"What Is It That's Going on Here?": Community Partner Frames for Engagement

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Abstract

Frames—defined as mental structures built through language and symbols that categorize our thoughts and experiences—have a significant impact on partnerships, shaping how participants understand the nature of the collaboration. While scholars have explored how teachers might frame engagement partnerships for university students and administrators, the field has yet to deeply draw on framing theory to examine community partner frames. This article argues that framing theory can shed light on how intentional frames might foster healthier partnerships for community members, offering a robust tour of framing theory and illustrating its impact through an analysis of how one community leader frames a high school-college writing partnership for local youth—ultimately suggesting that community partners may have much to teach the field of community writing about how to use frames rhetorically in engagement contexts.

I met Brenda Franco, a soft-spoken teenager with dark hair and soulful eyes, five years ago while I was interviewing community members involved in community writing[1] partnerships. Brenda had just completed a semester-long collaboration between her high school class and a first-year composition class as part of Wildcat Writers, a secondary-university writing partnership program housed at the University of Arizona that links high school and college English students for joint field trips, writing exchanges, and collaborative curricular activities that range from participatory action research projects to poetry slams. The program is focused on college access for minoritized students and offers opportunities for both high school and college students to practice meaningful public writing beyond the classroom. Brenda, like many of the other community partners[2] I interviewed, expressed a desire for more face-to-face meetings with the college students. But her explanation of why helped me reimagine the nature of community-university partnerships:

> [I'd like more time] to get to know my partners . . . and create a connection so they don't feel so homesick from home, because they come from other places. We're from here, so we know the area, so we could—this project was to help them stay in school, like not drop out and stuff. To have some connections around so when they felt lonely they could come back to us.

Strikingly, Brenda saw Wildcat Writers as a *college* retention program for the students at University of Arizona who might be experiencing challenges adjusting to college life away from home. Her take on this university-community partnership program

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may seem counterintuitive to those of us steeped in conversations about a university's responsibility to meet "needs" in the community—but her stance is sound, backed by research on how community engagement pedagogies impact retention rates for college students (Bringle et al.). As someone who has paired my college writing classes with high school classes for over ten years, I saw these partnerships in new ways through Brenda's frame. I was impressed at how this frame managed to push the traditional paternalistic assumptions about community engagement off balance, and I appreciated how Brenda's stance created a platform for the youth to be active contributors to the partnership with college students. Later, I would learn, Brenda's perspective on Wildcat Writers came from her high school teacher, Maria Elena Wakamatsu, a former community organizer of undocumented farmworkers, Chicana poet, and veteran teacher who spent quite a bit of time intentionally framing the Wildcat Writers program for her students.

This interaction with Brenda raises questions of how community engagement is framed by community partners, which frames might be most effective for community participants, and how community partners' knowledge might help guide engagement frames. In short, a frame is a mental structure built through language and symbols that categorizes our thoughts and experiences (Lakoff). These frames can have a significant impact on community engagement practices. As Donna Bickford and Nedra Reynolds argue in "Activism and Service Learning: Reframing Volunteerism as Acts of Dissent," the way that we "label and conceptualize our activities" has a deep impact on what participants do and how they understand the collaboration (241).

Community writing scholars have taken up this question of framing in community engagement, focusing on how to frame engagement for university representatives, such as college students or administrators. James Dubinsky describes shifting from a "charity" to a "change" frame for his professional writing service learning students, through tweaks such as altering "the language […] used to describe service-learning" (66) and revamping how he introduced the purpose of the collaboration, even as the basic structure of the class stayed the same. For example, he switched the terms used to refer to community collaborators from "clients" to "partners." Dubinsky found that the frame shift impacted how his students saw the benefits of the course, moving from a focus on self-gain and career preparation to community involvement. Similarly, J. Blake Scott and David Reamer both emphasize the importance of framing technical writing service learning for students in ways that promote ethical professional action rather than student personal growth or charity. Bickford and Reynolds suggest introducing community engagement to students as a form of activism rather than volunteerism, and they draw attention to how different framings might help students "enter relationships in ways that help destabilize hierarchical relations and encourage the formation of more egalitarian structures" (241). Moving beyond student interactions, Veronica House explores how to frame community engagement for university administration, suggesting that focusing on critical thinking and student learning benefits rather than civic learning, local literacy work, or political concerns might be most effective in obtaining funding and support. These insights are helpful for instructors thinking through how frames might function for university

stakeholders, yet many questions remain about which frames are generative for community partners involved in engagement partnerships.

In this article, I begin to explore the framing of university-community collaborations with and for community partners. To do so, I offer a tour of some dynamic scholarship on framing theory and place these concepts in conversation with data grounded in a specific community partnership: I invited Brenda's teacher, Maria Elena Wakamatsu, to a follow-up interview about how and why she frames the Wildcat Writers program for her high school students. In addition, I asked her to narrate a framing introduction to a community partnership live on video, targeted to an audience of youth entering community writing collaborations with college students. As I demonstrate in this article, framing theory sheds light on how framing efforts, such as Maria Elena's, function to prepare community partners to work with university members. This inquiry suggests approaches for community and university partnership coordinators to consider as they talk to community members about the nature of collaborations, as well as future research questions about the rhetorical strategies that community partners use to frame partnerships for one another. The article also invites readers to listen for and build from the frames that community partners may be using in their own engagement collaborations.

