in public libraries (Arbuckle, 2023; Mehra and Gray, 2020).

What Is Community Engagement? (Or Community-Engaged Scholarship)

Community engagement has emerged as a strategic approach in the 21st century that represents collaborations between academic researchers/educators and external stakeholders outside of academia to address issues of mutual concern (Strand et al., 2003). This collaborative process transcends traditional academic boundaries, promoting inclusivity, diversity, and empowerment within the research process (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). By actively engaging with diverse stakeholders, community-engaged scholarship not only produces rigorous scholarly outputs but also facilitates meaningful impact and sustainable outcomes that address the complex challenges facing society (Balazs & Morello-Frosch, 2013). The construct of community-engaged scholarship integrates community engagement while adding to the body of knowledge and academic discourse. It is operationalized via faculty and students in higher education connecting the three pillars of their academic obligations (namely, teaching, research, and service) to external stakeholders and their everyday concerns. Similarly, it also applied to partnerships between white-entrenched institutions (such as public libraries) and their external underserved communities that have been historically marginalized to come together and develop workable solutions to mutually defined issues (Caspe & Lopez, 2018).

Community-Engaged Discourse in LIS: Key Elements

The following insights developed from a community engagement literature review highlight key elements proposed in the community-engaged framework relevant to LIS. These elements include:

1. Community-based issues that integrate socio-cultural realities.

An important feature of community-engaged scholarship involves integrating socio-cultural, socio-economic, and socio-political realities of the partnering stakeholders. For example, Rowel, Sheikhattari, and Evans-Holland (2012) conducted a study involving low-income populations,

particularly minority groups, and examined the heightened vulnerabilities they faced before, during, and after natural disasters. Due to factors such as distrust of government agencies and ineffective messaging, traditional risk communication systems often failed to reach these communities. Significant findings from the research included the need for community engagement across various stakeholders, cultural sensitivity, and effective communication to address health disparities during times of crisis.

2. Collaborative decision-making.

A crucial aspect of community-engaged scholarship emphasizes the importance of libraries as inclusive spaces that foster collaboration and mutual understanding among diverse community members. For instance, Blackburn (2017) conducts a study that underscores the importance of facilitating positive relationships between public libraries and Indigenous communities. Notable findings revealed that by embracing collaborative decision-making practices, libraries can become more inclusive and effectively address the needs of all members of society.

3. Mobilizing community action.

An essential element of community-engaged scholarship entails community psychology, which strives to balance the practical application of scientific knowledge with the theoretical underpinnings of practice. For instance, Jariago (2016) emphasizes the crucial role of theories in effecting community change, with lessons gleaned from community interventions contributing significantly to our understanding of social reality. However, due to the complexity of essential theoretical models for community research and action, a diverse array of models are mentioned by community psychologists. This research underscores the importance of theory in community psychology and highlights the practical utility of well-grounded theoretical frameworks via concrete actions centered around information-related work (Langhout, 2016).

4. Mutually beneficial partnership (public library's institutional resources for the public good).

Rapkin et al., 2017 investigate the significance of collaborative alliances between public libraries and academic institutions, emphasizing their profound impact on community engaged scholarship. These partnerships serve as conduits for leveraging institutional assets to enrich public welfare. This synergy enables libraries to transcend individual limitations, fostering an environment conducive to collective advancement. For instance, such partnerships facilitate joint programming initiatives that integrate academic expertise with community needs, thereby fostering knowledge dissemination and empowerment within local communities (McKee & Lamb, 2004). The study underscores the pivotal role of collaborative partnerships in driving community-engaged scholarship, exemplifying how such alliances foster collective progress and societal well-being.

5. Story-telling (Telling the story of the organization, community's counter-narrative development)

Cooke's (2016) calls for integrating counter storytelling into the LIS curriculum as a social justice tool, emphasizing its role in challenging prevailing narratives and fostering inclusivity and equity within the profession. In this manner, libraries can emerge as more than mere repositories of information; they are envisioned as active agents in dismantling oppressive systems and advancing social justice agendas. The work provides valuable insights into how LIS educators can infuse counter storytelling methodologies into their teaching practices, empowering students to become advocates for marginalized communities.

