

# Navigating Liminal Spaces in University-Community Engagement: Risky Collaboration in Times of Crisis

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## Abstract

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced P-12 schools to temporarily transition to online learning, it exacerbated the already deep-seated educational inequities in communities across the United States. Employing a grounded theory approach, this paper explores how educators and community stakeholders created a free full-time volunteer-led K-2 learning pod for historically underserved students. The authors discuss the opportunities and challenges experienced in the pod's implementation, as well as lessons for these types of university-community partnerships. The findings of the study reveal the potential of equity-focused collaborations that accept risk, occupy uncomfortable liminal spaces, and leverage informal networks and relationships to build trusting and authentic community partnerships. The paper concludes with a call to reimagine the parameters of university-community engagement in times of crisis.

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, an overwhelming majority of schools across the United States shuttered their doors and pivoted temporarily to remote learning (McElrath, 2020). While the rapid transition to online instruction allowed teachers and students to continue their work amidst lockdowns and social distancing, it caused profound disruptions to students' academic learning and socio-emotional development. As a result of the pandemic, education and healthcare professionals reported myriad problems facing school-aged youth, including inadequate access to technology for virtual learning, student disengagement and absenteeism, social isolation, food and housing insecurity, and elevated levels of child neglect and abuse (Chaabane et al., 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021; Kovler et al., 2021; Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020).

Among the most notable effects of the transition to remote learning was a further stratification of the already unequal educational landscape. While privileged families hired tutors, organized private learning pods, or opted out of public schools entirely, families with limited resources were left with few viable options. Concerned observers decried the educational disparities brought on by the pandemic, but powerful social and institutional forces prevented easy solutions, leading many to reluctantly accept the unequal toll of the pandemic on socially and economically disadvantaged children as "predictable and inevitable" (James, 2021, p. 89).

In this study, we analyze the creation of a free K-2 learning pod for historically underserved students, which attempted to mitigate pandemic-related inequities by leveraging university and community resources to assist students and families. Staffed mainly by faculty and student volunteers from a local public university in a small southeastern U.S. city, the pod may appear to be a quintessential example of university-community engagement. Yet, beneath the surface, the details of the pod's inception and evolution reveal the tenuous and unorthodox nature of the initiative, which pushed the boundaries of established practice in response to an extraordinary moment of urgent need.

Employing a grounded theory approach, this study draws on qualitative interviews with key stakeholders who spearheaded the learning pod initiative, as well as the authors' direct observations as participants and volunteers. The study aims to shed light on how this project came to fruition against an array of countervailing forces; assess its primary successes and shortcomings as a community-based collaboration; and examine what it can teach us about the nature of university-community engagement in times of crisis. The findings of the study suggest that novel, equity-focused community collaborations naturally face an array of practical, professional, and institutional roadblocks, which may be amplified in moments of heightened uncertainty. However, by leveraging informal networks, accepting risk, and occupying

uncomfortable liminal spaces, university and community partners can forge innovative and beneficial solutions to pressing social problems.

## Literature Review

### *Educational Inequality and the Rise of Pandemic Pods*

The COVID-19 pandemic upended schools across the U.S., with more than 90% of U.S. households with school-age children reporting some form of distance learning in the spring of 2020 (McElrath, 2020). The sudden closure of schools triggered an array of related problems for youth, including disengagement in online schooling, challenges accessing and navigating technologies for virtual learning, and increased social isolation and declining mental health (Jones et al., 2021). While many of these issues transcended geographic, racial, and economic barriers, emerging research indicates that the burdens of the pandemic were not borne equally by all students across the U.S. Rather, pre-existing disparities in wealth and educational access exacerbated the already substantial “opportunity gap” facing students from disadvantaged racial and socioeconomic groups (Díaz Lara et al., 2021; Gaylord-Harden et al., 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Due to the high degree of spatial segregation and economic disadvantage concentrated in communities of color, many minority-serving schools did not have the resources to support effective online instruction during the pandemic (Carter & Welner, 2013; Gaylord-Harden et al., 2020). As a consequence, predominantly Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students were more likely to be learning remotely than their white counterparts, less likely to have access to electronic devices and the internet for online learning, and twice as likely to have no live access to teachers in the digital classroom (Dorn et al., 2020). Further, many children from disadvantaged backgrounds faced additional hurdles at home: financial instability, food and housing insecurity, and inadequate access to health insurance, medical care, and adult supervision were exacerbated by the pandemic (Agostinelli et al., 2022; Hofstetter & McHugh, 2021; Wilke et al., 2020). These challenges negatively impacted students’ motivation and concentration levels, performance on school assessments, and overall social and emotional health (García & Weiss, 2020).

Students from immigrant and refugee backgrounds were hit especially hard by school

closures, with some of the nation’s most culturally and linguistically diverse school districts reporting *less than half* of English learners (ELs) logging on for virtual classes (Sugarman & Lazarín, 2020). Among the special challenges facing this population, ELs were more likely to face school-family communication barriers (Sugarman & Lazarín, 2020) and less likely to have consistent adult supervision due to family members’ employment as essential workers (Reza, 2020).

In contrast, students from more privileged backgrounds tended to benefit from better-resourced schools, more economically stable home environments, and more active parental involvement in online learning (Goudeau et al., 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Many wealthier families also marshaled their resources and social connections to hire tutors, curate co-curricular enrichment opportunities, and organize neighborhood study groups to help mitigate the effects of school closures (Moyer, 2020). Indeed, one of the most distinctive features of the COVID-era educational landscape was the creation of so-called “pandemic pods”—small private homeschool groups, typically led by a parent or paid instructor, created to provide stability, socialization, and a nurturing learning environment for a select group of students (Horn, 2021; James, 2021; NSCW, 2022; Watson, 2022). While estimates vary widely, survey data from the education nonprofit National School Choice Week (NSCW) suggests that as many as 1 in 3 U.S. families with school-aged children participated in some form of learning pod at the height of the pandemic (DiPerna & Kristof, 2020).

Broadly speaking, all pandemic pods served the same core function—namely, reducing exposure to potential contagion by gathering students in smaller groups, while approximating something like a “normal” schooling environment. In practice, pandemic pods came in a wide variety of shapes and sizes (Garbe et al., 2020; Watson, 2022). The archetypical pod operated as an informal backyard cooperative where parents took turns educating their own children or hired tutors to help with supervision and instruction (Moyer, 2020; Watson, 2022; Widdicombe, 2021). In other cases, students enrolled in more formalized tuition-based programs staffed by certified teachers, resembling something more akin to the “micro-school” movement that predated the pandemic (Fox, 2020; Horn, 2015; Moyer, 2020). The vast majority of pandemic pods were created to provide supplementary support with online learning for students already enrolled in a traditional public

or private school (DiPerna & Kristof, 2020). However, a minority of “self-directed pods” took a more active role in designing lesson plans and instructional materials, replacing the conventional school curriculum with a home-grown substitute (NSCW, 2022).

