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# Tracking Culture: The Meanings of Community Engagement Data Collection in Higher Education

Howard Rosing

## Abstract

*The essay briefly outlines the history of community engagement at DePaul University in order to explore how and why universities and colleges are increasingly adopting data collections systems for tracking community engagement. I explore the question of why there is a growing interest in tracking engagement within the academy and suggest that dominant meanings attached to tracking behavior (e.g., recognition, marketing, budget legitimation) overshadow more critical and political rationales for documenting engagement, such as those that emerge out of aspiration to understand how higher education can play a role in promoting social justice and transforming communities. I argue that the latter requires a critical, self-reflexive, ethnographic approach to tracking that illuminates not only positive outcomes of engagement but also the inevitable challenges or failures of engagement that can limit student learning, faculty scholarship, and, perhaps most importantly, community benefit.*

The premise of this article is that higher education is moving through a cultural shift in respect to community engagement as a characteristic and practice that increasingly defines the identity of the academy and academic institutions. Since the early twentieth century, ethnographers have shown that culture can be elusive unless one undertakes systematic ethnographic analysis through long-term empirical research in the field. The “field” is a social space with boundaries defined by those considered to be among the research population. The field is also a political and economic arena usually, but not always, outside the academy and on rare occasions within the walls of academic institutions – a kind of space for critical institutional self-reflection. The ethnography of higher education is an emerging scholarship that for the most part has not focused a lens on community engagement as a practice or form of higher education institutional identity-making.

In what follows, I do not intend to produce an ethnographic study of community engagement in higher education. In a more limited sense, I call for further inquiry into what seems to me to be an evolving phenomenon centered on how we in the academy think about community engagement holistically in respect to its various meanings among faculty, staff, and students. This involves, I shall argue, detaching community engagement from its typical epistemological framework as a practice that supposedly involves institutions doing good for others who are constructed as underserved, needy, and vulnerable. My pursuit involves understanding community engagement beyond its strategic positioning for institutional marketing – one form of meaning production – and into the realm of serious critical ethnographic analysis. As a starting point, the article begins to take up the issue of how and why universities and colleges have started value tracking community engagement, a phenomena that I suggest is part of a broader shift toward understanding and valuing community engagement, especially integrated into curriculum and research, across academia.

To pursue the above proposition over the long term will require understanding the meanings attributed to the concept of community engagement within the academy: that is, how it implies certain defined practices (e.g., service-learning pedagogy, community-based research, community internships, and other forms of engaged scholarship and forms of capacity building with agents typically constructed as external to institutions), all of which will need to be separately analyzed as components of the whole. Moreover, as

I shall illustrate here for my own university, each higher education institution uniquely presents its own cultural expression of community engagement relative to its geography, history, and, perhaps most importantly, its social and political agenda (or “mission”) at any given moment. If the field site for the ethnography of community engagement in higher education begins with the institution of higher learning itself as a cultural creation, then one key topic of study is the myriad of meanings behind how and why universities and colleges seek to engage with external communities and, as this article begins to pursue, why there is a growing interest in tracking such engagement. How, when, and why each institution chooses to develop, track, and analyze community engagement activities, I submit, says a lot about its positioning within the social, economic, and political landscape more broadly.

The article begins to take up the project of understanding the meanings associated with community engagement tracking as a practice in higher education. Part one explores why tracking community engagement matters in higher education. This realm of inquiry is vast, given the range of types of academic institutions and the missions they supposedly engender. Yet there are certain dominant discourses (e.g., institutional recognition, enrollment marketing, budget legitimation) that are articulated across universities and colleges and that emerge within dialogue at community engagement conferences, seminars, and workshops. The overarching question I grapple with is, “Why community engagement tracking now?” Even with the rapid expansion of community engagement in higher education in recent decades, up until this journal edition, there has been sparse scholarly activity exploring why institutions are developing community engagement tracking systems. Very little is understood about the diversity of meanings attributed to community engagement tracking by those like myself who are in a sense “trackers.” As a consequence, the more dominant discourses on why institutions track or should track engagement overshadow more critical and overtly political rationales for tracking, such as those that emerge out of aspirations to understand how higher education can play a role in promoting social justice and transforming communities.

