Engaging Feminism, Transforming Institutions: How Community Engagement Professionals Employ Critical Feminist Praxis to Re-Imagine and Re-Shape the Public Purpose of Higher Education

Patricia Star Plaxton-Moore

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Engaging Feminism, Transforming Institutions: How Community Engagement Professionals Employ Critical Feminist Praxis to Re-Imagine and Re-Shape the Public Purpose of Higher Education

A Dissertation Presented to The Faculty of the School of Education Department of Leadership Studies Organization and Leadership Program

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education

By Patricia Star Plaxton-Moore San Francisco May 2021
ABSTRACT

Most higher education institutions have mission statements articulating a commitment to serve the public good, and venerate the broader historical project of higher education as a force that improves the lives of individuals and communities. However, the public purpose of higher education is perpetually embattled by intersecting forces of neoliberalism, positivism, and settler colonialism that emphasize priorities like generating revenue, chasing prestige, developing real estate, and connecting students with high paying careers. As our society continues to grapple with pervasive social and environmental injustices, it is imperative that we clarify and strengthen higher education’s civic role in shaping a more just and sustainable world. One manifestation of higher education’s public purpose is community engagement, an umbrella term for ways in which colleges and universities participate in mutually beneficial partnerships and activities with communities to leverage resources for the public good and provide contextualized learning experiences for students. Community engagement practices have the power to transform our institutions and communities, or serve as performative gestures that undermine true accountability to community. This qualitative grounded theory study elucidates how community engagement professionals (CEPs) employ critical feminist praxis to play an integral role in re-imagining and re-shaping the public purpose of higher education to be more authentic and impactful. Through purposive sampling, and in alignment with principles of critical feminist methodology and participatory action research, seven CEPs were selected to participate in individual
interviews and co-visioning conversations with their community partners. Thematic analysis of interview transcripts and observations illuminated a meta-theme of critical feminism as an aspirational praxis, six deductive thematic findings aligned with the elements of Adrienne Maree Brown’s (2017) Emergent Strategy framework, and four additional themes of mentorship, intersectional power analysis, disrupting the status quo, and reverence for community wisdom. Findings served as the foundation for a new conceptual framework, the *Ecosystem of Critical Feminist Praxis for Community Engagement Professionals*. The framework has implications for CEP professional development programming, CEP practice, and future research and scholarship in the community engagement field.

Keywords: community engagement, community-engaged learning, community engagement professional, feminism, critical feminism, feminist, feminist praxis, higher education, public purpose
This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate’s dissertation
committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to
and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research
methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my dream team: Andrew, Jackson, and Stella. Your generosity, patience, and encouragement over the past five and a half years have allowed me to achieve this goal. To my children, may you always stay curious and pursue the life of the mind. You have the power and responsibility to use your intellectual endeavors to change our world for the better.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

For fifteen years, I have worked at an urban Jesuit university where the term social justice permeates vision statements, learning outcomes, and daily discourses around campus. Some would argue that the term is overused and misused, describing everything from year-long living-learning communities focused on racial equity to one-off beach cleanups. However, I also argue that the sheer pervasiveness of the term “social justice” reflects institutional and individual commitments and aspirations toward achieving a more humane and just world. In general, faculty, staff, and students are drawn to our university to contribute to this vision of advancing social justice. Thus, it’s been an amazingly supportive institution in which to do the work of community engagement. And yet, our institution is subject to the same cultural, political, and social forces that shape all of higher education. Because of this, there’s an ongoing tension between striving toward our social justice aspirations while also competing for students, funding, and accolades with other universities in a neoliberal higher education marketplace. It is within this context that I share a story of my own professional journey in advancing a social justice-oriented approach to community engagement.

In fall 2019, the university moved from a service-learning requirement to a community-engaged learning requirement for all undergraduate students. The change was not just a shift in terminology, but also in paradigm, and was meant to make our community-engaged courses more accountable to community, effective at building students’ civic capacities and commitments, and critical of institutional and systemic power dynamics and savior narratives. This was a huge win that grew out of a five-year movement led primarily by myself and a colleague at the university’s public service
center, and involving several faculty and administrator champions. Our movement grew out of shared values of social justice, solidarity, civic participation, and community accountability. We felt an imperative to improve our practice in light of a growing body of critical scholarship on service-learning, and in response to our own observations of the shortcomings of university-community engagement compared to our visions of what was possible. Together we conducted research, made proposals, created policies and assessment tools, and educated peers.

Reflecting back on the process that led to this transition, I can identify some important strategies that moved it forward. The first strategy was building a critical mass of faculty and administrators who believed in a more critical approach to community engagement. In this way, my approach embodied principles of fractals and decentralization put forth by adrienne maree brown (2017). Fractals describe how the accumulation of small scale changes facilitate large scale change. Decentralization describes how dispersing power across multiple people can contribute to advancing a shared purpose and vision for the group. In my role at the public service center, I offer an annual faculty fellowship on community-engaged teaching and learning, along with individual consultations, workshops, and a book club. Over the years, more than 100 faculty have participated in the fellowship (slightly more than half were women), with many more opting into our other professional development offerings. Some of these faculty went on to become administrators, and have been crucial champions of our work at the institutional level. In addition to building individual capacities to teach community-engaged courses, our professional development offerings also built a collective commitment to shaping our institution to be more authentically community-engaged. We
also cultivated community, bringing engaged and enthusiastic faculty and administrators together to share successes and challenges, offer support and (friendly) critique, and generate ideas.

Another integral component of our approach was to draw on scholarship in the field of community engagement and investigation of peer and aspirational institution practices to root our movement in a broader context. This strategy was inspired by adrienne maree brown’s (2017) principle of intentional adaptation: making calculated changes that allow an organization to thrive in a changing environment. Our proposed changes reflected attention to what was happening in our field, allowing the innovative and aspirational work of other institutions to inspire our visioning for a new direction. This lent our efforts great legitimacy, particularly with administrators and faculty who weren’t already familiar with, or bought into, community-engaged learning. In some ways, this was an extension of our education efforts, but it was more about demonstrating that the changes we were recommending came from valid and reliable sources. This came in handy during our “traveling road show,” during which we presented our (evolving) proposal to the provost’s council, the councils of each college and school, academic departments, and individual skeptics. These presentations were framed as opportunities for constituents to offer questions and feedback, which we considered and integrated into the final proposal, when appropriate.

The timing of our endeavor was also critically important. We took advantage of the institution’s forthcoming accreditation process to catalyze our movement. It was a time when administrators, in particular, were seeking willing and enthusiastic faculty and staff to lead assessment initiatives. We were able to frame our proposed change from
service-learning to community-engaged learning as a transition to practices and learning outcomes that would be easier to assess. Also, community engagement is an integral part of our university’s identity as a faith-based institution, so administrators were keen to showcase both our existing promising practices and our efforts to iterate and improve. This effort aligned with adrienne maree brown’s (2017) principle of creating more possibilities, which calls us to see challenging situations or the constraints generated by external forces as opportunities to make positive change and open new paths toward achieving our visions.

The process of transitioning from service-learning to community-engaged learning was not without challenges. As I mentioned before, our institution is not immune to the neoliberal pressures of allowing student demand to dictate program changes and innovations (Lincoln, 2018). Nor have we fully embraced, and equitably valued, diverse epistemologies and research methodologies that do not fit into our legacy of positivist traditions (Grande, 2018). Further, as a model of “loosely coupled” institutions where component parts are siloed and operate with some level of autonomy (Weick, 1976), higher education is notoriously resistant to rapid or radical changes. These broader cultural forces imbricated in higher education shaped our process, even at a university where the vision and values aligned with the change. It took five years of active struggle. We had to deal with a vocal minority of faculty who felt very threatened by the changes, and maneuver through institutional change policies and processes that were being created on the fly. The work was messy and frustrating, but gratifying.

I share this vignette to illustrate the potential for Community Engagement Professionals (CEPs) to act as institutional change agents. Mobilizing our competencies,
relationships, and strategic interventions can allow us to transform our institutions toward a more authentic public purpose (Dostilio & Perry, 2017; Hubler & Quan, 2017). I also honor that we do this work with allies and community partners who contribute to a shared vision of what higher education could look like if it authentically fulfills its public purpose. This dissertation illuminates how CEPs employ critical feminist praxis to build movements that transform their institutions while also shaping the field of higher education community engagement.

Statement of Problem

The essence of the community engagement professional’s role is to engage faculty, students, and staff in meaningful and mutually beneficial relationships that address community-identified priorities and foster deep learning about self, community, and social (in)justice (Dostilio & Perry, 2017). The work of CEPs is often minimized, misunderstood, co-opted, and undermined by higher education institutions that are increasingly driven by profits and prestige. While CEP roles have proliferated at institutions in an effort to better coordinate the myriad engagement activities happening across campuses, their work remains on the margins, lifted up mainly for the purpose of refuting bad public relations or competing for honorifics. Universities use community engagement to elevate their reputations as good institutional citizens, often co-opting and perverting the work of authentically engaged faculty and students to portray reductive narratives about serving, helping, and fixing others. Yet research proves that community-engaged learning (also called service-learning) is a high impact practice that develops students’ academic and civic competencies (Astin et al, 2006; Kuh, 2008; Mitchell, 2015; Saltmarsh, 2005). Further, there is a body of literature that illuminates the benefits and
value that community partners gain from community-engaged learning, ranging from fulfilling a direct need for program support to strengthening organizational capacity to developing students as advocates and future employees, volunteers, or donors (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Sandy, 2007;). In other words, when this work is done well, it helps higher education institutions achieve what they claim to aspire to in their mission statements: producing well-rounded graduates and contributing to the public good.

Nevertheless, a further source of marginalization for community engagement is the siloed and positivist nature of academic culture. Senior faculty and administrators typically discourage new faculty from doing community-engaged teaching and research, warning that this work will not count toward their tenure and promotion the way “pure” research and traditional teaching will (Eatman et al., 2018; Meyers, 2018; O’Meara et al., 2011). Faculty who commit to this work in spite of the risks may find themselves isolated and frustrated, trying to sustain their efforts to maintain community partnerships, develop experiential learning opportunities, and demonstrate accountability for community-identified deliverables (Russell-Stamp, 2015; Wade & Demb, 2009). Without individual persistence and collective support to guide engagement, it is hard to do the work with integrity and consistency. The scope of the work necessarily remains small or, if it expands, becomes shallow because it is done by individuals in silos.

It is in this climate that community engagement professionals (CEPs) like myself strive to reclaim and reimagine the public purpose of higher education through advancing community-engaged teaching and scholarship. Like faculty, we find this work can be lonely, rife with complexities, prone to causing harm, and subject to co-optation by the university marketing machine if it is not undertaken with an explicit agenda to transform
students, our institutions, and our communities to be more equitable and socially just. Many CEPs draw on bodies of theory in the fields of education, social change, institutional organization, and leadership to inform our practices and visions. I assert that critical feminist theories are also crucial to advancing our visions for community engagement to move our institutions away from neoliberalism, corporatization, and positivist normativity and toward epistemic equity, community accountability, and social justice.

**Background and Need**

Higher education scholars have written much about the influences of neoliberal, positivist, and corporate ideologies on the culture and practice of academia (Harkavy, 2006; Lincoln, 2018; Trujillo, 2014). Their confluence shapes everything at universities from student recruitment to faculty tenure and promotion to land use. Coupled with legacies of settler colonialism, imperialism, exploitive research practices, and epistemicide, one could argue that higher education functions more to oppress, extract, marginalize, and co-opt community rather than advance the public good.

Though institutions of higher education in the United States were originally created to serve the public good, forces of neoliberalism, corporatization, and positivism have eroded this commitment, guiding students to focus almost exclusively on professional advancement, signaling to communities that working for their betterment is not a profitable or worthy endeavor, and driving research that (at best) lacks relevance to our daily lives and (at worst) exploits our most vulnerable populations. To be fair, higher education’s commitment to the public good has waxed and waned across historical eras, but we are currently in a time when the value of universities is judged by their tuition
revenues, endowments, grant awards, research publications, and brand awareness (Chomsky & Spooner, 2018; Harkavy, 2006). With these as indicators of success, high impact practices like community-engaged learning and socially relevant scholarship of engagement are relegated to the margins of the academy.

However, critical pedagogues, philosophers, and theorists persist in extolling the value of education as a liberating force. More specifically, they argue that learners can free their minds from oppressive ideologies and work collectively to advance a more just and equitable world through intentional educational interventions (Freire, 2018; Grande, 2018; Hall, 2018; hooks, 2003). To be clear, such educational experiences must be designed explicitly to liberate, integrating principles like democratic learning, problem-posing, praxis, etc. Scholars argue that critical feminist theory can be employed to shape educational methodology as well (Belenky et al., 1986; de Saxe, 2012; hooks, 2015). While liberatory education has primarily evolved outside of traditional academic spaces, teachers and scholars within the academy have figured out ways of adapting, extending, and applying it in their classes. One specific adaptation of critical pedagogy is community-engaged learning; and the principles that guide this pedagogy align significantly with critical feminist theory.

Most scholarship on community-engaged learning has emerged in the last 30 years and uses the term, “service-learning” to describe experiences whereby students take academic courses that integrate activities or projects that allow them to engage in meaningful work alongside people who are facilitating positive change in the community. For the purposes of this study, I consistently use the term “community-engaged learning” to reflect a considered rejection of the implications of the term “service” in the context of
advancing an equity and social justice oriented approach to higher education community engagement. Terminology notwithstanding, there is a rich body of literature on the practices of community-engaged learning (and campus-community engagement more broadly) that provides origins, principles, practices, critiques, studies, and aspirations (Dolgon et al., 2017; Welch, 2016). Healthy debates emerge from the interplay between scholarship and practice around issues of partnership reciprocity, solidarity versus charity projects, student voice, and assessment of learning. However, there is a dearth of scholarship about how critical feminist theory influences higher education community engagement. Existing scholarship seems to focus primarily on how feminist theory and praxis shape community-engaged faculty members’ teaching and research. Some scholars have also explored how feminism can function as a guide for community-campus engagement more broadly, but do not situate community engagement professionals as agents who can integrate and deploy feminist praxis as a means of moving universities toward more social justice-oriented community engagement.

To fill this gap, I seek to enhance the body of literature on intersections of community engagement and critical feminism by studying how community engagement professionals (CEPs) infuse and enact critical feminist praxis in their work as leaders who synthesize and catalyze efforts to advance a social-justice oriented agenda in higher education through community engagement. Scholarship on CEPs as a group is still emerging, but there are a few foundational publications written in the past 7-10 years that illuminate the various roles and responsibilities of CEPs (Benenson, Hemer, & Trebil, 2017; Chamberlain & Phelps-Hillen, 2017; Dostilio & McReynolds, 2015; Dostilio & Perry, 2017; Farmer-Hanson, 2017; Martin & Crossland, 2017; Weaver & Tate-Kellogg,
Extant literature primarily describes necessary competencies and situational roles that CEPs might inhabit to “institutionalize” community engagement. We know little yet about the breadth of theoretical underpinnings that guide their understanding of higher education community engagement, conception of their institutional roles, and implementation of their relational and operational practices. Specifically, it is unclear to what extent critical feminist theory shapes the work of CEPs.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

Critical feminism, at its root, is a movement to liberate women, and all people, from patriarchy, sexism, misogyny and intersecting forms of identity-based oppression by transforming individuals, institutions, systems, and cultures. Unlike mainstream (White) feminism, critical feminism uses intersectional analysis to understand and address how multiple interlocking systems of oppression based in ideologies like racism, classism, heterosexism, ableism, etc. compound violence and marginalization of people with diverse identities. Critical feminism recognizes the need to center the most marginalized women’s perspectives to guide acts of resistance and solidarity at the individual, interpersonal, institutional, and systemic levels. Critical feminism rejects the goal of achieving access to power for women within existing power structures. Rather, it seeks to transform the distribution of power in order to achieve equity and justice for all people. Transformation requires identifying injustices; disrupting the status quo; building coalitions to build power; advancing common justice-oriented agendas; theorizing and enacting change strategies; honoring and accounting for the distinct and unique experiences, needs, and priorities of diverse women; and co-visioning a more just and equitable world. This description of critical feminism is an amalgam of theories and
principles advanced by feminists of color, including Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Kimberle Crenshaw, Sara Ahmed, and adrienne maree brown. For the purpose of this study, critical feminist theories inform my literature review, research design, selection of participants, data collection, and analysis of findings.