"Reframing is Social Change": A Review of Framing Theory

Framing theory was sparked with a trip to the zoo. In 1952, Gregory Bateson was watching monkeys playfighting, and he considered how the animals had to use "some degree of metacommunication" (179) to clarify that a nip or aggressive posture was meant as play and not as a real threat. From there, he theorized that all actions had to be understood in light of a larger metamessage about the nature of a situation. In Erving Goffman's terms, frames allow us to answer the question, "What is it that's going on here?" (8). For example, is this insult a friendly joke or a mean-spirited slight? When I'm asked how I'm feeling, is this a greeting or a medical examination? Is the university's decision to ban an inflammatory speaker a free speech crisis or a triumph against hate speech? Is this university-community partnership an act of charity or collaborative activism? Frames categorize situations like these and help people interpret interactions. George Lakoff defines frames simply: "Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world. As a result, they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions" (*Don't* xi-xii). Deborah Tannen, drawing on Robert N. Ross, calls frames "structures of expectation" (16); that is, a frame allows us to organize knowledge about the world and make predictions when faced with new experiences. For example, establishing volunteerism as a frame for community-based learning leads college students to compare the partnership to previous knowledge of volunteering, which causes them to interpret what is happening in particular ways—ways that differ from frames like "working with a client," "testing ideas in a lab," or "community organizing." Linda Adler-Kassner and Peggy O'Neill compare a mental frame to the physical frame of a house, as the frame holds up the house and determines what can be in-

cluded in it—adding on a second bathroom may not be possible if the frame doesn't allow it, just as including the goal of deep collaboration with community partners may not be possible in all frames. Instead of wood or steel, the building materials of mental frames are language and symbols. As Adler-Kassner and O'Neill note, rhetoricians in our field may connect framing to Kenneth Burke's theory of terministic screens, in which symbols impact our sense of reality.

Framing theory has its roots in sociology and psychology, though it has also been taken up in a variety of fields, including linguistics, economics, media studies, and social movement studies, often with slightly different methods and definitions (Borah).[3] The theory has been engaged in rhetoric and composition through Linda Adler-Kassner's work on framing public conversations about writing issues (Adler-Kassner; Adler-Kassner and Harrington; Adler-Kassner and O'Neill) and also used to explore questions like race in WAC initiatives (Poe), rhetorical strategies in debates (Stevens), and the nature of technical communication (Reamer). As Sharon McKenzie Stevens and David Reamer both argue, framing theory holds promise for rhetoric and composition given our interest in the role of language in meaning-making. I would add that this theoretical approach might hold particular interest for community writing scholars, given that we are involved in meaning-making around not only texts, but ethical relationships between students and community partners.

Frames are significant because they shape our idea of "common sense" in a situation, dictating the nature of the event and what actions should be taken. For example, consider George Lakoff's illustration of two framings of the conflict in Iraq.[4] One framing is "the Iraq war." Under this frame, it is cowardly to pull out because leaving amounts to running away from a war, and the honorable thing to do is to sacrifice what is necessary. Those who do not support our national efforts in the war are unpatriotic. Yet, how might our understanding shift if we frame the American presence in Iraq as an *occupation?* This frame raises a different set of "common sense" questions: Do the Iraqis want us there? Are we doing more harm than good—to them, to ourselves? When should the occupation end? As Lakoff explains, "The question is not *whether* to withdraw but *when.* In an occupation, the problem is not an evil enemy. The problem is when to leave. The solutions that 'make sense' in an occupation are entirely different from the solutions that 'make sense' in a war" (*Thinking* 33). Similarly, when community partners interact with students, the questions and actions that make sense can vary widely when different frames are used. Are community members recipients of volunteer service—and if so, what do the college students have that the community members need? How should community members respond to the students' "gift"? Or, are community members helping college students with a school project—and if so, do they have time and interest to help? How should college students thank them? Or, are they co-researchers—and if so, what is their research role? Will they be compensated for their expertise? The frame shapes what responses would be considered "natural."

Frames have this impact because they include and exclude, or emphasize and de-emphasize values, information, and ideas. As Gregory Bateson notes, mental frames work like picture frames, calling attention to what is inside the frame and telling the

viewer not to use the same kind of thinking when looking at the wallpaper. For example, telling college students that a writing partnership with community youth is "practice in giving writing feedback" can lead the university students to focus on the community members' writing, while deemphasizing factors like the personal lives of youth. Porismita Borah explains that "frames highlight some aspects of reality while excluding other elements, which might lead individuals to interpret issues differently" (248). To illustrate, James Hertog and Douglas McLeod give the example of how framing drugs as a crime and punishment topic means that certain phenomena, like the diseases caused by drug use, are not considered relevant in the same way they would be when drugs are framed as a public health issue. In their example, I would add, we can see how frames are impacted by social inequalities, as the "opioid *epidemic*" makes certain values (e.g. empathy) relevant when overdoses predominantly impact white people, while Nixon's "*war* on drugs" highlighted other ideals (e.g. retribution) when African-Americans were seen as the main group involved. Frames, shaped by social contexts, work to highlight and hide. This process has been called by Thomas Nelson and Elaine Wiley "a kind of hydraulic system" that governs the balance of values, "wherein strengthening one weakens the other" (qtd. in Borah 252): a frame that strengthens the value of empathy weakens the value of retribution. Claes H. de Vreese goes so far as to define a frame as "an emphasis in salience of different aspects of a topic" (53). This function of frames raises for community engagement practitioners the question of which values and aspects of the partnership we would like to highlight for participants—and therefore, which frames might help us achieve these ends.