6. Providing a "voice" to underserved/marginalized populations (recognizing community asset: beyond a deficit model)

An essential trait of community engaged-scholarship involves social responsibilities. Racelis

(2018) emphasizes the indispensable significance of libraries in facilitating equitable access to information and services, particularly for marginalized communities. For example, offering tailored literacy programs or providing technology workshops aimed at enhancing digital literacy skills among economically disadvantaged individuals, thereby promoting social inclusion and empowerment within the community. The research underscores the imperative for librarians to prioritize the needs of the economically disadvantaged and marginalized, thereby ensuring that libraries function as indispensable resources accessible to all segments of society.

Research Methods

The methodology employed in this paper was a variation of autoethnography. A reflective journal was kept documenting experience in the researchers' place of work across a period of two years. This data formed the basis for further reflexive processes. To investigate the community-engaged discourse in LIS with a focus on underserved communities, a semi-autoethnographic approach was employed. Semi-autoethnography combines personal experiences with cultural analysis to generate a deeper understanding of the research topic (Ellis, 2004). This method allowed for a reflective exploration of the researcher's involvement in community-engaged programming, facilitating a nuanced examination of the experiences and insights gained. Ellis (2004) defines semi-autoethnography as an approach that involves the researcher reflecting on personal experiences within a cultural context, offering insights into both individual and collective experiences. In the context of this study, the researcher engaged in reflective analysis to understand her role in community-engaged programming for individuals in underserved communities (Ellis, 2004). The second author also applied similar practices.

Context of Research: Courses of Relevance

The second author's positionality as a recently appointed professor and endowed chair in social justice in a white-entrenched institution in the American South provided an opportunity to shape the LIS area of the college-wide doctoral program and develop related graduate courses through a concentration in social justice research. As a result, Mehra designed and served as an instructor of three courses for all graduate students (doctoral and master's) taught over a period of three semesters (spring 2021 through spring 2022) that became a springing board for the conceptualization and implementation of Williams' community-engaged initiatives in her public library work setting as branch manager. These courses included: 1) CIS 668 (Social Justice & Inclusion Advocacy); 2) CIS 650 (Community-Engaged Scholarship); 3) CIS 650 (Applying Diversity Leadership Theory & Praxis).

Course Name	Course Description	Project Description	Course Product
CIS 668 (Social Justice & Inclusion Advocacy): Fall 2021	Theoretical and research perspectives in action-oriented social justice and advocacy in communication information sciences and related disciplines.	Students learned to create, develop, design, apply, and contribute to social justice scholarship in an information/communication setting(s)/organization(s) of choice.	Course Website: https://cis668socialjusticef21.ua.edu Williams Course Website: https://rjwilliams6-cis668.people.ua.edu/
CIS 650 (Applying Diversity Leadership Theory & Praxis): Spring 2022	This course is designed to mobilize students to nurture bridges between the theoretical and practical aspects of serving diverse populations through all aspects of communication and information-related work.	Students discuss theoretical, philosophical, and practical aspects of diversity/inclusion in communication/information-related organizations.	Course Website: http://cis650diversityleadership.ua.edu {Password: burfi} Williams Course Website: https://rjwilliams-cis650.people.ua.edu
CIS 650 (Community-Engaged Scholarship): Fall 2022	This class introduces students to theoretical and applied community-based frameworks and approaches from the social sciences and allied disciplines to transform the “ivory tower.”	Students discuss philosophical/practical aspects of community engagement research in communication and information-related organizations and institutions.	Course Website: https://cis650communityengagedscholarship.ua.edu/ Williams Course Website: https://rjwilliams-cis650-2022.people.ua.edu/

Table 1

Chronological timeline showcasing the community-engaged project expectations in Mehra’s three courses.

Context of Research: Williams Community-Engaged Scholarship

Williams's positionality as an African American public librarian, rooted in her upbringing in the American South, has endowed her with a nuanced comprehension of the challenges encountered by various underserved communities. Additionally, she has augmented her understanding through formal education, undertaking relevant courses to obtain a master's degree in LIS. Following the completion of her master's, she is pursuing a doctoral degree to deepen her knowledge and refine her capacity to address the multifaceted needs of the communities she serves. Table 2 represents a chronological timeline showcasing William's select milestones while enrolled in the three courses (listed above) in her community-engaged projects as a public librarian/branch manager and doctoral student.