The second section draws on the history of community engagement tracking at my institution, DePaul University. This self-analysis is not presented for the purpose of marketing, though admittedly that may be an unavoidable, but rather to establish a framework for developing a critical analysis of community engagement tracking in higher education. The ultimate goal is to spur further ethnographic inquiry into the rationales for why, when, and how universities and colleges seek to understand comprehensively – through tracking – their own behavior in communities they seek to serve. A critical, self-reflexive, ethnographic analysis of community engagement in higher education, I contend, will produce greater transparency about the outcomes of engagement, that is, both the positive and negative or challenging results of institutionalized community engagement. I also suggest the need to incorporate community partners into tracking processes as a means to further illuminate avenues for understanding how academia can have a positive effect on the social, economic, political, and ecological issues that we seek to impact.

## **Why Tracking Matters**

The development of higher education community engagement in the United States during the 1990s and early 2000s reflected broader changes in the academy nationally and globally. The opening of university community engagement centers was symbolic of a cultural transformation whereby administrators, faculty, and students increasingly placed value on community engagement within curriculum, co-curricular programs, and research (Welch and Saltmarsh 2013). Many such centers were endowed and named, illustrating unprecedented higher education material investments in community engagement locally and internationally. Higher education community engagement had a social value: improving town-gown relations, new venues for faculty scholarship, and a marketing tool for recruiting students to participate in a different kind of college experience infused with social meaning and the building of character. In business and leadership terms, community engagement and community engagement centers were a value-added component of educational institutions, part of rejuvenating identities as “engaged

institutions” (Sandmann and Plater 2009; Holland 2001). Centers varied by institution but shared a common role in the institutionalization of community engagement often becoming the community engagement assessors or repository for assessment materials (Furco and Miller 2009). Those of us who joined such centers during this time period watched as financial and symbolic investments in community engagement produced institutional behavioral changes that redefined for many the purpose of a college degree and careers in teaching, research, and scholarship.

Higher education community engagement was not new to the late twentieth century, but certainly became more formalized and bureaucratized. An emerging engagement tracking culture was undoubtedly spurred by national recognition awards or rankings such as those published by the *U.S. News & World Report*, the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement, and the Presidents Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll, among others. More and more institutions created, or in some cases purchased, instruments to track community engagement behaviors – quantitatively and qualitatively. The value placed on tracking is perhaps indicative of the maturing state of community engagement in higher education and the rapidly developing need for data to legitimate institutional investments in reimagining and reimagining institutional identities. Community engagement, as I have suggested, has given new meaning to what it means to obtain a degree from, teach for, or conduct research from particular colleges or universities. Such cultural transformation, as we shall see from the case of my own institution, generally occurred slowly in small increments as institutions realized the social, economic, and political value of engagement. The technologies of tracking engagement are the most recent material culture or tools produced through institutional investment in community engagement and reflect a desire to understand the complete landscape of community-based student learning and faculty research and scholarship, among other forms of engagement. The meanings attached to data collected and the reasons for collecting it require further analysis if we are to come to some sense of truth – beyond our marketing efforts – about why and how institutions structure engagement activities.

The culture of tracking community engagement can be seen within the context of a wider set of economic factors that drive higher education. These are linked to competition for enrollment, research funding, faculty hires, and, perhaps most importantly, fundraising. Undoubtedly, community engagement tracking cannot be detached from inter-institutional competition and the broader forces pushing the marketization of higher education (Rhoades and Slaughter 2006). From the standpoint of my work, for example, the vast majority of tracking data goes toward institutional recognition applications, marketing-style publications, and grant narratives. The economic pressures of the academy help to form the meanings placed on tracking data within specific geographic contexts. More and more, engagement initiatives in higher education can be understood as distinctly place-based and embedded in localization, regionalization, and/or internationalization agendas that illustrate how particular higher education institutions are responding to, and the products of, changes in the broader political economy. The recent large institutional investment in community engagement initiatives at places such as Cornell and Duke, for example, illustrates the value for institutions of pedagogies such as service-learning and of approaches such as community-based research. Tracking validates such investments and can translate into further fundraising and marketing efforts as universities and colleges compete in an increasingly market-driven higher education landscape. Given how important community engagement has become as a fundraising and marketing strategy, it is no longer a question of whether to include it as an institutional strategic goal but rather of how to do so and how to demonstrate outcomes.