I use one particular framework within critical feminist theory, *Emergent Strategy* (2017) by adrienne maree brown, as the primary frame of inquiry. Emergent strategy asserts that social change happens through enactment of multiple intersecting elements that parallel principles shaping the natural world:

- **Fractals**: Patterns that repeat at small and large scales in nature; practices and habits that individuals enact in their daily lives can set patterns for whole social systems

- **Adaptation**: Organisms change in specific ways in response to their environment to be able to continue living and perpetuating; individuals and movements have to be open to changing tactics and strategies while staying true to their purpose

- **Interdependence and Decentralization**: organisms are in relationships of mutual reliance on each other (interdependence) and power and operations within an ecosystem are distributed across multiple organisms (decentralization); social movements require reciprocal relationships, shared leadership, and distribution of power and responsibilities among participants

- **Nonlinear and Iterative**: organisms and natural processes often progress erratically and/or cyclically (nonlinear) and through repetition with slight variations (iterative); individuals and movements progress along pathways that
are wrought with detours, double-backs, accelerations, and forks in the road but repeating grounding practices and actions can help to stay the course

- **Resilience**: Nature regenerates and heals itself in the wake of destruction; people and movements demonstrate strength and persistence in the face of challenges and defeats

- **Creating more possibilities**: the biodiversity of the natural world allows for infinite scenarios to play out; movements thrive on collective visioning that makes space for multiple futures to become reality

I contend that critical feminist CEPs’ efforts to move higher education institutions toward a social justice agenda for community engagement incorporate these elements, even if they are not intentionally, consciously, and explicitly invoked by CEPs. Using brown’s framework as a tool to shape my research format, questions, and analysis, I advance a conceptual framework that situates CEP praxis in the context of broader institutions and forces; and identifies the roots, embodiments, and aspirations of this praxis for critical feminist professionals.

**Purpose of Study**

This grounded theory study illuminates how community engagement professionals consciously infuse critical feminist praxis into 1) understanding their identities and roles within the institution, 2) practicing community engagement, and 3) cultivating and sustaining relationships with community-engaged constituencies. I draw on interviews with CEPs, and observations from a collaborative visioning project between CEPs and community partners who they have identified as crucial in supporting their work. My purpose is to examine how integration of critical feminist praxis into
higher education community engagement fosters roles, relationships, and practices that authentically advance the public purpose of higher education.

Through this study, I illuminate the value of critical feminist praxis in influencing how CEPs understand the field of community engagement, situate themselves within the field and institution, implement policies and practices, and engage in relationships to advance social justice-oriented community engagement as a means of reclaiming and re-envisioning the public purpose of higher education.

**Research Questions**

The research questions below reflect an effort to elucidate the complex contexts, understandings, actions, relationships, and aspirations that shape, and are shaped by, critical feminist community engagement professionals (CEPs) in their efforts to re-imagine and transform the public purpose of higher education.

- What critical feminist principles and theories guide community engagement professionals (CEPs) in their work?
- How do critical feminist CEPs understand the relationship between community engagement and higher education?
- How do critical feminist CEPs define their roles and responsibilities within their institutions and the broader community?
- How do critical feminist principles and theories guide the practices and policies developed by CEPs? Specifically, how do CEPs collaborate with community partners?
• How do critical feminist CEPs envision the ideal community-engaged institution? In what ways does that vision reflect the collective aspirations of community partners?

• What theories or strategies for institutional change do critical feminist CEPs employ to work toward their vision?

**Limitations**

This study is focused on the role and impact of CEPs in advancing a social justice orientation to higher education community engagement. Thus, its relevance is limited to CEPs and administrators who desire to envision and implement this type of community engagement. Further, the small sample of participants and qualitative interview methods mean that findings cannot be certain to be generalizable. However, the themes and recommendations are worthy of consideration for the purpose of guiding practice and shaping programming and partnerships.

All aspects of the study were shaped by this author’s positionality as a critical feminist, educational leader, and community engagement professional. The problem, purpose, research questions, literature review, selection of theoretical and conceptual frameworks, criteria for identifying participants, interview protocols, and analysis were influenced by my own learning within this doctoral program, my recent scholarship activities, and 15 years of experience in higher education community engagement.

**Educational Significance**

In the midst of a national higher education culture that prioritizes neoliberal and positivist ideologies, it is imperative for people across roles within academia and beyond
to organize and advance a vision of higher education that advances social justice and the public good. Community-engaged practices and programs are a strong and promising vehicle for catalyzing positive change, if they are developed strategically and collaboratively. The purpose of this study is to highlight and honor the power of critical feminist community engagement professionals as community-weavers, activists, and changemakers. By illuminating and analyzing multiple components of their praxis, I offer up a critical feminist conceptual framework for current and future practitioners who are committed to transforming higher education.

I intend to share findings from this study with several professional associations focused on higher education community engagement to ensure that it will have an impact on our field. As a board member of the International Association of Research on Service Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE), I will use this study to guide my participation in setting the association’s agenda and professional development programming. Further, as a long-time participant in Campus Compact, a consortium of higher education institutions dedicated to a public purpose, I will offer up my framework and findings to be integrated into their micro-credentialing program for community engagement professionals. Further, I intend to present and publish aspects of this study at local, regional, national, and international conferences.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

As a community engagement professional, I have made a point of being immersed in the literature on community engagement since I started in this field. I have used the literature to design and implement curriculum for undergraduate and graduate courses, and professional development programs for faculty, staff, and community partners. I have published scholarship based on research and my own experiences of guiding a higher education institution to fulfill its public purpose (see Donahue & Plaxton-Moore, 2018; Plaxton-Moore et al, 2018; Welch & Plaxton-Moore, 2017; Welch & Plaxton-Moore, 2019). However, it wasn’t until I joined my doctoral program that I was introduced to critical feminist theory. The scholarship on critical feminism gave me the language and frameworks for the professional practices, commitments, and relationships I was already implementing, but it also sharpened my praxis and made it more intentional. The connections between critical feminism and community engagement were exciting and organic for me, but as I have endeavored to study the literature that combines them, I have found a significant gap. Specifically, research and scholarship on the relationship between feminist theory and community engagement focuses almost entirely on how community-engaged faculty integrate feminism into their teaching and research. There is also some analysis of how feminist principles and theories shape community-campus engagement. However, I could not find any literature that integrates critical feminist praxis into how CEPs advance the public purpose of higher education. I believe that exploring this line of inquiry through my dissertation can illuminate more intentional theories and practices for CEPs to employ in their efforts to reimagine and reshape how their institutions advance the public good.
This study is situated within the historical trajectory and contemporary context of higher education community engagement where community engagement professionals (CEPs) have recently carved out a niche. Scholarship produced in the past five years indicates that CEPs play essential and diverse roles in guiding, overseeing, coordinating, and/or supporting institutions’ community-engaged work, leveraging a range of competencies and fostering myriad relationships with constituencies across campus and in community (Dostilio & McReynolds, 2015; Dostilio & Perry, 2017; Farmer-Hansen, 2017; Hernandez & Pasquesi, 2017; Hubler & Quan, 2017; Weaver & Kellogg, 2017). Based on fifteen years of experience as a CEP and my own scholarly journey, I assert that the most effective CEPs infuse critical feminist theories, epistemologies, and practices into their work, knowingly or unknowingly, to advance the transformation of higher education toward an authentic realization of its public purpose. Thus, this literature review also includes scholarship on critical feminist theory and praxis, drawing from the work of historical and contemporary feminist scholars and activists. It concludes with a brief overview of scholarship that integrates feminist theory into community engagement, highlighting seeds of possibility but also the limited nature of how feminism currently shapes the field.

**History and Contemporary Context of Higher Education Community Engagement**

The most widely used definition of higher education community engagement comes from the Carnegie Foundation, which describes it as “a collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in the context of partnership and reciprocity” (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of
Giles (2008) describes this term as a “big tent” under which we might include a range of activities, initiatives, and commitments like public scholarship, community-engaged learning, anchor institution initiatives, place-based partnerships, community-based research, collaborative programming and events, locally owned vendor preference programs, and resource sharing. Each institution creates its own amalgam of these activities to live into its proclaimed public purpose. Additionally organizations and associations including Campus Compact, Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU), Engaged Scholarship Consortium, and International Association on Research of Service-Learning and Community Engagement function to bring cohesion and cross-pollination in the field. In this section, I trace the historical roots of higher education community engagement, honor the contributions and legacies of significant scholars, and describe a snapshot of contemporary community engagement endeavors.

**Historical timeline of the public purpose of higher education**

Harkavy (2015) describes the origins of American higher education as being entwined with the United States’ founding fathers’ (e.g. Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, etc.) desires for a participatory democracy, whereby informed and engaged citizens participate in activities that promote and sustain democratic governance. There was agreement among early founders that higher education should serve the public good, but diversity in the foundational ideologies that drove this aspiration. Some institutions were driven by religious traditions while others integrated values emanating from the Enlightenment. The social missions of these institutions were central in influencing development of the curriculum, research and teaching practices, and relationships with the surrounding community.
As the United States expanded across the continent, colonizing new territories and creating urban centers, so too did higher education. Scholars often point to the Morrill Act of 1862 as an early indicator of the US government’s commitment to situating colleges and universities as purveyors of public good (Fitzgerald et al, 2012; Harkavy, 2015; National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012; O’Meara & Jaeger, 2006). The Morrill Act established land grant institutions that were meant to advance US society by producing teaching and research that could be applied to improving our mechanical, agricultural, and military prospects. It’s important to note that several critical scholars point to the Morrill Act as a tool of settler colonialism, taking land from indigenous communities in order to build these land grant institutions to serve the advancement of White farmers and industrialists (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014; Stein, 2020).

Indeed, the Morrill Act has a complicated history and legacy, but it is often cited as a watershed moment in the history of higher education community engagement, so it is included here along with notes on the arguments for its benefits and harms. The late nineteenth century also saw proliferation of urban research institutions like Johns Hopkins and University of Chicago. These institutions were lauded for proliferating democratic ideals and serving the needs of their cities by teaching generations of public servants and business leaders, while also producing research to influence public policy and economic development (Harkavy, 2015; National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012; O’Meara & Jaeger, 2006).

However, these institutions also have a history of conducting exploitive research on vulnerable communities, and influencing urban resource allocation to benefit their interests at the expense of low income communities of color, muddying the often
nostalgic and oversimplified reverence for their legacies (Cone & Payne, 2002). As we can see, contemporary scholars assert strong critiques of the tidy positive linear narrative of the early public purpose of higher education in the United States. Indeed, our history is rife with examples of incongruities between the espoused public purpose of higher education and the enactment of practices and policies that have harmed the most vulnerable members of our society.

The next broad era of higher education extends from the first World War into the early 1960’s when higher education deprioritized its commitment to educating engaged citizens as a means of advancing democracy. Rather, institutions became committed to safeguarding democracy from foreign interference, advancing the United States’ wartime powers by investing more in scientific research and education. Relatedly, the focus of curricula and research agendas moved from local to global concerns; and the call to action was to innovate and produce technologies that would help us win wars and maintain global supremacy (Fitzgerald et al, 2012; Harkavy, 2015, National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012).

The pendulum slowly swung back in the direction of local engagement and democratic education in the mid-1960s when the federal government and newly established charitable foundations allocated funds to colleges and universities for local renewal projects. Early on, this funding inspired institutions to do little more than symbolic activities to fulfill their public purpose, but as social stratification and issues of poverty and violence grew in the 70’s and 80’s as a result of neoliberal public policy shifts, higher education leaders began to take their institutions’ roles as purveyors of the public good more seriously (Harkavy, 2015; National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012).
Democratic Engagement, 2012). It was in the 1980’s that the pedagogy of service-learning emerged as a distinctive practice meant to develop students as citizens and directly support community efforts to enact positive change. Faculty and administrators who championed this work came together to form professional associations, including the Campus Outreach Opportunity League in 1984 and National Campus Compact in 1985 (Bocci, 2015). These organizations served to elevate the legitimacy, and clarify the principles and practices, of higher education community engagement. In the decades since, colleges and universities have developed professional positions and offices to coordinate and steward community engagement. Before discussing the contemporary landscape of higher education community engagement, I want to focus on other crucial, and often overlooked, roots of higher education community engagement.

**Historical roots of higher education community engagement**

While higher education has a muddy and contested history of waxing and waning in its commitment to the public good, community engagement has always been embedded to some degree in colleges and universities, even when that embeddedness has been somewhat controversial and covert. Indeed, we see roots of higher education community engagement in historically Black colleges and universities (HIsloaneUs) and faith-based institutions; in the practical fields of education, social work, and health; as well as in the interdisciplinary liberal arts fields of ethnic studies and women’s studies. I have included the examples below to illuminate the often forgotten or dismissed lineage of community engagement. They demonstrate crucial roots that contribute to how higher education has been incubating and innovating community engagement over time, and I
believe they should more explicitly guide the field of community engagement moving forward.

The original purpose of historically Black colleges and universities (HSloaneUs) was to elevate and celebrate Black identity, cultivate strong communities, and foster political activism to affect change (Bocci, 2015; Daniels et al, 2017). While policymakers saw these institutions as preferred alternatives to integrating historically White institutions, educators and students at HSloaneU’s leveraged the opportunity for these institutions to become hubs for advancement of Black epistemologies and ontologies inside and outside of the academy. The commitment to a public purpose grew out of both a moral code that emphasizes the necessity of giving back to one’s community; and a recognition of the systematic exclusion of Black people from access to education, resources, and services needed to thrive in the US society and economy. Thus, HSloaneUs prioritize providing an education that will not only advance the prospects for individual Black students, but also lift up the Black community through mutually beneficial partnerships. They are a paradigm of what highly integrated and authentic community engagement can look like.

Similarly, faith-based higher education institutions draw upon religious teachings as imperatives for motivating community engagement and social justice-oriented initiatives (Ray, 2017). Each faith tradition has concepts of caring for others, giving to those in need, and advancing fairness that can be enacted through multiple opportunities under the “big tent” of community engagement. Some faith traditions, like Catholic Social Thought, integrate an examination of systemic forces that lead to marginalization of certain groups, and discernment about how to address the root causes of injustice
(Brigham, 2018; Ray, 2017). However, in many cases, faith-based institutions’ community engagement activities include student volunteer programs or service-learning that come from a sense of noblesse oblige and charity, which can reinforce notions of othering and unequal power dynamics. In fact, the faith traditions that shape contemporary United States culture have also permeated community engagement practices at public institutions, infusing it with a charity orientation to engaging with underserved communities (Butin, 2007; Kahne & Westheimer, 1996; Morton, 1995). It’s important to note the role that faith-based institutions have played in higher education community engagement, recognizing that they do not function homogeneously, but rather ranging in their commitments and actions along a spectrum from charity to social justice.

