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Sarah E. Stanlick
Lehigh University

Lori E. Kniffin
Fort Hays State University, lekniffin@fhsu.edu

Patti H. Clayton
PHC Ventures

Edward Zlotkowski
Bentley University

Jeffrey Howard
DePaul University

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Urgency and Opportunity in Difficult Times: Elevating Voices and Widening the Circle of SLCE Leadership

Sarah E. Stanlick¹

Lehigh University

Lori E. Kniffin

University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Patti H. Clayton

PHC Ventures, IUPUI, UNCG, and Kansas State

Edward Zlotkowski

Bentley University and Puppet Showplace Theater

Jeffrey Howard

DePaul University and MJCSL

Welcome to the third in an ongoing series of special sections in the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning (MJCSL)* devoted to sharing the work of the Service-Learning and Community Engagement Future Directions Project (SLCE-FDP). This special section marks the second anniversary of the project. In this essay, we, the five curators of the SLCE-FDP, both introduce the thought pieces that comprise this special section and share our team's critical examination of the project's history and our sense of its own best future directions.

First, a bit of background on the SLCE-FDP. In 2015 this project opened a broad conversation on the future of service-learning and community engagement (SLCE) – twenty years after the 1995 article “Does Service-Learning Have a Future?” in which author Zlotkowski called attention to the importance of institutionalizing service-learning as an academic endeavor, complete with strong disciplinary connections, professional development and resources for faculty, and high pedagogical standards. Believing his earlier question to be largely settled, we launched the SLCE-FDP around new questions: “What are our visions *now* for the future of SLCE, why, and what will it take to get there?” and “How can we leverage the movement to advance those ends – intentionally, inclusively, and with integrity?” (Stanlick & Clayton, 2015, p. 78).

Functioning as an international learning community, the SLCE-FDP operates in three primary venues: an interactive website (www.slce-fdp.org); conversations on campuses, in communities, and at conferences; and special sections of the *MJCSL*. Short thought pieces of approximately 2500 words are published both on our website and in the journal. Across all of these venues the project's leadership team invites colleagues to envision a bold future for the SLCE movement and to issue bold calls for action accordingly. We seek to create the

future together as an inclusive, ever-growing learning community that adopts a frame of bold vision, tangible action, and appreciative inquiry.

The Current Set of Thought Pieces

This Spring 2017 special section of the *MJCSL* shares thought pieces from 22 contributors, including one undergraduate student, five graduate students, three community partners, six administrators or professional staff on campuses, six faculty, and one SLCE consultant. Many of these individuals came together at the beginning of their writing process in a Google doc and three online gatherings to explore their initial responses to four guiding questions:

- What do you want to use SLCE to nudge the world (any part of the world) toward? In other words, what is your vision of the future?
- What is your bold call? In other words, what must we particularly attend to in order for SLCE to advance in ways that allow it to help bring this vision to fruition?
- What has helped SLCE get to the point that your particular bold call for a future direction is thinkable/doable/imaginable? In other words, what is in place to build on?
- What will it take for us to move forward in accordance with your bold call/future direction? Propose specific recommendations, questions we need to keep thinking about, and tension points (maybe between short-term and long-term or among multiple values) we need to engage with as we heed your bold call.

The contributors gave one another feedback through multiple drafts of their thought pieces and in the process found several points of connection among their ideas. They worked closely with the

five of us as they deepened and refined their thinking. As a result of this highly collaborative process, they have produced seven thought pieces; each in its own way and through its own lenses responds to the project's overarching focus question: "What are our visions *now* for the future of SLCE, why, and what will it take to get there?" To these authors, the future of SLCE should focus on:

