Community Engagement vs. Racial Equity: Can Community Engagement Work be Racially Equitable?

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Abstract

The literature on the transformation of higher education institutions into engaged institutions identifies the great potential this transformation can have on higher education's ability to address pressing social issues. However, engagement work frequently operates in White racialized spaces and within systems that perpetuate racial oppression. A lack of critical reflection on this phenomenon may lead to racially inequitable or racially exclusive institutional transformation. If an understanding of racial equity work within community engagement does not occur, we run the risk that the transformation into engaged institutions will include some and not others, and those decisions will likely fall along racial lines. The purpose of this article is to identify and discuss four key findings based on a critical analysis of the ways in which the literature on transformation via engagement addresses issues of racial equity. The analysis leads to a discussion of the implications of the lack of connection between racial equity and community engagement. Most importantly, the overarching question of my own future research in this area is not *if* there is racial equity work taking place in community engagement initiatives, but *how* racial equity work is done in community engagement initiatives.

Keywords: institutional transformation; engaged institutions; critical analysis; educational equity

Introduction

The literature on the transformation of higher education institutions into engaged institutions identifies the great potential this transformation can have on higher education's ability to address pressing social issues (Alter & Book, 2002; Bridger & Alter, 2006; Fitzgerald, Bruns, Sonka, Furco, & Swanson, 2012; Holland, 2001, 2005; Inman, 2004; Kellogg Commission, 1999; Ramaley, 1996, 2002, 2009, 2014; Spanier, 2011.) However, a lack of critical reflection on how engagement work operates in White racialized spaces (Barajas & Ronnkvist, 2007; Moore, 2008) and within systems that perpetuate racial oppression (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015; Feagin, 2006) may lead to racially inequitable or racially exclusive institutional transformation. Without an understanding of racial equity work within community engagement, we run the risk that the transformation into engaged institutions will include some and not others, and those decisions will likely fall along racial lines.

One example of the consequences of not examining how engagement work operates within higher education institutions is the connection between faculty-of-Color retention and their ability to work with communities. In her discussion of the important role connection to community played for faculty women of Color as they attempted to surmount isolation, marginalization, and hostile campus climates, Turner (2003) described the tension faculty of

Color feel between service contributions they feel are important, but not valued by the institution. She found that "many faculty express a need to serve their communities and a continuing commitment to do so even if such service does not factor in as an important part of the faculty reward system at their institutions" (p. 122). This connection between the success of faculty women of Color and the connection to their communities questions how much of the community service being done by women of Color faculty could be considered engaged scholarship, yet was considered to be service by the institution.

Engaged scholars have called for significant shifts in promotion and tenure (Boyer, 1990; Bridger & Alter, 2006; Blanchard et al., 2009; Cherwitz, 2010; Fitzgerald et al, 2012; Kellogg Commission, 1999; Lambert-Pennington, 2016; O'Meara, 2011; Saltmarsh & Wooding, 2016). However, there has been little research conducted that explicitly connects changes to promotion and tenure policies and practices to facilitate consideration of engaged scholarship, and the impact those changes have had on faculty of Color tenure and promotion outcomes. This is only one example of a potential consequence of not considering racial equity in community engagement work within institutions of higher education. By not addressing the historical and current-day racialized exclusion, and the inequitable educational outcomes occurring because of it, the institutional transformation that community engaged scholars and administrators seek will not likely come to fruition. Thus, critically analyzing how racial equity operates in community engagement initiatives within higher education institutions is crucial to higher education's ability to transform into equitable spaces.

It is important to recognize that the work in this piece developed because of my own positionality. Specifically, in both my academic and professional work as a Latina in higher education and as someone examining racial inequity in educational contexts, I connect language such as tokenism and marginalization with the ways in which students, staff, and faculty of Color describe their experiences in higher education institutions. However, I came across similar language during a recent review of the literature on the connections between community engagement and institutional transformation in higher education. Instead of this language connecting to the experiences of people of Color, the literature made numerous statements about the ways in which higher education institutions marginalized the work of community engagement. For example, in their discussion of the importance of institutionalizing engagement into higher education institutions, Fitzgerald et al., (2012) suggested that to "avoid tokenism" (p. 23) is to make engagement central to higher education institutions. In her discussion of the long-standing practice of community engagement in higher education, Holland (2009) stressed that, "questions persist as to whether the practice survives only at the margin of academic organizations" (p. 86). Rosean, Foster-Fishman, and Fear (2001), in their discussion of the value that engaged scholarship provides to higher education stated, "we acknowledge the presence of engagement work at the margins within the academy and argue for wider recognition and more explicitly valuing of its contributions" (p. 11). To see language that held such strong racialized meaning for me used in a context completely removed from any reference to racial inequity in the literature on engaged scholarship gave me pause.