While fundraising, marketing, and the desire for recognition drive much of the value placed on community engagement tracking, practitioners like myself often assign alternative meanings to tracking behavior. That is, tracking as a cultural practice is not always driven by purely utilitarian motives. There are ideologically diverse politics of community engagement across the academy that produces alternative lenses from which to view institutional community engagement data. To this end, engagement activities in higher education may appear to be politically benign forms of serving when in fact such behaviors are

intricately tied to, for example, labor and immigration issues and to education and healthcare debates. A university that is partnered with an organization that supports undocumented immigrants through English (ESL) courses, childcare, and youth programming is embedded in the politics of immigration. Does the university track its partnership with the idea in mind that the institution is contributing to the well-being of undocumented immigrants? Tracking in this manner can matter for different reasons; it says something about the politics of that institution and more broadly about the explicit social, political, and economic agendas of higher education institutions in relation to local and global issues. To be sure, as scholarship begins to explore and fully illuminate how politically embedded and diverse higher education community engagement initiatives have become, new forms of meaning will be placed on obtaining a degree from, teaching for, or conducting research at particular institutions. Most importantly, tracking engagement publically in this manner could, in fact, leverage the support of higher education institutions for certain marginalized populations.

So why does tracking community engagement matter now more than ever in higher education? Clearly a desire for institutional recognition is an important rationale that is at the foundation for how we celebrate and affirm material investments in community engagement programs, offices, and centers. This rationale alone, however, misses a great deal of the values-oriented motivations for community engagement shared by many higher education engagement professionals. Many of us understand the work as channeling institutional resources toward building greater capacity for our community partners to challenge injustice. In this regard, the importance of tracking has more to do with the radical transformation of higher education institutions into vehicles for positive social change (Brukardt et al. 2004). This emerging cultural framework within the academy measures the central importance of community engagement by the impact universities and colleges have on communities. Community impact is the goal and purpose of the work; student learning and faculty scholarship is absolutely essential and highly valued but a subsidiary outcome. Tracking community engagement in the form of community impact is part of a desire to transform the purpose of higher education.

Given the academy's colonial heritage and reputation for fostering a sense of elitism, those of us orchestrating community-university partnerships are sensitive to our work being perceived off-campus as another tool for universities to "use" communities to build academic careers and prestige. This is regardless of our self-prescribed values of respect for community voice and knowledge and rhetorical commitment to social justice. Because we are in this liminal space between the academy and communities, we can see the explicit tendency for academics to perceive themselves as the most important producers of knowledge – knowledge that they then purvey to the world as self-prescribed experts. In a context like Chicago, home to my institution and a city with a long history of community organizing and activism, higher education community engagement can receive overt pushback from communities. Carelessly deploying tracked community engagement data without respecting the knowledge produced by communities with which we seek to engage can inflame such resistance and hinder future community partnerships. An institutional tendency toward self-interest in promoting how much we are "doing good" for others neglects how much community partners do to support engagement programming. In this sense, a greater focus on what the community sees as useful and relevant in tracking data could actually strengthen engagement practice and positively impact both campus and community.

Only in recent years have institutions begun to take seriously the act of documenting or tracking activities as they relate to community impact, and involving the community in such tracking is very much at an infancy stage. Furthermore, it could be argued that we have yet to debate the value of tracking higher education community engagement for the purposes of truly auditing actual behavior. We have not, I would contend, critically analyzed the ethical obligation to tell the full story of our historical or contemporary institutional behaviors as it relates to communities impacted by the academy. Instead, we generally track community engagement to illustrate what we perceive as our positive impact, ignoring concerns or complaints of our community partners or the damage our institutions may cause intentionally

or unintentionally. This perspective introduces the question as to what a genuine higher education community engagement tracking process looks like. I do not address this question here, but I believe it is one that needs to be pursued rigorously if we are to be honest about the role of the academy in communities and especially if the former is making institutional claims of contributing to social justice or positive social change.

Tracking therefore matters for a variety of reasons outside of institutional marketing, recognition, and budgets. How the academy documents community engagement in ways that move beyond institutional self-interest is of significant importance and there is a need, for example, to factor into data collection forms of dissatisfaction. Such research is especially salient in geographic spaces where universities and colleges are embedded in urban and regional economic development processes that can marginalize populations that are ironically often the target of community engagement initiatives. In this regard, there may be an ethical relationality and responsibility that binds institutions to the task of understanding holistically the impact – good and bad – of engagement. Carefully tracking how we behave in our community engagement activities, through a self-critical ethnographic lens can support a foundational value of the academy: seeking truth through knowledge. The first task may be to consider how our own university or college has established engagement tracking and to see how or whether involving community partners in creating and using tracking data can become a reality. In the long term, if higher education institutions are truly interested in authentic community-university partnerships that involve co-planning and co-implementation, tracking must become a part of our engagement, not just a product of it.