- Supporting students, faculty, staff, and community partners to engage in critical dialogues about social class- and race-based inequality that, in turn, lead them to develop and implement SLCE projects that are co-designed, sustainable, and focused on local issues [Hussain & Wattles];
- Designing approaches to professional development that bring community members and faculty together in community spaces to learn from one another and co-create otherwise unimagined possibilities for partnership work [Studer, Benton, Rogers, & Quirke];
- Broadening the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning to include all partners in SLCE as investigators into all partners' learning, as a way to enhance capacities within the SLCE community to collaboratively inquire, learn, and engage in constructive action [Miller-Young, Felten, & Clayton];
- Using sustainability (encompassing its four dimensions of environment, economy, equity, and education) as an organizing principle to focus SLCE on the flourishing of our planet and adopting such action strategies as engaging academic departments, collectivizing impact, and tapping transdisciplinarity to advance the associated shift to long-term time horizons for thinking and action [Kecskes, Joyalle, Elliott, & Sherman];
- Collaborating with the movement for Sustainability in Higher Education and becoming ecocentric so as to cultivate ecologically literate, place-engaged, planetary citizens who value and nurture justice for both human and other-than-human inhabitants [Wright, Keel, & Fleurizard];
- Acknowledging the ways in which higher education perpetuates injustice and re-centering our work within social justice collectives led by people from marginalized groups to address systems of oppression [Augustine, Lopez, McNaron, Starke, & Van Gundy]; and
- Asking about the future of democracy and even human civilization itself and becoming more able as individuals and institutions to feel and share the grief associated with those questions,

including through embracing the role and identity of artists [Bott].

Sustainability is a common theme running through several of these thought pieces: sustainability within partnerships, of the community engagement efforts of higher education institutions, of change initiatives, and of the planet itself – as well as sustainability of our individual sense of hope and possibility in a time of violence, oppression, and fear. Many of the thought pieces in this issue call attention to how we organize SLCE work and invite us to imagine alternatives: crossing presumed boundaries between campus and community if not dismantling them, positioning all partners as co-creators in inquiry and action, becoming part of processes already underway within communities, and developing relationships in the context of particular places. Integration also runs through the thought pieces as a common theme: integration within academic departments, across disciplines, of dialogue with action, of human with other-than-human systems, of day-to-day activities with long-term scales of change, and of our professional identities with our fundamental humanity.

Critical Examination of the Project's Work to Date

The authors of these and previous thought pieces have all brought creative ideas and candid reflection into our ever-growing learning community. Over these last two years, the body of work supported by the SLCE-FDP has explored macro- and micro-level opportunities for rethinking and visioning the future of SLCE. Specifically, this project has published 23 thought pieces contributed by a diverse set of 55 authors and six essays written by members of the SLCE-FDP leadership team. Individuals and groups have raised questions about and shared their responses to the thought pieces by using the comment feature on the project's website. Thought piece authors have contributed to SLCE-FDP conference sessions, which were also shared on the website in the form of blogs. Two additional blog posts will be posted this spring, and others are being solicited through a new process designed to enhance this opportunity to share thinking in creative and timely ways. The five of us have facilitated more than 20 in-person conversations on campuses, in communities, and at conferences. And we and others have shared and drawn on the SLCE-FDP as part of other scholarship and activities. We have gathered suggestions and feedback in all of our venues – digital and face-to-face. Ideas, questions, and feedback have been varied, critical, and

constructive. The thread that runs through all of it is a deep commitment to nudging the SLCE movement and our world toward a better future.

Through this diversified, iterative process, the five of us have connected with many individuals, learned about the opportunities and challenges faced by the SLCE movement, and critically reflected on where the movement stands and how it might best advance. Two years into the project, we are now having extended discussions about where the project started and what we have learned from the thought pieces as well as from discussions at conferences and other working sessions. We have been taking a close look at the collaborative work done through this project to date and have been asking what themes have emerged and what matters of urgency have been articulated. We have reflected critically, assessed the set of voices represented, and connected back to the democratic, collaborative values grounding this project.

When the SLCE-FDP team came together two years ago, we immediately identified inclusivity as a priority. To this end, the project guidelines, co-created with the early contributors, emphasize that thought pieces should differ from traditional academic articles in at least two ways: (a) be more overtly subjective, allowing the author(s) to offer “big” ideas and strategic suggestions in their own voices, without heavy reliance on scholarly citations, and (b) be written in a broadly accessible style, avoiding academic jargon and needlessly thick prose. We believed at the beginning – and still do – that contributions shared through the project should speak to as wide a range of individuals interested in SLCE as possible.