Within higher education, certain practical fields have emerged that lend themselves inherently to community engagement. Most notably, departments, schools, and colleges of education employ community engagement as an essential component of cultivating teachers, administrators, and school counselors (Butin, 2003; O’Meara & Jaeger, 2006). Engagement activities tend to look like fieldwork, practica, student teaching, and apprenticeships in schools and youth-serving organizations, but they might also include faculty research with and for local school districts, and institutional collaborations to share professional development opportunities and resources.

Further, the field of social work necessarily requires embedding students in community to learn from, with, and through interaction with the constituencies that students are learning to serve (Deegan, 2017; O’Meara & Jaeger, 2006). A prime historical example of this is Jane Addams’ establishment of Hull House, a social settlement where faculty and students could provide ongoing direct support to residents
while also using it as a site for research that could illuminate and address social justice issues. In contemporary social work programs, students do a significant amount of their learning through direct work in and with organizations that provide social services to underserved groups.

Additionally community engagement pervades the fields of public health, medicine, and nursing as students participate in apprenticeships that allow them to serve community needs while developing their ethical commitments and technical competencies (O’Meara & Jaeger, 2006). As with education and social work, this field also typically produces applied and engaged research that can shape public health policies and practices.

Aside from the above practical educational fields, there is also a history of community engagement in certain liberal arts departments. Women’s studies grew out of a tradition of feminist activism meant to expose and dismantle patriarchal systems and cultural norms that marginalize women and other non-dominant groups. Its origin outside of the academy allowed it to be situated in a grassroots orientation to change, building power through education, consciousness-raising, and collective action. In women’s studies programs, community-engaged learning might look like students doing advocacy and activism to address interlocking systems of oppression while also learning explicitly about power, privilege, and oppression in the classroom (Costa & Leong, 2013; Seethaler, 2016).

Similarly, ethnic studies is the higher education manifestation of scholarship and activism that coalesced initially outside of academia in response to systematic oppression of people of diverse races and ethnic origins and their exclusion from higher education
spaces (Mitchell & Coll, 2017; Umemoto, 1989). Indeed, even students of color who were admitted to higher education institutions found the curriculum and culture to be alienating, hostile, and irrelevant to their lived experience. In response, scholars of color found subversive and covert ways to teach about the diversity of human experiences and systems of oppression through informal events, clubs, and organizations. As they brought this teaching into the classroom they faced significant pushback from administrators and White students who saw it as a threat to the status quo, leading many faculty to be censured and threatened. It was only through collective student organizing and activism in the late 1960’s, to which universities responded with significant violence, that ethnic studies came to be embedded in higher education institutions. It is clear that the very origin of ethnic studies as an official academic department can be traced to student-led community engagement and to student demand for a relevant and empowering curriculum that they could use to lift up their communities.

Taken together, I see these examples as a lattice of roots out of which the tree of higher education community engagement has grown. They are powerful indicators of the traditions, theories, impacts, and exemplars of higher education community engagement, though they are often left out of the cursory literature reviews in peer-reviewed articles, and excluded from curricula on higher education community engagement. In a similar way, our field’s history is often told through the lineage of three male scholars, though a series of women have shaped the field toward a decidedly critical and justice-oriented approach. While I feel compelled to reference the contributions of the male scholars for the sake of providing a complete picture of the history of higher education engagement,
and do so in the coming pages, my small act of resistance is to first lift up the work of the revolutionary women who have shaped the field.

The revolutionary mothers of community-engaged learning and scholarship

Nadinne Cruz is one of the well-respected and widely understood pioneers of higher education community engagement, yet she is not broadly cited in the field’s scholarship. I suspect that this is because she has produced few formal publications, but she has produced and disseminated scholarship in the form of presentations, conceptual frameworks, and reflective essays that have been absolutely revolutionary in their call for transforming the field. In general, Nadinne is a fierce advocate for honoring and integrating community wisdom. In the early years of the formation of service-learning, she was an outspoken critic of traditional practices that positioned the community as a passive recipient of student service activities, and amplified the expertise of faculty over the expertise of community. She has consistently called for community members and partners to have an equitable stake in shaping and defining service-learning, to be compensated and celebrated as co-educators, and to be respected for their diverse epistemological and ontological traditions (Cruz, 1990b; Cruz & Giles, 2000; Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999). Her (1990a) Diversity Principles of Good Practice for Combining Service and Learning were a direct rebuke of the field’s lack of attention to diversity and inequities among students, faculty, and communities. As an administrator, educator, and elder in our field, Nadinne has done the courageous and necessary work of inserting incisive and critical questions to interrogate the nature of our community-engaged principles and practices.
To be fair, Dr. Tania Mitchell’s scholarship is widely cited, recognized, respected, and celebrated in the community engagement field. However, Dr. Mitchell is not (yet) celebrated and honored as a key figure in the field on the same level as the male scholars enumerated below. She has authored and co-authored multiple profound watershed publications that have made significant impacts on how we understand and practice community engagement. Among her most crucial contributions is her (2008) framework for critical service-learning, which she puts forward in contrast to traditional service-learning. This framework calls for faculty to explicitly address issues of power, privilege, and oppression in community engaged course curricula, and seek out partnerships with organizations or informal groups and associations focused on social justice action (not charity-based service). Dr. Mitchell has also written about the experiences of students of color in community-engaged courses, and particularly their tokenization and exploitation in classroom discussions about race and inequities. She has co-authored articles interrogating how Whiteness manifests in service-learning (Mitchell, Donahue, & Young-Law, 2012) and how ethnic studies combined with critical service-learning can be a form of political education (Mitchell & Coll, 2017). In other words, she is deeply invested in reshaping community-engaged learning as a mechanism for the mutual liberation of students and communities from hegemonic oppressive systems.

The founding fathers of community-engaged learning and scholarship

Many credit John Dewey’s student-centered experiential education theory as a germinal foundation of community-engaged learning (Bringle et al, 2013; Harkavy, 2015; Jacoby, 2013; Jameson et al, 2013). As a philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer working as faculty at University of Chicago, Dewey had a progressive view of
education as a democratic practice that involves learning through a combination of experience and reflection. In the context of community-engaged learning, we see Dewey’s influence in the experiential aspect of working with community, and in the classroom-based practices of individual reflection and group discussion.

Similarly, most community engagement scholars praise Paolo Freire’s problem-posing education framework and concept of critical consciousness as central to community-engaged learning (Jacoby, 2013; Pompa, 2005). Freire (1970) conceived of education as a liberating force when practiced by, for, and with oppressed people. He located the liberatory learning outside of traditional academic settings and constructs, and proclaimed its purpose as raising awareness of pervasive inequities and motivating action to incite social change. Further, Freire proposed praxis, an interplay between action and reflection, as the method for achieving critical consciousness and social change. In community-engaged courses, curriculum on power, privilege, and oppression, as well as the combination of community-based activities and critical reflection highlight Freire’s theoretical influence.

Finally, the community engagement field lauds Earnest Boyer as a pioneer in articulating the principles and value of the scholarship of engagement (Fitzgerald et al, 2012; Harkavy, 2015). Boyer (1996) makes the case that colleges and universities must take intentional action to reinvigorate their public purpose, and address growing public criticism that higher education is exclusionary and irrelevant in addressing the pervasive problems of American society. He proposed a framework for scholarship of engagement that connects “the rich resources of the university to our most pressing social, civic, and ethical problems, to our schools, to our teachers, to our cities…” (Boyer, 1996, p 21).
Boyer recognized the value of this scholarship happening at the individual, department, and institutional levels, and called for cultural and policy shifts within higher education to value and prioritize such work.

I do not dispute that Dewey, Freire, and Boyer are central figures in the history of higher education community engagement. To the contrary, these brief descriptions of their contributions demonstrate significant power in shaping our field. Nevertheless, there are other scholars who are not typically cited as widely in the literature, but should be celebrated among the field’s most influential minds. Tania Mitchell and Nadinne Cruz are among the elders in our field that I chose to honor and celebrate in an effort to expand the “cannon” of community engagement scholarship.

**Current Community Engagement Landscape**

I felt compelled to provide a sweeping overview of the history of higher education community engagement because the roots of this field are made manifest in the practices and institutions of today. Encompassed in that history, we see multiple complementary and contested orientations to engagement, which explains the diversity of community engagement activities across higher education institutions. The nature and affiliations of these institutions, the existence of certain community-oriented departments and disciplines, the integration of policies and infrastructures to support engagement, and the interests and commitments of individual faculty members have a huge impact on what community engagement looks like. It is possible that, even within an institution, we might see a spectrum of community engagement activities ranging from activist scholarship conducted by individual faculty to charity-oriented volunteer programs run out of campus ministry offices.
In the past ten years, we have also witnessed large-scale initiatives that leverage significant institutional resources and commitments, including place-based initiatives and anchor institution networks. Through place-based initiatives, colleges and universities build deep and multifaceted relationships with individuals and organizations in a geographically defined community usually adjacent to campus (Yamamura & Koth, 2018). The goal of these relationships is to address a narrowly focused set of intersecting issues (e.g. health and education for school-aged children and youth) by directing university resources, research, and service in support of community-based efforts to advance social change. The scope of an anchor institution mandate is typically city-wide or regional. Institutions with this mandate are seen as significant economic influencers that can make a measurable positive impact on underserved communities by participating in preferential hiring of local residents, doing business with local minority-owned companies, investing in urban renewal projects, and shaping local policy (Ehlenz, 2018).

While academically-based engagement activities are a valuable part of the anchor institution’s relationship with community, much of the work in implementing the initiative happens on the operations side of the academy.

At most community-engaged institutions, whether their commitments are comprehensive and expansive or dispersed and discreet, it has become common to create a center or office of community engagement. In 2013, Welch and Saltmarsh published a study that provided a snapshot of higher education community engagement centers. They drew their sample from institutions that had received the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement, a recognition conferred to institutions through a rigorous application process articulating institutions’ commitments to community engagement. In
their study, they highlight the importance of the role of campus community engagement centers charged with guiding and coordinating the myriad engagement activities across their institutions. They also provide descriptive statistics about the characteristics of campus engagement centers. The findings most relevant to my study relate to the important role community engagement centers play in both institutionalizing community engagement infrastructures and policies, and transforming institutional practices and commitments. These centers tend to serve multiple constituencies, including students, faculty, and community partners by providing educational and professional development programming, establishing and stewarding relationships, and creating and implementing policies and procedures. The heart and soul of these centers are the staff members who bring their passion, expertise, and commitment to the work: community engagement professionals.

**Community Engagement Professionals**

Community engagement professionals (CEPs) are defined as “staff whose energy, professional identity, and growth trajectory bring them to change-oriented and civically oriented community engagement” (Dostilio & Perry, 2017, p 3). As someone who has been in this field for 15 years, I can attest that I and others truly describe our professional roles as a calling. We do this work because it is meaningful and impactful for ourselves, students, faculty, community partners, and the broader community. It allows us to be part of a movement to make education a force for social justice. It invites us to be in mutually fulfilling relationships with individuals and institutions that are leading the challenging work of social change. We are guided to this work from diverse professional pathways like community development, student affairs, teaching, and nonprofit administration. Our
community engagement praxis is infused with the theories and experiences acquired through our formal educational and professional trajectories and informal epistemological traditions. In other words, we come to this work as practitioner-scholars engaging in a constant negotiation of theory and practice while guiding the institution to fulfill its public purpose (Dostilio & McReynolds, 2015).

Literature on the roles, responsibilities, and competencies of CEPs has mostly emerged in the past five years, thanks to innovative work by Dr. Lina Dostilio, whose dissertation became a foundation for new scholarly articles, books, conference presentations, communities of practice, etc. focused on CEPs. As a CEP, Lina was keenly aware of the particular knowledge, skills, dispositions, and commitments that she and her colleagues deployed in the daily work of community engagement. However, even as higher education community engagement has been the subject of significant scholarship over the past forty years, the staff who guide and orchestrate this work have been left out of the literature. Scholars have instead focused on theorizing and researching faculty development, student learning and engagement, community partnerships, community impact, and institutional strategies. While these are all essential areas of inquiry, the body of literature is incomplete and misleading without attention to the professionals who often function as the spoke in the wheel of community engagement.

Dostilio and Perry (2017) claim that the lack of prior literature on this professional field reflects how it has historically been perceived as primarily logistical and instrumental in nature. Indeed, early versions of public service and community engagement centers were often staffed by a single coordinator whose main responsibility was to connect students to volunteer opportunities, coordinate students getting off
campus to provide service, curate risk management paperwork, and keep tallies of service hours to report back to campus leadership for marketing purposes (Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013). These staff members were generally not perceived as having any unique and valuable scholarly expertise, and to the extent that their roles were categorized within the hierarchy and organizational structure of academia, most were lumped in with student affairs professionals. While this is a fine group with which to be associated, those of us who work as CEPs can illuminate several ways in which our roles, responsibilities, and competencies differ from staff who primarily focus on addressing the holistic needs of students through internally oriented programming and initiatives related to housing, campus life, spiritual development, student government, etc.

CEPs’ roles are highly contextualized based on the structure and culture of their centers, institutions, and communities. Their responsibilities vary as well. For some, they are a “staff of one,” and must span the breadth of doing everything from collaborating on designing tenure and promotion guidelines for engaged scholarship to troubleshooting a schedule conflict for a service-learning student to complete their service hours. At many institutions, the work of community engagement is housed in a center with multiple staff, which means each CEP takes on a subset of responsibilities for community engagement. Regardless of the scope of their roles, what makes CEPs distinct from other types of staff in academia is their function as boundary spanners, connecting campus with community in intentional and mutually beneficial ways, working across disciplinary silos to create cohesive institutional outreach, and weaving together multiple stakeholders into transformative relationships (Dostilio & Perry, 2017).
History and evolution of community engagement professional role

In tracing the history and evolution of the role of CEPs, scholars situate them within the first and second waves of higher education community engagement centers. The first wave, which emerged in the 1980s and lasted through the early 2000s, saw the creation of singular staff positions or the allocation of part of a faculty member’s time to create student service opportunities and/or facilitate service-learning projects, programs, and courses (Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013). Institutions developed these positions in various offices across campus, based on staffing structures and cultures. Commonly, early CEPs worked within campus ministry offices at faith based institutions or student affairs offices at public institutions. The scope of their roles was limited to the logistical and administrative tasks of organizing campus-wide community service activities and/or placing students into community organizations to fulfill service-learning hours. The CEP might do things like vet potential host organizations; coordinate dates, times, locations, and details of service activities; organize transportation to and from host sites; oversee student registration and risk management processes and paperwork, and possibly infuse an educational and/or reflective component into the experience. Often, institutions would use community engagement to advance their public relations and attempt to elevate their reputations in their communities. To the extent that most institutions include language about service and the public good in their mission statements, these types of activities became (superficial) indicators of their commitments. However, as more scholars, activists, community leaders and even CEPs challenged the authenticity and impact of these “first wave” forms of community engagement, institutions began to respond with deeper and more robust commitments to their public purpose.
The second wave of contemporary higher education community engagement ushered in the creation of campus centers focused more broadly on multiple forms of engagement and more deeply on partnerships, programs, and pedagogy (Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013). Necessarily, institutions needed more staff, and more robust professional preparations for those staff, to carry out the increasingly complex and expansive work of community engagement. The list of CEP responsibilities, and the rigor of these responsibilities, has increased dramatically. At any given institution, CEPs might describe their roles to include providing professional development to faculty and community partners; designing and implementing curricular and co-curricular community engagement programming for students; fostering, vetting, and sustaining community partnerships; assessing student learning and community impact from community engagement initiatives; guiding or setting policies, protocols, and procedures for community-campus engagement activities; overseeing or contributing to place-based and anchor institution initiatives; participating in professional associations and conferences to disseminate promising practices and scholarship; and contributing to strategic planning and goal-setting related to their institution’s public purpose (Benenson, Hemer, & Trebil, 2017; Chamberlain & Phelps-Hillen, 2017; Dostilio & McReynolds, 2015; Dostilio & Perry, 2017; Farmer-Hanson, 2017; Martin & Crossland, 2017; Weaver & Tate-Kellogg, 2017).