The purpose of this article is to call attention to the need for a critical analysis of racial equity work within community engagement in higher education institutions through an identification of four key findings based on an analysis of the ways in which racial equity appears in the literature

on the transformation of higher education institutions into engaged institutions. The research question guiding this study is: how is racial equity addressed in the literature on higher education institutional transformation into engaged institutions? The remainder of this article addresses the research methods and data analysis, findings, and a discussion regarding implications of the lack of connection between racial equity and community engagement. In addition the article will discuss next steps to continue to examine critically the connection between racial equity and institutional transformation via community engagement work.

Method

Qualitative content analysis is a process that "involves the simultaneous coding of raw data and the construction of categories that capture relevant characteristics of the document's content" (Merriam, 2009, p. 205). Qualitative content analysis provides a way to generate themes specific to the research question, allows for a connection between use of keywords and the context under which keywords are used, and allows for an ability to make meaning of the connections among research question, keywords, and contexts (Patton, 2002).

I initially began the data-gathering process using the body of literature on higher-education institutional transformation into engaged institutions. It was this body of literature that inspired my question about its treatment of racial equity. Much of the literature comes from the perspective of senior level administrators, who argue that the role of administrators is vital in aligning institutional transformation with community engagement (Liang & Sandmann, 2015; Sandmann & Plater, 2009). For this study, I determined it vital to understand how the literature on transformation into engaged institutions from the perspective of administrators addresses racial equity.

There were 42 articles written between 1997 and 2016 that had appeared in a literature review about the institutionalization of engagement. These same articles formed the basis for this study to explore the ways in which this body of literature addressed racial equity. The literature was searched both by reading each article, as well as by using a search function for keywords. Recognizing that terms used to refer to racial equity would likely be different, I expanded the keywords used to search for references to racial equity. These 13 keywords were race, racial, racism, racist, equity, equality, equal, diverse, diversity, minority, minoritized, culture, and cultural. Data were recorded in a spreadsheet that included one column for the article, one column for each of the keywords, and one column for each of the contexts of the keywords. For example, Ramaley (2009) used the term "diverse" four times and "diversity" once in her article, referring variously to diverse points of view, diverse talent, diverse communities, diverse perspectives, and human diversity. Therefore, the data entered in the column for term used were "diverse" and "diversity", and the data entered for the context columns were "communities" "perspectives" "abilities" and "people".

Preliminary findings from the analysis indicated there were limited references to racial equity in this body of literature, but led to some concerns that this might not be an accurate assessment. I had recently attended a conference specific to community engagement. Several sessions focused on the work of chief diversity officers, diversity initiatives on campus, and the role race played in societal issues. My preliminary findings, however, did not reflect this recognition of the

importance of diversity work. Therefore, it was important to expand this study to understand better how the field of community engagement referred to these terms on a larger scale. I was interested to see how leading journals that published articles on community engagement addressed racial equity. I selected two journals to examine: the Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, and the Metropolitan Universities Journal. I conducted a keyword search within these journals for articles using the terms "diversity" "diverse" and "racial equity". The preliminary findings from the analysis of the literature on transformation into engaged institutions indicated that "racial equity" was not a term often used, yet the terms "diversity" and "diverse" did appear in this literature. Thus, I chose to use the terms "diversity" "diverse" and "racial equity" when looking for articles in these two journals. Articles identified through a keyword searches were analyzed by both reading and via a search function, just as was the initial data. Articles published between 1997 and 2016 in the Metropolitan Universities Journal yielded 64 related articles. Articles published between 1997 and 2016 the Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement yielded 20 articles.

Analysis
Once the data gathering process was completed, similar terms and contexts were collapsed as appropriate. As shown in Table 1, specific terms were collapsed into one term, and the contexts for the use of each term were also collapsed.

