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# Community Engagement, Civic Learning, and the Spiritan Charism

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## Dr. Lina D. Dostilio

Dr. Lina D. Dostilio, Ed.D., is the Director of Academic Community Engagement and part-time faculty within the School of Education at Duquesne University. In her administrative role, she supports community-engaged teaching, learning, and research that promote civic development and community transformation. Lina's research is concerned with democratically-engaged partnerships and she teaches on the topics of educational leadership, stewardship of practice, and civic engagement. She is on the editorial review board of *EPiCHE: Engaging Pedagogies in Catholic Higher Education* and is a peer reviewer for the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*. Most recently, Lina facilitated the Eastern Region Campus Compact's Peer Development Network to support institutions seeking the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement.

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# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, CIVIC LEARNING, AND THE SPIRITAN CHARISM<sup>1</sup>

Since the 1980's, institutions have been thinking structurally and programmatically about the ways they engage their local communities through academic, co-curricular, and institutional strategies<sup>2</sup>. Community engagement, sometimes referred to as civic engagement, is the common terminology for the umbrella of ways a university collaborates with its local community.

Community engagement describes the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity. The purpose of community engagement is the partnership of college and university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good. (*Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2006*)

Provost Timothy Austin suggested that we develop a graphic to illustrate the relationship between the various forms of community engagement and to help position the academic forms of community engagement that are generally grouped under the heading of community-engaged scholarship ...*that is* ...the civic activities that span teaching, learning, and research (see Figure 1: Organization of Community-Higher Education Civic Engagements). As you can see, there are other strategies of community engagement that fall within the co-curricular and institutional areas. There are also forms of experiential learning that do not serve civic purposes. These would include traditional internships, study abroad, and forms of corporate consulting work. Although they are a form of community engagement, they are not civic engagement.

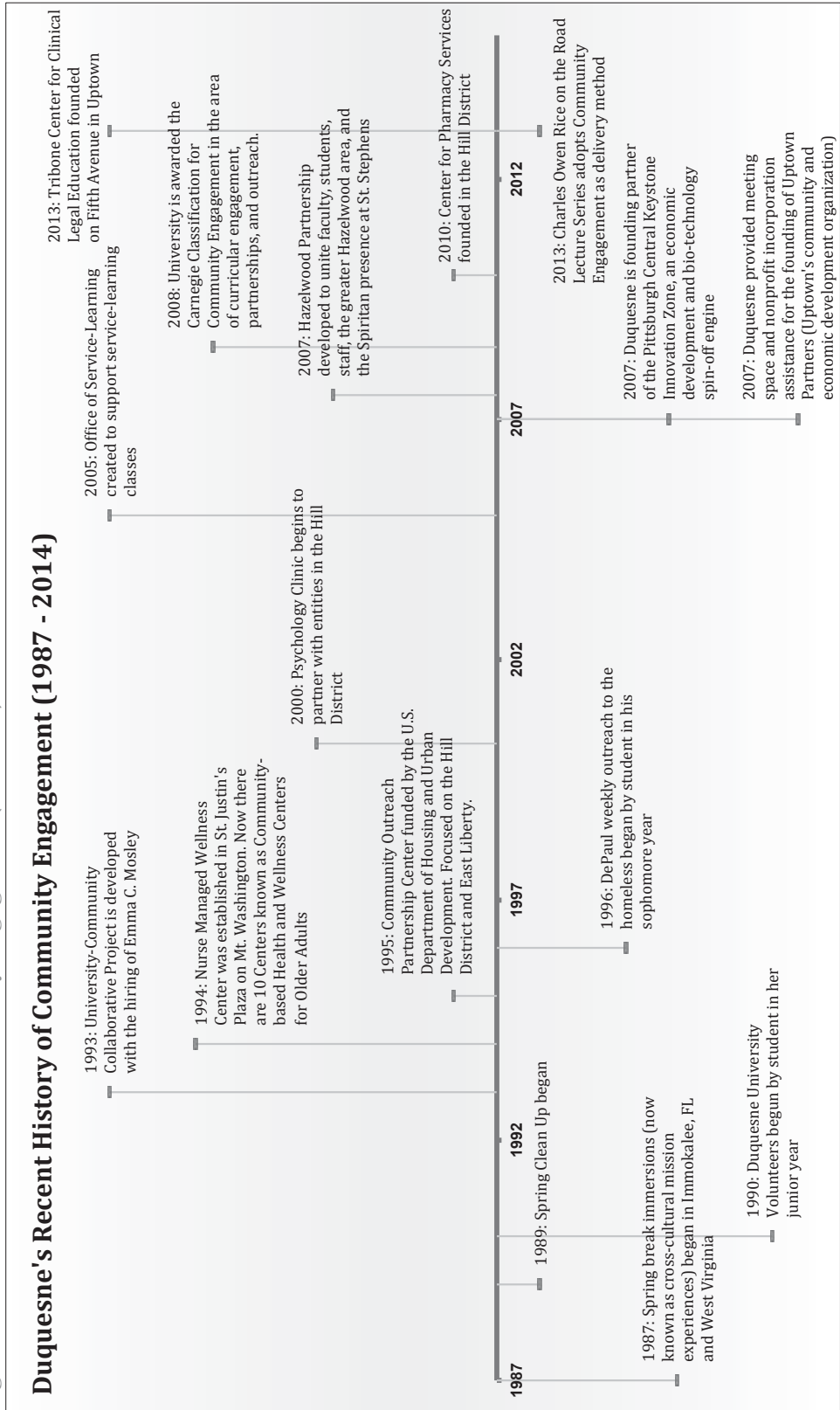
In figure 2, I give a brief history of recent community engagement at Duquesne since 1987. Though not exhaustive, you will see that the forms of community engagement included in the timeline are illustrative of the types of engagement within

