Mapping Tensions: Positioning Community Engagement Challenges as Generative Space

Jen Almjeld, Jennifer PeeksMease, Iona Black, Kerry Cresawn, Steven E. Grande, Juhong Christie Liu

Abstract

This research offers a contextual snapshot—via the applied tensional analysis (ATA) method—of common barriers that educators face when taking on community engagement work. A six-person research team interviewed 22 faculty and staff actively pursuing community partnerships at three different institutions of higher education in a single region. Participants' responses were coded to identify common barriers to engagement and the strategies that participants used to overcome those barriers. We draw on ATA (Mease, 2019) as a methodological approach that acknowledges tensions as critical entry points for understanding both the experiences of individual actors and the malleable structures from which those tensions emerge. This article does not attempt to offer one-size-fits-all strategies for community engagement. Instead, it offers ATA as a means for contextualizing specific tensions and strategies within local community engagement settings and for reframing those tensions as generative spaces for community engagement work.

When faculty describe their community engagement work, most will tell you that it is highly rewarding, supremely impactful to the community and to students, and always unpredictable and "messy." While "messiness" hints at the challenges and invisible labor inherent in community-university partnerships, the descriptor elides specific challenges and, perhaps more importantly, ways of overcoming such challenges. With the understanding that no two community engagements are ever alike, our research offers contextualized snapshots of common barriers that one community of adjacent educators on the east coast faced when taking on community engagement work. We also identify strategies—for better or worse—that faculty frequently employ when facing challenges, and we consider what these strategies may reveal about our institutions. In our investigation, we use applied tensional analysis (ATA) (Mease, 2019), which recasts community engagement struggles, tensions, and response strategies as constitutive spaces that both define and reveal the structures, values, and priorities of our academic and community institutions. This article does not attempt to resolve the messiness of community partnerships by offering one-size-fits-all strategies. Instead, it offers ATA as a tool that other schools can use to study the tensions, response strategies, and possibilities of their own local contexts. We hope these insights into specific challenges and strategies might inspire other scholars to investigate their own local community engagement contexts—not only in terms of the efficacy of individual service-learning practitioners but also with regard to the structures that both constrain and enable community engagement work.

This approach offers an important piece of the engagement puzzle: While the benefits of well-constructed community-university partnerships are documented for both students (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009; Wall et al., 2018) and, to a lesser extent, community partners (Comeau et al., 2019), stories of overcoming specific obstacles are less commonly captured. The stakes of the strategies used to address these obstacles are high. At an individual level, community-engaged instructors face challenges such as slowed career progression (Holland, 2016; Watermeyer, 2015), a lack of the conceptual clarity and skills needed for engagement work (Holland, 2019), and the strain of balancing the needs of the academy, community, and funding organizations (Fletcher et al., 2014). Community engagement work also requires more time and resources (Fitzgerald et al., 2016) than traditional instruction does. At an institutional level, engagement is often impeded by tenure and promotion standards (O'Meara, 2008; Saltmarsh & Wooding, 2016), difficulties in creating institutional support structures for sustained community engagement (Nicotera et al., 2011), and a lack of standardization in program-level curricula (Bryson, 2016; Fitzgerald et al., 2016).

Still, we need more scholarship that (a) analyzes how faculty members experience these challenges and develop strategies for navigating them and (b) acknowledges the stakes of these strategies for both individuals and organizations as a whole. Work that identifies strategies for addressing difficulties remains largely conceptual (Azevedo, 2015; Healey et al., 2016; Taylor & Kent, 2014). Consequently, our analysis asked faculty and staff in one region of the country about the tensions and challenges of engagement and how they take up those challenges on a daily basis. Thus, we discovered a previously unmapped picture of work-arounds, informal networks, and coping mechanisms unique to our context. In a deliberate turn away from the conceptual toward the pragmatic, we use ATA to contextualize these experiences and in so doing were able to identify structural interventions that might mitigate the practical challenges of community engagement and make engagement more feasible for more educators. At an individual level, identifying faculty members' strategies for successful community engagement gave us access to a variety of tactics and resonant response repertoires from which other community-engaged scholars might draw both inspiration and warnings. On a broader level, it offered insight into the structural and institutional values and systems that both might constrain and enable community engagement.

We interviewed 22 faculty and staff who actively pursue community partnerships at three different institutions of higher education in a single region. Our analysis identifies the challenges participants faced in developing, executing, and sustaining community-university partnerships as well as the strategies they developed to meet those challenges. We then interpret those challenges and strategies through the methodological approach of ATA.

We begin by reviewing the existing literature on common challenges of community-university partnerships and introduce a promising analysis tool in ATA. Next, we offer a methodological grounding for our study. We then present our analysis of participants' most common challenges and some of the strategies they have used to sustain and support their practices, and we discuss what viewing these challenges and strategies through the lens of ATA might teach us about our unique engagement contexts. We conclude by discussing how our findings might serve as a model for other universities seeking to understand the unavoidable tensions associated with community

engagement as generative entry points for shaping our classrooms and our institutions.