Table 1. *Final Keywords and Contexts Collapsed from Original Keywords and Contexts*

Final Keyword	Original Keywords Included	Final Context	Original Contexts Included
Diverse	Diverse, Diversity	Community	Community, Society, Populations
Race	Race, Cultural, Culture, Minority, Minoritized	Thought/Institution	Thought, Discipline, Action, Institution, Process
Racism	Racism, Racist	Students	Students, Populations, Changing Demographics
Racial	Racial	Faculty	Faculty, Populations
Equity	Equity	Unconnected Initiatives	Unconnected Initiatives
Equality	Equality, Equal		

Findings

Much of the literature stressed the need for institutions to transform. However, little discussion took notice of racial equity. The ways in which the body of literature on transformation into engaged institutions, as well as the way articles in leading journals that publish community-engaged work addressed racial equity, is important to consider, as it contributes to the ways in which higher education institutions think about, understand, and act on transforming into engaged institutions. There were four key findings of my analysis of this literature. The first

finding is the lack of reference, explicitly, to the term "racial equity" in this body of literature, which prevents an examination or discussion of the role racial equity has in institutional transformation. The term most often utilized within this body of literature is "diversity", thus necessitating a change from focusing on racial equity to focusing on diversity.

The second finding in this analysis is scholars writing about engaged work tend to address diversity in terms of diversity of discipline or diversity of thought. For example, Johnson and Wamser (1996) discussed the need for the scholarly work of faculty to be diverse, an approach where faculty strengths work collectively, as opposed to individually, to meet the research, teaching, and outreach expectations in higher education. Similarly, Rosean et al. (2001) provided important institutional steps to support faculty from a variety of disciplines in their engaged scholarship in order to move the work of engaged scholarship out of the margins of academia. Fear, Sandmann, and Lelle (1998) provided a useful framework to understand the diverse ways higher education has institutionalized engagement by focusing on where within the institution engagement has been incorporated (e.g., realigning institutional mission, or restructuring faculty reward systems). Likewise, Jaeger, Jameson, and Clayton (2012) argued that the diverse activities of faculty creates the best learning environment and productivity, particularly at land-grant, research-intensive universities. All of these articles addressed the importance of having diversity in faculty work and areas of expertise, which is an important perspective to take in engagement work to prevent engagement from becoming synonymous with particular disciplines.

The third finding is that authors discuss diversity in terms of racial demographics, most often of community demographics and student demographics within higher education institutions. While Checkoway (1997) refers mostly to diversity in higher education in terms of disciplinary approach, he also briefly addresses the needs of diverse communities and the mistake higher education makes when there is a lack of alignment between higher education goals and diverse community needs. Cantor, Englot, and Higgins (2013) describe the importance of establishing anchor institutions, or institutions that serve as a community place-based organization that are the as "social glue, or economic engines" (p. 20), and that have mutual benefit and reciprocal partnerships as the foundation of engaged work between universities and communities. Although establishing anchor institutions is vital to sustain community-university partnerships, the racial diversity addressed by Cantor et al. is the diversity embedded in the community. The racial diversity referenced in these examples focus on particular populations that are either external to or are students within institutions of higher education. Cortes (1999) identified four diversity topics that will be most salient in the 21st century: affinity groups, facilitating constructive intergroup relations, modification of identities, and restructuring curriculum. He argued that these diversity topics would become increasingly important, because of quickly changing student demographics.

The fourth and final finding is specific to diversity work internal to institutions of higher education, yet has no connection with community-engagement work. For example, Butler (1990) described the experiences of African American faculty in higher education and provided suggested ways for faculty of color to survive and thrive in higher education. Butler also cautions administrators against expecting faculty of color to tend to all diversity initiatives on campus. Yet, no literature links these experiences and the work happening in community engagement.

Similarly, King, Barnes, and Hitt (1999) provide invaluable insights into the importance of ongoing faculty development in order to create a better understanding of diversity issues within higher education institutions. However, it fails to connect this need for development to the work of community engagement. Edwards and Montague (2014) conducted interviews with racially diverse community members who had been a part of the community engagement initiatives a specific institution. They found that community members overwhelmingly thought the university was doing a good job of recognizing and engaging in issues of race relations within the community, but that the institution could be more diverse. Pointing out a lack of racial diversity within the university provides important insight into the need for more people of Color within institutions of higher education.