Given their sudden and unexpected growth, as well as their “diffuse and private nature,” Watson (2022, p. 200) notes that reliable data about the quantity, quality, and efficacy of pandemic pods is hard to find. However, a growing body of evidence points to the idea that pandemic pods were both a product of—and a contributor to—longstanding inequalities in the U.S. educational landscape. In part, the significant outlay of time and money required to initiate and sustain a private learning pod meant that wealthier, more privileged families were more likely to participate (DiPerna & Kristof, 2020; Moyer, 2020; Samuels & Prothero, 2020). Moreover, experts cautioned that pandemic pods threatened to exacerbate existing educational inequalities by siphoning off funding and instructional staff from already strapped public schools (Moyer, 2020; Natanson, 2020), intensifying racial segregation (Green, 2020; James, 2021), and widening the gaps in educational access and achievement between rich and poor (Bastian, 2020; Green, 2020; Samuels & Prothero, 2020). Exemplifying this line of argumentation, James (2021, p. 100) characterizes pandemic pods as a form of “opportunity hoarding,” benefitting the children of privileged, predominately white families, while excluding those without the means to participate.

### *Learning Pods for the Public Good*

While an estimated 80% of pandemic pods were privately organized by participating families (Jochim & Poon, 2022), there also emerged an alternative model serving the needs of less privileged students—a phenomenon that we describe as “learning pods for the public good.” Though the details differed from place to place, various equity-minded schools and community organizations across the nation created free learning hubs and virtual learning centers for underserved students in localities across the U.S. (e.g. Polo, 2020; Schimke & Aldrich, 2020). Some community pods were run directly by school districts and staffed by teachers and school employees, while others were initiated by partner organizations and managed by volunteers. Some offered transportation, free meals, and full-day supervision, while others provided only Wi-Fi

access and a few hours of adult assistance with online schoolwork (Polo, 2020; Schimke & Aldrich, 2020). The common link was their recognition of the problems facing socially and economically marginalized families during remote learning, and their commitment to help level the playing field for students across racial and economic lines.

Among the more than 160 examples of public learning pods tallied by the Center on Reinventing Public Education, the majority were operated by non-profit community organizations like the YMCA and the Boys & Girls Clubs of America (Jochim & Lake, 2020). Other public pods were facilitated by local school districts and municipalities, daycare centers, summer camps, faith-based organizations, and even private businesses (Jochim & Lake, 2020). These organizations leveraged their community connections, institutional resources, and past experience with youth programming to expand their services in response to unprecedented community need. Yet, one notable omission from this list was the nation’s vast network of universities and colleges (Grove, 2022).

### *University-Community Engagement from a Distance*

The role of the university historically has been to provide teaching, research, and service to the community at large (Altbach, 2008; Mugabi, 2015; Perkins, 1972). Since their inception, universities have been vaunted as a pillar of society, central to the workings of democracy (Fallis, 2011; Ling, 2020; Williams, 2010). Yet, in recent decades, skepticism surrounding the presence, motives, and commitment of universities, particularly toward community partnerships, has increased (Ehrlich, 2000; Glover & Silka, 2013; Thomas & Benenson, 2017). While many higher education institutions espouse the principles of civic engagement and social responsibility, the realities of university-community engagement are complex and nuanced. University-community partnerships are frequently stifled by bureaucratic red tape and institutional inertia. At the same time, many engagement projects are initiated and led by universities rather than by community partners, resulting in self-serving projects that are out of touch with community needs (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Koekkoek et al., 2021; Stoeker & Tyron, 2009; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010).

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, universities struggled to cope and adapt to quickly changing circumstances, much like other organizations. However, due to their substantial

size and resources (economic and human), most universities were able to successfully adapt their core operations by pivoting to online learning and remote student services (Smalley, 2021). This type of rapid transformation did not come as easily for smaller organizations in surrounding communities, such as local nonprofits, schools, and businesses. While the CARES Act and other emergency initiatives made government funding available (NCON, 2022), many community organizations struggled to meet the challenges brought on by the pandemic (CAF America, 2020; Johnson et al., 2021; Kumar et al., 2022; Ng & Manzelli, 2020). For scholars and practitioners in the university-community engagement field, this context raised both unprecedented challenges and unexpected opportunities to strengthen community connections and engage in collaborative public problem solving (Ohmer et al., 2022). How would universities respond?

As the pandemic has become more manageable with widespread access to vaccines and increasing knowledge about the COVID-19 virus, stories highlighting university-community engagement during the height of the pandemic have become increasingly prevalent. Universities across the country have been spotlighted for their efforts ranging from expanding Wi-Fi services for the public at large, to utilizing 3-D printers to make face shields for healthcare providers, to offering vacant buildings for testing, vaccinations, and even medical services when hospitals were full (Leckrone, 2020a; Leckrone, 2020b; Mahoney, 2020; Reimers, 2021). To assist with P-12 learning, colleges of education offered online tutoring for P-12 students, virtual enrichment activities, and lesson-planning support for teachers, particularly in helping to assemble learning packets (Barko-Alva et al., 2020; Glaser et al., 2021; Gutierrez et al., 2021).

While each of these examples is noteworthy and valuable, they all share a common thread: they leveraged the assets and capabilities of the university, while conforming to the risk-averse culture of the contemporary higher education sector (Delbanco, 2022; Husain, 2022; Jones, 2020). While safety and harm reduction are reasonable concerns for any institution, particularly in the midst of a public health emergency, observers have noted a long-term trend toward bureaucratization and heightened sensitivity to risk and liability among American universities that began long before COVID-19 (Hayes & Wynyard, 2002; Selingo, 2013; Strikwerda, 2014). In the context

of the global pandemic, some have argued that this risk-averse mindset led universities to adopt policies that elevated concerns about risk and liability over the interests of students, employees, and the community at large (Delbanco, 2022; Jones, 2020).

In this study, we consider how the prioritization of risk avoidance shaped the ability (and willingness) of universities to respond to the exigent challenges posed by the pandemic. Specifically, we examine how safety and liability concerns may have impeded potential university-community collaborations during this time of crisis—sanctioning superficial modes of engagement in the form of “distributing to” communities or “offering of” goods and services by universities, while discouraging deeper community-based collaborations that would require the assumption of shared risk with community partners.