The thought pieces published in this special section of *MJCSL* serve as a microcosm of the critical examination we have been undertaking in that they highlight both successes of and concerns about the SLCE-FDP to date. We are excited that approximately half of the 22 authors are new contributors to the SLCE literature and that more than 25% are undergraduate or graduate students. At the same time we are concerned that only three authors, contributing to two thought pieces, work primarily with community organizations rather than academic institutions. We are delighted that every piece in this set speaks to the importance of increasing community member voice (e.g., in faculty development, through dialogue, in project development, in leadership roles, in scholarship) and/or focuses attention on the challenges and opportunities facing broader communities (e.g., sustainability, social justice, local community development). And yet, again, we realize the limitations of producing thought pieces that call our attention to such issues

without directly incorporating the voices of community members. We keenly feel the irony of this essay itself being co-authored by individuals who primarily think and write as academics. Relatedly, we see and experience the ongoing challenge of writing in ways that avoid academic overtones and college- or university-centric perspectives.

The intent of the SLCE-FDP has always been to widen the circle of leadership and invite all voices into conversation about the future of the SLCE movement. Along with many others, we keep coming back to the fervent call of colleagues such as Stoecker, Tryon, and Hilgendorf, who, in 2009, asked the movement to listen to the “unheard voices” of community members. Before that Cruz and Giles asked in 2000 “where is the community?” in research on service-learning. Increasingly, SLCE conference organizers ask how to design events so as to engage more community members as participants. Throughout the movement, we ask and ask again. We challenge each other to do better, yet we still struggle with making the full participation of community members in SLCE a reality.

One key outcome of our critical review of the SLCE-FDP thus far has been our recognition of the extent to which we ourselves have fallen short of this goal. Indeed, while we have several community members among the thought piece contributors, the inclusion and amplification of those voices has not been achieved to the extent we had hoped when we began the SLCE-FDP, much less to the extent we now believe is necessary. This is due in part to the fact that, despite this project’s earnest intention to be inclusive, our networks, venues, and outreach strategies have remained largely on campuses, at conferences, or in other predominantly academic spaces.

When we began this project, we identified as one primary goal working inductively toward some kind of framework or plan that would help SLCE stakeholders more effectively leverage collective efforts. Such a plan, we hoped, would renew the SLCE movement by infusing it with a new, decidedly contemporary sense of purpose. It is clear to us at this point in the project that any such plan will have to be informed by community voices to a much greater extent than this project has been to date. As a result of our critical review, we have decided we need to make a stronger effort to gather and amplify marginalized and otherwise less-heard voices as we move into the project’s third year.

We also realize that we need to address more explicitly the political culture we find ourselves in – one in which deep divisions and distrust threaten to tear the very fabric of the United States while a surge of reactive populism and fear sweeps through

the global community. The months during which the thought pieces shared in this special section of the *MJCSL* and this essay itself were written have witnessed global upheaval on many fronts: hundreds of thousands of people participating in marches and protests, turmoil related to immigration and the refugee crisis, growing concern over the actions of presidents in both the U.S. and Russia, a renewed threat of nuclear war, uncertainty about the future of international structures and relationships, and many other situations that have led to violence, isolation, and further polarization. Of course, many of the challenges of our current socio-political context have been persistent in countries around the world for a long time. However, they seem to have become more visible to more people and to have generated a heightened sense of urgency.

As author Zlotkowski noted in the framing statement that helped introduce the first set of thought pieces in the Fall 2015 issue of the *MJCSL*, the engagement movement that began gaining significant traction in the 1990s operated in a sociopolitical, economic, and cultural environment that was in many ways far more hopeful than the one we face today. Bott's thought piece in particular concretizes this shift as he sketches for us the dissonance he experiences sitting "in yet another meeting" on campus in which discussion proceeds as if "the death of our planet [and] of liberal democracy and the rise of authoritarianism and oligarchy around the world" were either not happening or not relevant to the matters at hand. In his 2015 framing essay for the SLCE-FDP, Edward suggested that 20 years ago "it was a good time to dream of a new era" in which SLCE could "help make the promise of democracy and equality more of a reality" (Zlotkowski, p. 82); today, Bott wants – and invites us to – "weep at the absurdity of it all." Yet, might not the urgency and challenge of the present give us exactly the momentum we need to engage a broader spectrum of participants in visioning a better future through SLCE? Listening again to Bott: "Only when we weep at all that's been lost and all that will be lost . . . can we begin to imagine alternative possibilities beyond; . . . maybe if we all cried, something new would emerge."