As frames determine which aspects are "relevant," they also define roles. As Hertog and McLeod note, "Under one frame, a particular group may be seen as an essential actor in resolving a social problem while in another the same group may be perceived as peripheral to its resolution or even a source of the problem itself" (143). In community writing collaborations, a frame can determine the role that college students and the community members take, along with roles for other stakeholders like non-profit staff or the government. Goffman also makes a point about how "frames organize involvement as well as meaning," because frames bring with them roles that involve different levels of engrossment into the frame. He gives the example of how the frame of traffic systems only requires partial attention, as drivers glance at stop signs and follow traffic rules, while sex (hopefully) is much more immersive as a frame (345). Goffman's idea, when applied to community writing, suggests that the frames we use for community engagement might bring with them different levels of engrossment—for example, telling community members that college students are visiting because "it is their assignment to fulfill required volunteer hours" calls for a more limited level of attention from community members and students than, for example, if they are visiting because they are "working with us on a collaborative writing project" or they are "guests at our event, so they can learn from residents about the neighborhood." The "guest" or "co-worker" frame invites more personal investment than the "assignment" frame.

Frames, like "community engagement as assignment," do not have to be explicitly introduced to be activated, as each frame comes with a language. Hertog and McLeod explain that a pro-life frame can be sparked by its vocabulary—"baby, abortionist, pro-abortion forces, unborn, mother, murder, and so on"—while the pro-choice frame is activated by "fetus, doctor, woman, freedom, etc." (143). In community engagement, slipping words like "hours requirement" or "due" in conversations with community partners brings to life an "assignment" frame, just as "help," "student volunteer," and "community needs" highlight a charity frame. In fact, frames do not need to be intentionally selected to be activated: frame theorists have suggested that many frames are used unconsciously, and sometimes the frame even contradicts the intentions of the speaker. Lakoff gives the example of Democrats who use the term "tax relief" without realizing that this language undercuts their views: the phrase activates the frame of "taxes as affliction" rather than "taxes as investment" (*Thinking* 36). In this light, we might wonder about which frames are activated unconsciously by the language we use to talk about engagement.

These frames, though activated by small language choices, have significant impacts. Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman demonstrate how presenting the same information using different frames has a powerful impact on people's decision-making. Sharing the odds of a surgery's success in terms of gain (90% survive) versus loss (10% die) swayed not only patients, but also doctors, in making medical decisions. Tversky and Kahneman conclude that frames can overpower rational decision-making. Similarly, Paul Thibodeau and Lera Boroditsky hosted experiments where people read crime statistics framed under different metaphors and then offered solutions to the problem of crime. The metaphor's impact was dramatic, leading people toward recommendations of either social reform or individual punishment. Strikingly, people pointed to the statistics instead of the metaphor when asked to explain their choices, suggesting that we may underestimate the power of frames in shaping our thinking.

Given the high stakes, frames often become a source of conflict. Sometimes, multiple frames are in play at the same time, and this can mean that people are caught between differing ways of being (Tannen; Benford and Snow). For example, a college instructor may frame a partnership as both a class *requirement* and a form of *volunteerism,* creating some obvious friction. Often, "framing contests" (Ryan) develop as people wrestle to establish the dominant frame (Benford and Snow).

As interest has grown in how to win framing contests, framing theorists have examined the factors that impact framing success, which include:

- **Cultural Resonance.** When a frame aligns with cultural ideologies or myths, the frame appears natural (Gamson and Modigliani; Bedford and Snow). For example, a frame for a community program that emphasizes "hard work" as a solution to poverty can be seductive because of the Horatio Alger "bootstraps" myth.
- **Frame Sponsors.** Frames often have "sponsors," people or institutions invested in the promotion of a particular frame (Gamson and Modligiani; Hertog and Mcleod)—similar, as Linda Adler-Kassner notes, to Deborah Brandt's "literacy sponsors." Sponsors often have resources to help them

impose particular frames. In university-community partnerships, the university is a powerful frame sponsor that seeks to shape how engagement efforts are understood, and it has influence through avenues such as the university communications office and tenure and promotion policies.

- **Audience Characteristics.** Audiences are not passive, monolithic groups at the mercy of frame sponsors. Known moderators that influence whether people are swayed by frames include gender, mood, and prior beliefs (Borah). In community engagement, these findings mean that a frame will not work the same for every participant.

- **Experiential Commensurability.** The match between an audience's personal experiences and a frame, "experiential commensurability," has also been shown to impact the persuasiveness of a frame (Benford and Snow 621). Engagement practitioners might consider how to offer experiences to align with the desired frame (e.g. presenting a "collaboration" frame but involving college students in tutoring community members may not be effective).

- **Pervasiveness.** Frames are most powerful when they are prevalent (Chong and Druckman). As Lakoff notes, "Repetition can embed frames in the brain" (*Thinking* 37). This means college teachers and community leaders will need to repeat their desired frames often—and that they should be concerned about the pervasiveness of problematic frames for engagement.

Reframing is possible even in the face of established frames, and Chong and Druckman map out the process for recasting frames. People draw frames from the beliefs stored in our minds, some of which are accessible enough to pull from memory, and some of these accessible frames are considered strong enough to be relevant. Therefore, reframing work can happen on multiple levels: making new frames available, repeating frames so that they are more mentally accessible, and persuading people that these frames are strong. Each of these steps can apply to community engagement. Joby Taylor has examined the conceptual metaphors used to frame engagement, such as service as war (*mobilizing* students to *attack* social problems). After reviewing dominant metaphors, he calls for the first step of reframing work: "we may, in a manner similar to the poet, self-consciously develop new metaphors that nuance or change a concept's meaning…[to] creatively redescribe concepts, giving them a new interpretive range, and, in many cases, overturning previous conceptions" (45). As the field develops new frames, we should avoid "spin" or manipulation, and instead craft frames that reflect our deeply-held beliefs about what engagement is and could be (Lakoff, *Don't*).