### *Liminality: A Metaphor for University-Community Engagement*

In this study, we refer to the concept of liminality as a central organizing theme. In its most basic form, liminality describes a transitional moment or space “betwixt and between” two (or more) fixed states (Turner, 1974, p. 234). In other words, it signifies a space where change is occurring. During liminal moments, the formality of structures and established roles lessen, with the potential to foster both ambiguity and creativity (Piironen, 2022; Thomassen, 2015; Turner, 1974; Turner, 1987). These spaces can feel challenging and even chaotic because they serve as a crossing-over point—a way station between the familiar and the unknown. They are also spaces full of possibility. Moreover, in this state of betweenness, liminal spaces are often accompanied by suspended or attenuated rules, which can lead to feelings of discomfort and uncertainty (Barajas & Martin, 2016; Shortt, 2015). Scholars across disciplines have analyzed this concept highlighting the struggle (and potentiality) that such spaces foster, resulting in the emergence of new ways of seeing and becoming (Becker & Steele, 1995; Cresswell, 2015; de Certeau, 1984; Foucault, 1975; Gibson, 1966; Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 1995; Tuan, 1977; Turner, 1987; van Gennep, 1909/1960).

In their innovative study of university-community engagement at the University of Minnesota, Barajas and Martin (2016) call attention to the role of liminality in advancing authentic and transformational collaborations with community partners. For universities to



work effectively and equitably with community stakeholders, they assert that both parties must enter into unsettled and uncomfortable liminal spaces, in which they are willing to “change their assumptions, change their standard ways of doing, and expand beyond their comfortable ways of knowing” (Barajas & Martin, 2016, p. 62). This requires flexibility, creativity, and a willingness to share control. In short, Barajas and Martin (2016) suggest that “the university and the community need to transform and benefit together” (p. 62).

In this study, we employ the concept of liminality as a framework for understanding the evolution and operation of an equity-focused learning pod co-organized by university and community partners during the height of the pandemic. As a university-community collaboration unfolding at a time of crisis, we consider how the project emerged in the spaces between—both between the university and the community, and between the old ways of doing and being and the “new normal” of the pandemic. Specifically, we examine the following research questions in our analysis:

1. How did an unlikely collaboration such as this come to fruition? Who were the key stakeholders involved? What roles did they play? What motivated them to enter into this unfamiliar and uncertain space, especially at a time of heightened risk?
2. What were the benefits and limitations for participants? How did the project impact students and volunteers? How did it affect the community and the institutional partners who supported it?
3. What lessons can we discern for future university-community collaborations in liminal spaces?

### **The Story of a Community-Driven Learning Pod**

As the reality set in during the summer months of 2020 that in-person schooling for P–12 and higher education institutions would not occur in the fall, a group of friends, all of whom were educators ranging from the preschool to university level, began discussing the ramifications of this situation via Facebook. Through a “chat group,” our group explored possibilities for collaborating across grade levels in hopes of assisting students and their families with the sudden shift to online learning. Initially, those within the group who held teaching positions in higher education began to strategize about how their course offerings could somehow support local elementary students in

their transition to online instruction. Online tutoring support became the most viable idea. Yet, when seeking input from principals within the community’s city school district, it became clear that trying to orchestrate an online tutoring program with university students was a task too overwhelming for the local schools at a time when they were focused on onboarding courses and communicating basic instructions to families before the start of the school year.

However, during these discussions, one principal jokingly remarked, “Now, if you could create a learning pod to help provide childcare and instructional support off site, then we can talk.” When members of our organizing group began visiting with families in the community, the need underlying the principal’s response became evident. Many parents who held jobs as essential workers and relied on limited incomes were searching for viable options to navigate their children’s daily care and online learning while meeting the demands of their employers. This study details the creation and implementation of the initiative that resulted in a free full-day learning pod for K–2 children in a small southeastern U.S. city, created to address community needs while remote learning continued during the 2020–21 academic year.

Because many on the pod’s organizing team were faculty or staff at a local university, the initial impulse was to explore the possibility of using the university’s early childhood learning center, run by the College of Education (CoE), since it was not in operation due to the pandemic. The early childhood center was already a licensed learning facility for grades P–5, which seemed appropriate for this endeavor. However, after a series of conversations about the project, the CoE decided it was not in their best interest to spearhead this project due to its tight timeline, concerns about the spread of COVID-19, and liability issues. The group continued to look for spaces on campus but to no avail. Each possible lead on campus wanted the involvement of the CoE before providing their commitment. The issue of liability became the largest roadblock in furthering collaboration or formalizing the project with the university, especially without the backing of the CoE.

Despite the CoE’s decision, conversations were well underway with the local school district to create a cooperative learning pod. The main stipulation by the school district was that the selected location for hosting the pod would need to be associated with a licensed childcare program in order to enroll students from the city schools.

The organizing team sought a physical space and a connection to a licensed childcare facility that might host or partner with the learning pod. Both of these requirements were daunting in the midst of a global pandemic. When it seemed like all possibilities were exhausted, one of the members of the organizing team made contact with a local childcare director who ran an early childhood learning center in the basement of a church. The director, with the support of her board, agreed to help oversee the learning pod and allow it to operate under her center's licensure until/if the pod's emergency license expired. Further, the director spoke with the pastor of the local church (where her center was located) who offered their sanctuary space free of charge as an area for the learning pod to meet. A memorandum of agreement (MOA) was created between the childcare center, the local church, and the city school district.

As part of the MOA, the school district provided funding to pay for two part-time employees. However, additional assistance would be required to meet the child-caretaker ratio required for licensed childcare centers and to better serve the needs of the children. The faculty on the organizing team decided to reach out to their public university's Office of Community Service-Learning (CS-L), which designated the learning pod as a community partner and orchestrated undergraduate and graduate student volunteer placements. Four local non-profit organizations provided additional funding support and material donations to facilitate the pod's daily operations, from school supplies, snacks, and warm clothes, to enrichment activities and media support.

The organizational design of the learning pod was centered around the school district's online learning platform. Although the district's daily synchronous learning occurred intermittently between 9:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m., the pod operated from 7:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, with enrichment activities such as outdoor play, reading circles, and socio-emotional learning enhancement games occurring in between online instruction. The daily work schedule for part-time staff and volunteers was split between a morning shift (7:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.) and an afternoon shift (12:00 to 3:30 p.m.), with 3–5 adults present at all times.

University faculty and community leaders from the organizing team who served as volunteers at the pod were designated as "supervisory volunteers." Supervisory volunteers were required to undergo fingerprinting, a tuberculosis

screening, a criminal background check, a 10-hour training for early childcare providers, and attend weekly planning meetings. It is important to clarify that many of the university faculty serving as supervisory volunteers had limited to no experience in elementary education. Further, the identities and positionality of the majority of supervisory volunteers did not reflect the diversity of the students attending the learning pod. Finally, it is essential to note that we, the authors of this study, comprised the majority of university faculty that served as supervisory volunteers for this project. Out of the five of us, two are white cisgender males, two are white cisgender females (one is multilingual and immigrated from Russia and another is proficient in Spanish), and one is a cisgender Latina who is bilingual in English and Spanish. In total, there were nine supervisory volunteers, four of whom were community members.