Moving Forward in Light of Contemporary Challenges in a Changing World

Perhaps the results of the recent elections in the United States offer a rough analogy. Just as American society as a whole seems to be lurching toward some kind of radical reconfiguration, perhaps the SLCE movement needs to do the same. For if those results teach us anything, they make clear the

extent to which a large part of the population – indeed, whole sections of the country – feel excluded from any meaningful say in the forces shaping their lives and, indeed, life around the world. The recent election shows how distant we can be from our neighbors, both local or global. It makes clear the dangers of being immersed in echo chambers – the phenomena of information, ideas, and beliefs being reiterated and amplified in social media feeds and partisan news channels – that do not challenge our ideas or open our eyes to what we cannot readily see. We begin to wonder if the SLCE movement is not caught up in its own echo chamber. Do we engage as well as we might with people who have never heard of "service-learning and community engagement," seeking to learn their stories and asking about their priorities? Do we not need to be concerned for the long-term health of a movement whose primary advocates are limited to academics and staff of nonprofit organizations?

Whatever the SLCE movement of the last 20 years may have achieved, it has not realized its full potential as a vehicle of hope for the vast majority of people who have been steamrolled by economic, social, and political systems. Further, the accomplishments of the SLCE movement represent primarily academic and individual student development successes, privileging campus over community impacts. It is for these reasons that the SLCE-FDP leadership team has decided that the project will now begin focusing very deliberately on creating spaces that more directly and openly interact with community voices. Such an emphasis is not meant to denigrate the importance of other more academically-focused voices and initiatives, but rather to recognize the rich body of knowledge held in the broader community and to promote a deeper democratic dialogue among *all* stakeholders. It is here that we feel we can make our most important and timely contribution. In short, although our ultimate goal remains the deepening of a truly comprehensive democratic dialogue that will guide the SLCE movement into the future, we cannot imagine how such a dialogue can take place when so few voices beyond the academy meaningfully and effectively participate in identifying the movement's priorities and strategies.

It is with this sense of where we are, and with the voices of all those we have worked with over the last two years in mind, that we offer this statement to guide the project forward:

The Service-Learning and Community Engagement Future Directions Project (SLCE-FDP) seeks to build capacity for bold visioning and bold action within and beyond the SLCE movement. This project prioritizes both the

concept of community and the work of communities. Central to this emphasis is a commitment to SLCE practice and scholarship that foster non-hierarchical relationships, honor all voices, address difficult questions, reach for ever greater inclusivity, and share power and responsibility. We facilitate the exchange and development of ideas and practices that are grounded in this democratic spirit and explicitly focused on empowering all of us to co-create a more just, equitable, and peaceful future for our planet and all beings.

We want to be very clear that, in developing this statement, we are not suggesting the priorities articulated here have been absent from the thinking or the work of SLCE-FDP contributors to date. Indeed, in his framing essay for the 2015 special section of the *MJCSL* that shared the first set of thought pieces, Edward summarized the bold calls offered and noted a pervasive, underlying commitment to what he called “enhanced social efficacy” (Zlotkowski, 2015, p. 83). Two of the six thought pieces in the second, 2016, set are co-authored by individuals who work in community-based organizations and explicitly draw on the work of those organizations, and another two directly raise questions about social justice.