## **Community Engagement Tracking at DePaul University: A Tracker's Perspective**

I have been involved in higher education community engagement since the late-1990s when I began teaching courses that incorporated experiential learning. Higher education community engagement was coming of age and during a time of unprecedented economic restructuring in the United States and globally. Since the 1980s, the United States had embarked upon a neoliberal policy agenda embraced at varying levels by the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton administrations through policies that led to austerity measures, deregulation, and privatization. As I experimented with service-learning pedagogy in introductory social sciences courses, literature emerged offering a critical perspective on community engagement and its apparent complicity with the policies of government cost-cutting in the social sector (e.g., Petras 1997). To critics, retraction of public funding through reform of social programs, for example, and the concomitant promotion of community service, including service-learning pedagogy, were not coincidental (Hyatt 2001). The political agenda, they would argue, was suppression of labor through austerity measures and the privatization of public resources while promoting service by individuals as a viable response to social problems. We were in higher education, Hyatt argues, producing “neoliberal citizens” (2001). Along with unfettered expansion of financial markets, spurred partly by electronic trading and growth in speculation and trade in derivatives, national policies supported skewing of capital accumulation toward a small percentage of the population, thereby increasing social inequality. The theoretical foundations for this political agenda were concretized in the academy in my hometown of Chicago by the Chicago school of economics and then tested internationally under the Chilean dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. Eventually, these policies were applied across US federal, state, and local governments (Harvey 2005). This was the political context within which I was trained as a critical anthropologist and within which I explored the pedagogy of service learning at DePaul University in Chicago.

In the United States, economic restructuring during the 1980s and 1990s led to significant investment in redevelopment of the aging core of cities like Chicago. Since the 1970s there had been a channeling of capital – guided by municipal urban planning policies and through assistance from banks and the US

Department of Housing and Urban Development – into neighborhood revitalization schemes. Enormous wealth entered cities in the form of investments in residential and commercial property, and entire neighborhoods were cleared. Working class households and the businesses that served them were replaced with higher income residents and a commercial sector that reflected their interests. Many urban higher education institutions were situated geographically within such gentrifying spaces where they took part in neighborhood transformation by acquiring property to expand campuses. Concurrently, new forms of community engagement practice were developing such as service-learning pedagogy. An interesting irony emerged in relation to the role of metropolitan higher education institutions within the context of an urban redevelopment environment that removed the very people who were the target population that many universities and colleges sought to support through community engagement.

When in 2001 I embarked upon a career in support of higher education community engagement at DePaul, numerous Chicago communities were in the midst of neighborhood changes; multiple battles were being fought over gentrification and decreasing access to affordable housing. The university, with campuses in the Northside Lincoln Park neighborhood and in downtown Chicago, was immersed in the transformation of the city. During the 1970s and 1980s, DePaul faced the challenge of both watching and participating in the redevelopment of its surrounding neighborhood, a process that meant displacement of many of those who demographically fit the profile of those the university sought to educate and serve. By the 1990s, both Lincoln Park and Loop campuses were in the midst of redevelopment. Lincoln Park in particular had been a dense working class mix of Puerto Rican, black, and white residents who increasingly found housing unaffordable. Since the 1970s, DePaul had expanded its physical footprint in the neighborhood, purchasing tracks of housing and redeveloping them into classrooms, student housing, and offices. As the university's enrollment increased along with its physical size, Lincoln Park became even more gentrified along with most of Chicago's Northside neighborhoods. The ramification of this process was the pushing of lower income populations to the west and south. Within this context, I dived into building an academic community engagement program, connecting faculty and students to community partners in a city ripe with dynamic and, in some cases, volatile socioeconomic contexts.