"Student volunteers" were undergraduate students referred by the CS-L office. Although they were not required to complete the same protocol as supervisory volunteers, they did complete a tuberculosis screening, an online tutorial on COVID-19 protocols, and a guided introduction to volunteer responsibilities and daily routines at the learning pod. Student volunteers committed to working a minimum of 15 hours for the duration of the pod. Many of the student volunteers placed by the CS-L office were federal work-study students who far exceeded this minimum requirement by working up to 10 hours a week at the pod. Approximately 25 undergraduate students, including the assigned federal work-study students, provided at least 15 hours of service to the learning pod during its operation. Additionally, seven graduate students from the university's school counseling program volunteered on a regular basis, using the pod as a field placement site. Although more racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity existed among the student volunteers than the supervisory volunteers, the majority of student volunteers were white as well. We attribute this to the fact that the public university is predominantly comprised of white, middle to upper class students.

All of the children who participated in the learning pod came from the same "feeder school"—the elementary school designated by the school district to be paired with the learning pod. Students who attended the learning pod were predominantly BIPOC students with the majority identifying as male. Most students were multilingual learners (ML), with Spanish being the predominant home

language. The student enrollment varied over the duration of the learning pod primarily due to the district's intent to scaffold children's return to in-person learning, beginning with kindergartners. The highest enrollment during the learning pod's operation was 20 students, and the lowest was nine.

The learning pod opened on November 9, 2020, nearly 10 weeks after the original group of organizers began envisioning its inception. It remained operational until the end of March 2021, when all elementary-aged students returned to in-person instruction. In May of 2021, following the pod's closure, the five of us decided to formalize a study analyzing this noteworthy community collaboration.

### **Methods and Theoretical Framework**

The learning pod was not designed as a research study at the onset. Rather, it was a grassroots initiative driven by a collective desire to help address a pressing social need. Only after completing the project did we decide to capture its story and reflect upon its uniqueness as a university-community collaboration. For this reason, we relied on grounded theory within the constructivist tradition (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) to design this study following the pod's closure. Constructivism is an epistemological position whereby knowledge is regarded as a construction that is "grounded" or rooted in the experiences of those participating (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). This theoretical framework allowed us to explore participants' thoughts, beliefs, and feelings as collaborators in the creation of the learning pod. This approach also fosters spaces for reflection following an event or project. Finally, this approach considers the roles of researchers in the process. To reiterate, each of us as researchers and authors were also participants in the design and implementation of the project as supervisory volunteers. Thus, the logic of studying this case qualitatively elevates the vulnerability and fluidity of its participants while exploring the "both/and" spaces not only of project-based research but also of the researcher as a participant (Probst, 2016; Secules et al., 2021).

### *Sample*

We identified purposive (quota) sampling as the most appropriate approach for our case study to ensure that stakeholder groups involved in developing and implementing the learning pod were invited to participate (Robinson, 2014). We set the following stakeholder groups for inclusion:

university faculty and staff, school personnel, childcare consultants, childcare center director and employees, and partnering community organizations. With Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, we contacted all persons involved in the planning and implementation of the pod (19 people in total). Fourteen participants agreed to participate in the interview process, with at least two individuals representing each stakeholder group. Additionally, we corresponded with two of the teachers who taught students online while attending the pod to determine if noticeable changes were observed in student attendance and participation as a result of the pod. We were unable to interview family members of students who attended the pod because the director of the participating elementary school preferred that only school officials have direct contact with the families (rather than pod supervisors and volunteers) in order to avoid role confusion and potential miscommunication.

### *Procedure*

We divided interview subjects between our team of researchers based on scheduling availability. Each of us used a semi-structured approach (Creswell & Guettermann, 2019) to conduct the interviews in person or via Zoom. Questions were developed around three broad topics of inquiry: process and implementation, benefits and challenges, and lessons learned. Interviews were approximately 60–90 minutes in length. Because we, the researchers and authors of this study, comprise the majority of university faculty involved in this project, we also interviewed each other.

We recorded and transcribed interviews verbatim and removed identifiers as we reviewed transcripts for accuracy. After transcribing the interviews, each interviewer relied on a thematic coding process (Creswell & Guettermann, 2019) to identify and organize meaningful data segments. This coding system allowed us to formulate common themes between interview participants, which were discussed and developed around consensus and meaning to specific stakeholder groups. Finally, we refined and synthesized these core themes in our analytical discussion of participants' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about the opportunities, challenges, and lessons derived from the learning pod experience.

Since this study is not intended to examine measured learning gains of students who participated in the learning pod, our online

correspondence with the two teachers from the feeder school was shorter in length and less structured than the formal interviews. Our goal was to gather teachers' perceptions of improvements in student attendance and participation upon starting the pod, as well as whether participation in the pod eased student transitions back to in-person learning following the pod's closure.

### *Trustworthiness*

Lincoln and Guba (1986) posit four crucial areas for showing trustworthiness: credibility ("truth" behind the results), transferability (applicability of findings across contexts), dependability (consistency of findings), and confirmability (neutrality of findings). We took deliberate steps, which Merriam and Tisdell (2015) outline, to address these areas of trustworthiness. We relied on member checking to establish credibility by sending interview transcripts back to participants for review. We relied on investigator triangulation by having multiple investigators collect and analyze interviews. Our sampling strategy included perspectives on the development and implementation of the learning pod from multiple stakeholder groups (transferability). We also debriefed as a team each week, as we interviewed participants and offered researcher statements to reveal our positions within the project (dependability and confirmability).

### *Limitations*

We acknowledge that this study involves some limitations. As mentioned, the entire team of volunteers and community partners devoted their collective efforts to developing and implementing the community learning pod in response to an ongoing educational crisis. Research on this endeavor was not our initial objective, so our approach does not include other data sources (i.e., entrance/exit surveys, researcher journals). As a result, we chose to focus on interviews with relevant stakeholders. However, sampling stakeholders also posed problems, as other critical stakeholder groups (i.e., parents and university students) are not represented in the sample, due to our limited interactions with families (for reasons described above) and our desire to focus on community partnerships.

### **Findings**

Through extensive coding, the following themes emerged in our data analysis: the

importance of networks, social trust, and liminal spaces; motivations, risks, and benefits; and centering power and privilege. Based on triangulation of data from various groups of stakeholders, our findings portray a rich, thick description of participants' firsthand experiences with the design and implementation of the learning pod.

### *The Importance of Networks and Social Trust in Navigating Liminal Spaces*

Networking was of central importance from the very beginning of this initiative. Members of the organizing team relied on their connections with families, educators, and community leaders, based on prior relationships from their professional positions and community involvement, in order to begin brainstorming possible collaborations. One of our organizers reflected on preliminary discussions with families during their interview:

I was hearing a lot of trepidation about how schooling would look during the pandemic, particularly from families that I had come to know from other projects and just the relationships that I had built. [These were] families that were on very rigid schedules, that were considered essential workers, who were struggling as single parents or just trying to maintain a lot of responsibilities with family here and abroad. I realized that there was a huge gap, and so one of the things that I love to do is just start conversations.