Further, in the set of thought pieces that comprise this special section there are clearly shared, community-focused themes. The pieces by Wright, Keel, and Fleurizard and by Kecskes, Joyalle, Elliott, and Sherman call the SLCE movement to focus on ecological sustainability. These two pieces posit connections between healthy ecosystems and human flourishing and speak to social justice, which is the goal of the community leadership discussed by Augustine, Lopez, McNaron, Starke, and Van Gundy and of the processes of dialogue recommended by Hussain and Wattle. Bott poignantly foregrounds these ecological and social justice concerns and invites us to create space to grieve about what is happening to our planet and our democracy and to breathe life into the world through art; his view of being in community goes far beyond partnership models or campus-community dichotomies and engages the whole human to determine the ways we show up in the world. He celebrates the work of the after-school program called True Skool in Milwaukee and thus aligns with the inclusion of community-oriented stories, examples, and voices that link many of the pieces, including, for example: Miller-Young, Felten, and Clayton’s vignette about community partners co-inquiring with faculty members into their own learning; Studer, Benton, Rogers, and Quirke’s example of professional development that takes the form of

“Community Conversations” in Indianapolis; and Hussain and Wattle’s story of a “Big Talk” in Geneva, New York, that used intergroup dialogue in sites throughout the city to document and mobilize the voices of otherwise unheard community members in a city planning process. Whether calling the movement’s attention to possibilities for joining social justice collectives, for collaborating with the Sustainability in Higher Education movement, for inquiring into and cultivating the civic learning of all partners in SLCE, or for learning from and with artists to claim our power to imagine and create, the current set of thought pieces gives the five of us a sense of the potential of a community orientation to guide SLCE practitioners and the movement overall toward that “more just, equitable, and peaceful future for our planet and all beings.”

Urgency as Opportunity: Our Historic Moment

The public purposes of higher education are not simply to research and educate as goals in themselves, but to do so in the service of larger social goods and to prepare the next generation of active citizens. The question of “education and research for what?” is one the SLCE movement grapples with, not only in intention but also in practice. Despite constant references to partnering, academics can easily slide into a kind of ventriloquism – speaking *for* the community in formulating priorities and goals while purporting to work *with* the community on discrete projects. However, the time has long since come when the SLCE movement has demonstrated sufficient critical mass and institutional traction to bring its resources and needs into a deeper, direct conversation with the broader community.

The questions we have grappled with in the SLCE-FDP and the SLCE movement, coupled with this challenging and divisive time in history, have brought us as curators of this project to think creatively about possibilities for bringing the full range of stakeholders in SLCE together. We have spent these two years listening, and we hear loud and clear the desire to make lasting, positive change and to think in less dichotomous terms about “community” and “campus.” There has been so much investment in the academic aspects of the SLCE movement; while helpful in advancing the work in many ways, this priority has also come at a cost. As we have heard repeatedly, many people who care about the future of the SLCE movement – both on campus and in the broader community, in the U.S. where we ourselves most often hear it and around the world – are concerned about the increas-

ing distance between academic research and theory and the goals and questions of flesh-and-blood communities.

Historian Heather Cox Richardson (2017) suggests that the division and urgency we are experiencing – stemming from waves of populism and increasing violence against marginalized populations all around the world – are the markers of a “shock event.” Such events are unexpected and have the potential to divide a society and throw it into chaos. How we respond, she emphasizes, can “reorganize [us] into a different pattern . . . [and lead us to] reach across old lines and reorganize to challenge the leaders who are pulling the strings” (p. 1). With this in mind, we seek to help reorganize, rally, and resist.

We have identified a few ways in which the SLCE-FDP can best serve in this historic moment. Moving forward, this project will:

- Use new media in addition to our online learning platform to reach more community members and invite dialogue and reciprocal learning, including, but not limited to, creating new virtual spaces for engagement and sharing;
- Co-create opportunities to invite and amplify diverse input into projects, research agendas, and collaborations at an early point (e.g., collaborating with the organizers of the 2017 Heartland Conference in the center of the United States to design an event around issues equally of interest to individuals on- and off-campus, as a vehicle for strategic collaboration among all stakeholders);
- Solicit and shepherd the development and sharing of what we are calling “community stories”: examples of community members and organizations working (with and without educational institutions) in the spirit of democratic engagement to collaboratively envision and nudge the world toward a better future for all; and
- Emphasize in our calls for blog posts, thought pieces, and other less-text-based products the wide spectrum of contributors whose voices are crucial in guiding the SLCE movement forward and who we hope will use this opportunity to share their ideas.