**Competency model for community engagement professionals**

The myriad professional responsibilities listed above belie an even greater array of competencies and commitments needed to do the work of a CEP. Dostilio and colleagues (2017) developed a comprehensive conceptual framework that maps the
competencies and commitments for each category of organizational responsibilities for CEPs. This framework grew from an extensive review of literature from the field of community engagement, and integrates theoretical models of leadership, social entrepreneurship, and professional identity development (Dostilio & Perry, 2017).

Dostilio and colleagues field tested the CEP competency framework with multiple professional focus groups, using their input to develop, eliminate, and refine individual competencies and broader categories. The final version of the conceptual framework was detailed in a book edited by Dostilio, *The Community Engagement Professional in Higher Education: A Competency Model for an Emerging Field*.

Dostilio and her team of graduate student scholars organized CEP competencies into broad role-based categories, with knowledge, skills, and dispositions as subcategories. Critical commitments, which are distinct from competencies, are also listed in each category. These describe the “intangibles” that CEPs need to carry with them to do the work with integrity. The broad CEP professional categories include: cultivating and nurturing community partnerships, designing and facilitating faculty development and support, guiding students’ civic learning and development, creating and implementing community engagement programs, institutionalizing community engagement within one’s institution, and leading change within higher education (Dostilio et al, 2017). I go into more detail for each category below.

**Critical commitments for community engagement professionals**

Before delving into the core competencies for community engagement professionals, I feel compelled to discuss the critical commitments that should undergird our work. Indeed, these commitments might be described as a web of ethics and
principles woven together into a coherent ethos that guides how CEPs understand and enact community engagement. To be clear, these critical commitments might not be espoused by all CEPs, but scholars make the case that they are essential to implementing community engagement as a means of advancing social justice and the public purpose of higher education (Cruz, 1990; Dostilio & Perry, 2017; Hernandez & Pasquesi, 2017; Marullo & Edwards, 2000; Mitchell, 2008).

Hernandez and Pasquesi (2017) contend that CEPs should demonstrate commitment to a process of professional and personal praxis; cultivation of authentic relationships of solidarity; examination, critique and redistribution of power; and advancement of equity and social justice. Praxis is a cycle of reflection and action whereby individuals synthesize learning from formal and informal educational experiences to better inform and shape their understandings and behaviors. In the context of advancing social justice, praxis guides the cultivation of a critical consciousness, or awareness and understanding of how interpersonal, institutional, and systemic inequities have disproportionate impact on particular populations (Freire, 1970). CEPs should engage in ongoing praxis with a goal of developing critical consciousness about the dynamics within their institutions and between campus and community.

Additionally, CEPs must understand the work of community engagement as necessarily rooted in authentic interpersonal relationships. We have to be willing to dedicate our personal time, energy, and attention to showing up for our comrades and demonstrating solidarity. We have to bring our full authentic selves to every conversation, negotiation, and celebration. We have to know when to abdicate or leverage our privilege and resources in service to our collaborators for the advancement
of equity and justice. Ultimately, these relationships of authenticity and solidarity are the fertile foundation upon which collaborative social change is created. A related commitment, described by Hernandez and Pasquesi (2017) and Kuttner and colleagues (2019), is to illuminate, examine, and challenge unequal power dynamics that tend to manifest in community engagement relationships. Specifically, CEPs should consider how community engagement is defined and confined by the power inequities between individuals (e.g. student and faculty, faculty and community partner, faculty and administration, nonprofit staff and clients, etc.) and institutions (e.g. universities and nonprofits). Examination of these dynamics should lead to intentional and informed actions to disrupt and redistribute power to ensure more equitable participation, voice, and access to resources wherever possible.

Finally, the “North Star” that guides all of our work should be advancement of a more just and equitable world. All programs, practices, partnerships, policies, and processes should ultimately function in service to this commitment. These commitments to praxis, solidarity, and social justice are infused into how CEPs internalize and deploy each competency described below.

**Competencies for fostering and sustaining community partnerships**

Martin and Crossland (2017) describe the competencies and commitments necessary for CEPs to foster and sustain community partnerships. In the context of higher education community engagement, community partnerships are defined as relationships in which campuses and community-based organizations participate in exchange of knowledge and resources and/or collaborative civic endeavors for the mutual benefit (or, ideally, mutual transformation) of each entity, and advancement of the public
good. For the purpose of this study, community-based organizations can include nonprofits, advocacy groups, government agencies, foundations, and activist movements. When we imagine the constellation of different types of organizations, the issues they address, and the nature of the work they do; and then overlay the myriad academic disciplines, community-engaged course structures, and tangible resources of higher education, we can see how CEPs would have to be highly skilled in working at the individual and institutional levels to weave together meaningful and mutually beneficial partnerships.

Indeed, the knowledge-related competencies for this role include understanding of the context of community organizations and their relationship to the campus, theory-based practices of developing and sustaining partnerships, and resources and opportunities offered by each partnering entity (Martin & Crossland, 2017). Whereas the latter two knowledge-based competencies may seem fairly self-explanatory, the first is less obvious, though arguably most important. As CEPs engage with particular organizations and communities, it is essential to have a working knowledge of their histories, demographics, current realities, and nature of their relationships with higher education institutions. These forces shape the organizations’ work, their desires and capacities for partnership, and their understanding of the role of the university in community. It is not uncommon for CEPs to approach organizations or communities who are highly suspicious of universities and colleges because of past experiences of being the objects of dehumanizing research by faculty focused singularly on publication and tenure. Folks may see campuses as ivory towers that forbid their entry as potential students, staff, or faculty, but seek out their community development work to research or connect with
student volunteers. CEPs must understand these dynamics in order to deploy the skills and dispositions necessary to address past harms, reframe power dynamics, and build trust.

Skill sets for facilitating partnerships include relationship management, democratic engagement, and conflict resolution (Martin & Crossland, 2017). Within each of these categories are multiple overlapping skills, including the ability to articulate and understand expectations and limitations, clear communication, active listening, organizing and facilitating meetings, assessment of process and outcomes of partnership, building consensus, negotiating terms, developing shared vision, etc. In service of developing and sustaining partnerships, CEPs may find themselves activating these skills while conducting individual site visits and meetings with partner organizations; participating in community-organized working groups and initiatives; joining campus task forces and committees that allocate resources toward a public purpose; and facilitating problem-solving conversations between faculty, partners, and students.

Additionally, CEPs must bring dispositions into their partnership work that engender trust and respect for community (Martin & Crossland, 2017). These dispositions include awareness of one’s own identity and positionality, humility, and a passion for community work. Self-awareness is crucial when navigating identity-based dynamics in partnerships. For example, showing up as a White woman to a community association run by and for Black people requires careful reflection and navigation of how race, gender, education level, and institutional affiliation will shape perception and interactions. Situations like this require humility, which manifests as stepping back, listening, and honoring the legacies of distrust, pain, and struggle shared by community
members. It also requires that the CEP keeps showing up with passion and commitment, ready to do the work of building trust and contributing to the work of positive social change.

Kuttner and colleagues (2019) address many of these partnership-related competencies in their case study of a place-based initiative at University of Utah. Through an examination of their organizational structure and partnership model, they illuminate how the CEP competency model (Dostilio et al, 2017) aligns with and diverges from their own experiences of fostering and sustaining mutually beneficial partnerships between the university and its neighborhood partners. This study is one of few that focuses on CEPs and tests the assertions of the CEP competency model. It provides a thoughtful critique of the limitations of the competency model and an invitation to scholars to find new and innovative ways to apply, extend, and adapt the model to particular partnership contexts.

**Competencies for facilitating faculty development and support**

Chamberlin and Phelps-Hillen (2017) provide an analysis of the competencies necessary for supporting faculty in their community-engaged teaching and scholarship. In general, the role of the CEP has involved recruiting faculty to do community-engaged teaching and research, facilitating their professional development in this area, providing logistical and administrative support, matching them with community partners, and connecting them with colleagues doing similar work. Thus, CEPs’ knowledge must span across interpersonal, institutional, and field-based dimensions. CEPs must know strategies for attracting and engaging faculty in community-based work, understand and address the primary motivating factors (e.g. promotion and tenure) and barriers (e.g.
department culture) that shape faculty commitments, have familiarity with institutional policies and protocols that affect faculty community engagement, and have deep knowledge of the principles and practices of community engagement to the extent that they are able to educate faculty about how to do it.

With regard to skills for facilitating faculty development, CEPs must know how to organize and disseminate resources, provide consultation on course and research development, design and implement faculty development programming, coach faculty in initiating and sustaining community partnerships, and foster a sense of community among engaged faculty (Chamberlin & Phelps-Hillen, 2017). Essentially, faculty need to feel empowered, prepared, and supported in their community-engaged teaching and scholarship. They also benefit from being connected to each other and to the broader community. CEPs are often responsible for making sure all of this happens, so in addition to knowledge and skills, dispositions like empathy, flexibility, innovation, and persuasiveness are crucial.

**Competencies for guiding students’ civic learning and development**

Depending on the CEP’s role, they may directly administer community engagement programs for students, and/or support faculty and community partners in providing opportunities for community-engaged learning. Either way, it is often the CEP who brings expertise about what civic learning looks like and how it happens. Benenson, Heber, and Trebill (2017) assert that CEPs need to have knowledge of the scholarship and research on student civic learning, including common pedagogies, curricular content, and learning outcomes. It is also beneficial for CEPs to know theories of student development and social identity to effectively design and scaffold developmentally
appropriate learning experiences. If the CEP is directly facilitating programming, then they will need to develop skills in discussion and reflection facilitation, as these processes are integral to students’ civic learning. If they do not directly teach, then CEPs still need collaboration and communication skills for working with faculty and other staff to design civic learning outcomes and experiences. As mentors and exemplars for students, CEPs should embody a disposition of civic-mindedness (Steinberg, Hatcher, & Bringle, 2011), which is a commitment to informed, active, ongoing participation in civic life.

In a reflective article published in 2019, Tryon and Madden assert that CEPs should also take responsibility for comprehensive student preparation for community-engaged learning. They draw on literature highlighting community partner critiques of how students show up, often ill-prepared, misinformed, and with a savior mentality. Their article suggests that CEPs need to deploy their social justice-related commitments and competencies to ensure that students learn about social identity, positionality, privilege and oppression, implicit bias, and cultural humility before they begin their community engagement experiences. These scholars identified and began to address a gap, or at least an implicit oversight, in the CEP competency model with regard to facilitating students’ civic learning.

**Competencies for implementing community engagement programs**

As mentioned above, CEPs may implement community engagement programs for students, which could entail public service internships, civic/servant leadership programming, volunteer opportunities, or undergraduate research. They might also run programs and initiatives that are university-wide or place-based. For example, a CEP may be charged with launching and sustaining a campus voter registration and education
initiative, or coordinating a multifaceted youth literacy campaign in an adjacent neighborhood. Orchestrating these varying programs requires a combination of technical knowledge and educational expertise, along with professional administrative skills and dispositions that allow CEPs to toggle between big picture ideas and finite details.

Farmer-Hanson (2017) delves into the competencies specific to program administration. Before enumerating them, it’s worth noting that CEPs integrate many of the competencies already described above into aspects of program design and implementation. In addition, CEPs deploy knowledge of academic program design, including development of learning outcomes, curricular content, pedagogical practices, and assessment. They must also know about institutional structures and policies, including those related to risk management, academic credit, student employment, academic research, fundraising, and budgets. Many of these understandings are highly contextual and specific to each institution, so as CEPs transition to different institutions during their careers, this knowledge might need to be relearned. Skills for program administration, however, are highly transferable. Regardless of the type of institution or program, CEPs will use marketing skills to generate interest and participation in their programs, fundraising and budgeting skills to ensure programs’ financial sustainability, educational facilitation skills to provide meaningful learning experiences, and program assessment and data analysis to determine the effectiveness of programs. When overseeing programs and initiatives, required dispositions include visionary thinking, attention to detail, intellectual curiosity, and a commitment to continuous improvement.
Competencies for institutionalizing community engagement

For higher education to truly achieve its public purpose, community engagement scholars argue that institutions must integrate community engagement as a means of fulfilling the vision and mission, reflecting institutional values, and advancing the work of the academy in service to the common good (Boyer, 1996; Cantor, 2020; Harkavy, 2006; Saltmarsh, 2005). Community engagement needs to be a strategic priority, bolstered by the resources, budget, and staffing required to ensure robust and comprehensive engagement. Often, CEPs play a critical role in advocating for, and creating, the infrastructure to support broad-based community engagement. Further, CEPs can influence the institutional culture in such a way as to make community engagement part of the ethos and identity of the institution.

Weaver and Kellogg (2017) examine the competencies needed for this type of mid-level leadership for institutionalization. CEPs must be able to deeply understand the vision, mission, and values of the institution and their links to the work of community engagement. Further, CEPs benefit from keeping up to speed on priorities and initiatives that might generate interest convergence with community-engaged endeavors. For example, knowing about upcoming accreditation reviews might assist with pushing forward program evaluation and revision. Diversity initiatives might be an entry point for implementing more social-justice based curricula in community-engaged courses. Along with these opportunities, CEPs need to recognize the policies, structures, systems, and processes that shape community engagement on the large and small scale. Relatedly, CEPs must be skilled at working within these existing frameworks where possible, or building collective will and capacity to change systems, structures, policies, processes
when necessary to advance community engagement in alignment with the institution’s mission and values. As with other role-based categories described above, some of the component skills include relationship management, strategic communication, and consensus building. It’s essential to note that institutionalization happens in collaboration with multiple other stakeholders, so in addition to requisite skills, CEPs will need to integrate a spirit of teamwork, compromise, innovation, and creative problem-solving.

Farmer-Hanson, Gassman, and Shields (2019) used a case study methodology and qualitative interviews to analyze the roles CEPs played in strategic planning at their institutions, a common vehicle for institutionalization of programs and initiatives. The study showed the breadth of roles, strategies, and competencies deployed by CEPs based on institutional context, but one of the most commonly engaged competencies was advocating for community engagement through communicating its value and centrality to institutional mission. The study also described how CEPs leveraged competencies across the categories listed in Dostilio and colleagues’ (2017) framework to participate meaningfully in strategic planning processes. This study speaks to the interrelatedness of the competencies, as well as the key importance of advocacy skill sets in institutionalizing community engagement.

**Competencies for leading change within higher education**

In Dostilio and Perry’s (2017) framing piece on the role of CEPs as professionals and leaders in higher education, they offer up a few theoretical frameworks that specifically signal the expectation that CEPs are institutional change agents. Using Meyerson and Scully’s (1995) concept of the “tempered radical,” Dostilio and Perry describe how CEPs artfully navigate the tensions between their social justice
commitments and the constraints of neoliberal institutional forces to make small-scale incremental changes that accumulate toward broader structural, systemic, and cultural shifts that more authentically advance their institution’s public purpose. Similarly, CEPs function as transformational leaders (Sandmann & Plater, 2013) in their work to build capacity and will among stakeholders to advocate for large-scale change. Further, there are ways in which CEPs take on the role of social entrepreneurs within their institutions, identifying opportunities for interest convergence and innovation in order to create or reimagine outdated programs, initiatives, and practices that are impeding the realization of the institution’s vision and mission related to advancing the common good.