These conversations began with a group of colleagues and friends on a Facebook group chat and continued with P-12 educators and families with school-aged children, hoping to find a viable solution to assist families and schools utilizing community networks. After several weeks, the idea of creating a free full-day learning pod for elementary-aged students began to take shape, based largely on existing relationships and networks.

Determining where to draw support for launching such an endeavor was a recurring topic within the research, particularly as it relates to social trust and commitment. For example, several interviewees spoke of their disappointment in the CoE's lack of involvement in the project. Many felt angry and disillusioned and began to question the role of the university as a resource when crises emerge. As one participant stated, "Why is the



largest entity responsible for training K–12 teachers and advocating for equity in education not at the table?” Despite these sentiments, the momentum and commitment of the group remained. This lack of support forced organizers to re-envision and reconnect with community members in new and creative ways that allowed for innovative opportunities to emerge. Some participants expressed how not having university policies and procedures guiding the process allowed for greater flexibility and swifter action: “We don’t need a committee to see if we need to have a sub-committee created in order to figure out whether we should do this or not.” Another participant noted that the project was a vivid demonstration of “the power of small institutions, from individuals to small organizations ... because we weren’t able to count on the bigger institutions with the expertise and resources that they had to support us.”

Feelings of reciprocity and mutual trust among those committed to the project helped turn the idea into a reality. Participants began to bring in additional supporters, thereby growing the network. Those involved saw the challenges but were committed to working together to find solutions that may never have been tried. Taking risks and thinking outside the box became a part of the pod’s evolution. The willingness of the childcare director to commit to the idea, seek support from her board, and advocate for a physical space with the pastor of the building in which her facility was located is a prime example. Below is how one organizing team member recalls a conversation with the childcare director:

So we started talking and [the director] was like, “Well, we will need to bring in the pastor for this space,” because she knew they weren’t using the space upstairs. So she talked to the pastor, and he was like, “Yeah, this is what we would do in this community.” So everyone started chatting. It worked out that we could open under a state of emergency, hoping to eventually get under [the director’s] licensure.

The faculty organizers’ longstanding relationship with the university’s CS-L office was another example of the pod’s reliance on networking in order to operate. Multiple faculty members involved in the project had utilized the CS-L office’s services prior to the pandemic and knew of the expertise available to them in supporting such an initiative. Because the local

university was not overseeing the project, the CS-L office treated the learning pod as a “community partner” rather than a university entity (despite the organizing team being primarily composed of university faculty). As a result, the CS-L office was not required to seek special approval by higher administration since the pod was simply listed as a community site for service learning. In doing so, the CS-L office was able to offer sustaining support for the duration of the learning project. Participants referenced the support of the CS-L office in their interviews and how the CS-L office “filled the gap” by providing volunteers to help staff the learning pod. By creatively bypassing bureaucratic procedures and claiming the pod as a community partner instead of a university-driven initiative, the CS-L office was able to recruit undergraduate volunteers and work-study students as well as facilitate a partnership between the learning pod and the university’s school psychology graduate program as a field placement site. This collaboration provided more volunteers with specific training that benefitted the K–2 student participants. The instrumental involvement of the four non-profit organizations in providing materials and supplemental supplies was also the result of previous relationships with faculty and connections with the CS-L office.

Though this was not a project officially endorsed by the university, those of us on the organizing team who serve as university faculty noted our reliance upon relationships built with community partners during previous university-related projects. Further, many of us in the interviewing process discussed how our roles at the university helped bring legitimacy to the project and enhance social trust when seeking support from community partners. By operating in the liminal space between our professional roles as university employees and our personal identities as community members and concerned citizens, we were able to leverage resources and access opportunities that would not have been available otherwise. In this way, the learning pod took on the appearance of a university project. It also benefited from the people power of the university community while remaining an independently initiated and managed community project.

#### *Motivations: From Intrinsic Value to Collective Action*

An intrinsic desire to help children in the community resounded as a key motivating factor among participants involved with the pod. As one participant noted, “[children] had

needs—academic and social. And so ... all those stakeholders that we were connecting through each of our networks were people who care about children.” Others were searching for a way to get involved and be connected to the community during a time of social and physical isolation. One participant shared about her life during COVID-19 prior to volunteering, “My daily activities were totally disconnected from any kind of outward-focused work.” Another participant echoed this sentiment: “I knew there was so much need in the community [that] I felt like I wasn’t doing enough.” One respondent was motivated by the stress she saw teachers experiencing, while others sought involvement in a “grassroots” effort to address “equity issues” in the community more broadly.

Another source of motivation and momentum was the daily interactions that came from working directly with the elementary students in the pod. One participant noted, “I got to know the kids one on one.” Another found a sense of intrinsic motivation in working with a student exhibiting challenging behaviors: “By the end [of the learning pod], I was sitting with him in class one day, and he got the Knight Badge of Honor and ... tears were coming down my cheeks because he was doing really well.” Other participants felt motivated by the overall progression and increasing stability the learning pod offered to participating children. One participant mentioned: “Even though the process was slow, it felt like we were always making a little bit of progress, and that was what kept me in it.”

Some participants’ motivation was rooted in the synergy and meaningful connections among volunteers and agencies participating in the project. For these participants, the size and scale of the project, when considering its aims, turnaround time, and the number of stakeholders, was exhilarating:

We were trying to figure out the structure, we were trying to figure out the locale, we were trying to figure out the people power, we were trying to figure out how to be seen as legitimate. ... And we had to try to figure out everything all at the same time.

Others saw the pod as a community collaboration like no other, in which partners from many walks of life worked cooperatively for the common good: “Nobody had their own personal or agency agenda,” remarked one participant. “It just seemed like the community came together to make it happen,”

observed another. Further, another participant summarized the experience as follows:

After we left every meeting, everybody had something that they needed to follow up on. And there seemed to always be progress being made, and so I think there’s value in really believing in each other and believing in the idea and doing the work to ensure that this is going to happen.

This shared commitment fostered a sense of collective action that sustained organizers and volunteers throughout the learning pod.

#### *Accepting Risk for the Common Good*

All participants expressed some degree of fear about health and safety due to COVID-19. They experienced fear about the safety of the student volunteers and children participating in the learning pod, as well as their own safety, and the health and well-being of their families. One participant summarized pandemic concerns related to spikes in cases: “We knew there was always a risk when you would bring people together that somebody would get sick.” Staff and supervisory volunteers constantly cross-checked COVID-19 protocols with organizational procedures and daily practices. The protocols necessitated establishing procedures for bathroom breaks, food consumption, the handling of toys and books, area cleaning, and outdoor activities, in addition to ensuring students wore masks, exercised social distancing, and received a temperature check upon arrival. “I don’t want there to be some kind of outbreak caused by something we did,” one of the participants noted. All involved knew that not maintaining safety procedures could have led to the learning pod’s closure.