DePaul was a unique place to build community engagement programming. Founded in 1898 by the Catholic Vincentian order, the university's central purpose was to educate those with the least access to higher education in the city. One of three Vincentian universities in the United States that models itself after the life's work of the seventeenth century priest Vincent de Paul, the university consistently prides itself on its mission which "places highest priority on programs of instruction and learning." The mission statement also includes a succinct statement about community engagement:

As an urban university, DePaul is deeply involved in the life of a community which is rapidly becoming global, and is interconnected with it. DePaul both draws from the cultural and professional riches of this community and responds to its needs through educational and public service programs, by providing leadership in various professions, the performing arts, and civic endeavors and in assisting the community in finding solutions to its problems. (DePaul University Office of Mission and Values)

Of particular note was the university's openness during the early twentieth century to enrolling women (1911) and Jews when quotas at other Chicago area universities limited their access. Most recently, the university's leadership, including the president himself, has been active in supporting campaigns for the education of immigrants and their children. Equally important, DePaul consistently seeks to ensure a balance of economically and racially diverse students through enrollment and attainment strategies. These are only a few examples among an array of past and current university policies and practices where the university seeks to realize its mission.

During my early days at DePaul, I noticed how the institution's mission was regularly spoken about among faculty, staff, and students, especially in relation to first-generation students and community service but also as a tool to hold the university accountable to principles of social justice and fairness. Notwithstanding DePaul's rapid growth during the 1990s and early 2000s, eventually reaching 25,000 students and becoming the largest Catholic university in the United States, community engagement remained an important institutional focus. Ironically, new investments brought the university into neighborhoods where displaced Lincoln Park residents relocated in search of affordable housing. In 1994, DePaul opened the Monsignor John J. Egan Urban Center (EUC) with grants from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the Chicago Community Trust. According to its mission, EUC was to "extend opportunities for DePaul, in collaboration with Chicago communities, to address critical urban problems, alleviate poverty, and promote social justice through teaching, service, and scholarship." The Center's namesake, John Egan, a priest whose years of activism in Chicago during the 1960s largely focused on affordable housing, reflected DePaul's commitment to social justice, notwithstanding the transformations in Lincoln Park. Well known for his early work in Chicago, Egan returned to the city from a position at Notre Dame in 1982 and in 1987 took on leadership of DePaul's Office of Community Affairs until his death in 2001 just a few months before my arrival (Steinfels 2001).

Under the leadership of Elizabeth Hollander, former director of planning for Mayor Harold Washington (Chicago's first and only African American mayor), the Egan Urban Center flourished through federal and foundation grants. The university partnered with community groups in ways that leveraged DePaul's educational resources to directly support community development projects in housing, education, technology, and job creation within low-income communities. The center developed into two vibrant offices, one on each DePaul campus, filled with community researchers, organizers, and engagement practitioners whose work became a vehicle for the university's engagement with grassroots community organizers and development professionals. Drawing on the work of the Asset-based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University, the EUC incubated programs and organizations that focused heavily on assisting communities to build capacity to address critical urban problems. By the time I arrived in 2001, EUC had become the university's force for supporting positive social change throughout many communities on the south, west, and near northwest sides of the city. Until his death, Egan himself continued to push forward on social justice campaigns (Steinfels 2001). Three years later, in 2004, an enormous statue of Egan was erected in front of DePaul's Lincoln Park student center with the inscription, "What are You Doing for Justice?"

Ten years following the establishment of EUC, DePaul had not yet considered systematically documenting its own contributions to social justice by way of well-institutionalized community engagement programming. In truth, the statue of Monsignor Egan reflected decades of service and activism at DePaul. Unquestionably, there has been a strong ethos of community engagement among faculty, staff, and students since the university's beginnings. Indeed, the original purpose of the institution was to provide access to higher education to those least served. Not surprisingly, the institution attracted and helped to form faculty and students that pushed for deeper institutionalization of social justice initiatives both on and off campus. During the 1960s, for example, African American students hosted a sit-in resulting in the creation of the Black Student Union, and during the 1990s, Latino students agitated for a center that resulted in the opening of the university's Cultural Center to provide a safe meeting space for students of color and other underrepresented groups (now the Center for Intercultural Programs). By the 2000s, strategic planning and increasing enrollment led the university to make additional institutional investments in co-curricular community engagement. This occurred through the University Ministry Office in student affairs that supported weekly student-led service groups, service days, and domestic and international service immersion trips among other programs. DePaul's largest financial investment in community engagement occurred just prior to my arrival in 2001 with the establishment of the Irwin W. Steans Center for Community-based Service Learning and Community Service Studies.