Literature Review

Higher education scholars herald community and public engagement as a high-impact practice (Kuh, 2008), and faculty report that it improves their teaching, enhances student learning, supports disciplinary goals, and provides opportunities for meaningful collaboration (O'Meara, 2008). Community engagement is complex, at times daunting (Clayton & O'Steen, 2010), and few clear pathways exist to help instructors cultivate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to effectively integrate it into teaching and research (O'Meara & Jaeger, 2006). In our review of the existing literature, we found that the documented challenges of community engagement generally fall into four areas: a lack of shared vision and faculty support, obstacles to career progress and a lack of reward structure, the competing needs of the academy and the community, and limited time and resources.

Lack of Shared Vision and Faculty Support

As early as the late 1990s, germinal works in the community engagement field led universities throughout the United States to organize stand-alone units to support faculty who were new to community engagement efforts (Welch, 2016). Faculty entering academic posts in the current decade have benefited from those efforts; they have often had "engaged" experiences as undergraduate and graduate students and expect to serve as engaged scholars and teachers (Post et al., 2016). However, these incremental shifts in faculty expectations, the emerging infrastructure to support community engagement, and new approaches to rewarding participating faculty have not fully replaced an academic culture that often resists the collaborative approaches to teaching and research that are essential to a broad range of community engagements. While Post and colleagues (2016) reported that a new generation of scholars "demand recognition of new modes of scholarship and teaching … [and] more easily integrate their values with scholarly expertise and translate such commitments into active and collaborative research" (p. 4) many tenure and promotion guidelines, for example, have not evolved along with those scholars. Community engagement scholars generally orient themselves toward collaboration even if graduate training (O'Meara, 2008; O'Meara & Jaeger, 2006) and

higher education institutions remain resistant to "new forms of collaborative, interdisciplinary, and engaged work" (Holland, 2016, p. 79).

Community engagement is inherently counternormative (Harrison & Clayton, 2012) in terms of both scholarship and teaching in that it flips traditional pedagogical approaches. Fitzgerald and colleagues (2016) argued that community engagement "require[s] new approaches to knowledge generation, generally… within the context of partnerships" (p. 245) and thus requires us to rethink more traditional approaches to knowledge dissemination in the classroom. All participants—faculty, students, and community members—"co-construct knowledge and community in often unfamiliar and potentially transformative ways" (Harrison & Clayton, 2012, p. 29). And while collaboration alone may threaten some institutional structures, all collaborators bring potentially conflicting visions and goals to the work, adding additional challenges to each project. Even agreement on key concepts and terms related to community engagement proves difficult, with the very terms "community" (Dempsey, 2010) and "engagement" remaining enigmatic (Kahu, 2013) and fluid. These loosely defined concepts provide room for all kinds of community partnerships but can make discussing and having a shared vision for such work more difficult.

Obstacles to Career Progress and a Lack of Reward Structure

This lack of shared vision and support creates corollary challenges for career progress, especially for scholars who do not have a tenure-secured position. Faculty members who initiate community-engaged scholarship not only disrupt many common institutional and disciplinary practices but also risk marginalization from colleagues and institutional leadership (Morrison & Wagner, 2017). Despite the emergence of academic journals and conferences that address community engagement—and despite acceptance of such work in a wide range of disciplines (Demb & Wade, 2012)—it still runs counter in many ways to traditional modes of scholarship (O'Meara, 2016), often leading to misunderstanding, disinterest, and skepticism (Clayton & O'Steen, 2010; Holland, 2016). Community-engaged scholars are often misperceived as a relatively homogenous group, "which minimizes, if not ignores, the ways in which faculty differ in their approaches, priorities, needs, and motivations" (Morrison & Wagner, 2017, p. 6).

This marginalization potentially conceals innovative approaches, leading to insufficient support and rewards for faculty who pursue community engagement work. While some universities and departments have incentivized engagement scholarship (Saltmarsh et al., 2009; Welch, 2016) via high-profile campus awards, grant opportunities, and other forms of financial support or accolades for "high impact practices" (Kuh, 2008), many institutions do not offer such benefits (Chung et al., 2015; Driscoll & Sandmann, 2016).

The role of engagement in tenure and promotion decisions presents another challenge. For two decades, engagement has challenged tenure and promotion standards (O'Meara, 2008; Saltmarsh & Wooding, 2016). Although there have been strides in recognizing and even encouraging engagement scholarship in tenure and promotion documentation, disagreement remains about what actually "counts" as scholarship and which kinds of products (e.g., grants, articles, book chapters, or curricula) appropriately demonstrate scholarship. Disagreement over these terms might hinder the career progression of scholars whose values and definitions are not accepted (Holland, 2016; Watermeyer, 2015). Until there is more universal agreement on the importance of both doing and equitably rewarding community engagement scholarship, faculty will likely continue to "invest their time and talents in ways that are most beneficial to the individual researcher rather than improving the human condition" (Braxton & Luckey, 2010, pp. 71–72).