The risk associated with these health and safety concerns was a key factor for why many individuals and nonprofit partnering organizations (beyond the university) chose not to get involved with the learning pod. Fearful of liability issues, organizations that declined to participate (such as the local university’s CoE) felt that the risk involved with organizing, administering, and being accountable for this kind of project outweighed the benefits. It is important to note that although the organizing team met with the various administrators throughout the university, each deferred to the CoE as to whether to pursue the project given that it was within CoE’s domain of P-12 schooling. However, the lack of institutional support from the university, in

particular, presented its own set of challenges. Without formal university recognition, there was an absence of “affirmation” that would have supported the pod’s efforts, particularly at the onset when seeking buy-in and legitimacy from other stakeholders. This lack of support also presented personal struggles for faculty attempting to maintain professional responsibilities without this project being recognized as service toward tenure and promotion. As a result, some of us as faculty felt we had to carefully navigate our discussions and/or admission of time being spent at the pod, for fear it would be seen as a distraction from our regularly assigned duties—even though many of the students who were volunteering through the CS-L office were enrolled in our university classes.

The individuals and organizations that did become involved in this endeavor were similarly aware of the potential risks but felt they were worth taking. For example, the childcare center that took the learning pod under its leadership and licensure assumed the threat of penalization by state regulators or even forced closure if the pod violated state requirements. Nevertheless, the organization decided that the needs of children and families served by the learning pod outweighed these risks. The same was true for the church that offered their space to the pod and for the school district that entrusted a group of community organizers to support the learning and well-being of their students. Both groups assumed legal liability risks and the threat of public backlash if things went awry. In the words of the church pastor, the decision was simple: “It is clear that it is good for children to get as much education as possible ... Why would we not say yes immediately?” This sentiment highlights the importance of key community stakeholders not only accepting risk but prioritizing the good of the community above their own legitimate fears and concerns—a theme that ran through many of our interviews with organizers, volunteers, and community partners.

### *Multifaceted Benefits*

Participants discussed several benefits that the learning pod provided for attending children, particularly regarding safety, stability, and emotional support. The learning pod provided a space that became familiar for students as they navigated the challenges of online learning amidst the ongoing stressors associated with the pandemic. “I think it gave them a safe structured place to go every day. A routine, you know, to the extent that

we could.” This sense of safety transferred into the classrooms when students returned to in-person learning because they already knew some of their peers from the learning pod. “This helped them feel more comfortable socially in the classroom,” added one of the teachers we corresponded with following the closure of the pod. Emotional regulation and coping skills were also benefits that arose from offering a structure with embedded activities between online learning sessions. As one participant stated:

They’ve learned a lot about empathy, [about] their feelings and ... the social rules of the game—both the game, like as a metaphor, but the game as literally games and different ways of organized play in groups.

Other notable benefits for participating children included consistent adult supervision and informal mentorship opportunities. Volunteers implemented extracurricular activities, read to and with the children, and assisted with homework. Consequently, students developed a rapport with participating adults. As one participant stated, “Every time you get an opportunity to put forth new adults in front of a child to build relationships, there’s that great possibility that this could be the one that could turn their listening ears completely on.” Similarly, another participant spoke of the importance of children having “other caring people who are not family members” in their lives.

Skills for school preparedness was another benefit for children attending the learning pod. Participants noted the relevant skills that students learned at the pod, such as being safe in a pandemic (i.e., wearing a mask properly) and understanding school expectations. “Establishing and practicing routines (i.e., how to line up, how to enter and exit the pod, how to ask for help) from the start prepared students for re-entry into in-person schooling.” Our follow-up correspondence with the feeder school’s teachers supported these observations. One teacher commented that because of the pod, students were “familiar with some of the writing tasks and letter recognition games that were sent as part of learning packets that they completed with their tutors at the learning pod.” Moreover, they said that “having practice with the academic tasks in the learning pod led to students being more confident learners and being open to more challenging tasks when returning to in-person learning.” Another teacher mentioned, “I

saw improvement in their participation and work ethic due to the support they received in the pod.” Additionally, the teachers mentioned how the learning pod provided a sense of continuity where students would log in more regularly to virtual schooling while at the pod than when they were at home. This was due to access to a reliable internet connection and adult supervision by volunteers familiar with the online login process. In this way, participating students were able to experience a kind of “school outside of school” that offered much of the structured and emotional support that research suggests many children lacked during the pandemic (Cardullo et al., 2021; DeArmond et al., 2021; Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020).

Significantly, we found that the benefits of the learning pod extended far beyond the children who attended. The faculty, university students, and community members who created and staffed the learning pod highly valued the experience in their own right. The majority of those interviewed reported that the experience offered a respite from the isolation and inward focus of the pandemic as well as a much-needed sense of purpose and routine in the face of ubiquitous uncertainty and anxiety. Participants reflected on having a “sense of purpose” or feeling a “sense of community” from their time volunteering at the learning pod. Several involved (including representatives from participating community organizations) discussed how the learning pod symbolized a place to connect that “eased the fear of the unknown” while recognizing “the humanity in one another amidst an isolating and terrifying time.”

Further, the pod was a clear and tangible way to serve the community during a time of overwhelming suffering and need caused by the pandemic. Participants discussed the learning pod as an opportunity to address structural inequalities and a widening privilege gap in the local community. By providing a free option for families who did not have ready access to resources to create their own learning pod, the initiative helped level the playing field for students and families from marginalized backgrounds—which, in turn, would contribute to a more fair and just community in the long run.

Finally, multiple participants reflected on how benefits continued to arise even after the learning pod ended. Examples included volunteers receiving paid employment from community partners after the closure of the pod; children recognizing university students and faculty in the feeder school after they had returned to in-person schooling;

and community organizations beginning new collaborations that did not exist prior to the pod. The following statement exemplifies the continued collaborations as a result of this project:

[The childcare center director] didn’t know that she could ask for federal work-study students to come and contribute to the work that’s done here. So now she and I are working on getting more students in here. The center took this risk to cover us under their license, but the benefits that are coming back to them are this resource they didn’t know about through community service-learning.

These observations demonstrate the complex and multifaceted nature of the benefits flowing from the learning pod—not only for the students served, but for the organizers, volunteers, and community partners who were willing to take on the risk.