While it’s clear that the other CEP competency categories are independently valuable, it seems that scholars assert this specific category as the ultimate synthesis of all the competencies in service to a lofty aspiration for what CEPs can accomplish within the context of their institutions and higher education more broadly. Hubler and Quan (2017) put forth a set of competencies for envisioning, leading, and enacting change. Knowledge for leading change includes understanding theories of organizational and social change, knowing the institutional processes whereby change is facilitated, benchmarking innovative ideas against other practices and innovations, and recognizing the contemporary context of the organization and broader field. CEPs use this expertise to convene key stakeholders, cultivate a shared vision for what change should look like and why it’s needed, facilitate democratic processes to gather input and disseminate information to shape the details of the change, work across organizational silos to build collective commitment and buy-in to implementing change, and proactively re-imagine or create new ways of doing community engagement that more authentically advance
their institution’s public purpose. This work can be protracted and frustrating, as illustrated in my opening anecdote, so necessary dispositions include persistence, confidence, cooperation and compromise, integrity, and critical hope.

As we can see from the emerging literature, CEPs are significant forces for community engagement at their institutions and across higher education. Whether they are primarily responsible for stewarding community partnerships, facilitating public service programs, fostering student civic learning, or organizing faculty development, their efforts have the potential to contribute simultaneously to the institutionalization of community engagement and the transformation of institutions to make them more accountable to their public purpose. Though existing scholarship on CEPs is scant, it provides a stable foundation upon which to build a body of research so we can truly understand and leverage the potential of CEPs. My study will contribute to the early stage of research on CEPs’ roles, competencies, identities and impacts.

**Critical Feminist Theory**

The body of critical feminist theory that shapes my praxis as a CEP primarily includes scholars who are women of color (Ahmed, 2010, brown, 2017, Collins, 1989, Crenshaw, 1989, 1991, Davis, 2013, hooks, 2003, 2015a, 2015b, Lorde, 1978, 1981, 1985) and White women scholars who are explicitly attentive to race and other dimensions of identity in their work (De Saxe, 2012, Rich, 1973, 1977). The works of these scholars overlap, complement, and challenge each other in ways that make them a powerful web to undergird the work of higher education community engagement. I find it especially valuable that most of these feminist scholars also identify as activists, and choose to do much of their intellectual and organizing work outside of the constraints of
the academy. I contend that this allows them to create truly innovative and radical visions for the possibility of the public purpose of higher education. Thematically, the tapestry of feminist theories presented below encapsulate intersectional analysis of power, privilege, and oppression; critique of patriarchal culture in education and work; and action-oriented praxis for disruption, solidarity, and transformation.

**Intersectional analysis**

At its root, critical feminism is about far more than advocating for the liberation of women from patriarchal forces. While scholars pay attention to gender-based oppression as one manifestation of hegemonic power, they also argue that it is inextricably linked to other forms of identity-based oppression, including racism, ableism, classism, heterosexism, etc. (Collins, 1989, Crenshaw, 1989, 1991, hooks, 2015a, 2015b). These forms of oppression become internalized by individuals and groups, play out in interpersonal interactions, shape institutional structures and policies, and coalesce into pervasive and insidious cultures and systems that stealthily perpetuate a status quo of marginalization, exploitation, and dehumanization. This status quo serves the interests of hegemonic power, ultimately benefiting wealthy White men, who sit at the apex of the power structure.

Critical feminist scholars argue that an intersectional analysis is necessary to render oppressive ideologies and structures visible so they can ultimately be examined and disrupted (Collins, 1989, Crenshaw, 1991). Furthermore, an intersectional frame provides a way to honor and analyze the diversity of women’s experiences within a hegemonic society while also identifying areas of similarity and convergence in our narratives as a way to build solidarity. Intersectionality is a necessary countermeasure to
attempts to essentialize, tokenize, and homogenize women’s experiences for the sake of advancing a White middle class form of liberal feminism that only serves their narrow interests at the expense of women of color (Crenshaw, 1989, hooks, 2015b).

Patricia Hill Collins (1989) articulates Black feminist thought as a powerful and nuanced form of intersectional feminism that explicitly resists co-optation by a White feminist agenda and boldly proclaims a revolutionary purpose. Her foundational premise is that Black women’s multiply-oppressed status affords them a “distinctive set of experiences that offers a different view of material reality than available to other groups,” (Collins, 1987, p 747). These experiences make Black women uniquely qualified to critique the structure and function of our society. Black women’s epistemology operates on two levels, including the daily development and deployment of wisdom gained through life experience; and the integration of this wisdom into more formalized and specialized knowledge codified by Black women scholars. This knowledge-- derived from concrete experience, embodied, situated within relationships, and infused with empathy-- is oppositional to dominant ways of knowing, and serves as a site of resistance to intellectual oppression and exploitation (Collins, 1989, Lorde, 1985).

Integrating intersectional theory and Black feminist thought into higher education community engagement has several implications. First, it requires that community-engaged faculty and staff illuminate, analyze, and challenge intersecting oppressive power dynamics within the academy, and in their relationship with communities and students. This praxis extends to the curriculum and instructional strategies in courses, as well as the policies and practices that facilitate community-campus partnerships. Relatedly, community engagement must center traditionally marginalized voices, and
especially the voices of Black women, whose particular experiences and standpoints are crucial to making oppressive structures and cultures visible. In addition, we can respectfully draw inspiration from Black women’s epistemological traditions for guidance about how to contextualize learning within relationships, legitimize the value of knowledge gained through direct experience, and attend to the social emotional components of the learning process. Further, feminist practitioners must adopt a revolutionary stance of using community engagement to unveil and disrupt the hegemonic status quo.

**Critiques of hegemonic education and work cultures**

Colleges and universities are spaces of both education and employment, intentionally designed for the promulgation and dissemination of hegemonic worldviews. Adrienne Rich calls out higher education’s agenda of covert indoctrination into patriarchy in a 1977 speech given at the convocation and Douglass College:

What you can learn here….is how men have perceived and organized their experience, their history, their ideas of social relationships, good and evil, sickness and health, etc. When you read or hear about “great issues,” “major texts,” “the mainstream of Western thought,” you are hearing about what men, above all White men, in their male subjectivity, have decided is important (p. 609)

Indeed, in many institutions, education that centers the standpoints of women and people of color has been, and continues to be “ghettoized” into discrete departments rather than permeating across disciplines (hooks, 2003). The predominant perspective is
that courses that include these perspectives do not offer up objective, factual, and scientifically sound curricula. Rather, they are seen as subjective, lacking rigor, and designed to advance radical leftist political agendas (hooks, 2015b). Thus, they function at the margins, requiring students to actively seek out courses in Women’s Studies and Ethnic Studies to access liberatory learning. These same students have to justify to their advisors, peers, and mentors the value of taking community-engaged courses that many academics see as less rigorous than traditional courses. Furthermore, hooks (2003) links the ideology of the inferiority of diverse standpoints to the continued failure of higher education to achieve its proclaimed role as a mechanism for creating social mobility and equity. The academy’s application process and criteria, cost of attendance, and reliance on standardized testing all function as covertly racist and classist barriers to keep marginalized groups from accessing education. In sum, institutions of higher education continue to operate in a culture of scientific elitism and White normativity that shapes who has access to education and what curricula and pedagogical strategies are deemed valid. The cumulative effect of these practices and policies is denial of students’ access to liberatory learning opportunities that develop their critical consciousness of inequities and injustices.

The academy also functions as an oppressive employer, specifically exploiting women’s labor. Adrienne Rich (1973) argues, “the structure of the man-centered university constantly reaffirms the use of women as means to the end of male ‘work’-meaning male careers and professional success” (p 1). For example, studies have highlighted the disproportionate role women of color faculty play in the area of “service” to the institution, often being called upon to function as token members of committees or
as essential contributors to diversity efforts (Arnold et al., 2016; Jayakumar et al., 2009; Kelly & McCann, 2014). Logically, this means that White male faculty are freed up from service activities and able to put more of their professional labor toward the two other pursuits that are most highly valued in academia: research and teaching. Additionally, with regard to research and teaching, women and people of color are often advised to employ positivist frameworks that disallow more relational, connected, and community-oriented work that aligns with their epistemological traditions. Collins (1989) asserts that the dominant White male epistemological framework in academia requires Black women scholars to “objectify themselves, devalue their emotional life, [and] displace their motivations for furthering knowledge about Black women...” (p754) in order to protect themselves from being seen as incompetent and illegitimate, and to sustain their employment in higher education. Hooks (2015a) further rejects the application of White male normative academic standards as measures of feminist faculty legitimacy, instead asserting that the ultimate measure of value is the extent to which scholarship advances liberation from oppression.

In efforts to deploy community engagement as a means of transforming the academy, this layered critique of higher education as a site for (hegemonic) learning and (exploitive) labor illuminates potential barriers that CEPs must take care to address. Institutional gatekeeping severely limits access to higher education for underrepresented students and faculty, particularly those who identify as women of color, perpetually excluding diverse worldviews and epistemologies. An academic culture of policing curriculum, pedagogical practices, and research methodologies influences faculty away from community-rooted teaching and scholarship in order to pursue “safer” mainstream
practices so they can advance professionally. Additionally, the culture of labor exploitation can leave faculty too overstretched and overburdened to work in coalition to push for systemic change to support and reward their community-engaged work. The oppression perpetuated by academia’s cultural status quo requires action-oriented feminist praxis to disrupt and transform it.

**Action oriented praxis for disruption, solidarity, and transformation**

In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, hooks (2015b) calls for feminist movement to employ “liberatory feminist praxis,” (p113) a cycle of strategically combining theory and action to advance equity and social justice. Hooks doesn’t privilege formal academic constructs of theory, but rather makes room for the value of theories emanating from concrete experience and the organic process of sense-making. Further, hooks recognizes the need for praxis to manifest in the individual’s daily ways of being as well as in broader collective work. In *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, brown (2017) similarly lifts up the interplay between small and large scale implementation of praxis in the concept of fractals. She asserts that the work of social change can and must happen through the proliferation of small acts of resistance, which collectively fuel the creation of global movements.

When considering modes of disruption, Sara Ahmed’s (2010) construct of the “feminist killjoy” offers great appeal. In essence, a feminist killjoy is one who refuses to normalize and excuse oppressive thinking, speech, and behaviors. Instead, the killjoy disrupts through various combinations of voicing resistance, demonstrating anger, or simply being present in spaces not meant for her. Ahmed acknowledges that disrupting the dehumanizing status quo often leads to the killjoy being framed as the problem
instead of the one unveiling the problem. However, in the act of disruption, she creates a moment of discomfort and unhappiness that makes space for questioning and reconsidering what has been previously regarded as common sense. This echoes Audre Lorde’s (1978) reflections on transforming silence into language and action. She positions herself as a “warrior poet” (p 42) who uses her words and art to render visible the forces of violence and exploitation that allow dominant groups to thrive at the expense of the oppressed. In speaking the truth of her experience through poetic publications and performances, she upsets the dominant myth that we live in a society of race and gender equality. Disruption also happens at a group level. Ahmed calls for a “collective politics of willfulness” (p 6), which entails coming together in the spirit of care and support while sharing the burden of enacting resistance. This could look like large scale labor strikes, boycotts, protests, walkouts, etc., or strategically orchestrated disturbances in settings like classrooms, staff meetings, and public events.

A praxis of disruption must be accompanied by a praxis of solidarity. Hooks (2015b) uses the concept of “feminist sisterhood” to describe the “shared commitment to struggle against patriarchal injustice, no matter the form that injustice takes” (p 15). She goes on to recognize that solidarity across race, class, and other identity-based divisions is only possible when privileged women divest from their power to achieve greater equity with marginalized women. Brown (2017) goes beyond solidarity to invoke the concept of interdependence. She outlines a praxis of building capacity for interdependent social change work by 1) seeing others and being seen, 2) being open to the possibility that you are wrong, 3) accepting the multiple contradictions in yourself, and 4) asking for and accepting what you need. In essence, this praxis requires a commitment to vulnerability
and accountability. Additionally, Lorde (1978) invokes “umoja” (p 42) as a call for unity, and shares that her spoken and written words connect her with women of all backgrounds who in turn have contributed to her own survival through their care and support. On a practical level, De Saxe (2012) describes how the critical feminist praxis of testimonio, sharing one’s story of a significant life event, generates solidarity by empowering the storyteller to speak their truth and putting their audience into a relationship that engenders empathy and deeper understanding. On a larger scale, feminist consciousness-raising praxis creates space for women to identify shared and divergent experiences, and seek opportunities for solidarity in common struggle (hooks, 2015a). Though traditional versions of consciousness-raising circles are less common in current times, one could argue that they have evolved into formal and informal gatherings like feminist book clubs and discussion groups. The solidarity built through the forms of praxis described above can be a foundation for transformative action.

Ultimately, hooks (2015b) calls for a renewed feminist revolution whereby our culture is transformed through eradication of oppressive systems and binary thinking. The work of transformation must be guided by love and compassion, not a desire to gain power and redistribute the dominant/oppressive relationship. One important praxis for advancing this work is enacting political education that transforms individual and collective consciousness and commitment to action. Brown (2017) contends that transformation happens through the process of intentional adaptation. Any changes that we facilitate must be responsive to the current context while also staying anchored in the deeper purpose and goals of the work. We must be open to adaptation and transformation as individuals, letting ourselves be inspired and informed by new experiences and
information. We also contribute to transformation of institutions and systems through collaborative ideation (Brown, 2017) which is a praxis of employing collective imagination and creativity to foster a vision for a more just reality. The ideas that come from this process can serve as guideposts for intermediary actions and strategies toward achievement of the vision. In sum, transformative praxis involves individually and collectively illuminating and interrogating our current reality, while simultaneously envisioning and enacting a more just and equitable future.

Critical feminist praxis can be a powerful force for disrupting traditional higher education community engagement practices, building solidarity among constituencies involved in community engagement, and fostering transformation toward a more just and equitable vision for society. In the next section, I describe how critical feminist scholars and practitioners integrate feminist theory to inform their community-engaged teaching and scholarship, and influence institution-wide culture and systems that serve the public purpose of higher education.

**Feminism and Higher Education Community Engagement**

My search for literature on intersections between “critical feminism” and higher education community engagement yielded very few results, which I surmise may reflect a combination of the following factors: 1) critical feminism is still an emerging construct as a subfield in the body of feminist theory, 2) few community engagement professionals and scholars knowingly and intentionally integrate critical feminist praxis, 3) those who integrate critical feminist praxis into their community-engaged work are not writing about it. Thus, for the purpose of being able to draw on a wider body of scholarship, I expanded my search to include feminism more broadly (dropped the “critical”) in
combination with terms related to higher education community engagement. Based on the scope of my search, and what I found, references to feminism, feminist, theory, and feminist praxis in this section reflect a broader definition of feminism than what I put forth in the critical feminism section of my literature review.