Sr. No.	Course	Williams Initiated Community-Engaged Scholarship During the Course in Her Public Library	Description
1	CIS 668 (Social Justice & Inclusion): Fall 2021	Tiny Titans Information Hub (876 people attended): Involved collaborating with local schools to provide library resources and programming for students. [August -December, weekly event].	Initiated after-school reading program: Through a curated selection of age-appropriate literary works, participants engage in structured reading sessions aimed at stimulating critical thinking, comprehension, and analytical abilities.
2	CIS 650 (Applying Diversity Leadership Theory & Praxis): Spring 2022	Community Resource Day (1525 people attended): Hosting educational workshops on topics such as digital Literacy, job searching skills, or financial management. [August - December, monthly event]	Initiated in 2022 with over five hundred patrons, the Community Resource Day expanded to include additional components such as the Children & Senior Resource Days, offering educational workshops on digital literacy, job searching skills, and financial management from August to December.

3	CIS 650 (Community-Engaged Scholarship): Fall 2022	<p>Senior Resource Day (1495 people attended): Providing outreach services events to underserved populations such as seniors, immigrants, or people experiencing homelessness. Includes Farmers Market. [January - December, monthly event].</p> <p>Senior Digital Divide Workshops (234 people attended): Offering free access to computers, internet, and other technology resources for community members. [January - December event].</p>	The inception of Senior Resource Day stemmed from the expansion of the Community Resource Day 2022 program due to its significant growth.
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Table 2

Chronological timeline showcasing William’s select community-engaged activities conceptualized and implemented at her public library.

Findings

Williams and Mehra, as authors of this study, position themselves within the critical framework of LIS. Their perspectives are constructed by a commitment to challenging hegemonic discourses and promoting inclusivity in library programming and in LIS education. Both authors bring unique insights and experiences from their respective journeys, contributing to the richness and diversity of the proposed framework. This collaboration between the educator and the public library practitioner emerged owing to William’s positionality as a doctoral student in an LIS program. Through her participation as a student in the three courses spanning the period from 2021 to 2022, Williams was able to develop activities in her public library that helped it reach out to better serve the minority and underserved populations in her local community. The experiences illustrate the operationalization of the community engaged scholarship framework applied in practice. Through this interdisciplinary partnership, academic expertise, pedagogical insight, and community resources converge to enrich the research process and enhance the dissemination of knowledge.

Sr. No.	Elements of a Community-Engaged Framework	Community-Engaged/ Public Librarian/Branch Manager
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1	Community-based issues that integrate socio-cultural realities.	The Senior Resource Day (Fall 2021) and the Community Resource Day (Spring 2022) provided an opportunity to deliver information resources tailored along the following topics to address related issues and concerns in the Titusville community: 1) Language and culture; 2) Racial and ethnic discrimination; 3) Immigration and integration; 4) Gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights; 5) Socio-economic disparities; 6) Access to education; 7) Health disparities.
2	Collaborative decision-making	The following events enhance community engagement, collaboration, and the library's ability to address diverse patron needs: Focus Groups: Small-group discussions led by staff or external facilitators to gather feedback and insights from specific demographics.
3	Mobilizing community action	The following event promotes community action by providing Support Groups & Mental Health Workshops: Organize workshops on topics related to mental health, such as stress management, coping strategies, resilience building, and self-care techniques.
4	Mutually beneficial partnership (public library's institutional resources for the public good)	The following programs create and foster community collaborations of events with organizations that promote beneficial partnership. Working with community entities such as youth centers, senior centers, and cultural institutions can facilitate joint programming, resource sharing, and outreach efforts.

5	Story-Telling (Telling the Story of the Organization, Community's Counter-Narrative	The Titusville Library is central to community engagement, offering programs that enhance literacy and deepen cultural and historical understanding. The "Community's Counter-Narrative" program highlights underrepresented voices, enabling members to share unique stories and challenge dominant narratives. Recently, local elders shared their Civil Rights Movement experiences, providing personal insights often missing from mainstream accounts.
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Table 3

Application of the elements of the proposed community -engaged framework.

Individuals in underserved communities often grapple with information poverty, where access to relevant and reliable information becomes a barrier to empowerment and well-being. The recently community-engaged discourse in LIS emphasizes the need for LIS students and educators to tailor their coursework and apply insights in response to contextual understanding of the unique challenges faced by disenfranchised populations and help directly address their needs and expectations. The exploratory community-engaged framework proposed in this paper provided an opportunity for two people of color (faculty member and doctoral student) to develop bridges between library theory and practice to shape concrete programming in a branch public library and develop tangible community impact. Strategies supported in the classroom rooted in collaboration and inclusivity, offered Williams a nuanced approach to understanding and overcoming the challenges faced by underserved individuals in her library setting. Such insights are important to continue developing approaches that strengthen the value, relevance, and impact of the public library, especially in its relationship to depressed and marginalized environments.

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