Once frames are available, the next step is to make them accessible—the desired frames need to be used frequently, with language and imagery to reinforce them. Reframing cannot be accomplished with a single speech at the beginning of the partnership, but rather must be repeated in various ways. A related point is that it is ineffective to argue against a frame using that frame's language, because this repeats and strengthens the opposing framework. Lakoff's book *Don't Think of an Elephant* is dedicated to this idea: telling someone not to think of an elephant makes elephants come to mind, because when you negate a frame, you activate it. In engagement, for

example, telling community members, "You are not lab subjects for students to test their ideas," may serve to reinforce the problematic frame. We need to think carefully about which frames we want to be accessible.

And finally, reframing involves making the target frame appear strong. This does not mean simply relying on the fact that a frame is ethically sound or grounded in research—as Chong and Druckman note, "Strong frames should not be confused with intellectually or morally superior arguments" (111), and frames that are based in lies or prejudice have held powerful sway. A frame may need to be promoted to help people see how it aligns with their values or fits their experience.

These three components of reframing all take time, but interventions in any of these areas can have a considerable impact—as George Lakoff argues, "Reframing is social change" (*Don't* xi). Of course, like all forms of social change, reframing is much more complex in concrete situations than in theory. Next, I explore one community leader's attempts at reframing a university-community partnership.

Framing Illustration Context: Wildcat Writers

The community leader interviewed for this illustration of community partner framing, Maria Elena Wakamatsu, was involved in an initiative called Wildcat Writers, a program at the University of Arizona that connects secondary and college classes for writing exchanges, joint class sessions, and field trips. Individual high school and college teachers are paired in the fall semester, and in the spring semester they link their curricula and design common projects that support course objectives in areas such as research skills and rhetorical awareness. Common Wildcat Writers curriculum activities include debate tournaments, local issue panels with politicians, community action research projects, discussions of shared texts, public showcase events, and family literacy nights. Responding to calls for the field to smooth the transition between high school and college writing and promote college access for minoritized secondary students (Goldblatt; Ruecker), Wildcat Writers engages high schools with demographics historically underrepresented in higher education, including mostly Latinx and Native American youth. The program, now in its fourteenth year with over six hundred students participating each year, is one of several similar school-university writing collaboration initiatives across the country.

Maria Elena has been involved in Wildcat Writers since its early years, first as a high school teacher partner, and later as a founding advisory board member involved in directing the program (Shah). She is an award-winning poet, a member of one of the longest-running Chicana writing groups in the country, a former community organizer of undocumented farm workers, and an expert English teacher, with her high school students frequently winning writing awards. As the former coordinator of Wildcat Writers, I served with Maria Elena on the advisory board and partnered my college writing classes with her high school classes for several semesters. Her high school students were among those I interviewed for a book on community perspectives of university-community partnerships, which is when I met Brenda Franco, the teenager mentioned in the introduction, and learned of Maria Elena's intentional ap-

proach to framing engagement for community members. Intrigued, I asked Maria Elena to demonstrate on video how she framed community partnerships, speaking to an audience of youth about to start a collaboration with college students, with the plan to use this video in an online toolkit I was creating of community-driven resources for engagement. This 28-minute video would later become one data source for this article. When I later decided to formally write about Maria Elena's approach to framing for this article, I invited her to a 40-minute follow-up interview specifically to discuss framing. Both the interview and the video were transcribed and analyzed for framing concepts to inform this project. I sent Maria Elena a draft of this article to make sure I was fairly representing her approach, and with her permission I cite her by name to credit her for her insights, borrowing a practice from indigenous methodologies (Chilisa).

Based on Maria Elena's insights, the next section examines one approach to framing community engagement for community members. This approach is grounded in a specific partnership, Wildcat Writers, with particular cultural, economic, and relational factors at play in Maria Elena's decision to frame the partnership this way for the youth in her classroom. The following analysis is not intended to be an argument for this particular approach to framing engagement—rather, it offers one illustration of how framing functions for community partners in order to prompt reflection on how community and university partnership coordinators might intentionally talk to community members about the nature and purpose of collaborations.

"That's What This Is All About": An Engagement Frame for Community Members

Maria Elena Wakamatsu was very intentional in her approach to framing the Wildcat Writers program for the community youth participants. Her intentions began with a clear sense of purpose behind the framing: she wanted the framing to challenge many of the problematic power imbalances that often appear between university and community members in engagement partnerships. In her words during the interview, "By the very fact that you have university on the one hand and high school on the other hand, there can be a very strange power dynamic that rears its ugly head"— especially, as she notes, when the youth come from title one schools whose students are traditionally underrepresented in college classrooms. These youth, she explains, may "feel a little intimidated because they don't have that experience of having an older brother or sister or parent who went to college." On the other hand, college students may believe, "Oh I'm a big college student now, and I'm working with this high school *kid* from the other side of the tracks so to speak." These dynamics can lead to condescending attitudes on the part of the college students and a hesitance to fully participate on the part of the youth—dynamics that are mutually reinforcing and can snowball over the course of the semester. Maria Elena explains that as a community coordinator of the program, she has to be aware of these dynamics and prepared to challenge them.