Competing Needs of Academy and Community

Community-engaged faculty also face the challenge of balancing the needs and values of the academy with those of community partners. Different expectations among the academy and community for deliverables, rigor, availability, time commitments, and programming require faculty's time and attention (Resnick & Kennedy, 2010). Fletcher and colleagues (2014) have argued that project management and training must incorporate greater communication so that all stakeholders can agree on expectations for community-engaged participatory research. Beyond research, tensions often exist between pedagogical objectives and community partner needs. While many courses emphasize for students the pedagogical value of "real-world" experience in their field (Bryson, 2016) and the benefits of such experience for opening up promising career paths (Fitzgerald

et al., 2016), running classes with community partners usually requires faculty to redesign their curricula (Gerholz et al., 2018) and to provide extra training for students in terms of values, attitudes, and patterns of interaction in the community. Making community partnerships productive and instructive for both students and partners requires extra preparation to meet the needs of both so that the social capital gained through "real-world" experience is not compromised (Bruening et al., 2015). Thus, the asymmetrical needs of community and academia in both learning and knowledge production demand increased energy, time, and planning from faculty as they attend to the distinct demands of each (Fletcher et al., 2014).

Limited Time and Resources

The extra effort required for pedagogical and scholarly reinvention exemplifies the increased time—and other resources—required for community engagement work. In the early 2000s, scholars began examining common barriers to community engagement work in the classrooms (Butin, 2007; O'Meara, 2008; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). Fitzgerald and colleagues (2016) identified the need for extra time and resources—including money, transportation, insurance, and other infrastructure issues—as a leading concern for community engagement. Other scholars have identified specific ways in which time is needed and spent in regard to community engagement work, including the time required to create and/or adapt existing pedagogy (Surak & Pope, 2016) to both satisfy curricular standards and meet the needs of partner organizations. Faculty may also need extra time and training to develop best practices for community engagement work (Gorski et al., 2015) and cultural competencies (Shabazz & Cooks, 2014) for themselves and their students.

Faculty engaging with community-based scholarly work often require extra funding and material resources beyond time. To this end, institutional grants (Nicotera et al., 2011) and extra incentives for creating new community-centered courses are becoming more popular on campuses throughout the country. While funding is important to satisfy logistical needs related to community engagement work (e.g., support staff, physical space, etc.), faculty also frequently need extra resources in the form of support networks (Mehta et al., 2015) and cite the need for more on-campus allies (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009) to sustain community-engaged partnerships.

Applied Tensional Analysis (ATA)

To further understand the challenges facing engaged faculty and the strategies that faculty use to navigate these challenges, we draw on ATA (Mease, 2019). ATA, a fairly new framework that has not been previously used in engagement scholarship, offers a methodological approach that acknowledges tensions (such as the challenges scholars face in community engagement) as critical entry points for understanding both the experiences of individual actors and the malleable structures from which those tensions emerge. ATA depicts tensions as moments in which the structure, norms, and expectations of an organization are at stake. In other words, the challenges faced by faculty members pursuing community engagement reveal places where institutional structures have the potential to shift, change, or improve. Perhaps most important to our work, ATA encourages researchers to forgo efforts to determine single "best practices." The framework acknowledges that each organizational context (in our case, each partnership) is unique and that there is no "one-size-fits-all" solution to common problems. Instead, ATA encourages researchers and practitioners to identify the multitude of available responses to a given tension or challenge and to consider how those responses might challenge or maintain existing structures in beneficial or problematic ways.

The ATA approach suggests that practitioners should attend to four related foci when studying tensions as constitutive moments of possibility: context, tensions, enacted responses, and response repertoires. On one hand, ATA suggests focusing on organizational and social *contexts*, how they foster unique *tensions*, and how they enable and constrain *responses* to those tensions. Mease (2019) calls this the *analytical loop*, which "reveals the complexity of existing relational configurations that constitute organizational tensions and experience" (p. 411). As an applied approach, however, ATA also entails attention to what is called the *change loop*, which "addresses potential becomings through possible responses and constitutive implications" (p. 411). Here, the focus shifts from what *is* to what *could be*. In other words, ATA invites practitioners to consider what they can do to respond to challenges and how their choices matter. This requires a simultaneous focus on repertoires of potential responses and strategies (rather than best practices) and a consideration of how the chosen responses constitute and sustain the organizational context and structures.

We believe this approach is particularly useful for studying engagement because it recognizes the uniqueness of each community-university partnership while still helping us to understand common genres of tension. More importantly, ATA goes beyond description: It helps practitioners build repertoires of responses to identified tensions and hone the expertise needed to draw from those repertoires in both efficacious and constitutively ethical ways. Although ATA is a relatively new methodology, Cooper (2021) has demonstrated its utility as a framework in navigating community partnerships among nonprofit organizations. Cooper showed how power-based tensions between formal organization members and community members involving grassroots and grasstops as well as inclusion and exclusion evoked a variety of responses, which themselves evoked tensions between affirmation and admonition in their outreach efforts. Cooper's work exemplified how ATA helps to parse the nuanced relationships among tensions and responses and the related emergence of cultural, organizational, and structural constraints and possibilities.

