

# From the Guest Editors

A. Scott Reed and Louis E. Swanson

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This special issue was conceived and assembled during the Covid-19 pandemic, a black swan event which is producing paradigm shifting ripples throughout society and for higher education. This pandemic, along with other all-encompassing social and environmental challenges, is making compelling cases for the power and necessity of university-wide engagement.

Readers of the *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship* (JCES) broadly assume the centrality of engagement for public colleges and universities is self-evident. We certainly do as well. They also are open to and participate in broader analyses of contemporary engagement discussions. JCES seeks to provide critical reviews on the well-being of engagement missions and offers insights and examples of community and university practitioners' achievements and innovations.

Dr. Samory Pruitt's commentary in this issue offers a broad analysis of the status of engagement as a central higher education mission and a focus on examples of what can and is being done. His ever-present optimism is on full display, as are his insights on community-focused university engagement. Dr. Pruitt's essay is a seasoned engagement practitioner's assessment worthy of a second and third read. He and the JCES staff made this special issue possible. We are deeply grateful and thankful for his and their expert counsel and professional support, without which this issue would not occur.

Like Dr. Pruitt, we have several decades between us within multiple spheres of university engagement, having served as VPs<sup>1</sup> for university-wide engagement and as directors of Extension at our institutions. After retiring within a month of each other in 2019, we continued our commitments to and passion for connecting universities to society. We created *Longview Engagement Associates* (<https://longviewengagement.com/>) as our retirement platform to share our and others' perspectives on university-wide engagement and Extension.

Our first effort was an essay on university-wide Extension and engagement that champions *transdisciplinary programs* with community partners. We sent the essay to several of our

colleagues, including Dr. Pruitt, for critical feedback and suggestions for a publication outlet. Dr. Pruitt shared the essay with Dr. Drew Pearl, Dr. Rhoda Reddix, and others at JCES. Their conclusion was that the essay did not really fit JCES's focus on community and academic partnerships, but it might provide the centering theme for a special issue on current opportunities and constraints for university-wide engagement, including for Extension services at land-grant universities (LGUs).

The original essay in this issue has been adapted to JCES's expectations for articles, including its readability for community partners. Professors are often ill-equipped in communicating with these community colleagues. We benefited from Dr. Ed Mullins' edits of the original manuscript, making it much more readable for others and for us. It is this edited manuscript that is the centering theme for this special issue.

Drs. Pearl and Reddix have been our principal partners at JCES. Together, we identified four additional associate editors, the authors appearing in this issue, and peer reviewers. For our other associate editors, we turned to long-term professional colleagues from whom we have learned a great deal. These are Dr. Jon Boren, Dr. Chuck Hibberd, Dr. Roger Rennekamp, and Dr. Fred Schlutt. All four have been directors of Extension, and they have been among our close confidants during our tenures as directors of Extension. Together, the eight of us have spent considerable amounts of time on Zoom calls. Dr. Pearl in particular shared with us JCES's aims and standards as we crafted our timelines and worked through innumerable challenges in order to be at this point of publishing the special issue. The insight from the guest peer reviewers has greatly improved all of this issue's articles, as has the copyediting expertise of Ms. Sam Held and Dr. Elisabetta Zengaro. We are deeply grateful for their time, energy, networks, and creative verve in shepherding us through this process.

The framing essay focuses on several themes developed during our administrative experiences, including innumerable conversations with citizens, community organizations, government representatives, our university colleagues across our campuses, and our statewide Extension service

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<sup>1</sup> Vice Provost and Vice President

colleagues. We learned more from all of them than we can ever document or say thank you. Administratively, we believed in our Extension colleagues and championed community-based bottom-up programming that connected our far-flung agents and their community partners with the considerable talent on campus.

This essay taps two themes from our experiences: the necessities for university-wide engagement and leveraging university talent in collaboration with community partners. Together, all of us are better prepared to address seeming intractable transdisciplinary topics/issues, such as climate change, youth, and community development. An ancillary theme is our concern that university-wide engagement is struggling, and for many LGUs, their extraordinary Extension services' programming continues to reside in one or two colleges and may be focused on relatively narrow constituencies.

Frankly, we are caught in a conundrum of fully embracing and identifying with Dr. Pruitt's well-founded optimism, while at the same time being deeply concerned that university-wide engagement as a primary institutional mission is struggling. The pandemic and ubiquitous budget cuts certainly have taken their toll. Familiar hurdles, such as institutional resistance from within and a nationally polarized culture that diminishes the value for collaborative citizenship, seem to be grinding down our energy and resources. These and other persistent challenges, along with the black swan events of the past decade, have disrupted our visions and our efforts.

Public higher education, illustrated by the creation of LGUs during the U.S. Civil War, are children of America's sometimes fitful democracy and sentinels for the principles of equality before the law. They create opportunities for individual and societal economic and social improvements. Yet, the sheer complexities of our societal and environmental challenges can overwhelm us. Universities can inspire institutional innovations that leverage their extraordinary collection of human talent to co-create transdisciplinary educational and engagement programs. They, in turn, can be inspired by the communities with whom they engage. We believe that all of these are opportunities for senior university administrators, students, staff, and faculty to build upon their capacities to engage, partner, and learn from our citizens.

We hope readers will identify other themes emerging from our authors' narratives. Among these are the symbiotic relationships between the

viability of democracy and inclusive involvement of people; these are among the cultural foundations of our society. Public higher education's history, our history, includes continuous efforts to achieve fair and equitable access. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, higher education emerged as a societal and cultural imperative, and during the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, universities acknowledged engagement with their publics as a co-equal mission with their teaching and research responsibilities. The ascendancy of academic engagement has and will continue to connect colleges and universities with messy and divisive social issues; it will also create new challenges associated with collaborative citizenship.

Managing university-wide engagement often presents unique challenges and opportunities. Our administrative experiences have taught us that collaboration with communities is enhanced by structural and cultural collaboration with our university colleagues, their aspirations, and our institution's goals. Engagement management benefits from trusting and empowering off-campus Extension educators, students, staff, and faculty. Going forward, we believe that within engaged universities, community partnerships will increasingly shift academic priorities, especially for LGUs and their Extension services. Our view of effective leadership is defined by teams that cut across missions, units, and geography. Micromanaging from the top, such as traditional standardized reporting, may seem to reduce institutional risks, but it can also create disconnections with community voices and missed opportunities for community-based transdisciplinary engagement.

Our experiences, as with many of this issue's authors, taught us that higher education engagement is facilitated but not accomplished at the senior administration level. Successful engagement occurs at the university's practitioner level. Engagement facilitates universities' function as cultural representatives for shared principles in our democracy, but it is dependent on democracy and civility to succeed. JCES's focus on community practitioners embodies these principles. Through sharing their work, JCES advances universities' principles and missions.

Again, we thank our partners at JCES, our authors, and our peer reviewers in making this special issue possible. We hope that you, JCES's readers, will engage our authors and provide your thoughts and advice in the tradition of the academy's culture of critical inquiry and learning.