While those of us in community writing may immediately identify the power imbalance as ethically problematic because of the ways it reinforces unequal dynamics in society, for Maria Elena, the problem encompasses and moves beyond ethics: for her, subverting these dynamics is necessary in order for the partnership to achieve what she sees as its root purpose—college access. She explains in her interview that when her high school students have the experience that "they can hang" with the college students, "that's what makes my students change their mind about going to the university." When she surveys her high school students on the first day of class, ninety percent say they have no plans to go to college, or they are only considering community college. But, Maria Elena details, "after doing [Wildcat Writers], that number completely turns around for me. At the end, it's the majority who are saying 'Miss, I finished all my paperwork and I got accepted and I'm going to University of Arizona or another four-year institution.' The change, the impact that this program has on my students, it's amazing." For Maria Elena, the stakes of framing are high: her ability to open up college pathways with her secondary students depends on a reframing of the partnership to minimize paternalistic power dynamics—she must frame the partnership as a deep collaboration in which the high school students are capable intellectual contributors to college-level conversations, rather than as a hierarchical mentorship or charity program.

Yet other frame sponsors seek to conceptualize Wildcat Writers differently than Maria Elena, resulting in a "framing contest" (Ryan). For example, the University of Arizona is motivated to position Wildcat Writers as an "outreach" program that demonstrates that the institution is fulfilling its land-grant mission and therefore deserves broad public support and funding. The University Relations Office titled an article about the program "Innovative Writing Program Helps High Schools"—despite the fact that I, as coordinator of the program, explicitly explained when I was interviewed for the article that the program was a collaborative venture rather than an initiative designed to "help" schools. The University was working to sponsor a frame that explicitly contradicted Maria Elena's, so achieving her purpose in framing would take intentional—and artful—work. In Maria Elena's words, "Getting high school students to understand that they are or can be on an equal footing when it comes to doing a project with a college student, getting them to see that, to feel it, to really buy it, is part science on the part of the teacher, and part magic."

Maria Elena's framing narration video offers a glimpse of how she created this "magic" to achieve her purpose. She organized her talk by discussing three "players" in the partnership: the youth, the college students, and the Wildcat Writers program itself.[6] Frames establish roles for various participants in a situation (Hertog and McLeod), and Maria Elena worked to offer these three players specific roles through her framing. She began by discussing the youth, taking an explicitly asset-based (Gonzalez et al.) view: "When it comes to understanding how you fit in, you have to understand first what you bring to the table…You're going to need to know what are the things that you bring that can be of benefit to other people—in this case, can be a benefit to your university partner." She encourages the youth to consider "the things that you know, the skills that you have," and points them to a specific area: "If you

start by just going to your family and your place where you are the most comfortable, you'll probably come to find that the things you know, and the things that you understand the best are your community and your culture." In other words, Maria Elena begins a framing of the partnership by establishing the cultural and local knowledges of the youth—a very different starting point than a charity or tutoring frame, which would be more likely to begin with their knowledge gaps or needs.

From here, Maria Elena transitions to talk about the second player in the partnership: the college students. She encourages the youth to learn about the college students and consider questions to ask them, as it's in "asking those questions that the relationship starts to have some sort of flavor, and it starts to mean something to you." Here, Maria Elena is setting up a frame that involves a deeper personal investment, or "engrossment" (Goffman), than a standard school project. She prompts the youth to learn about their partners' problems, "the issues that they're facing on a day-to-day basis at the university." Then, she moves into a discussion of the types of challenges the college students might be facing. For example, some college students may be first-generation, "and they're facing the same sorts of fears and are up against the same kinds of problems that a lot of you are feeling." The students may be wrestling with skill level: "A lot of them come in, possibly, not having the reading and the writing and the math skills that they wish they had." Or, perhaps a college student may be very prepared academically, but "they might have problems in terms of discipline." She explains, "This might be the first time they move away from home, that they have to manage their own finances, that they have to set their own curfews. They may be worried about—I'm not doing as well as I should. I'm staying up too late. I'm partying too much." On the other hand, some of the college students might be "a little too focused," and they have academic "tunnel vision." Maria Elena elaborates, "You need to remember that that can also lead to students being isolated and withdrawing from other people. They may not have the friends that you have. They may not have as much of a social life as you do. They may need to lighten up a little bit." She touches on mental health issues on college campuses, from depression to anxiety, and shares research on the relatively high dropout rates of college students. She points out some dropouts can occur because students are struggling with homesickness: "Many of them are here from God knows where—other states, the other side of the country, even other countries. When they come here, paired up with you, they're missing their mom. They're missing their dad. They're missing their families. They're missing their food. They're missing the connection that they feel, their relationships that they have at home." Maria Elena pauses to emphasize, "These students at the university level, they have issues, and they have risks, and they face problems that you have no idea." As she explained to me later, her framing does explicit work to humanize the college students: "They can't just work with a college student. They have to work with a person."

As the college students are humanized with challenges and insecurities, Maria Elena positions the youth as offering hope and support: "Let's talk about some of those solutions—the solutions that you have, that you bring to students at the university." For example, "If they have someone like you to talk to, to communicate with,

someone who's asking, 'Hey, how's it goin'? Have you been out of your room today? Did you get up? Did you go to your classes—,' something that might help them—it would be tremendous." She emphasizes, "You can be there and work with them on some kind of project that will, hopefully, bring them out of whatever shell and make them forget about whatever problems they might have, even if it's for just the hour or two that they're working with you." Maria Elena explains that Wildcat Writers offers an opportunity for these college students to feel like Tucson is home, and to build relationships with the youth. "We talk a lot about how homesick they can be. What can you do about that? Do you know? If they're missing—I don't know—the language, do you speak their home language?" Sometimes, she says, "All it takes is for someone like you to open their hearts and to lend a hand. Sometimes that's all it takes for these kids at the university to not drop out." In many ways, Maria Elena's language seems to mirror the framing work that we may expect in a training for privileged service learning college students working with "at-risk youth," but her subversive choice to use this language to frame the college students upends traditional power dynamics.