The idea of the Steans Center partly emerged out of EUC strategic planning to engage students in their community-based projects. Institutional strategic planning during the mid-1990s also included development of an experiential learning course requirement in the undergraduate liberal studies curriculum (Meister and Strain 2004). One primary way to fulfill the requirement was for students to complete an approved course that integrated service-learning pedagogy, and in 1998, the Office for Community-based Service Learning (CbSL) was established with seed funding from the Steans family. The office's founding director, Laurie Worrall, who had been on the staff of EUC, was charged with the goal of integrating service-learning pedagogy into DePaul's curriculum with a special emphasis on supporting the experiential learning requirement. Worrall and her small staff proceeded to build DePaul's infrastructure to support service-learning course development. The office proceeded to build a momentum that would prove worthy of a five-million-dollar endowment from the Steans family in 2001 and renaming of the office as the Steans Center. The endowment leveraged DePaul to deeply invest in curriculum-based community engagement. Just before I arrived, the university's internal newspaper published its May edition announcing both the passing of John Egan and the Steans endowment.

When I arrived at DePaul, the Steans Center was just months old, and we temporarily shared space with the University Ministry Office's co-curricular community engagement staff. Although collaboration existed across EUC, the Steans Center, and the University Ministry Office, the university's three main community engagement units, comprehensive tracking of the institution's engagement activities had yet to evolve. The work of all three units expanded rapidly and somewhat independently: EUC building contracts for research, capacity-building, technical assistances, and evaluation with nonprofit partners; the University Ministry Office building opportunities for co-curricular service activities; and the Steans Center expanding the use of service-learning pedagogy. A need to build effective programming took priority over development of cross-unit collaboration that could theoretically improve impact on communities. We were not ready to think collaboratively about our institutional commitment to community engagement, let alone track it.

I had not considered tracking DePaul's community engagement work until 2005 when Laurie Worrall, then appointed to the provost's office as associate vice president for community engagement, began collecting engagement data for the first Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement application. Worrall had recently completed a dissertation that would soon become a journal article on community-partner perspectives on service-learning relationships (Worrall 2007). Given that this was one of the first such studies to listen to community partners in this manner, I can see in retrospect how and why my early work in service-learning was not concerned with understanding community impact. The following year in 2006, I was appointed director of the Steans Center and charged with completing the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll, a process that, unbeknownst to me at the time, would install me into the role of DePaul's primary community engagement tracker. My starting point for DePaul's community engagement tracking was patching together what university staff perceived as community service successes.

The roll out of the Carnegie Classification in 2006, which Worrall had successfully attained for DePaul, coincided with the university's new six-year strategic plan, Vision 2012. I was asked by the provost's office to align the Steans Center's goals with those of the university's strategic plan. The plan specifically embraced community engagement with language such as "engage the City of Chicago to extend classroom learning," "prepare students to be socially responsible future leaders and engaged alumni," "promote leadership, civic engagement, cultural awareness, and personal and spiritual development," and "become a university known for its students' lifelong commitment to social justice and civic engagement." The plan led to additional budgetary allocations to the Steans Center and community engagement in general, further expanding DePaul's reach throughout Chicago neighborhoods. I completed the first President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll application in collaboration with colleagues in the University Ministry Office. We collected data and stories from across

the university using emails and spreadsheets, a process repeated for several years. I also submitted applications to a variety of organizations to receive recognition awards from, for example, the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Partnership Award for Campus-Community Collaboration and the Washington Center Higher Education Civic Engagement Award. Vision 2012 had fostered university-wide collaboration to promote community engagement externally and internally and the associate vice president of student affairs established DePaul Engage, a network of staff and faculty from across the university who were involved in community engagement activities. Through quarterly meetings of DePaul Engage and informal discussions across units, DePaul began formalizing approaches to tracking community engagement.

Historically, it is often recounted by veteran university staff and faculty, DePaul quietly engaged in a variety of community-based initiatives; these activities were seen as simply what the institution does; why it exists in the first place. This intrinsic sense of institutional character suggests why the university had not coordinated its community engagement efforts in a more comprehensive fashion. Vision 2012 challenged DePaul folklore and called for the university to “become a university known for its students’ lifelong commitment to social justice and civic engagement.” This objective was emblematic of how far the university had come in institutionalization of community engagement, provoking deeper questions about how much, where, and to what ends DePaul was engaged with communities. As Vision 2012 came to a close, these questions reemerged within a task force I co-chaired charged with making recommendations for the subsequent plan. The goal of the task force was to explore how DePaul could further “Engagement with Chicago.”