However, this reference to demographic differences did not connect the work of engagement with the work of diversity. This group of scholars all focus on racial diversity internal to higher education institutions and are published in a journal dedicated to engagement, yet all focus on the experiences faculty of Color within higher education with no connection to community engagement or engaged scholarship. This sort of attention to the topic of racial diversity within the body of literature on transforming into engaged institutions shows promise. However, the lack of connection between the work around racial equity and the work around engagement leaves me skeptical of the ability for engagement to transform higher education institutions into spaces and places that truly consider communities to have and produce meaningful and valuable knowledge through their own expertise.

In the midst of conducting this analysis, I attended a conference on public engagement, which focused on looking at the role of publicly engaged work in addressing pressing social issues. The experience at the opening plenary mirrored, almost exactly, the findings in the analysis of the ways in which the literature on institutional transformation addressed issues of racial equity. The plenary featured six panelists who represented the ways in which community engaged scholarship addressed community issues. All six panelists were White and all were from science or health-based fields. At the end of the session, an audience member asked, "Where are the faculty of Color and Indigenous faculty who are also doing engagement work?" The panel responded to the question, but never addressed the question directly. They stressed that they knew that having a diverse group of people was important because diverse people represent other ways of knowing. One panelist quickly stated that 40% of the research team were people of color without providing additional information about what role they played on the team. Two panelists added that community members provided racial diversity on the project, and one asserted that everyone on the team brought great diversity to the table. Lastly, the panel facilitator, who was a White high-level administrator who represented the engaged work of the university, stated that the central office (which was hosting the conference) offered workshops on decolonizing methodologies to those who were interested in learning about that topic.

Yet this individual failed to connect this optional workshop with the question about the lack of racial diversity within community-engaged work. The inability of the panelists or of the high-level administrator moderating the panel to answer the question about the lack of faculty of Color and Indigenous faculty represented in engagement work at the institution is troubling, and it represents, on the surface, one of the issues at hand. Although troubling, the historical and current-day experiences of people of Color within higher education institutions may explain the

demographics of the panel of engaged scholars. Their experience may also provide an explanation as to why the panelists were unable to answer a direct question about the lack of racial diversity in community engagement. However, because there is a gap in the literature that directly connects racial equity with community engagement initiatives in higher education, we cannot be sure. Even though demographic representation is a good place to start when attempting to understand and address racial inequity, relying solely on racial diversity cannot address educational inequity along racial lines (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). Thus, the ways in which community engagement impacts people of Color within institutions of higher education continues to be unexamined.

My observation at the public engagement conference is not the first time thoughtful observers have called into question the lack of racial diversity within community engagement. Simpson (2014) argued there was lack of attention to systemic issues of inequity and injustice within the civic engagement work in higher education; "in the context of social issues that are profoundly entrenched and complex, the scholarship of engagement does little to sustain even an awareness of these issues, let alone consideration of their resolution" (p. 82). My own observations and experiences at various community engagement conferences, events, and workshops support this conclusion. Similarly, Hernandez and Pasquesi (2017) argue that it is not possible to make substantial changes outside of higher education if the institution continues to lack racial equity within itself. Additionally, Strum, Eatman, Saltmarsh, and Bush (2011) assert that in order to have full participation in the transformation of higher education institutions, building an architecture for both community engagement and diversity is critical, as the two fields need to come together to inform, support, and grow with one another. Nevertheless, the literature connecting racial equity to community engagement within higher education institutions is still lacking, leaving community engagement initiatives critically unquestioned and unexamined.

Discussion

I have found that the literature addresses diversity instead of racial equity. Its authors conceive of diversity as difference in thought or discipline. The literature isolates the importance racial demographic diversity to community and student populations, and addresses diversity work within higher education institutions as important yet unconnected to community engagement work. In terms of the lack of focus on racial equity, addressing diversity instead of racial equity within community engagement work prevents racial equity, specifically, from obtaining exploration in the work of community engagement. Dowd and Bensimon (2015) found that "discriminatory sorting occurs through structures and practices that are so thoroughly institutionalized that they seem normal (to many) until we ask why racial inequities in outcomes are occurring so routinely and prevalently" (p. 1). It is imperative to understand the ways in which community-engagement work may, intentionally or unintentionally, facilitate routine discriminatory sorting, which requires a narrowing in focus from the generality of diversity to the specificity of racial equity. Furthermore, by focusing on racial equity instead of diversity, we can continue to highlight the importance of having diversity of thought and diversity of discipline without diluting the conversation about racial equity. In other words, focusing on racial equity indicates exactly what we are intending to analyze, as opposed to diversity, which can mean several different things to different audiences.