Finally, Maria Elena turns to the program of Wildcat Writers itself, explaining that it is a service learning program, which she defines as "projects and programs that combine teaching with community service so that your learning experience in the classroom can be richer, so that the experience of the university students can be richer, so that you can learn a little bit more about civic responsibility." Here, Maria Elena is echoing Jeff Howard's definition of service learning, culled from a large survey of definitions, that includes three components: service in communities in response to a need defined by the community, academic learning related to course content, and commitment to developing students' commitment to civic engagement. Yet Maria Elena's twist comes in how she presents the first component. When discussing community service, she asks, "You know who that community is going to be? It's going to be those university students," reversing the traditional definition of service learning that positions the youth as "the community." She describes Wildcat Writers as serving both the university students and the larger community of Tucson, as many of the projects involve collaborating with college students on public projects such as family literacy nights or forums with elected officials. "We're going to bring you folks together, so you can work on some kind of project that will help other people. It's community-based [work] that is of service and of benefit to others." She pauses here for emphasis. "Yeah. That's what this is all about."

When discussing the program of Wildcat Writers, Maria Elena also tells her audience of youth that "what this program is not is just as important as understanding what it is…It is not this thing, where university students come in with their knowledge and their skills and help you. This is not a charity program. This is not a handout." This move clarifies Maria Elena's frame, but it also makes me wonder about George Lakoff's argument that negating a frame often activates that frame and reinforces it, making it more accessible in the minds of participants (*Don't*). I wonder, here, if using terms like "handout" and "charity," might serve to trigger the framework she is countering even as it clearly identifies her stance.

Maria Elena concludes with a more positive statement of her own frame: "What this program is, is real simple. It's a collaboration. That means a partnership between two equally intelligent and invested groups of people who just want to help each other out, who want to do whatever they can to make a difference for each other." In short, Maria Elena establishes a frame that positions the youth as bringing strengths to the table that allow them to build supportive relationships with college students and collaborate on public-facing projects.

In her interview, Maria Elena explains that establishing this frame is not a simple matter of offering an inspiring narration at the beginning of a partnership. As the framing research emphasizes, frames take root over time, with repetition and creative representation. David Reamer argues that acknowledging the cumulative nature of frames "is particularly important in an educational context, wherein instructors often assume that a single lesson or reading will be convincing or produce a noticeable effect in students" (43-44). Maria Elena detailed how she sets up experiences in the partnership that reinforce her frame—what Robert Benford and Daniel Snow term "experiential commensurability" (621). For example, in one assignment, the high school and college students walked around the high school together to create an asset map of the school's strengths. Maria Elena told the story of one high school student who later shared that at the beginning of the tour, she was uncertain about what assets she could show her visitors. So, she began just walking her college partner around, pointing out places like the gym and the art classroom. But, Maria Elena narrated, when the college partner asked what happens in the gym, the student shared, "I started answering in ways that kind of surprised me. I remember saying to my partner that we had a really great basketball team." And then, by the art classroom, when the partner asked what happened there, the high school student said, "I remember feeling very proud to say that we had a congressional art award winner." The high school student continued: "Pretty soon, I was like, 'Oh my god, and *here* is the mariachi room, and these people, they go out and perform at Disneyland.'" This high school student reflected, "All of the sudden I began to realize that what I have here is amazing. I never thought I could be proud of this, of my school, of these programs, of these people I go to school with." The asset-mapping activity was designed to reinforce Maria Elena's frame: that the high school students and their community were brimming with assets that could be resources to the college students.

Offering another example, Maria Elena also shares the story of one activity in which her secondary students put on a potluck for the college students. She describes hosting a discussion with her high school students about what kinds of things they could do to encourage their college partners, and this group of students landed on the idea of a potluck. Initially, they were planning to bring many of the foods they ate every day, such as pizza and chips. "But then," Maria Elena explained, "I remember asking them, 'If you were far away from home, what would you want to eat? What would make you feel warm and fuzzy inside if somebody were hosting you?' They all said, of course, 'Mexican food, tacos, beans,' these kinds of things. And I said, 'So why don't you ask your partners, what do they want to eat? What would make them feel warm and fuzzy?' So, the high school students posted on their online discus-

sion board with the college students and asked what meals the students missed from home. The responses varied, but they were all some form of comfort food. The high school students worked to cook many of these foods, from chicken alfredo to spanakopita, and they also brought in homemade Mexican food using family recipes. When the high school students set out a line of cookware and crock pots across the back of the classroom in preparation for the college students and witnessed the college students' exclamations of genuine thanks in response, they experienced—very viscerally—the asset-based frame of care for university students that Maria Elena was working to create.[7] These experiences, along with Maria Elena's statements throughout the partnership, worked to continually reinforce her frame. In Maria Elena's words, "I've got to make sure that I keep reminding my students that a partnership means, and it requires, some sort of equal footing here."

Enacting this frame, however, is only possible if university and community partnership coordinators genuinely believe it and can see the frame at work in the world. As Maria Elena suggested, helping youth internalize an asset-based frame of themselves in a college collaboration requires that she consistently "project confidence in them," including identifying "empirical evidence" about past successes in which the young person used the skills that would be involved in the college partnership: "Look, when you did this other project by yourself, these were the skills you used in terms of research, writing, and peer editing, and those are the kinds of skills you're going to be using with this person. You've got this." Here also, Maria Elena emphasizes Lakoff's point that frames have to be built from our genuine beliefs and values rather than "spin" (*Don't*), stressing, "I can't say enough for the fact that you have to believe in your students." Partnership leaders have to be able to show community members that they are capable of college-level interactions, and feel that it's true, in order to project and draw out this reality in the collaboration. An asset-based frame pasted over deeply held paternalistic or racist beliefs will not work. In order for frames to be effective, they must be tied to root beliefs and values, and then reiterated through a variety of experiences and interactions.