Conclusion

The intent of this project from the beginning has been to facilitate a conversation across a wide range of stakeholders while highlighting and elevating traditionally marginalized voices. We have tried. We have succeeded in some ways. We have fallen short

in many others. And we are now quite clear on the need for a deepening of this priority if the work of this international learning community is to have integrity and maximum impact on the movement and, through it, the world. We intend to see the SLCE-FDP, through its intermingling of diverse perspectives to generate bold calls, contribute to the development of formative public conversations on campuses and in communities around the world, conversations that function as and also catalyze action.

Please add your voice to this effort. Think about your work and passions as well as the lessons you have learned along the way that you wish others engaged in SLCE knew about and would build on. If you are a community member who has worked to effect change and want to share your front-line stories, we welcome your voice as essential. If your work is wildly un-academic and deeply meaningful, we want to hear from you. Please contact us using the project’s email address: slce.fdp@gmail.com.

We conclude with a quote from Amy Mondloch, then-director of the Grassroots Leadership College, an SLCE community partner organization, and author of a chapter in *The Unheard Voices: Community Organizations and Service Learning* (2009) – and we ask you to join us in bringing this sensibility to life as a guide for the future of SLCE:

It all comes down to one motto: ‘Everyone a learner, everyone a teacher, everyone a leader.’ That’s it. That’s the radical view of the world that changes how community works and shuffles the balance of power. . . . It’s just that easy and just that hard. . . . When we remember this, great things happen. (pp. 136-137)

Note

¹ What do you do when the processes and the products of your collaboration are thoroughly co-created, yet you work in a system in which author order implies relative importance, either of title or of contribution? This is where we found ourselves in the final stage of writing this essay: trying to figure out how to effectively portray the democratic partnership we have tried to establish and model. It is the tension we continue to hold: honoring the venues and spaces we are privileged to find ourselves in and trying to tear down hierarchies that reaffirm place and value in ways that are not genuine. We accept the challenge and hope you will work with us to find better ways together to honor each other authentically.

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Authors

SARAH E. STANLICK (ses409@lehigh.edu) is the founding director of Lehigh University's Center for Community Engagement and a professor of practice in Sociology and Anthropology. She previously taught at Centenary University and was a researcher at Harvard's Kennedy School, assisting the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power. She has published in journals such as *The Social Studies* and the *Journal of Global Citizenship and Equity Education*. Her current interests include inquiry-based teaching and learning, global citizenship, transformative learning, and cultivating learner agency.

LORI E. KNIFFIN (lekniffi@uncg.edu) is a doctoral student in Cultural Foundations of Education and a graduate assistant at the Institute for Community and Economic Engagement at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Her scholarly interests include food justice, community dialogue, and democratic classrooms. She is the 2016-2017 SLCE Future Directions Project Fellow and the chair of the International Association for Research

on Service-Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE) Graduate Student Network.

PATTI H. CLAYTON (patti.clayton@curricular-engagement.com) is an independent consultant and SLCE practitioner-scholar (PHC Ventures) as well as a senior scholar with IUPUI and UNCG and a visiting scholar with Kansas State University. She facilitates professional and organizational development, co-produces practice-oriented scholarly resources, and helps cultivate the talents and agency of SLCE colleagues and friends. Her current interests include civic learning; the integration of SLCE and relationships within the more-than-human world; walking the talk of democratic engagement as co-inquiry among all partners; and the power of such "little words" as *in*, *for*, *with*, and *of* to shape identities and ways of being with one another.

EDWARD ZLOTKOWSKI (ezlotkowski@bentley.edu) is professor emeritus of Literature and Media Studies at Bentley University. He was the founding director of the Bentley Service-Learning Center and has been a senior associate at the American Association for Higher Education, Campus Compact, and the New England Resource Center for Higher Education. He devotes much of his time to early childhood literacy initiatives and is an active board member of the Puppet Showplace Theater in Brookline, Massachusetts.

JEFFREY HOWARD (jhowar15@depaul.edu) is director of faculty development at DePaul University's Steans Center for Community-based Service Learning where he conducts faculty workshops and consults on service-learning courses and getting community-engaged scholarship published. He is the founder and editor of the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*.