Our goal is to engage with this new analytical framework (a) to identify the predominant challenges voiced by community-engaged faculty members (the tensions focus) and (b) to identify the strategies that individual faculty members have developed to navigate those challenges (the enacted responses). With the latter, our goal is to offer community-engaged faculty and staff a variety of responses (response repertoires) to enable them to navigate their own situations. We also aim to offer a model for critically considering the constitutive implications of these responses in their own contexts.

Methodology

To assess the challenges faced by faculty members who pursue community engagement and the strategies they use to respond to those challenges, our six-person research team drew on personal networks to identify community-engaged faculty members at three different universities. Two of the universities were small private institutions, while the third was a large state-funded institution. In total, we interviewed 22 faculty members who had developed community partnerships as part of their teaching or research responsibilities. The interviews consisted of three parts, addressing (a) the faculty members' specific work and their motivations; (b) their opportunities, challenges, and strategies for engagement; and (c) their envisioned ideals for community engagement.

Interviews lasted between 15 and 75 minutes, with most lasting around 1 hour. The interviews were transcribed by a research assistant and a professional transcription company. The first two authors used an open coding method to identify and describe the main themes. We coded five interviews together to create convergence, and then each coded half of the remaining interviews. This process resulted in 49 different codes, 17 of which referenced specific challenges and are the focus of this analysis. Additionally, we isolated the 111 responses coded to the term *strategies* and recoded them using the 17 challenge codes in order to map the strategies to specific challenges.

Findings

Our 17 challenge categories ranged from personal barriers, such as the amount of emotional labor required for community engagement work, to structural barriers, such as resource misalignment and the limitations posed by traditional academic calendars. The most commonly cited challenges reported in our study were time, lack of resources, partner-specific constraints, and student limitations. Three additional barriers were mentioned by nearly half of our participants: academic calendar restraints, a lack of reward structures, and issues related to partnership itself.

Time

All but one participant spoke about time as a barrier to engagement work, a trend we also see in the community engagement literature at large. One interviewee explained, "Engagement is intensive, so that requires time.... It requires more time than it requires money." Specifically, faculty remarked on the need for time to prepare students for community partnership, to coordinate meetings and other communication among groups of stakeholders, and to establish meaningful relationships both on and off campus. These observations align with existing research suggesting that efforts to prepare students and balance competing priorities create an added burden for those who bring community engagement into the classrooms (Bryson, 2016; Fletcher et al., 2014). Moreover, we suggest that this type of preparatory work may be unique to collaborative knowledge building because of the differences in community and academic norms and priorities.

Interviewees highlighted finding and setting up relationships as particularly important and time-intensive. "It's very difficult to create time

to build those connections," explained one respondent. Another lamented, "I don't feel like I have enough of a relationship with the community partners; I'd like to spend more time developing that and that's also a time issue to be able to do that." This issue is exacerbated if campuses lack infrastructures that might be able to help. Another participant explained:

> You know, early on I had to very much be the pioneer with these community partners and I had to physically be the one to go out and connect with them and meet with them just because no one else would or…there was nobody that came alongside me in that venture.

These examples both point to the material demands on time needed to meet with potential community partners and suggest that stronger institutional support in facilitating such meetings could help solve this problem. Such institutional involvement "alongside" faculty would make such work less time-consuming at the individual level.

Several strategies—*enacted responses* in the parlance of ATA—emerged to meet the challenge of high demands on faculty's time. One strategy was to borrow time from other work requirements. For example, one scholar explained that although her work feeds her scholarly inquiry, "finding time to write is a challenge" when partnering with those outside of the academy. Another faculty member explained this tension, saying, "You feel like you're not always giving your all to everything." Although this time-borrowing strategy certainly creates time for engagement—and many fields consider engagement a suitable subject for scholarship—the constitutive risks include compromised scholarly productivity or quality of partnerships.

Other interviewees attempted to merge the multiple demands of partnering and scholarship. One participant stated, "I try as much as possible to make all of these things dovetail." As ATA points out, response strategies—including dovetailing—may be either constrained or enabled by organizational context, including institutional policies, structures, and willingness to "count" engaged scholarship toward research obligations. Additionally, several faculty members indicated that they borrow time from their personal life and self-care. "I do think sleep is the first thing that gets lost," one participant reported. Another clarified, "It basically means, I will be honest, you are burning the candle at both

ends. I was getting 4 hours of sleep for a good 2 years." Yet another recounted,

> I will say, it is a total juggling act. It is really vigorous and it takes a huge toll and it costs you your health, relationships, time and energy and the deepest kind of resources that you have to give.

Borrowing from personal resources can also take the form of unpaid and unrecognized labor. One participant explained, "I use most of the summer time to do community engagement and my work is not paid." While such responses successfully create time for engagement, they normalize a culture of overworked faculty and staff who risk personal health to sustain engagement priorities.

Considering these tensions and the repertoire of interviewees' responses, we agree that time is clearly a very real barrier to doing engagement work. Investigating how time is spent and honored at the three institutions we studied, however, revealed the institutions' values as well as the structures that exist—or need to be created—to help faculty navigate these tensions. We found that faculty and staff use strategies of professional and personal compromises fueled by passion. "The benefits personally and to my students outweighs that time commitment," said one faculty member. Another reported, "I'm just busy. I'm just always busy. But, I don't think I would be happy any other way." This complicated balance was summed up succinctly by one of our participants, who noted, "I choose to do [community engagement work] because I want to do it. But, certainly it's a problem."