I found several publications that addressed three themes: integration of feminist pedagogy and praxis into community-engaged teaching, feminist frameworks for engaged scholarship, and feminist critiques of community-campus partnerships. Almost all of the literature focused on faculty as the primary actors in higher education community engagement. Additionally, a prevalent tension emerged in the literature around faculty situating themselves primarily as either 1) scholars of women’s and gender studies (WGS) who enact community-engaged teaching and scholarship (Costa & Leong, 2013; Martin & Beese, 2016; Rojas, 2015), or 2) scholars and practitioners of community engagement who integrate feminist theory and methodology (Clark-Taylor, 2017; Putnam & Dempsey, 2017, Santiago-Ortiz, 2019). Interestingly, I found no publications that explicitly addressed how community engagement professionals employ feminist praxis in their work, though some publications do reference the role of staff in community-campus partnerships. Therefore, my study has the potential to fill a gap in the research and literature on higher education community engagement. Analysis of existing literature, though focused primarily on faculty, is meant to help me identify principles, practices, and frameworks that might also be deployed by CEPs in their distinctive roles as they advance the public purpose of higher education.
Feminist community-engaged pedagogy

The majority of feminist community engagement literature features studies and reflective papers on infusing feminist theory to shape the content, processes, relationships, and goals of community-engaged courses. Among these pieces, most authors focus on courses within WGS departments, which raises questions for me about the possible existence of unspoken boundaries and even taboos around overtly integrating feminism into community-engaged courses across diverse disciplines. Perhaps feminist frameworks have not been more explicitly and broadly implemented in higher education community-engaged courses because of hegemonic cultural understandings of feminism as an ideology of man-hating, a desire for domination over men, or simply a vision of (cis)gender equality in professional and personal spheres. These limited (mis)understandings of the nature and goals of feminism may deter individuals and institutions from embracing it more overtly as a framework for designing and facilitating community-engaged courses.

Nevertheless, scholars make a compelling case for how feminist theory can and should shape the content of community-engaged courses. In particular, assigning critical feminist readings allows students to examine systems of power, privilege, and oppression that contribute the the injustices they observe through their community-engaged learning (De Santis & Serafini, 2015; Santiago-Ortiz, 2019; Seethaler, 2016). For example, Kimberle Crenshaw’s groundbreaking (1991) essay on intersectionality, bell hooks’ (1994) theory of emancipatory education, or Eve Tuck’s (2009) analysis of damage-centered versus desire-centered research provide theoretical frames for considering how social injustices are compounded and amplified by overlapping systems of oppression,
and how dominant narratives about particular communities cast them as intrinsically damaged and broken. These frameworks make visible the forces that serve to privilege and oppress individuals and groups, directly refuting commonly held beliefs about how and why specific groups or people are unable to thrive.

Given feminism’s assertion that our understandings and worldviews are shaped by our context, the curriculum should intentionally contextualize the student’s community-engaged experience. This might include content on the historical, economic, political, cultural, geographic, environmental and/or social factors affecting particular communities. Providing such information, much of which students may not have encountered through traditional patriarchal education systems, helps students develop nuanced understandings of communities and justice issues. For example, Martin and Beese (2016) run a service-learning program that connects college students and girls from an alternative high school to develop interventions against sexual harassment. In their curriculum they cover the history of gender roles and gender-based oppression, examine how gender is portrayed in literature and media, and offer an overview of global feminist activism. Providing students with sound facts and data, and supporting them in analyzing and synthesizing it, helps them to understand both the universal and particular impact of intersectional injustices. It situates their own observations, interactions, and contributions through community-engaged learning within a bigger picture of populations, institutions, and systems. Exploration of facts and data also contributes to how students consider implications for policies and practices to address injustice.

Additionally, feminist theoretical traditions draw heavily on the wisdom and knowledge that come from lived experience and are shared through personal stories and
reflections (Santiago-Ortiz, 2019). In the community-engaged learning course, this means integrating personal narratives as part of the curriculum (De Santis & Serafini, 2015; Fuller & Russo, 2018). These narratives may come in the form of published memoirs, recorded interviews, informal conversations with community members and leaders, guest speakers, and from the students themselves as they participate in course-based discussion. Indeed, this kind of content provides an important complement to facts and data, painting a picture of the diversity of experiences and perspectives within identity groups and communities that are often mistaken as monolithic. As stories are shared, analyzed, and celebrated, tendencies toward “othering” among students, and between students and community members, diminish (Clark-Taylor, 2017; De Santis & Serafini, 2015; Santiago-Ortiz, 2019; Williams & Ferber, 2008). Further, personal narratives help us see how we are all affected by, and implicated in, systems of oppression (Fuller & Russo, 2018).

Whereas narratives provide important content for feminist community-engaged learning, direct and authentic community-based experiences are an integral part of the process of making meaning. As a form of experiential learning, community-engaged learning requires students to test out their theories, values, and worldviews through direct interactions and activities in and with community. Feminist faculty apply great intentionality in selecting and cultivating community partnerships with organizations that espouse a social change orientation in their work. They work in trusting relationships with partners to co-develop projects that allow students to connect their experiences to course concepts, and contribute to the organization’s priorities and needs. Additionally, feminist faculty often match students with host organizations based on a deep and
nuanced understanding of the student’s talents and limitations as well as the organization’s culture (Clark-Taylor, 2017; De Santis & Serafini, 2015; Rojas, 2015, Santiago-Ortiz, 2019; Williams & Ferber, 2008).

Reflection is another integral part of the community-engaged learning process that potentially aligns with feminist praxis. In community-engaged courses, students analyze and synthesize their experiences from community and classroom into new understandings. In traditional community-engaged courses, reflection is both a process and a demonstration of learning, primarily focused on helping students understand disciplinary concepts in light of real world application. A feminist approach to reflection requires attention to the cognitive and affective aspects of the learning experience. In other words, faculty structure classroom activities, assignments, and discussions to foster students’ critical thinking about how power, privilege, and oppression manifest as pervasive social inequities (Clark-Taylor, 2017; Martin & Beese, 2016; Rojas, 2015; Seethaler, 2016). Learning experiences are designed to cultivate students’ feelings of empathy and solidarity with communities bearing the brunt of these injustices. Additionally, Costa and Leong (2013) assert the value of self-reflection as a necessary process for guiding students to examine their own identities and positionalities vis-a-vis community, and how they are implicated in perpetuating the justice issues they are observing and engaging. Reflection in feminist community-engaged courses is ongoing, guided, and takes many forms including journaling and discussion (De Santis & Serafini, 2015; Seethaler, 2016).

Further, the very nature of community-engaged learning requires faculty to orchestrate literal and figurative border-crossing, a critical feminist concept that describes
working across difference in theory and practice (Clark-Taylor, 2017). Students cross borders between campus and community to participate in their learning praxis, engaging in experiences that cannot be simulated or replicated within the confines of a classroom. They also get to move fluidly across a continuum that positions them more as knowledge-seekers on one end and knowledge-holders on the other end as they navigate the classroom and community settings. This is because feminist community engagement recognizes students and community partners as wisdom holders whose knowledge is as valuable as the academic expertise held by the faculty member (De Santis & Serafini, 2017). These border crossings challenge binary thinking inculcated in students through patriarchal education systems, creating new cognitive schema for understanding a continuum of diverse possibilities.

Additionally, feminist community-engaged learning happens within relationships of equity, mutual respect, and accountability (Clark-Taylor, 2017; Costa & Leong, 2013; Williams & Ferber, 2008). These relationships span between faculty and students, faculty and community partners, students and community partners, students and community members, and among students. Feminist educators strive to create a democratic learning environment that reduces power dynamics across stakeholder relationships by inviting each person to share their perspectives and experiences, contributing to collective understandings of the human experience (Rojas, 2015; Santiago-Ortiz, 2019). Community partners function as co-educators in these courses, asserting their own expertise as people working on the front lines to address injustice. Faculty, students, and community partners participate in a practice of mutual accountability where they bring their whole selves to the community-engaged learning relationship. Each provides labor,
wisdom, and time to accomplish shared expectations; and each benefits in some way from the collective experience. In some courses, students also benefit from a mentoring relationship with faculty, community partners and “near peers” who model a praxis of lifelong learning and self-reflection for students to emulate (Clark-Taylor, 2017; Williams & Ferber, 2008).

Finally, feminist community-engaged learning aspires to ambitious goals of raising students’ critical consciousness, developing their sense of empowerment as change agents, and contributing to social transformation by putting feminism into action (Clark-Taylor, 2017; Costa & Leong, 2013; Martin & Beese, 2016; Rojas, 2015; Santiago-Ortiz, 2019; Seethaler, 2016; Williams & Ferber, 2008). Feminist educators take an explicitly political stance of unveiling, critiquing, and dismantling systemic injustices; eschewing pressure from their neoliberal institutions to develop learning experiences that promote apolitical conceptions of civic participation. The development of critical consciousness involves noticing the complexities and contradictions inherent in our lived experience; questioning and critiquing the status quo; identifying the role of power, privilege, and oppression in shaping our world; and cultivating a sense of responsibility and efficacy to create more humanizing and equitable conditions (Freire, 1970). Traditional community-engaged learning courses rarely list these explicitly activist skills and dispositions as learning outcomes, instead dwelling mostly in the realm of broad (apolitical) civic competencies like communicating across differences, working collaboratively to achieve a shared goal, and understanding the role of nonprofits in society (Costa & Leong, 2013; Santiago-Ortiz, 2019). For feminist faculty, community-engaged learning is a form of doing feminism, or putting feminism into action, through
contributing to ongoing efforts to enact social change (Seethaler, 2016). Further, students carry the skills, knowledge, and experiences from these courses into their lives as they figure out how to continue to translate their feminisms into action (Clark-Taylor, 2017; Rojas, 2015).

Though the literature reviewed for this section focused primarily on feminist pedagogical practices for community-engaged learning, I assert that much can be extrapolated to how CEPs advance community engagement at their institutions. Many CEPs facilitate community-engaged programs and activities for students, functioning essentially as educators. In these roles, it is easy to see how the frameworks and practices above can be integrated. Further, CEPs often facilitate professional development for faculty in the form of workshops, fellowships, learning communities, book clubs, etc. These learning opportunities can explicitly draw on feminist theory, principles, and practices to guide faculty in choosing course content, implementing learning processes, cultivating relationships, and setting goals with a focus on examining power, privilege, and oppression and working toward social transformation. At a “meta” level, CEPs can draw on this body of literature to continue educating themselves about how to effectively translate feminism into action. Through self-reflective practices, CEPs might analyze their work through questions like: What theories and worldviews are guiding my community-engaged work, and the work of colleagues at my institution? What narratives, perspectives, and epistemologies are we privileging or marginalizing? How are we developing collaborative activities and border crossings that are mutually enriching? To what extent do relationships across community-engaged stakeholders reflect equity and accountability? What are the ultimate goals of our community-engaged programs and
initiatives for our students, our institution, and our community partners? Who is defining
those goals and how are we ensuring the goals advance social justice? Indeed, whether
CEPs function directly as educators of students or fulfill other positions in higher
education, the literature on feminist community-engaged pedagogy is instructive and
applicable.

**Feminist engaged scholarship**

Literature on feminist community-engaged scholarship shares common themes of
lifting traditionally unheard voices, collaborative research processes, researcher
reflexivity, and inquiry for the purpose of advancing social justice. It’s worth noting that
these themes are quite similar to what emerged from the feminist pedagogy literature
above, suggesting that feminism is a way of being and doing that pervades all aspects of a
feminist faculty member’s intellectual work. For the purposes of this part of the literature
review, I am using the term community-engaged scholarship as it parallels the language
in the rest of my study. However, I feel compelled to disclose that this term is contested
and critiqued across academic disciplines; and is often replaced by other terms like
activist scholarship, action research, or engaged scholarship. While some of the authors
referenced below chose to use these different terms in their publications, the nature of the
scholarship they described aligns closely with this definition of community-engaged
scholarship:

...the dynamic integration of the scholarship of teaching, research, and service
where faculty work is grounded in an active commitment to campus mission and
community needs. Where scholars doing the scholarship of engagement are
motivated to act in partnership with external communities and use their expertise and resources to address society’s problems. (Ward, 2010, p. 45)

When combined, feminism and community-engaged scholarship conspire to illuminate and synthesize the voices and perspectives of marginalized individuals and groups, challenging dominant constructs of expertise and epistemology. It’s worth noting that the faculty who typically conduct community-engaged scholarship often hold identities, as women and people of color, that are marginalized by the academy (Fairbairn, 2019). In addition, institutions devalue the nature of their engaged research, which focuses on curating and sharing the stories of oppressed individuals and/or collecting quantitative data that highlights systemic inequities. Conducting community-engaged scholarship is an act of resistance against rigid positivist epistemological norms that prescribe what research matters and who counts as a researcher. In fact, Verjee (2012) posits that community-engaged scholarship is not just about lifting up community-based narratives, but also diverse communities’ epistemologies and ontologies. The assumption is that society will not only benefit from learning what marginalized groups know, but how they know it and how they enact that knowledge in their lives. Ward (2010) additionally contends that women’s engaged scholarship reflects distinct ways of knowing, being, and engaging that emanate from intersections between their identities, lived experiences, institutional and community contexts, and values-driven sense of responsibility to advance equity and justice. She asserts that individual scholarly practice, higher education institutions, and the field of community engagement must account for, and integrate, “women’s ways of engagement” to truly fulfill a public purpose.
Focusing in on scholarly practice, feminist community-engaged research relies on participation and collaboration between the faculty member and the community (Putnam & Dempsey, 2015). Ward (2010), who uses the construct of gender instead of feminism, asserts that women’s engaged scholarship reflects reciprocal relationships and rootedness in place. Instead of framing community members as research objects from which data is to be extracted and analyzed, community members are seen as research subjects who have specific and valuable wisdom, expertise, and knowledge. In fact, in some cases, community members become co-researchers, setting the agenda, generating research questions, collecting and analyzing data, and disseminating findings in partnership with the faculty. This is typically referred to as participatory action research.

To truly foster a scholarly relationship with community that lifts marginalized voices and includes community members as collaborators, faculty must engage in ongoing reflexivity about their identities, positionalities, values, and ethics (Fairbairn, 2019; Putnam & Dempsey, 2015; Ward, 2010). This requires deep knowledge of constructs of social identity; dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression; historic and contemporary relationships between campus and community; and ethical frameworks and guidelines for conducting research with vulnerable populations (Verjee, 2012).

Finally, the purpose of feminist community-engaged scholarship is to contribute to social transformation toward a more just and equitable world (Fairbairn, 2019; Putnam & Dempsey, 2015). Ward (2010) frames this as a responsibility to engage in political action through research that challenges systems of inequity. Research findings might surface otherwise obscured information about injustices, synthesize knowledge to inform policy reform, or advance a theoretical or conceptual framework for enacting change. In
other words, faculty don’t do research merely for the sake of publishing in a journal or achieving tenure. Rather, the primary purpose of the research is to affect real social change.

These feminist community-engaged scholarship themes are instructive and applicable to CEPs in their roles as community-campus liaisons and program evaluators, and in their relationships with faculty, students, and community partners. CEPs should bring awareness of the tensions between positivist academic cultural norms and Western European epistemologies on one hand, and community-based epistemologies and ontologies on the other, into how they develop opportunities for collaboration and border-crossing between campus and community. Additionally, as program evaluators, CEPs can employ principles of seeking and lifting up diverse voices as well as working collaboratively with stakeholders to shape program revisions. In relationships with community-engaged faculty, CEPs should be mindful of the barriers and risks posed by doing this type of scholarship and work in solidarity as champions and supporters. When engaging diverse students in programs and activities, CEPs can create a culture whereby their perspectives, epistemologies, and ontologies are invited and valued. Similarly, engaging in true collaboration with community partners requires an understanding of them as co-educators who bring unique and valuable expertise and experiences into the relationship.