#### *Power and Privilege*

Because the learning pod had multiple stakeholders, questions about authority and decision-making were always in play. The school district, for example, provided financial support and permission for the pod to operate. The feeder school provided the online instruction and communicated with the families. The childcare facility, whose administrator adopted the learning pod under their license, oversaw the pod’s daily operations. And the educators who envisioned the project served as volunteers and worked to keep all the stakeholders connected. At times, the cooperative and multifaceted nature of the collaboration left unresolved questions of hierarchy and managerial responsibilities.

Multiple participants interviewed described the ambiguity from the lack of conventional structures and roles. “[T]his isn’t school, but it feels like school,” one participant shared. Another commented on feeling “a little intimidat[ed]” directing students and community volunteers that the participant deemed as “superiors.” This sentiment was expressed particularly about the university faculty volunteering at the learning pod. For some, the position of a university professor represented a higher level of privilege and power, regardless of whether these professors had any childcare expertise coming into the pod. Despite the experience of the hired part-time staff working with this age group, providing feedback and instruction to the university faculty felt uncomfortable for



some. More broadly, with so many stakeholders working together, one participant noted some communication challenges, stating, “We probably could be more clear about roles [with each other].”

Put differently, this was a space “betwixt and between” (Turner, 1974, p. 234). Not only was the pod operating outside the physical structures of any one stakeholder group but also beyond their sole control and oversight. Although transitional or liminal spaces provide opportunities for thinking outside the box and fostering new ways of knowing and doing, the uncertainty can at times cause frustration, confusion, and anxiety—themes that clearly emerged in participants’ descriptions of their experiences.

Despite the ambiguity of roles, no one mentioned outward conflict or tension between stakeholders. However, some participants noted frustration at the lack of presence of key partnering organizations—namely the feeder school. “I feel like we could have done so much more with a stronger partnership with the schools,” one participant stated, particularly referring to how communication occurred with families. The learning pod operated under the auspices of the childcare center and the feeder school, each maintaining power and feeling a sense of responsibility in overseeing the children, despite limited direct contact with each other. Participants often referenced this disconnect, particularly when trying to handle behavioral issues, absences (without knowing if they were COVID-related), or relaying general announcements of cancellations and reminders (from either party).

Other participants observed these ambiguities associated with liminal spaces, yet saw them as an opportunity rather than a limitation. They recognized the learning pod as a space that, by its creation in response to an ongoing crisis, lacked a traditional organizational structure. This absence of structure allowed for opportunities for stakeholders to operate outside of their “comfort zone” to ensure that students had a nurturing and safe space. The positional powers shifted in this time of flux, resulting in a new and valuable creation. As one participant noted, “I was able to help aid families in ways that directly met their needs that traditional structures could not.”

In addition to examining the positional power among stakeholders, many participants discussed ideas related to the intersection of diversity and privilege in this project. Participants noted the wider implications of the learning pod for a diverse and underserved community and the

learning pod’s ability to help “build trust” within the community across racial and ethnic lines. One participant summed up the support the learning pod extended to a community in need with a question: “Why do only the privileged kids get to have these pods?” The approach of the learning pod specifically helped to “mitigate the lack of privilege” that some families experienced. Another participant echoed this sentiment by saying, “None of [the] families were in the position to hire tutors or to bubble with other families and make their own little homeschool cooperatives ... that stuff just wasn’t going to happen.”

Participants also reflected on the lack of representation within the volunteer staff. One participant wished there had been more diversity among the staff so that attending BIPOC students realize that “they can also be a part of hope.” Another participant reflected on wanting to bring more “folks who live in the neighborhoods that we’re trying to serve to the table.” With a higher experience of trauma and trauma-related behaviors among students, another participant argued that volunteer staff who were predominantly monolingual, white, and highly educated may not have understood students’ behaviors in the context of their traumas, which were exacerbated amidst the pandemic.

## Discussion

Based on the findings above, our analysis of the learning pod suggests several lessons about the benefits and challenges of such an initiative, as well as insights for future university-community collaborations.

*Lesson 1: Participants were able to overcome obstacles and realize their objectives only by entering unfamiliar and inherently challenging liminal spaces.*

Bureaucratic red tape and institutional inertia were an inescapable fact of life for the organizers of the learning pod. Concerns about safety and liability on the part of the university frustrated efforts to utilize the full array of campus expertise and resources that could have set the project on firm footing from its inception. Moreover, for reasons related to privacy and licensure, the feeder school limited communications between the pod and the families it served. The resulting communication bottleneck prevented direct and regular contact between volunteers, staff, and families, making it difficult to build relationships and best serve the needs of attending children. These institutional

challenges slowed the early implementation of the pod and undercut efforts to foster reciprocity and sustainability with community members and partner organizations (Sandy & Holland, 2006).

However, these obstacles were not insurmountable. From start to finish, the organizing team found creative ways of bypassing, re-envisioning, re-grouping, and even accepting the multi-layered obstacles in order to continue moving forward. Tellingly, in one way or another, *all* of the participants we interviewed described acting *outside* the bounds of their formal institutional roles as collaborators in this initiative. Comments like, “This is not part of my job description” were a familiar refrain, as organizers and volunteers described stepping into uncomfortable “in-between” spaces to make the vision of the pod a reality. For the university faculty and staff involved in the project, this meant intentionally straddling the space between their role as representatives of the university and their role as citizens and community activists—often without the express consent or endorsement of their supervisors. Yet, this liminality was critical to the success of the initiative. Indeed, the project required multiple individuals and organizations to step out of established roles, take on risks, and rely on “humbly unlearning” routines and “fossilized practices” that had previously dictated what was possible (Herrera et al., 2020, p. 46). Had participants been unwilling to do so, the pod would have never existed.

That being said, this study also highlights the inherently challenging nature of working in the midst of such liminality. Although the pod operated on a regular schedule with planned activities and routines, it often felt chaotic and confusing as participants tried to sift through the details and dilemmas of each day. Traditional structures and ways of doing things were in flux. It was a kind of schooling, but not in the familiar school building, with adults who were acting as facilitators of online learning instead of teachers, at a time when in-person interactions were severely limited and even potentially dangerous. This reality caused anxiety and uncertainty, as daily life seemed unfamiliar, roles and responsibilities were unclear, and the path ahead was perpetually shifting.

*Lesson 2: The initiative succeeded because of participants’ deep ideological commitment to the work and their willingness to take risks in an extraordinary moment of urgent need.*

As interviewees reflected upon why they got involved in the project and why they persisted

despite the difficulties and personal risks they encountered, we heard a clear and consistent message: they believed in the importance of the work, and they were dedicated to addressing the injustices that unfairly impacted the children they were serving in spite of the potential negative consequences. From that place of earnest conviction, organizers and volunteers from many different backgrounds and stages of life leveraged their connections and resources in new and creative ways. This meant not only stepping out of their usual roles and stretching the boundaries of their formal responsibilities, but accepting personal and professional risks in order to support a project that they believed in deeply: a church gave over its sanctuary space to become an elementary classroom; an already overstretched community childcare center extended its license and shared its resources to make room for a group of K–2 children; a university CS-L office backed the initiative when other university officials opted out; teachers, students, faculty, and community volunteers gave freely of their time and talents to organize and staff the learning pod; and families entrusted their children to the care of this learning pod’s organizers and volunteers, most of whom they never had the opportunity to meet in person.