By focusing only on student or community racial demographic diversity, racialized spaces and practices within higher education institutions may go unrecognized, unaddressed, and unchallenged by community engagement scholars and practitioners. Much like the earlier example of the connection between engagement and women faculty of Color, we do not yet understand the ways in which changing policies and practices specific to recognizing community engagement work may affect tenure and promotion of faculty of Color.

Lastly, by not connecting internal issues of racial equity with internal work of engagement, higher education institutions run the risk of continuing to move forward with a transformation that, at its core, is exclusionary to faculty, staff, and students of Color, which is the opposite of what I argue engaged scholars believe to be central to transforming into engaged institutions. Take, for example, my experience at the public engagement conference where the plenary panelists responded to an inquiry about the lack of faculty of Color and Indigenous faculty representation in the same ways the literature addressed racial equity. I omitted from this example that the faculty on this panel represented projects awarded institutional-level grant money for continuing to do work that addressed pressing social issues. In fact, a critical mass of faculty of Color at this institution are also engaged scholars (personal communication, 2018).

If we knew better how racial equity and community engagement connected in this example, we might question why this group of people won selection to represent their work on this panel. What were the racial demographics of those who applied for this grant funding? What were the racial demographics of those awarded and those who were not? What were the racial demographics of persons involved in the projects? What were the racial demographics of those who served on the review board for the grant? These are only some of the important questions needed to unpack the connection between community engagement and racial equity at this particular institution.

Conclusion

Although this literature analysis has shown a lack of attention to racial equity work, I believe the field of community engagement is ready to analyze their own practices in terms of racial equity. From the beginning of this field, there has been ongoing and critical analysis of how higher education is transforming and what the intended and unintended consequences might be for this transformation. Although this analysis has not included connections between racial equity work and community engaged initiatives within higher education to date, there is still a willingness to learn. The fact that the literature on institutional transformation has addressed diversity at all indicates that scholars understand, at some level, that diversity plays an important role in community engagement. However, the discussion only circles the issues of racial equity internal to institutions of higher education, lacking the connection needed to make the argument that racial equity is an important component within engagement initiatives. This gap in the literature opens up the opportunity for empirical investigation into the ways in which engagement initiatives within higher education consider racial equity.

In addition to the recognition that diversity and engagement are somehow connected, it has become clear both through my own review, as well as comments from scholars within this field (Sandmann, 2008; Sandmann, Jordan, Mull, & Valentine, 2014), that much of the published

work in this area includes descriptions of model programming, innovative approaches, and critical opinion pieces from revered scholars. What is lacking in this field is empirical research and theory development. Thus, a focus on empirical research and theory development is an important aspect of connecting racial equity and community engagement as we move forward with this work.

As the literature has indicated repeatedly, knowledge and expertise does not just exist in traditional manners within higher education. In the context of future work, this means that just because peer-reviewed journals have not published it does not mean no one is doing such work. In other words, there might be great work and attention paid to issues of racial equity in community engagement initiatives internal to higher education, but no one has written about it yet. Thus, the focus of my future work in this area is not a "gotcha" adventure; it is quite the opposite. I have recently proposed a study that focuses on the ways in which institutions of higher education address racial equity in their community-engagement initiatives. Race is pervasive and has been foundational to the way our society, including higher education institutions, functions (Feagin, 2006; Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). The question is not if, but how racial equity work goes on in community-engagement initiatives.

By failing to address issues of racial equity within higher education, community-engagement initiatives may result in engaged institutions that continue to operate as racially exclusionary spaces. It may prevent a critical consideration of how policies and practices are meant to strengthen the institutionalization of engagement could continue to produce racially inequitable outcomes in higher education. In addition, much like a buffer block prevents trains from moving past particular points on a track, the lessons we are learning from our community partners through our community engaged work may be prevented from being utilized within our own institutional communities if we are unable to critically analyze the role of racial equity within our own work. If we are prevented from taking our lessons-learned from communities into our college or university communities, we may be doing a great disservice to our community partners and our desire to recognize multiple ways of creating knowledge.

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