**Feminist frameworks for institutional community-campus partnerships**

Zooming out from the realms of community-engaged teaching and scholarship, there’s scant literature on how feminist praxis can inform community-campus partnerships at an institutional level. In an edited volume from 2015, Iverson and James
summarize thematic guidance for higher education community engagement, calling for a focus on boundary crossing, relationship building, reflexivity, and disruptive practice. These themes mirror what emerges in the literature in above sections, demonstrating that feminist principles, values, and praxis can be infused at the individual, interpersonal, institutional, and systemic levels. With regard to physical boundary crossing (or border crossing), scholars describe multiple practices, including moving programs and events to be physically located in the community (Noel, 2014) and conducting field-trips and place-based learning (Clark-Taylor et al, 2014). Shaaban-Magana and Miller (2014) also discuss mental border crossing in community-campus engagement, which requires a shift in how we recognize the importance of bringing community epistemologies into the academy to shape higher education curriculum and practices.

Feminist scholars further assert that relationship building is foundational to community-campus engagement, and focus on the essential qualities of strong relationships. Whether at the individual or institutional level, scholars call for the practice of “showing up” and “being there,” meaning we must be in and with community in order to demonstrate our commitment to the relationship (Noel, 2014). It cannot be built simply on email exchanges, phone calls, and MOUs. For relationships to reflect a justice orientation, they must be reciprocal, with each individual or institution accounting for the investment of labor and expertise, developing shared expectations, and working to mitigate challenges. Ultimately, there should be a high level of trust that grows out of a demonstrated care and concern for each other’s well being and commitment to following through on shared work (Noel, 2014). At the aspirational level, Mena and Vaccaro (2014) describe how women faculty of color characterize their relationships with community as
familial, connoting a sense that people are looking out for each other and you feel like you belong to the group and in a particular place. How can CEPs play a role in fostering this level of commitment whereby campus and community feel like a cohesive family?

Another component of feminist community-campus partnerships is reflexivity, which is “a process of reflection in which one examines oneself, her assumptions and preconceptions, and how these affect decisions, experience, and actions” (Iverson & James, 2014, p 4). The chapters in Iverson and James’ book illustrate examples of feminist faculty, staff, and students reflecting on their practice and narrating their learning journeys. Each contributor roots their piece in feminist theoretical frameworks, describes their program or course, provides their research methodology, and analyzes their findings in a way that demonstrates commitment to advancing equity and social justice. At the institutional level, Verjee and Butterwick (2014) call upon institutions to reckon with their own systemic perpetuation of oppressive White supremacist patriarchal ideologies and practices, and how they affect internal campus constituencies, before focusing their efforts on “fixing” the social problems happening in communities beyond campus.

Feminist scholars argue that disruptive practices necessarily grow out of feminist reflexivity. In the context of community-campus engagement, disruptive practices include programs and policies that challenge positivist and neoliberal norms that govern academia. One of the most impactful examples of a disruptive practice is reshaping promotion and tenure guidelines to value engaged teaching and research equitably with traditional teaching and research models (Mena & Vaccaro, 2014). Until this work is
valued on par with other types of scholarship and teaching, it will always be a professional risk for faculty to engage in it.

Another disruptive practice is claiming the explicitly political nature of community-engaged teaching and research, infusing curricula and practices into our programming that illuminate dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression (Bisignani, 2014). This can be integrated into faculty development, course curricula, public events, and co-curricular programs. Additionally, institutions would benefit from centering the voices of women of color, who have a legacy of doing community-centered work as an expression of their identities and values (Mena & Vaccaro, 2014; Verjee & Butterwick, 2014). The challenge, of course, is to center their voices without adding the burden of extra labor for shaping the practice of the entire institution. One way to mitigate this is to reward community-engaged teaching and scholarship in tenure and promotion. An additional way is to compensate the women of color students and community partners who contribute to these efforts. In fact, creating policies that value and compensate community-situated epistemologies in the academy is another necessary disruption to transform institutions to be more accountable to their public purpose.

CEPs can integrate the lessons from this body of scholarship into their praxis, especially given their roles in guiding institutional community engagement policies and practices. The calling to span boundaries and build relationships can manifest as physically be in community as much as possible to attend meetings, events, and protests. Further, CEPs span the boundaries across academic departmental silos, facilitating opportunities for faculty to learn how to do community engagement from peers across disciplines. They are also positioned to integrate community-situated epistemologies into
programing, and (ideally) provide compensation to the co-educators providing their wisdom and expertise, which speaks to boundary-spanning and integrating disruptive practices. CEPs can extend their disruption of dominant norms by curating and disseminating resources that address power, privilege, and oppression. Finally, CEPs should acknowledge the particular historical and contemporary role that women of color have played as community weavers and wisdom holders both inside and outside of the academy, and look to them as guides or role models whose insights can shape our practices to be more aligned with an orientation toward advancing social justice.

Summary

My study builds on this interwoven corpus of literature that combines the historical and current context of higher education community engagement, the evolving role of community engagement professionals, a compendium of critical feminist perspectives and theories, and application of feminist theory to community engagement in teaching, research, and institutional practice. Examining dominant and counter narratives about the origins and principles shaping community engagement guides me to ensure that I situate my research to lift up and integrate otherwise marginalized voices in community engagement literature, particularly the voices of critical feminist CEPs, many of whom are also people of color.

Additionally, a deep dive into the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required of CEPs, along with an understanding of the breadth of their roles, allows me to calibrate the study around their potential to affect institutional change. I have drawn on my own journey of immersion into critical feminist scholarship as a foundation to shape my
practice and clarify the lines of inquiry I pursue in advancing the community engagement field.

Finally, seeking out and analyzing literature that directly combines feminist praxis and community engagement has been a joyful and inspiring process, locating my aspirational work within existing scholarship focused primarily on faculty as the subjects of study. Indeed, I see that my research can truly fill a gap in the literature, as it speaks specifically to how CEPs employ critical feminist praxis to reshape the public purpose of higher education to be more oriented toward social justice.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The themes that emerged from my literature review affirm the originality and necessity of my lines of inquiry in this study. I examine how critical feminism, either explicitly-espoused or implicitly-embodied, informs the ways community engagement professionals (CEPs) reimagine and transform the public purpose of higher education, focusing on the following research questions:

- What critical feminist principles and theories guide community engagement professionals (CEPs) in their work?
- How do critical feminist CEPs understand the relationship between community engagement and higher education?
- How do critical feminist CEPs define their roles and responsibilities within their institutions and the broader community?
- How do critical feminist principles and theories guide the practices and policies developed by CEPs? Specifically, how do CEPs collaborate with community partners?
- How do critical feminist CEPs envision the ideal community-engaged institution? In what ways does that vision reflect the collective aspirations of community partners?
- What theories or strategies for institutional change do critical feminist CEPs employ to work toward their vision?

This qualitative study uses a grounded theory design. I chose a qualitative methodology for several reasons. First, the nature of the research questions require a qualitative approach in order to generate relevant and actionable findings. Further,
qualitative methodology aligns well with critical feminist theory and praxis in that it centers humanizing narratives, and accounts for the diversity of experiences, actions, and contexts of research participants. Within the framework of qualitative methodology, I specifically chose grounded theory design because the lack of scholarship on my topic indicates that new conceptual frameworks are needed to elucidate the phenomenon of CEPs employing critical feminist praxis in their professional work.

The main data collection process for this grounded theory study involved three components: 1) initial outreach to participants with an invitation to self-select into the study based on identification with a description of critical feminist principles and community engagement experience, 2) individual interviews with CEPs, and 3) observations of CEPs engaging in a collaborative visioning conversation with community partners. Integrating these three distinct but connected components is a form of triangulation (Creswell, 2014) whereby the validity of findings increases because multiple sources and types of data are analyzed for common themes.

Drawing on the participants’ self-selection into the study, individual interview transcripts, and CP co-visioning conversation transcripts, I moved through multiple rounds of data analysis, using coding to develop themes related to CEPs’ praxis. According to Linneberg and Korsgaard (2019), the practice of coding involves analyzing coherent portions of text and assigning labels to them that summarize the content. These codes evolve into themes for further analysis. The first part of my process entailed deductive coding, which means I drew from a list of pre-defined thematic labels (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Though I position this research as grounded theory, I began with a critical feminist framework as a lens of analysis for the data. I apply this
framework, adrienne maree brown’s Emergent Strategy Elements (2017), in a novel context: as a praxis within higher education institutions for the purpose of guiding them toward a more authentic embodiment of their public purpose. Further, I engaged in inductive coding to capture themes that did not align with the Emergent Strategy Elements. Inductive coding is a process of noticing similar themes and messages across multiple sources of data and synthesizing them into a common category for analysis (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

Thematic findings were validated through “member checking,” which involves sharing codes and/or drafts of the report back with interview participants to ensure fidelity to their original message and intent (Creswell 2014). I elucidated each theme with evidence from multiple data sources, connecting them with parallel themes in critical feminist scholarship. Themes were synthesized into a conceptual framework and a set of recommendations for improving practice.

This grounded theory study draws upon critical feminist methodology and participatory action research (PAR) principles as a demonstration of my commitment to conducting research that contributes to positive social change. In alignment with feminist methodology and PAR principles, I continuously examined my positionality as a White, middle class, cis-gender woman who has worked for 15 years as a community engagement professional and holds deep and broad relationships with many colleagues in the field, including some of the interview participants.

The actual research process was joyful, inclusive, generative, and creative. Guided by my dissertation committee, feminist principles, and an ongoing process of self-reflection, I moved through a process that had strong methodological integrity while
also infusing a humanizing approach to research. I participated in deeply meaningful conversations with CEPs and facilitated co-visioning conversations between CEPs and community partners that yielded new insights into the work of community engagement and its intersection with critical feminism. Further, I found these conversations strengthened my relationships with each interview participant, and also infused CEP and community partner relationships with new understandings and appreciations. Across the board, all participants expressed appreciation for having time and space to reflect on their work and having their perspectives heard and shared. Above all, I felt thrilled and inspired by the conceptual framework that organically emerged from the convergence of themes across the conversations and interactions among participants.

**Grounded Theory Design**

According to Creswell (2014), grounded theory research emerged from the field of sociology for the purpose of developing a theory based on the experiences and worldviews of research participants. Grounded theory is the most appropriate design for this study because research on community engagement professionals is still sparse and emerging. Most of the existing literature describes the roles, responsibilities, and competencies required of CEPs, but very little examines the interplay between CEPs’ theoretical understandings and their practices to advance the public purpose of higher education. I was unable to find any study that specifically analyzed how CEPs knowingly or unknowingly apply critical feminist theories and principles to shape their work and their vision for higher education community engagement. My study begins to fill this gap. Through a rigorous process of participant selection, data collection, coding, and creation of themes, I advance a conceptual framework rooted in critical feminist theory.
meant to explain and shape understandings and practices related to the CEPs’ role in transforming higher education toward an authentic public purpose.

**Critical Feminist Methodology**

This study is rooted in critical feminist theory, which “calls us to reconsider our existing understandings of knowledge, power, and spaces of empowerment” (de Saxe, 2012 p. 183). Feminist research methodologies are meant to be humanizing, treating participants with respect and reverence as wisdom-holders and experts in their own lives. The participants in my study were invited to share their expertise and insights via Zoom interviews, which were loosely guided by an interview protocol so they had the freedom and flexibility to share what was most salient and urgent for them. Further, feminist research methodologies recognize the role of context and relationships in research. While there are threads of commonality across experiences of diverse research participants, their unique contexts and relationships are a powerful force in shaping their worldviews and experiences. In this study, I analyzed the role of relationships and institutional context in CEPs’ praxis through a collaborative visioning project with a respected community partner that each CEP identifies.

In alignment with feminist methodology’s effort to interrogate and transform our dysfunctional education system, hooks (2015) contends that there has long been a conflict between theory and practice in feminist movement, with theory residing primarily in academia and the practice of social transformation being advanced by women and allies who have traditionally not had access to higher education, including women of color and working class women. I identified CEPs who embody a feminist praxis, meaning they are involved in creating theory while also engaging directly in struggle for social
transformation inside and outside of the academy. I asked these CEPs to identify community partners who also (knowingly or unknowingly) embody feminist praxis in their work as members of organizations that directly address social injustices. As a result, my study participants defy the artificially constructed dichotomy in feminist movement by engaging in conversations that blur the boundaries across domains of academic and community-based knowledge and action for change. Additionally, hooks (2015) argues that feminist methodology requires research to be made accessible and relevant to audiences outside of academia. While my research primarily looks at the role of CEPs in transforming the public purpose of higher education, my goal is that my conceptual framework might be of interest to allies from outside of the academy in the struggle for more just communities and educational institutions. Finally, feminist methodology requires research to inform action for social change. De Saxe (2012) asserts that critical feminism “is a valid methodology for reworking our educational institutions to better reflect equity, emancipation, and true liberation” (p 189). Inspired by this assertion, my study was designed to inspire CEPs and their collaborators to engage in more intentional and effective praxis to advance an authentic public purpose for higher education, while also adding to bodies of literature in community engagement, higher education, and feminist theory.

**Participatory Action Research Principles**

Participatory action research (PAR) draws upon multiple grassroots traditions, including “international liberationist, feminist, antiracist, activist, and social justice movements” (Koirala-Azad & Fuentes, 2009, p 2). Though I did not employ a PAR methodology, I have committed to integrating some PAR principles to guide my research.
To begin, PAR explicitly acknowledges the existence of power imbalances in interpersonal and institutional relationships, and in the research process (Lake & Wendland, 2018). As staff at higher education institutions where faculty are traditionally seen as being more valuable and holding more expertise, CEPs face varying degrees of marginalization based on their professional positions and the status of their educational degrees. This is in addition to any identity-based oppression CEPs might experience as women, people of color, individuals with disabilities, etc. Marginalization might manifest in the way faculty choose to work with CEPs, how institutional resources are allocated to community engagement endeavors, the titles and compensation CEPs receive, and the roles and responsibilities that CEPs are granted. Thus, lifting up CEP voices is an act of honoring the latent power that they hold; challenging traditional distributions of power across faculty, administrators, and staff; and building their capacity to wield power toward positive transformation of higher education.

Additionally, PAR is committed to individual transformation for researcher and participants (Koirala-Azad & Fuentes, 2009). Participants in PAR studies have indicated that the research process was a meaningful opportunity to engage in self-reflection and learn from others (Balakrishnan & Claiborne, 2017; Francisco, 2014, Garcia & Garcia, 2016; Wagaman, 2015). The research process educates everyone involved, with participants and researchers learning reciprocally from each other through the interviews, dialogues, and observations. The knowledge, skills, and dispositions that participants develop build their capacity for future research and action. The CEP participants in this study had the opportunity to learn from and with their community partners through a
collaborative visioning activity. Through “member checking,” participants also learned from, and contributed to, the thematic findings and conceptual framework that emerged.

Finally, the purpose of PAR is to create positive social change, but Koirala-Azad and Fuentes (2009) recognize that this often looks more like small scale revisions within institutions than large scale changes to systems of injustice. These changes matter, and are driven by the “commitment and diligence of a community of like-minded and committed people” (p 2). The scholars’ analysis of the impact of PAR feels affirming to me as a researcher because I recognize that the scope of this research project, and the work of CEPs, is limited but necessary if we situate our work within a broader struggle to make education more equitable and accessible to all people, relevant to the priorities and needs of our communities, and responsive to the most pressing issues of our world.