At least in part, this creative rethinking and reprioritization was likely a result of the pandemic itself. More often than not, routines are not questioned or re-envisioned until they are no longer an option. Due to the constraints of the pandemic, individuals, organizations, and communities were pushed to think beyond the paths of least resistance and reorder their priorities. It is often times of crisis and transition that foster meaningful conversations and new possibilities—as well as a reappraisal of the tensions between risk and reward. While participants in the pod understood that the risks of the work they were doing were real and ever-present, they willingly accepted them in a moment of crisis that brought clarity to what they valued and an opportunity to act on those beliefs.

*Lesson 3: The pod demonstrated the power, as well as the limitations, of temporary equity-focused community collaborations.*

This research speaks to the possibility and the power of equity-focused community collaborations in which stakeholders prioritize community needs and work earnestly toward the common good. Against the backdrop of a global pandemic and a growing educational crisis, our learning pod offers

an important counterexample to the kind of “risk-driven opportunity hoarding” (James, 2021, p. 100) that so often characterizes the unequal educational landscape in the U.S. Despite many obstacles, the learning pod demonstrates how a group of concerned community members can come together and take action to address social needs.

That being said, it is equally important to recognize the inherent limitations of this type of temporary, out-of-the-ordinary community initiative. Though the benefits for families and the community were real, and the interpersonal and symbolic impact of the project was meaningful and potentially long-lasting, the learning pod was ultimately a short-term fix, not a long-term solution to addressing educational inequalities that permeate the system beyond the pandemic. In the best of circumstances, it offered only an emergency stop-gap designed to prevent the already unacceptably large opportunity gap from growing even wider, rather than a pathway to substantive and lasting change. As such, it is essential to acknowledge the limits of such temporary solutions and to reiterate the need for systematic structural reforms that might begin to move us closer to equitable educational access for all.

*Lesson 4: The pod serves as a reminder of the university's responsibility to prioritize the public good when fostering university-community partnerships.*

As the world continues to adjust to the difficulties that have ensued as a result of COVID-19, there is a desire to return to normalcy both personally and collectively. The hum of pre-pandemic activity has largely returned to daily life, with businesses reopening, students returning to in-person classes, and familiar routines resurfacing. Yet, in returning to the familiar, it is imperative to reflect on lessons learned during this time of crisis, especially when thinking about university-community partnerships and the common good.

One of the persistent underlying questions motivating this study is: *What is the university's role in times of crisis?* In regards to our learning pod, the role of the university was minimal. Despite the CS-L office being a key hub in the volunteer and organizational networks that enabled the pod, the university never formally endorsed or supported the project. While the perceived legitimacy of the pod was aided by its association with the university due to the fact that many of us were university faculty, the practical viability of the

initiative depended mainly on small community organizations, dedicated leaders and volunteers, and a wellspring of social trust.

Liability concerns, however warranted, prevented the CoE from taking a risk and recognizing an opportunity to *work with* community partners in need of support. Universities across the country did step up, distributing essential items *to* communities and providing resources *for* various initiatives (Leckrone, 2020a; Leckrone, 2020b; Mahoney, 2020; Reimers, 2021). However, many of these well-managed initiatives occurred from a safe distance, limiting their potential to build social trust and foster real community-driven change—the kind of work that only occurs in liminal spaces where uncertainties and risks abound.

If the local university in this case would have gotten actively involved in the learning pod, the possibilities would have been seemingly endless. Indeed, the school district's hope was to open multiple community learning pods throughout the city mirroring this model—a hope that never came to fruition due to limited human and economic capital. Too often, bureaucratic policies meant to prevent potential harm end up preemptively limiting the potential for good. This situation is especially relevant to the field of university-community collaborations, where engagement policies tend to prioritize the self-preservation of the university to the point that they cannot contribute to the public good in a comprehensive and impactful way.

Extending this line of argumentation, scholarship on the history of higher education points to a troubling turn inward in the contemporary era, as universities become preoccupied with their own economic and organizational interests, rather than their larger purpose in society:

At the very moment when the idea of the university should be opening up, it seems to be closing in. ... What is striking about the conceptual journey, which the idea of the university has undergone in nearly one thousand years, is that it has gradually shrunk. Whereas the metaphysical university was associated with the largest themes of humanity's self-understanding and relationships with the world, the idea of the university has increasingly—and now especially in its contemporary and corporate incarnations—closed in. ...

Given the closing in on the idea of the university in the early part of the 21st century, a key question becomes this: How might the idea of the university be expanded? (Barnett, 2011, p. 88, as cited in Ling, 2020, p. 362)

Long after the conclusion of the pod, the relationships between stakeholders in this initiative have remained strong, with multiple conversations, projects, and future plans that have arisen as its offspring. Our hope is that this research will encourage university representatives to prioritize the public good and turn outward—to embrace and engage community partners in ways that are reciprocal, uncomfortable, and even risky. Further, we hope this piece validates the continual pivoting that CS-L faculty and staff do in order to navigate liminal spaces. In the end, the university at large, as well as the CoE, celebrated this project by presenting awards to various participating faculty. This paradigm shift occurred because CS-L staff found ways to share the successes of this project in reports, newsletters, meetings, and interdepartmental dialogue that perhaps will serve as rationale in the support of future projects that entail elements of risk.

## Conclusion

Through the power of creative thinking and social networking, our study details how educators and community stakeholders in one small southeastern city in the U.S. attempted to mitigate the worst effects of the COVID-19 pandemic for early elementary students, by creating and implementing a free, full-time, volunteer-led community learning pod. By accepting risk, occupying uncomfortable liminal spaces, and leveraging informal networks of trust and reciprocity, the organizers of the learning pod overcame the forces of institutional inertia and fear of liability that so often stymie efforts to meet emergent community needs with meaningful and timely solutions.

More broadly, this study highlights the need to reimagine the parameters of university-community engagement in times of crisis. While universities across the U.S. espouse their commitment to civic engagement and social responsibility principles, the barriers to effective and timely action in risk-prone environments like a global pandemic are steep and multifaceted. Nevertheless, effective community partnerships remain possible even in the most

unfavorable circumstances—if stakeholders are willing to work outside the bounds of conventional roles and practices, and assume calculated risks for the good of the community. Community engagement, like the university itself, is not derived from offices, policies, or rhetoric; rather, it is about people, networks, and creative collaborations that transcend physical spaces and established ways of knowing and doing.

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