Though Vision 2012 spurred significant growth in community engagement at DePaul, tracking activities remained at the unit level, and then a few others and myself collected data annually. In time, I began working with a representative from the president’s office who assisted in collecting the data. Information was managed in a database at the Steans Center and distributed to other units upon request, typically for grant writing, marketing, and internal and external communications. The final version of Vision 2018 (Goal II) would include language that called for the university to “deepen DePaul’s connection with Chicago, enriching students’ educational experiences,” to “strengthen partnerships with the city and the region, expanding our influence as an urban partner,” and to “achieve recognition as the city’s higher education anchor institution and the premier institution for Chicago civic engagement.” Even more than Vision 2012, Vision 2018 suggested DePaul could no longer afford to quietly engage with communities for such a central component of its mission. Tracking engagement seemed imperative.

In the summer of 2013, the associate vice president of student affairs and I began coordinating the DePaul Committee on Community Engagement, an ad hoc group that brought together leadership of units, many of which facilitated community engagement activities. The group was asked to assist in improving upon cross-unit collaboration on community engagement initiatives and tracking the institution’s engagement was our top priority. The committee discussed moving toward an online platform where units would submit relevant data and information to a system that could efficiently build a profile of the university’s community engagement efforts. Goal II of the strategic plan, “Engagement with the City of Chicago,” and the pending call for Community Engagement Reclassification by the Carnegie Foundation provided an impetus for our work. I began meeting with vendors of community-engagement-tracking software, attending sessions at conferences on tracking engagement, and initiating discussions with DePaul’s information services about developing an in-house system. Outside of our 2006 Carnegie Classification application, DePaul had never comprehensively tracked community engagement activities, let alone their impact on faculty, staff, students, or community partners.

During 2012-2013, a group from DePaul participated in the American Association of Colleges and Universities Civic Learning & Democratic Engagement Collaborative with Chicago Area Colleges and Universities. The group produced a report that established a set of recommendations, including to

“establish and oversee effective processes for data and story collection related to DePaul’s community engagement work for the purposes of documenting, reporting, and public relations needs” (Chaden et al. 2013). Completed in December 2013 and submitted to the provost, the report noted that the university was “under-utilizing and under-promoting significant university strengths and a unique and distinguishing mark of who we are”; and that a lack of a tracking system made it challenging not only for marketing, communication, and public relations, but also “for those within the university to collaborate with others in communities and with organizations where an established relationship already exists.” The latter reflected other DePaul folklore stories about faculty, students, and staff from distinct units partnering with the same community organizations without even knowing it. As a result, the report concluded that “we are less effective than we might be (in our community engagement) if there existed a more transparent mechanism for sharing this information publicly.” The sentiment of this conclusion became clear to me as I completed the Carnegie reclassification application and had to speak honestly about our need to better track engagement activities. After completing the application in spring 2014, I charged the Steans Center’s technology coordinator with creating a prototype for a university tracking system.

The goal of the prototype was to allow us to begin to think through what was necessary to track university community engagement and to document the impact of the institution on communities. The starting point remained tracking activities or “projects” and not on incorporating an actual assessment of our impact on communities. By early 2015, I began using the system to prepare for the President’s Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll application and quickly learned that the value of this first iteration was limited. Essentially, we produced a calculator that made it easier to generate community service numbers needed for the honor roll application. The system’s limitation clearly illustrated the need for larger institutional investment in tracking technology. In spring 2015, the university received the community engagement reclassification from the Carnegie Foundation, and shortly after, I worked with student affairs to submit a formal proposal to information services to produce a university tracking system. By the summer of 2015, the proposal was accepted and comprehensive community engagement tracking became a DePaul priority.

