

CU Engage Response Re Recommendations for Public Engagement and Scholarship

Ben Kirshner, Roudy Hildreth, Melissa Rubin, Kira Pasquesi, Sabrina Sideris, Jennifer Ciplet,
Manuela Sifuentes

CU Engage is excited to see the Academic Futures report's focus on strengthening CU Boulder's public mission through public scholarship, interdisciplinary teaching, and community engagement learning opportunities. The authors make a convincing case for the interdependence of public engagement and inclusive excellence.

Our purpose in this response is to draw on CU Engage's lessons learned to suggest ways to link more explicitly the report's public engagement framing with the project recommendations. As the initiative moves into its next phase, it will be important that implementation reflects ongoing commitments to ethical, reciprocal and collaborative community engagement. Without such commitments, service learning can unwittingly serve the interests of university students without addressing the challenges that give rise to the need for service. There is also risk of reproducing a pattern of university outreach that in many places has been extractive, particularly in communities of color.

Fortunately, CU Boulder is poised to realize the best traditions of community-engaged work: developed with (not for) partners, focused on complex challenges, advancing diversity and inclusion, and beneficial to multiple publics in and outside of the university. Several units on campus, in addition to [CU Engage](#), play important roles in this work, including the Office of Outreach and Engagement, Center for Communication and Democratic Engagement, Metro Lab, CEDaR, Engineers without Borders, Volunteer Resource Center, among others. Below we develop these ideas with regard to two recommendations in the report.

Project 1, Recommendation 2 (p. 11) ("The schools and colleges should make available...")

Based on our experiences, we think this recommendation is within reach, but calls for intentional design principles that guide planning and implementation. These include:

- **Equity and reciprocity with partner agencies:** What role can community partners play in crafting the purpose and roles for student engagement? What mechanisms might enable coordination across university departments? Might there be ways to think creatively about physical space, such that CU eventually develops satellite offices or meeting spaces in the communities where we form long-term partnerships?
- **Evaluation and feedback:** Community engagement is challenging to organize and difficult to assess. Merely matching students with opportunities to carry out service learning is no guarantee of a deep or engaging learning experience. Fortunately, there is a body of expertise around evaluating both student learning and community impact, but this must be integrated into the design.
- **Developmental approach:** We have found it useful to distinguish between entry-level opportunities for students, which are more structured and scaffolded, and capstone experiences, which are more student-driven and open-ended. As CU continues to

expand online and distance learning, it will be important to consider how to design for course-based public engagement under these conditions (e.g., not place-based). It is possible, but it calls for new kinds of design thinking and digital tools.

- **Recruitment and retention for equity and inclusion:** Community engagement has the potential for multiple positive feedback loops that support diversity, equity, and inclusion. Partnerships with under-represented communities, for example, heighten the chance that students from those communities form connections to CU Boulder and feel more welcome here. When CU students can advance their academic progress through valued public work in neighborhoods or schools where they grew up, they find meaning and relevance in their education.

Project 2: Recommendation #1 (p. 12) (“Dramatically increase campus support for...”)

Interdisciplinarity goes hand in hand with efforts to address public challenges, which are by definition complex, layered, and relevant to multiple types of disciplinary expertise. We endorse the major recommendations, but would like to extend them in one important way, by emphasizing the important role of communities of practice, which are spaces and processes where people learn from each other, foster community across difference, and develop identities as interdisciplinary teachers and scholars.

CU Engage’s Faculty Fellows program, for example, invites faculty from across campus to propose a new or re-designed course that integrates community engagement into its design. Our evaluations find the most powerful outcomes for faculty come from being part of a cohort. They not only gain important insights, but also develop an ongoing community dedicated to excellence in engaged pedagogy.

A second example of an interdisciplinary community of practice is the Graduate Fellowship in Community-Based Research. This fellowship is designed to enable emerging scholars to build strong academic careers while working on public issues in partnership with community groups. Participants report that it has been valuable to connect with graduate students from across disciplines and see the ways their projects are both discipline-specific and grapple with dilemmas that span disciplines. Moreover, the public recognition of the fellowship enables CBR fellows to craft a professional identity that connects them to a growing professional community in the U.S. that spans many fields and offers new career pathways.

Finally, with regard to developing and sustaining robust interdisciplinary communities of practice, this recommendation offers a unique opportunity to recognize, invite, and learn from the knowledge and expertise held by residents, activists, educators and others working on public issues outside of the university. Interdisciplinary communities of practice are greatly enhanced, when appropriate, with the participation of community partners. Elevating the roles of community members, such as by co-teaching courses and co-designing research questions, enhances the quality and impact of our shared work and deepens university-community connections.