Faculty's enacted responses also reveal their personal values. For example, the strategy of dovetailing tasks demonstrates a desire or need to do everything rather than an ability to prioritize community engagement over other responsibilities. Additionally, borrowing time from other professional or personal priorities reveals a personal privileging of community engagement work. While enacted responses are at least partially a personal decision, ATA reminds us that organizational structures constrain the enacted responses that one can choose, and the response repertoire in turn normalizes practices in the organizational culture and (re)constitutes the organization itself.

Lack of Resources

Lack of resources emerged as another barrier to engagement for those in our study. This issue

was raised by 65 percent of our respondents and was coded 30 times in the transcripts. Most of these comments referred to financial support. One participant noted, "While the university supports us in doing this, they don't put a lot of financial resources into it." Another observed, "Our university is not very supportive. I think they want to be. They say they value it. I think they like that I do it but they provide zero support." Several faculty echoed this frustration, and one participant noted their institution's propensity to be "philosophically" but not financially supportive.

While most references to resources had to do with funding, other faculty mentioned the need for additional staff or administrative support ("I would love an administrator, and administrative personnel that could do all the logistics stuff"), physical space for their work ("Other times you're very confined space-wise and so that can be a challenge"), and even pedagogical resources to help with reflection and grading ("We don't even have a TA [teaching assistant]…available…at all"). Provision of these resources would allow faculty members to work more efficiently and effectively; thus, the need for resources is tied to the demands that engagement work puts on individuals' time.

Additionally, some structural responses to limited funding begat additional complications: For those lucky enough to secure initial funding to start their projects, long-term funding was still limited. "A lot of funding agencies now want to just fund new programs and new initiatives," noted one participant. This response to funding needs actually devalues successful projects and does not reward the kind of sustained work that the community engagement field acknowledges as beneficial for both faculty and community partners. The data reveal, then, a structural tension between the espoused values of institutions of higher education and the material resources available to support those values. This tension manifests in individual experiences when faculty and staff do not have the resources they need to sustain their work.

Individuals may cope with limited resources by limiting or scaling back their engagement efforts. The faculty member who lamented a lack of TAs and other pedagogical support, for example, indicated that "[these circumstances have] forced me to limit the amount of community engagement that I can have in my classes." On the financial side, another participant explained,

> We have changed the formatting of the program to respond to the financial

constraints…. We were bringing in kids for four or five days to spend time on campus. Now we just bring them in for a day.

Interviewees reported building networks of administrators and other faculty as an important strategy for procuring resources, whether for recruiting volunteers or pooling other resources. One participant explained,

> Because I knew [a colleague] in admissions and we were looking for help in terms of opening the [community-based] program, I reached out to him and said, 'Hey, you know I've heard things your office can do to help.' And he was like, 'You know, I can get you a bus.'

Another faculty member extended his resource network to include students: "I'm learning how to put more and more trust and responsibility on those students for scheduling and meeting with community clients and finding spaces." Such networking was made possible by hiring students using money that the otherwise unfunded engagement center earned for its work performed in the community.

In yet another case, a participant extended the search for resources by leveraging the strengths of the community, stating, "Community work and applied research is about surfacing the indigenous system and the positional assets that are existent." It is worth noting this strategy, but it is also important to be aware of the distinction between sustainable interventions that draw on community resources to benefit the community and extractive interventions created mainly to serve students and faculty.

Whether interviewees focused on resources that improve efficiency and effectiveness or on financial resources, they reported that limited infrastructure and funds made engagement difficult. Without structured long-term funding, many participants pieced together resources from multiple places. Once again, the ATA approach draws attention to how tensions are interwoven: Building networks, piecing together resources, and training students connect the tensions of time and resources because each of these strategies requires time. One participant summed it up well:

> To be honest I do not want to focus my energy and time to secure the funding because there are a lot of important

things that need your attention such as planning the curriculum, recruiting the right people, and planning the field trips, or planning reflection or coursework.

Further study of such tensions and faculty's enacted responses might allow administrators to create and support structures to better leverage resources and to make resources available to more engaged faculty.

Partner-Specific Constraints

Participants also commonly cited challenges related to partner-specific constraints. These barriers are similar to those found in the literature in which faculty work to balance the needs of the academy and the community. Examples ranged from clashes between partner and university values to shifts in the political landscape that impacted at-risk populations, such as immigrants. Sixty-three percent of those interviewed mentioned partner-specific challenges, and 27 instances of this topic were coded in the transcripts. The challenges in this category demonstrate the need for faculty to be mindful of contextual constraints and particularities unique to their partner organization, including their surrounding communities, physical locations, rules and regulations, and any number of other factors. One faculty member explained, "For each organization the barriers may be different." Ultimately, these challenges highlight the need to assess and adjust to the unique constraints of each community partner, and they point to the futility of standard "rules" for community engagement.