Another particularly powerful insight that Maria Elena raised about the nature of framing in university-community partnerships is that frames have to be echoed at multiple levels of an engagement program. In other words, for college and high school students to hold a frame of deep collaboration rather than hierarchical tutoring, this frame should be replicated in interactions between the high school and college *teachers*, who should see their partnership as a collaboration rather than an example of the college instructor "helping" the high school teacher. This framing is important, as many secondary-university collaborations assume knowledge flows from the university to the schools—the university is presented as the source of research and expertise in writing studies, and the schools are presented as the location of knowledge *application*. Consider, for example, how workshops are often presented by university faculty for local K-12 teachers, but rarely the opposite is true. Maria Elena challenges these traditional frames, emphasizing that not only are the college and high school students involved in a reciprocal knowledge exchange, so are the college and high school teachers. Maria Elena asserts, "We need to be able to frame this for

the instructor partners as well, to talk to them about the weird power dynamics that can happen if we don't do something to prevent them." She explains that when she works with teachers who are new to the program, "I need to be able to share with both the high school and university instructor what each brings to the table, what their strengths are, but also what their challenges are"—and specifically, to "humanize" the college instructors for the high school teachers in the same way she humanizes college students for her students. Maria Elena coaches her fellow high school teachers in the program to be aware that the graduate instructors may be relatively new to teaching, "so you have to help them out." On average, the high school teachers in Wildcat Writers have significantly more experience teaching than the college instructors, most of whom are graduate students. Therefore, in Wildcat Writers, the high school teachers are often more practiced in pedagogical skills, such as scaffolding instruction and classroom management, while the graduate instructors often have a richer understanding of recent composition and rhetoric scholarship. Both need to not only bring their strengths to support their teaching partner but also be willing to learn from the other. When the teachers can learn to work under this deep collaborative frame, Maria Elena explains, "then they will make it happen for their students." Just as teachers model writing strategies or reading think-alouds for their students, they have to model how to be a partner in a university-community initiative under a collaborative frame. This insight of frame modeling at leadership levels of a community engagement partnership holds implications for community-engagement practitioners who want college students and community members to take up particular frames in interactions with each other, pushing leaders to consider what frames are used by the university and community representatives who plan the partnership.

For Maria Elena, a significant part of her work in cultivating a partnership between her high school students and the local university is framing work. She engages all three parts of Chong and Druckman's approach to reframing: making new frames available, repeating and amplifying frames so that they are more mentally accessible, and persuading people that these frames are strong. She introduces a new frame for service learning, defining the college students as the "community" the high school youth will be serving. Then, she works to amplify this frame to make it more accessible to participants, repeating it in various conversations, embedding it into experiences her students will have, and working to establish it at multiple levels of the program so high school and college students see a consistent frame. And, she actively works to persuade participants that the frame is valid, identifying particular strengths of the youth she works with and describing specifically how the youth can support the college students.

Maria Elena's framing example is instructive not because her particular frame is or should be transferrable to other community writing initiatives—indeed, there are many situations where it would be deeply problematic to ask community members to see themselves as serving college students. For example, in Tania Mitchell and Kathleen Coll's partnership with a group of domestic workers who were organizing to pass the California Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, I imagine it would not have made sense for the domestic workers to take precious time out of their meetings to dis-

cuss how to provide emotional support to college students who may be experiencing homesickness; the domestic workers' focus, I expect, would have rightly been on the passage of this critical legislation. However, even though Maria Elena's framing may not be widely transferrable, my hope is that learning about how a seasoned community organizer with years of experience in shaping university-community partnerships intentionally frames the partnership for the community members she works with might spark our field to reflect more deeply about framing writing collaborations. Next, I turn to some questions for the field.

Exploring Our "Meaning Work": Future Directions in Framing Writing Partnerships

Benford and Snow argue that framing is, simply, "meaning work" (613). Engaging in this meaning work with communities is critically important as community writing continues to grow as a field. In this article, I have offered a rough sketch of key insights from framing theory in hopes that these concepts and strategies might be useful for community and university partnership coordinators as they create meaning around their partnerships—and in particular, as they consider how frames are functioning for community members. As foundational framing theorist Goffman notes, "When participant roles in an activity are differentiated—a common circumstance— the view that one person has of what is going on is likely to be quite different from that of another. There is a sense in which what is play for the golfer is work for the caddy" (8). Community members experience writing collaborations in significantly different ways than college students or university teachers: when an activity is "volunteer work" for a student, what is it for the community member? We need explicit attention to how frames are working for community partners. As Maria Elena's example in this article demonstrates, local knowledge from community partners may be able to guide reimagined frames for engagement partnerships—frames that could generatively shape the experience for *both* university and community representatives. Frames for engagement partnerships can be intentionally built through repetition in words and experiences, even in the midst of framing contests with powerful frame sponsors that may seek to attach different meanings to our work. These frames can have concrete consequences on partnership power dynamics, ethics, and outcomes.

Given the importance of community partner frames, there are many related questions our field might consider. Dietram Scheufele sketches a series of research questions on framing, exploring frames as a dependent and independent variable, and I build from his questions to identify a few inquiry areas that might be generative for scholars in community writing to pursue:

- What kinds of frames currently exist for how community partners perceive community engagement? If we were to observe how non-profit staff or university representatives discuss engagement with community members, or how community members discuss engagement with each other, what frames could we identify? What frame sponsors, social dynamics, or institutional factors shape these frames?