Figure 1: Organization of Community-Higher Education Civic Engagements



**Figure 2: Timeline of Recent Community Engagement (1987-2014)**

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figure 1. Although it is not included in figure 2, it is important to highlight one of our earliest examples of community engaged scholarship. In 1962, Associate Professor Charles Unkovic of the Sociology department collaborated with stakeholders of Hazelwood to produce the “Hazelwood Neighborhood Survey<sup>3</sup>.” This collaborative research was developed to address the profound distress being experienced by the Hazelwood community in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s. This is one of our oldest examples of community-engaged scholarship and is part of the legacy that we continue to support. It also represents a challenge: have our collaborations with our local communities yielded appreciable change for the people who live there? Or, as in the case of Hazelwood, do we continue to recreate the same set of engagements over time with little measurable change?

It is evident that a high volume of activity occurs across the University’s divisions and schools. It is because of this rate of involvement that the University chose to pursue the 2008 Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching’s Community Engagement Classification. The Community Engagement Classification is only held by some 300 institutions of higher education across the nation, and it requires the completion of an exhaustive self-study that documents not only the frequency of community engagement but also its quality, depth, sustainability, and impacts (to both University constituents and the communities being served). We achieved the classification in 2008 and held that distinction until this year, in which we were required to reapply as per the conditions of the classification. Having the opportunity to chair the University’s self-study for the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement, both in 2008 and in this recent year, has provided me with a vantage point from which to see the strengths of our community engagement efforts as well as our challenges.

In terms of strengths, the Spiritan charism provides a strong platform on which our efforts are built. As the nation has paid closer attention to civic learning amongst college graduates within higher accreditation bodies, the US Department of Education, and various higher education associations, certain civic development outcomes have been stated as desirable. Many of these, such as working for justice, having the knowledge and skill to enact social change as a community member and professional, and comfortably collaborating with people across racial, socioeconomic, and cultural divides (The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012) are quite evident in our Spiritan nature.

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Another strength we enjoy is a strong network of community agency partners and community leaders who wish to collaborate with Duquesne University. A student body that exhibits exceptionally high rates of volunteerism and a robust corps of faculty who are dedicated to engaged teaching and engaged research complements this. Interestingly, the majority of prospective faculty being interviewed for our open positions express interest in community-engaged teaching and research opportunities. Finally, our last strength is that we have a good number of programs and initiatives throughout the divisions that support student and faculty involvement in the community.

As you can imagine, having completed an exhaustive self-study, which we chose to follow up with an external program review of our community-engaged scholarship activities, has made clear the challenges that we face. In conversation with Provost Austin, we agreed that there are three that we would like to bring to your attention.

Being known as a University committed to service can have a downside. Generally, the meaning associated with service here at Duquesne (amongst the students, within our institutional rhetoric, and also among some of the faculty) is a set of charitable activities such as volunteerism, philanthropy, and clothing and food donations. This can lead us to divest from building authentic relationships with people who are on the margins and give preference to acts that make us feel good about giving back. While charity is critical in the absence of justice, we cannot ignore our opportunity to engage a diverse set of civic activities that involve us in changing unjust conditions. As an example, community-based research can be a very deep form of civic involvement that has transformational learning opportunities for students within their disciplines.

The second challenge I highlight is that in some instances, the vehicle, or mode, of community engagement has become the end point rather than a means to improve community conditions and help our students develop civically. An example of this is service-learning. In a recent program-wide assessment, we learned that students who take service-learning classes have very significant increases in disciplinary learning but exhibit few or no demonstrable gains in civic or social responsibility. In light of our Spiritan charism and the goals for service-learning that we articulate in our core curriculum, this is troubling.

A third area of challenge is concerned with the role of community engagement within faculty work. Currently,

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the faculty handbook does not include community-engaged scholarship (those activities that span teaching, learning, and research) or provide description of how these are distinct from work that is considered service (such as membership in University committees). Given the high frequency of such work and the growing number of incoming faculty who choose to pursue community-engaged teaching and research, it is vital that we understand its role within faculty performance and that, further, our department chairs and school leadership know how to evaluate the quality of community-engaged scholarship.

I have given a brief overview of community engagement, albeit a whirlwind tour. It is difficult to quickly summarize all that we've learned from our yearlong self-study of engagement and external review. We finalized the last draft of our Carnegie Community Engagement Classification self-study in February and it is with the Provost and his colleagues at this time. We will be submitting it on or before April 15<sup>th</sup> and will know in January of 2015 if we will continue to hold this acknowledgement for the next five years.

*Dr. Lina D. Dostilio  
Duquesne University*

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>Remarks presented to the Duquesne University Board of Trustees Executive Committee, March 21, 2014.

<sup>2</sup>For an exposition on the history of community-university engagement, see Maurasse, D. J. *Beyond the Campus: How Colleges and Universities form Partnerships with their Communities*. Routledge, 2001; and Ostrander, S. A. "Democracy, civic participation, and the university: A comparative study of civic engagement on five campuses." *Nonprofit and voluntary sector Quarterly*, 33/1 (2004), 74-93. See also, The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement. *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2012; Zuiches, J. J. "Attaining Carnegie's: Community-Engagement Classification." *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 40/1 (2008), 42-45.

<sup>3</sup>There are only two copies of the Unkovic report and they are housed at the Heinz History Center and the Harrisburg Library. The Office of Service-Learning maintains a copy of the first chapter of the report.