For some interviewees, physical spaces presented unique constraints. One faculty member, who values the opportunity to work at his local aquatics center but also recognizes the problems inherent in sharing space with water aerobics classes, noisy swimmers, and other distractions, explained that "you have little control over the setting itself." This setting proved exceptionally troublesome for the faculty member's community contacts with autism, who were particularly affected by auditory stimuli. Similarly, another faculty member observed that not all community partner sites were ADA compliant and accessible for all students.

Community partners' rules and policies can create additional challenges. One faculty member reported that high minimum volunteer hour requirements kept his students from participating at a given location, while another explained that rigorous rules for volunteers at a public school

forced her to redesign her course assignment. "The school itself did not make up those rules," she explained, "So I cannot very well negotiate with them about those rules."

Another partner-specific challenge can arise from a community partner's unwillingness or inability to stay engaged with a project. One faculty member explained, "I've had plenty [of partnerships] that the … community partner wasn't engaged." Some interviewees saw this issue as rooted in community partners' view of themselves as clients more than colearners. Other faculty members attributed the challenge to the limited resources and capacity of many nonprofit partners. Issues of turnover among staff, especially at nonprofits, may also hinder high levels of engagement and partnership. One participant explained,

> Just when I'm finally getting to know and have a working relationship with a contact there, they are leaving and you have to start that process over again with reaching out and figuring out who took over.

Regardless of their cause, community partner changes in staffing are both impactful and impossible for faculty to plan for.

While insufficient staffing can cause faculty stress, community partners are sometimes stressed by an overabundance of volunteer staff coming from universities. One faculty member in our study described how agencies might become overtaxed, citing the example of the large number of students he worked with who wanted to study immigrant populations. He said that at a recent meeting, an agency spokesperson explained, "I am putting a stop to how many requests I am getting for people who want to do projects about refugees because I cannot exploit these people anymore." Partner fatigue might result not just from a glut of volunteers but also from the quality of student work or from unrealistic expectations of students' work, or from the perspective of not overburdening the helped population, for example, refugees in the above example. "Community partners have been burned in the past by different outreach activities," explained one faculty member. "And if you run into one of those scenarios, you really, truly have to rebuild that relationship and respect before you can move forward."

In their response strategies, many faculty privileged the needs of the community partner

when navigating partner-specific constraints. One faculty member explained, "This is not about us, this isn't about [our university] you know. If you're gonna do this then we really need to prioritize what are the needs of the agency." Others have taken a more balanced approach to addressing partner-specific constraints. One noted, for example, "I think we have to always keep in mind the notion of reciprocity and the notion of humility and respect." Faculty must also prepare students to address partner-specific constraints. As one faculty member explained,

> I have this conversation a lot: They're not ignoring you…. They have two people probably doing the work of a dozen. They're a small nonprofit. They're overwhelmed right now with clients whatever the situation is so, yeah, it's not personal.

The most frequent strategy used to balance academic and partner needs was open communication with all stakeholders—yet another time-consuming task. Faculty in our study invested significant time and energy into understanding partners' needs and clearly explaining the needs and expectations of students and faculty involved in each project.

While increased communication was one of the leading strategies in our participants' response repertoire, the constitutive implications of these strategies are revealing. The enacted responses show various ways of balancing community needs with faculty and student needs; thus, the strategies used to navigate this tension will define the capacity and quality of the community partnerships that an institution can sustain. While certain partner-specific challenges are often beyond the university's purview—particularly in cases of shared spaces, expectations of workloads, and the like—an awareness of these issues seems important, and faculty's reactions to such tensions reveal their deeply held values about community engagement work.

Student Limitations

While all participants agreed that community engagement provides a wonderful learning opportunity for students and, at its best, enriches both students' educations and partner communities, several faculty felt that student limitations sometimes posed a barrier both to learning and to the successful completion of projects and research with community partners.

Student limitations were mentioned as a barrier by 55 percent of our participants, and this barrier appeared 31 times in transcripts. Respondents' discussions of student limitations generally fell into one of three categories: material limitations, emotional limitations, or skill set limitations. Material limitations included students' ability to balance their engagement efforts with other classes, work schedules, extracurriculars, and, for some students, family obligations. One faculty respondent explained,

> Every one of these students is probably taking at least four if not five other classes that also ask them to do work…. The way that education really splits students into multiple kinds of tasks aren't always helpful to them in terms of figuring out priorities.

Material access at a less abstract level—like the lack of access to a car—can also pose issues.

Faculty also noted emotional limitations, such as many students' general lack of maturity as well as individual students' specific shortcomings. "We have some students we don't feel comfortable sending out," explained one faculty member. "Or I don't want this person to be the connection to the community." Trepidation to send some students out into the community often has to do with a student's perceived inability to engage with and respect difference. One respondent explained that some students, particularly those from affluent backgrounds, might face challenges when working with populations they were unfamiliar with or considered different from themselves. Such work provides powerful teachable moments but creates additional emotional work for the faculty member:

> That's been a hard thing for me…. I travel around the world…and work in diverse areas, so when my students were having so much anxiety about it, it honestly, it pissed me off.