- What strategies are most effective for forwarding frames in community engagement? What factors influence how frames are taken up by community partners? How do factors like community member characteristics (e.g. age) or partnership characteristics (type or length of collaboration) influence the process?
- How do frames impact how community partners interact, and how might changing a frame change dynamics or outcomes?
- How do (or could) community partners play an active role in constructing frames? How do they resist some frames, and what might this resistance indicate?
- What new frames might we imagine with community partners to frame engagement?

Exploring these questions offers community writing practitioners the opportunity to more deeply examine how community partners understand the nature of university-community collaborations, and how we might better employ rhetorical tools with community partners to shape meaning-making processes around engagement. Too often, I fear, university coordinators may not consider how frames are operating for community partners. An important first step may be to talk with partners about frames, which might provide opportunities to collaboratively craft frames or reveal ways for university members to reinforce the frames that community partners are attempting to construct.

As an engagement coordinator, I spent years of practice carefully designing frames of community-based learning for my students and thoughtfully examining my framing in grant proposals or reports for administrators, without bringing the same attention to how the partnership was introduced to the community youth involved. After hearing Maria Elena's student Brenda Franco frame Wildcat Writers as a college retention program, I was struck by how framing could so dramatically shift how participants experienced engagement. In the school-university partnership I now coordinate with a 300-level writing pedagogy class, I have been working with the high school teachers over the last few iterations of the class to construct a frame that positions the high school students as instructional coaches for the college education majors they partner with over the semester. Inspired by Maria Elena, I visit the high school classroom before my students to introduce myself and our partnership directly to the youth as one step of my framing process, to supplement the framing done by the teachers. In my introduction, I express appreciation to the high school students for helping my students stay in college, sharing research about how engaged pedagogies support college retention (Bringle et al.), and I express gratefulness to them for helping my university students become better teachers. I tell them that for many of my education majors, this will be their first time working with secondary students on writing, so my students may be nervous—seeking to humanize the college students for the youth. I let the high school students know they will have an opportunity to offer feedback to the college students (Shumake and Shah), as the youth are experts in what makes a good teacher given their lived experience. I tell them that this partnership is often a formative experience for the education majors, so the youth are playing

a role in shaping the teaching identity of their college partners. I thank them sincerely for working with my students and helping them grow as teachers. Some semesters, this frame of youth as teaching coaches is built stronger than others, as it is often difficult to find time for deep collaboration with the high school teachers around framing. The work of frame construction—especially as a collaborative practice—is challenging, but it's also critically important.

Frames work to include and exclude, to draw attention to certain elements, to call for special kinds of consideration. And for me, the process of considering how frames might function for the youth who would work with my college class helped draw my attention in new ways to the important role the youth were playing in the partnership. I am reminded here of Bateson's description of how frames invite us to look more carefully at what's inside than we do at the wallpaper. Too often, community partners are viewed as the background, as we scan over community members to focus on college students and teachers. Perhaps one of the most exigent reasons for exploring community frames is the ways this process rightly calls for our deep and deliberate attention to an aspect of engagement that is too often overlooked and underappreciated: the community partners that make this work possible.

Notes

1. "Community writing" is one term of many used to describe community-engaged teaching in rhetoric and composition (service learning, community-based learning, etc.). The field has long wrestled with what to call this work (see Mathieu for a classic discussion of various terms). One reason the choice between these terms is so important is that these words evoke different frames. For example, several years ago, the Wildcat Writers Advisory Committee made the choice to drop the phrase "service learning" from the program title and all program materials, out of concern for the charity frame that might be evoked through the word "service." Instead, they use phrases like "high school-college partnership program." I follow them in using terms like "community engagement," "partnership," and "community-based learning" rather than "service learning" in this article when possible. Exceptions are references to other scholars' use of the term, discussions of programs that take a "service" frame, and Maria Elena's reframing of the term "service learning."

2. Terms like "community member" and "community partner" have historically been slippery words in community engagement scholarship (Cruz and Giles). Throughout this article, I use "community partner" to refer to participants in community writing initiatives that enter the partnership primarily through their affiliation with a non-profit, K-12 school, or other community group, rather than through their affiliation with the university. This definition acknowledges that lines between "community" and "university" frequently blur (e.g. college students or instructors may be clients of non-profits involved in partnerships). I define "community member" as a community partner who is a *constituent or client* of the community organization (e.g., a resident of a nursing home, a student at a k-12 school), rather than a staff member of the organization.

3. Frame analysis is often considered a fragmented area of scholarly inquiry, with scholars using different definitions and methods, and academic fields taking up the approach in varying ways (Borah). The scholars included in this lit review, for instance, do not all agree on how they conceptualize and implement framing theory. Yet the diversity also allows for creative inroads in many possible scholarly areas and directions.

4. Many of the framing theory examples shared here are of highly political and contentious topics. This is both because some of the most interesting work in framing theory is dedicated to understanding frames for policy debates, and because foregrounding political issues in this article serves to underscore that frames—including frames for community engagement—are political, as they shape social power relations.

5. Of course, the term "pro-life" itself invokes a frame that highlights certain values.

6. While Maria Elena focuses on defining roles for the high school students, the college students, and the Wildcat Writers program itself for the purposes of her short video, there are, of course, multiple other stakeholders who could be impacted by her framing (high school teachers, college teachers, the university writing program administrator, etc.).

7. It is worth emphasizing here, again, that this article does not argue for the applicability of Maria Elena's framing activities to other community partnerships. In fact, I would actively advise *against* college representatives requesting that community partners provide food for university students given the labor and costs involved. Maria Elena took this approach because of her knowledge of these particular youth—many of whom who were interested in culinary arts—and her relationships with them.

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