## **Conclusion**

What will become of our emerging community engagement tracking culture at DePaul? As we build, test, and implement a new system, how we choose to track engagement will certainly be discussed and debated, and the outcome will reflect where we position ourselves within the social and political landscape of higher education. Discussions about the design of the DePaul tracking system will be filled with meaning-making: What to include? How and why to include it? The verdict remains out as to whether future community engagement tracking and trackers at the university will holistically document and assess our successes as well as the quarks and blemishes that could build an authentic culture of tracking both in scope and content. The system under development will not only allow for tracking engagement activities across campus but also will include an application for maintaining a historical record of engagement outcomes that could in theory include achievements and challenges. There is also a proposal to formally recognize a DePaul Council on Community Engagement and part of the Council’s charge will be to guide future development and usage of the new community engagement tracking system and how data is employed for assessment purposes rather than solely for institutional promotion and marketing.

At the Steans Center, I intend to continue pursuing assessment and scholarship focused on dissatisfaction with community engagement as a means to improve our work. In 2010, we published an assessment project analyzing student dissatisfaction with service-learning pedagogy (Rosing et al. 2010), and in 2014, we embarked upon a similar analysis of community-partner dissatisfaction (Rosing et al. 2014). During the fall of 2015, we held focus groups with community partners, both to attain deeper feedback on engagement activities and also to produce new tools for collecting data on partnerships and determine the

impact they are having on community organizations and peoples' lives. The focus groups solicited the cooperation of community partners in developing tracking and evaluation resources to further their interests and the interests of DePaul from the standpoint of its educational and community engagement mission. Through such efforts, I hope to build new forms of meaning from data that values accomplishments but also illuminates the realities we face as we struggle to understand what works best with various engagement efforts. I intend to draw on the product of the new community partner evaluation tools to tell stories about our work that incorporate all aspects, including when things go wrong or fail, and to publicize this data in a fashion that helps us to build a greater sense of trust with our community partners. To this end, planning is also underway at the center to incorporate evaluation data throughout our website and to include dissatisfaction results (complaints) from community partners, students, and faculty.

As higher education institutions increasingly value community engagement as a characteristic and practice, there remains a question as to whether there will be truthful and transparent tracking and assessment of engagement; whether tracking systems will allow for self-reflexivity and critical analysis of engagement behaviors, and include perspectives from community partners. There is a need, as I have suggested, for deeper ethnographic inquiry into how those in the academy think about higher education community engagement and to move beyond tracking systems that only allow for easier promotion of how institutions do good for others. Geography, history, and social and political agendas will surely continue to inform the meanings behind how and why institutions engage with external communities, as they have at DePaul. Why and how we in higher education choose to track such engagement within our respective sociopolitical contexts will say a lot about our motives and intentions. Why tracking matters at DePaul evolved on its own timeline for reasons that related to but existed beyond institutional recognition, marketing, and budget legitimation. Collecting community engagement tracking data has become increasingly useful for understanding and deepening our role in Chicago as a university that asks its students, faculty, and staff, "What are we doing for justice?"

Inquiry into rationales for why universities and colleges seek to comprehensively track community engagement remains in its infancy. Future ethnographic analysis of community engagement in higher education will surely include a critique of institutional practices. In the end, I am convinced that such scholarship will produce greater transparency about the motivations and values that drive institutional engagement with communities. The longer term question persists as to whether the academy will move beyond the "who is the best" syndrome that seems to pervade through much of higher education community engagement tracking behavior; whether institutions will take up the challenge of documenting and publishing findings from engagement activities that build an authentic picture of impact on communities. This type of tracking will have to ask to what extent our practices in the community are hegemonic: for example, to what extent are we proliferating ethnocentrism among students and affirming notions of privilege in how we track and publicize our community engagement work; to what extent do we present our engagement outcomes as ahistorical and detached from current social, economic, and political issues, depoliticizing engagement in ways that mystify the complicity of the academy in producing structural inequality; and to what extent is our work impaired by tendencies to solve problems in communities rather than to deploy resources to honestly and transparently assist in building the capacity with our community partners.

As I have sought to articulate, there is a value in telling personal stories that lead to deeper inquiry into our emerging community engagement tracking practice in higher education. An authentic tracking practice will require a different kind of data analytics; one where the conclusions drawn will allow for better decision-making, for verification of models or theories of engagement at the institutional level, and for comparative analysis across institutions about successful and challenging engagement practices. As we pursue development of a critical community engagement tracking practice, telling stories that unpack the good news as well as the challenges and controversial baggage of the past and present, we will likely

produce new meanings and a sense of humility and increased integrity attached to our institutional engagement profiles. Perhaps the new meanings that emerge from this type of tracking culture will serve as some of the most effective institutional promotion that we can ask for.

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