Working across different cultural backgrounds is clearly rewarding for both students and faculty, but it adds another layer of preparation and, if handled poorly, may compromise a project and relationship. Other emotional limitations for some students "have to do with immaturity and irresponsibility," reported one respondent. Several faculty echoed concerns about work ethic and students' ability to "follow through."

The final category of student limitations relates to students' lack of skills. Because community engagement work in higher education is about learning, students involved in such projects are frequently asked to employ skills that are new or entirely unfamiliar to them. Gauging student competencies for what often amount to professional tasks is challenging for both faculty and community organizations. "I had no idea, you know, at what level these students were working at," one faculty member explained. While the majority of faculty we interviewed acknowledged the tensions between "trying to do some learning objectives" and producing services and products for and with the community, figuring out exactly what skills students possess and what they still need is often made more challenging by the need to complete a project on a specific timeline.

Faculty in our study responded to these challenges by (a) focusing on preparing the community partners for student limitations and (b) working with students to mitigate their limitations. One strategy for mitigating these limitations was to work on "unspoken" skills. As one interviewee described, for example,

> Training our collaborators and training our students to work on open-ended problems [by]…using design thinking and training them to be collaborators or learning to be collaborators…is a huge kind of subset of skills that is kind of implied in engagement but we don't necessarily articulate it.

Although these skills are specifically related to the course objectives of some classes, this type of training often occurs in addition to the established course objectives—and working to train community partners is an additional task all together.

When it came to preparing community partners for student limitations, some faculty responded by reminding partners that students are not professionals and so their work products and other tasks may not be at the level of paid consultants or staffers. In terms of communicating expectations to students, one respondent reminded students that the course project was much more than a class assignment and had real repercussions for others. Helping students frame their work is the faculty member's responsibility and is an important strategy for minimizing student limitations, but it adds yet another layer of invisible and uncompensated labor. Ultimately, whether working with partners or students to address limitations, another participant advocated explicitly celebrating the "not knowing" and "learning as you go" as defining community engagement projects. Communicating uncertainty as part of the process to students is another strategy that faculty use for overcoming this barrier.

Considering student limitations via ATA, we might position this tension between meeting students' learning needs and meeting community partners' practical and knowledge building needs as a generative space for learning, discussion, and communication. Again, we see communication as a leading strategy in the response repertoire of our sample. While many faculty approach the challenge of navigating student limitations by framing and managing expectations for both students and community partners, others focus on training students and community partners with specific skill sets and helping students to meet those challenges by "learning as you go." The latter response strategy requires borrowing time from students' other course topics or from community partners' professional and personal priorities, and it points to areas in which institutional structures for capacity building might shift some of the time burdens that currently fall on community-engaged faculty and staff. Understanding student limitations as a challenge and evaluating the multiple ways that faculty meet this challenge in their local contexts not only suggests specific strategies for overcoming these tensions but also reveals personal and institutional values around student learning, efforts to avoid extractive models with our community partners, and the needs that we privilege during community engagement work.

Additionally, these tensions and responses may suggest an opportunity for universities to provide additional support structures—in this case, a university-wide training course for students on diversity, community engagement work, and other issues that frequently arise as students engaging with community-based projects.

Discussion

Table 1 summarizes our findings and highlights the four major categories of challenges and responses identified by our participants. Returning to the methodological foundations of ATA can help us understand the significance of these findings. ATA reminds us that tensions are important for two reasons. First, they present challenges to the efficacy of our work. Rather than

Table 1. Challenges and Strategies Highlighted by Participants

Major tensions	Specific challenges	Enacted responses/repertoires
Time	• Not enough time to balance priorities • Not enough time to set up partnerships • Not enough time to navigate challenges	• Borrowing time from other work obligations • Borrowing time from personal life (not sleeping, working without pay) • Relying on personal passion to drive time commitment • Creating structures to help navigate challenges (finding partners, TAs, etc.)
Lack of resources	• Lack of funding • Lack of space for engagements • Lack of teaching support • Lack of administrative support	• Scaling down efforts • Piecing together support • Building networks to access resources • Increasing student responsibilities • Accessing community strengths and resources
Partner-specific constraints	• Inadequate partner facilities • Constraints of partner policies and rules • Limited partner engagement • Partner with previous bad experiences	• Staying flexible • Redeveloping curriculum to center community needs • Balancing community and class needs
Student limitations	• Lack of skill • Material constraints (physical ability, access to transportation) • Emotional limitations (limited cultural efficacy, maturity, or work ethic)	• Preparing partner for student limitations • Preparing students to persist in face of challenges • Integrating cultural awareness into the curriculum

casting a single strategy as the "best practice," our summary table shows that a multitude of available response strategies may help individuals meet the challenges presented by community engagement.

Second, tensions help us identify specific points of potential structural intervention—that is, places where the organized practices of engagement may be open to change and enhancement. In other words, even as individuals employ a multitude of strategies to accomplish engagement work despite the barriers they face, we must also consider how those strategies construct norms and expectations that constitute our institutes of higher education and our relationships with community organizations. For example, as the findings related to time-based challenges reveal, although all enacted responses create time for engagement, they

differ greatly in terms of the kinds of institutions they foster. While some normalize a culture in which community engagement requires both personal and professional sacrifice, others have the potential to build stronger networks and to cultivate institutional support that creates a more cohesive culture of engagement in which people feel mutually supported.

ATA encourages us to think critically about available strategies while avoiding settling on single strategies as best practices. Our study thus sustains ATA's call for a thoughtful examination of each context (campus, local communities, organizations, state and federal funding bodies, etc.). For instance, in some institutions (but not in others), faculty who borrow time from other areas of work may foster a successful community-

engaged program but jeopardize their own career advancement in the process. In lieu of offering universal best practices, we combine contextualized understandings of common challenges with a repertoire of potential responses that may strengthen community engagement at each institution. Our hope is that these well-informed strategies can prove both efficacious at an individual level and ethically informed in terms of their constitutive implications for the organization more broadly. This "situated awareness" is important for all who hope to advance community engagement work, especially administrators, because it reveals both potential problems and possibilities among existing practices in each unique context. Identifying strategies that may require mitigation—such as borrowing time from personal lives and relying on passion rather than resources—and enhancing other strategies—such as creating strong and visible engagement networks on campus and in the community and developing capacity for communication and transparency—will lead to *organizational structures*, not just *individuals*, that conduct community engagement in more effective, efficient, and humane ways.

ATA facilitates this structural analysis because it enables us to examine tensions as imbricated knots rather than isolated challenges. Our study shows that many of the tensions link back to time—as faculty respondents' time-intensive strategies for developing resources and overcoming partner and student limitations demonstrated in this study. Simply stated, redeveloping curricula, having extended discussions about balancing faculty and partner needs, piecing together resources, pursuing grants, and building capacity with community partners all compound the existing time crunch. If individuals are left to unravel these knots alone, burdens are simply shifted: using time to find resources, using resources to create more time, using resources and time to cope with limitations of community partners and students, and so on. To address this feedback loop, ATA broadens our focus beyond individual coping strategies and reminds us that tensions are moments of organizational potential and becoming. It guides us to create structures that enable institutions to absorb some of these challenges in systematic ways. In our region, for example, service-learning centers might take on the role of offering training that builds community partners' capacity to manage students, or they could train student workers as "project managers" who can take on some of the administrative duties of larger

engagement projects, with right communication strategies. Community engagement centers could facilitate an interdisciplinary one-credit lab on managing service-learning relationships so that faculty could incorporate this training into their courses without additional work on their part. Our study thus helps those in our region consider the enacted responses of others as part of response repertoires that may be useful to individual faculty members and to our institutions.

Conclusions

To say that community engagement work is challenging, messy, and time-consuming is not new. For those of us who do such work, it is just as well established that there are also endless educational, ethical, and practical benefits to community engagement. The ATA approach offers a new way to look at old challenges and strategies. Rather than merely lamenting the additional stresses and barriers associated with learning with community partners or simply advising faculty to push through on their own, taking the ATA perspective can offer a contextual study of unique challenges and opportunities for community engagement in place. From such data, a broader picture of the institutional limitations and possibilities of specific learning communities might be better understood and leveraged to foster deep learning for students and real, sustainable benefits for our community partners.

Our data about challenges and strategies revealed little that surprised our team of community-engaged scholars on the individual level. We have all at times felt overtaxed by our lack of time and resources and have had to navigate challenges specific to students and partners. However, this work helped us assemble a picture of community engagement in our region and begin to identify structures and strategies that might benefit those in our service area. We also gained a deeper understanding of the systemic, cultural, and value-laden issues that affect the "who" and "how" of community engagement in our area. For this reason, the specific data reported here are likely less useful than the ATA approach we offer as a model for assessing other specific community engagement sites. Taking time to critically assess the particular challenges of engagement work in our local contexts not only allows us to discuss specific responses to those challenges but also permits generative discussions of how our institutions and networks of community-engaged scholars might collaborate to leverage and create

new strategies to help our work thrive. Developing this sort of deeper understanding both helps us overcome barriers to community engagement and gives us a better understanding of the success stories in our field. What strategies worked for these practitioners, and what specific challenges did they overcome? All community engagement success stories start with barriers and tensions that lead to generative, constitutive decisions, priorities, and actions. Understanding our challenges and some of the available strategies moves us past best practices and a simple reiteration of common barriers and may lead to creative problem-solving and deeply impactful work with our community partners.

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About the Authors

All the authors work at James Madison University and collaborated to interview faculty at three local universities working in community engagement. Jen Almjeld is an associate professor and director of graduate studies for the School of Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication. Jennifer PeeksMease is an associate professor of communication. Kerry Cresawn is the director of the JMU Center for STEM Education and Outreach. Steve Grande is director of Community Service-Learning at JMU. Juhong Christie Liu is an associate professor in JMU Libraries. Iona Black was a teaching faculty member in the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry. She passed away in August 2020, as this article was being revised.