Researcher Positionality

I am pursuing a line of inquiry about critical feminist praxis and CEPs because I identify as both a critical feminist and a CEP. My commitment to critical feminist praxis formally developed in the past two years as a student in USF’s Organization and Leadership program. Though some of my previously existing values and practices related to community engagement already aligned with feminist ways of being, much of what I have learned through engagement with feminist texts, media, scholars, educators, and practitioners has significantly shaped my practice. Additionally, I am compelled to honor how peers and mentors within my doctoral program have contributed to my formation as a feminist. I have been fortunate to move through a progression of learning opportunities provided by Dr. Jane Bleasdale, my dissertation chair, that began with a course entitled Critical Feminist Perspectives on Leadership, continued with an immersive women’s
retreat, and currently functions as an informal learning community known as The Fem Ten. I have learned from, and alongside, women with diverse backgrounds and identities who have gifted me with their friendship and vulnerability and deeply honest insights. While I have not cited our conversations in my literature review, I affirm that their wisdom has shaped how I see the world.

My development as a feminist professional and researcher is also significantly influenced by the scholarship of Elaine Ward, particularly her 2010 dissertation on *Women’s Ways of Engagement: An Exploration of Gender, the Scholarship of Engagement, and Institutional Rewards Policy and Practice*. She intentionally set out to lift up the voices of women doing community-engaged scholarship, seeking to illuminate the extent to which gender influenced their work. I was inspired by her focus on women’s stories as a source of wisdom that can and should shape the field of community engagement. In addition, Dr. Ward boldly challenged traditional research paradigms in her study by integrating reflections on her professional trajectory and personal learning from the research process. I appreciated how she conveyed her deep connections to the women’s stories and to the findings that emerged from her analysis. Her style of writing resonated so much with my desire to reflect the organic integration of my values, professional work, and the research I wanted to undertake; and gave me permission to identify and articulate the personal dimensions of my research process. I also saw a way where my scholarship could complement hers by focusing on a different group within our field. Whereas Dr. Ward focused on community-engaged faculty, my interest lied in exploring the experiences of CEPs. I originally considered focusing on the experiences of women, as Dr. Ward had done, but in conversation with mentors and colleagues, decided
to take a different approach of identifying CEPs that have infused critical feminist praxis into their professional work.

Out of these foundations of critical feminism in my doctoral program and in the community engagement field, I have developed an ardent aspiration to work through collective movement building to transform higher education to be more equitable, accountable, and socially just. As someone who has spent 15 years in the field of higher education community engagement, I see the role of CEPs as crucial to catalyzing institutional change in this regard. This field has truly become my life’s work, and I care deeply about the future directions of higher education community engagement and its power to reshape the public purpose of colleges and universities, especially in a context of pervasive neoliberalism that seems to be tilting institutions toward more capitalist and exploitative agendas. I have also developed powerful relationships with CEPs at other institutions, faculty, community partners, staff and administrators, and students. My most valuable learning has come from the people with whom I have had the privilege to work, so I see this study as a bit of a love letter to my collaborators, allies, mentors, and friends who have shaped me as a human and as a CEP.

I also feel it is important to name my positionality as a White, middle class, cis-gender woman. These identities have shaped my worldview and participation in professional spaces, affording me significant privilege and power, while also requiring me to navigate daily experiences of sexism. It is only in the past five years that I have done the deep work of explicitly examining and interrogating the ways I have perpetuated identity-based oppression in my work. During that time, I have also actively pursued ways to engage in ongoing reflection and self-directed education to unlearn hegemonic
ways of understanding the world, contribute to existing movement work and take collective action to disrupt oppressive practices and systems, collaborate with diverse colleagues on remaking and reorienting our work to be more intentionally liberating and empowering, particularly for traditionally marginalized people. I acknowledge my shortcomings and growing edges with humility, recognizing that I continue to make mistakes and misunderstand issues even as I strive to achieve greater understanding and act in solidarity. This research project is an embodiment of my deep commitment to leveraging my own privileges in service to the broader causes of educational equity, community accountability, and social justice.

**Research Process**

After passing my dissertation proposal defense, my research process began by drafting and vetting the frameworks for data collection. I developed the interview protocol based on my research questions and field-tested it with a trusted colleague within my institution to ensure that the questions made sense, were accessible and understandable, and yielded my desired data. Based on feedback from my colleague, I made small revisions to the questions and determined that it would be beneficial to share the interview questions in advance with participants so they would have time to reflect on their answers. Additionally, I shared the co-visioning activity framework with my dissertation committee, inviting feedback on the structure and content. My committee approved the activity as it was originally designed.

As a result, I was prepared to submit a proposal to USF’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) in October 2020. The proposal included multiple supplementary documents: consent forms, outreach templates, and interview protocols that can be found in the
appendices. I received approval from USF’s Institutional Review Board in November 2020 (Appendix A), and began my outreach. I employed a purposeful selection process (Creswell, 2014) to identify a list of approximately 15 CEPs from across diverse higher education institutions as possible participants in the research study. This list reflected my own network of colleagues, as well as some recommended by dissertation committee members. I recognize that some scholars might critique this approach as biased because it limits the participant pool primarily to acquaintances or “acquaintances of acquaintances,” but as a feminist scholar and community engagement practitioner, I assert that there is value and validity in selecting qualitative research participants with whom one has a relationship of trust and understanding to facilitate honest sharing of insights and experiences. Therefore, among the list of potential participants, I prioritized outreach to eight initial invitees based on two factors: depth of relationship and diversity. In other words, I felt the ideal participants were people I knew well, or at least counted as acquaintances, and those with diverse backgrounds. Six of the original invitees were folks from my own network, and two were folks recommended by my dissertation committee members. I had previously met and interacted with the latter invitees, but did not consider them to be close contacts.

The email invitation to potential interview participants included a set of criteria for identifying as an eligible (e.g. non-entry level) community engagement professional, and a list of critical feminist principles with which participants must identify (Appendix B). Interested participants were invited to determine whether their role aligns with the CEP criteria, and their perspectives and practices explicitly or implicitly align with the principles of critical feminism. They also had to confirm that they were willing to
identify and invite a community partner to participate in a co-visioning activity, and adhere to my desired timeline for data collection: January-February 2021.

Of the original eight invitees, five immediately said “yes.” One immediately said no, citing a health issue that she needed to focus on. One expressed a desire to participate, but was new to her position at her current institution and did not feel she could reach out to a community partner, so I excluded her from the study. One invitee responded with some follow up questions, including an inquiry about whether we could adapt the collaborative visioning activity to be more specific to a collaboration she was doing with a community partner. After consulting with my dissertation chair, and making the case for flexibility in alignment with feminist and PAR principles, I decided to include this CEP in the study. This meant I secured six participants through my first round outreach, but I wanted to secure at least one more. I systematically moved through my potential participants list, yielding an additional “no,” a “no response,” and (finally) a “yes” response from one more participant. Thus, the study includes a total of seven CEP participants.

Participants represented six different institutions, including two public research institutions, two private research universities (one of which is considered ivy league), and two faith-based universities. Two participants are from the same faith-based institution. Four participants are located on the West Coast, and three on the East Coast. Five out of the six institutions are located in urban settings with one in a suburban location. I provide these descriptors of institution types and locations because context matters. CEPs often discuss how the culture of their institutions affects their legitimacy and capacity to advance community engagement. For example, colleagues at research institutions often
describe significant challenges to institutionalizing and legitimating community-engaged scholarship because it doesn’t conform to traditional positivist research standards. At public universities, community engagement is meant to fulfill their public purpose, but may be relegated to extension and outreach programs, as is common at land grant universities. At faith-based institutions, the ethos of community engagement aligns with institutional mission, but can be limited by narrow conceptions of engagement as charity and service. In other words, there are benefits and drawbacks to doing community engagement at any institution, and CEPs know that these benefits and drawbacks operate in a unique amalgam according to institution type, culture, geography, etc.

Each CEP’s role is classified as assistant director or higher. One CEP directs a division at their institution, two direct campus centers for community engagement, and four are staff within their community-engagement center. Their careers in the field of community engagement span from eight to 25 years. Their centers have a range of reporting structures, including reporting lines through academic affairs, student affairs, or divisions of institutional mission or community-facing operations. Six participants identify as women and one identifies as a man. Three participants identify as people of color, with four identifying as White.

Given the current pandemic situation, I scheduled interviews to take place via Zoom in January 2021. Prior to the initial interview, all participants signed informed consent forms approved by USF’s IRB (Appendix C). To protect the anonymity of participants, I use pseudonyms instead of their names. I also refrain from identifying their exact institutions, employing general descriptors related to relevant institutional characteristics. Participant interviews lasted approximately 50-55 minutes, and were
loosely structured by an interview protocol aligned to my research questions (Appendix D). Participants received the interview questions 3-5 days in advance of their interviews with an invitation to review and reflect on them in advance if they had the time and inclination. Prior review and reflection were not required, but all participants indicated that they had read the questions in advance and appreciated the time to think through their answers before we met.

During the interviews, I attempted to create an informal and conversational tone, asking the original interview questions but also inserting follow up questions and comments meant to clarify what was shared. The interviews were video recorded and transcribed via the Zoom platform. Directly after each interview, I jotted down notes about themes that emerged from the conversation as a starting point for inductive and deductive coding during the data analysis process. Subsequently, I rewatched each recorded interview and made corrections to the transcripts to accurately reflect the exact words that were shared. I emailed participants with the clean transcripts, providing an opportunity for them to offer clarifications or additional information. None of the participants provided any revisions or additions to the original transcripts.

In addition to the interviews, I asked each participant to identify a community partner who has been a collaborator in their community-engaged work. These community partners joined the CEPs in a facilitated conversation about setting an aspiration or vision for how the CEPs university could fulfill its public purpose in an authentic way. For the purpose of this study, a community partner is defined as a staff member who works in a nonprofit, public institution, movement-based organization, or other entity that advances the public good as evidenced by the entity’s mission, structure, and services. Eligible
community partners have a history of a sustained relationship with the CEP and/or their higher education institution.

On February 1, 2021, I provided a template email for CEPs to invite their community partners to the visioning conversation (Appendix E). My request was to schedule the CEP/CP conversations during the months of February/March. Once the CP agreed to the CEP’s invitation, I stepped in to arrange the conversation logistics. As with CEPs, community partners signed informed consent forms approved by USF’s institutional review board (Appendix F). Conversation participants received the prompting questions for the co-visioning conversation in advance to allow them time to reflect on their answers. Together with their community partner, each CEP engaged in a 45-55 minute collaborative visioning conversation that I facilitated via Zoom (Appendix G). One conversation was an outlier, in that it didn’t follow my protocol. I received approval from my chair to allow one CEP, Alethia, to structure the conversation with her community partner as a planning meeting for a collaborative summer institute they were running. In this instance, I played the role of observer for most of the conversation as they moved through their agenda, and then asked some follow up questions on their institute at the end. This alternative format still yielded rich data on the nature of their relationship, how they co-vision and plan together, and how community wisdom is honored.

To provide a profile of the partners who participated, I offer up some broad descriptors. All of the community partners had a history of working with students and faculty from the CEP’s institution, as well as working directly with the CEP. Five of the CPs’ relationships to the institution pre-dated the CEP’s arrival. Two partnerships were
newly cultivated by the CEP. The length of relationships between CEPs and CPs ranged from one year to 19 years. CPs represented the following types of organizations: a public school, a faith-based community organizing coalition, two youth development organizations, a cultural arts organization, a nonprofit consultant, and a center for nonviolent organizing. Five of the community partners also served, or currently serve, on various committees for the higher education institution, including search committees, strategic planning committees, and community advisory boards.

The co-visioning conversation allowed each CEP and their community partner to move through a creative process that illuminated how their relationship contributes to the creation of, and aspiration toward, a shared vision of the public purpose of higher education. Again, the Zoom session was video recorded and transcribed. I also took notes on observations of the interactions between CEPs and community partners. I shared the clean transcripts and observation notes with CEPs and community partners for their review. None of the participants responded to request any revisions, additions, or corrections. As with the CEP participants, I protected community partners’ anonymity by using pseudonyms and general descriptions about the nature of their organizations in my findings.

The co-visioning activity serves multiple purposes. First, it provided an opportunity for more diverse perspectives to shape the study, and (by extension) the field. While there’s great value in hearing directly from CEPs about their work, we know that higher education community engagement is meant to include multiple stakeholders’ perspectives in mutually shaping relationships, processes, and outcomes (Dostilio & Perry, 2017). Further, the co-visioning activity serves as a form of data triangulation.
According to Creswell (2014), triangulation involves examining evidence from multiple data sources to build a coherent justification for the themes and increase the study’s validity. I expected that CEPs would provide honest and vulnerable accounts of their own understandings, practices, and commitments related to their work, but it was important to consider the extent to which their community partner collaborators experience them in ways that align with their self-descriptions. Finally, I am committed to finding ways to bring CEPs and community partners together for generative and visionary conversations, so my hope was that participants would find joy in this opportunity to dream big together. Opportunities like this build trust and strengthen relationships (Glaser & Tartell, 2014), so I see this as a valuable collateral outcome of the study.

Data analysis included both deductive and inductive coding. I used “hand coding” instead of a software platform to conduct coding because I wanted to engage intimately with the artifacts from my data collection and have tangible copies of transcripts to review, hold, and carry with me as I thought through emergent themes. Hand coding is the process of segmenting data by hand while reviewing print artifacts (Creswell, 2014). I also employed “color coding,” applying different colors of highlighters to indicate each theme (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019) using a coding key I developed after two initial reviews of the data (Appendix H). For the deductive coding process, I applied adrienne maree brown’s six elements of emergent strategy (2017) as my lens of analysis, coding for evidence of fractals, intentional adaptation, interdependence and decentralization, nonlinear and iterative change, resilience and transformative justice, and creating more possibilities. In addition, I discovered four common themes inductively in my analysis of the transcripts: mentorship, power analysis/intersectional analysis, disrupting the status
quo, and reverence for community wisdom. These themes show significant alignment with critical feminist scholarship, as I discuss in the next chapter. Interestingly, I found evidence across the transcripts of participants enacting critical feminism as praxis and aspiration, versus claiming feminism as an identity label. I treat this finding as separate from the other themes, classifying it as a “meta-theme,” as it seems to be the mindset that undergirds participants’ other understandings and practices.

Once I developed this coherent set of ten themes and one “meta-theme,” I shared these back with interview participants as a form of member checking. In the same email, I asked CEPs to confirm and/or revise my general descriptions of their identities and positionalities to be included in chapter 4. This practice of member checking increases the validity of a qualitative study by providing the researcher’s preliminary findings for review by participants to confirm whether they accurately represent the participants’ perspectives and practices shared during the data collection process (Creswell, 2014). Most CEP participants responded with a general affirmation of the themes and appreciation for being included in the study. One CEP, Diana, wrote back to me with positive feedback on the themes and recommendations of other feminist scholarship to inform my future work. No participants communicated any concerns or discrepancies with the themes.

Once the data, themes, and codes were validated, I was able to write up my findings. I also began to sketch out a conceptual framework to both describe how CEPs engage critical feminist praxis to advance the public purpose of higher education, and guide CEPs in developing and deploying this praxis. I found that my artistic skills were too limited to effectively render the framework that developed in my head, so I hired a
graphic design major student, Natalie Ferrer, to produce a high quality graphic using my hand drawings. We engaged in an iterative process that moved us through three versions of the framework. The final version of the framework, *Ecosystem of Critical Feminist Praxis for Community Engagement Professionals*, is presented as a graphic in chapter 5 with detailed descriptions of its component parts in the text. At my request, Natalie also developed a blank framework graphic that I intend to use as a worksheet for facilitating CEP professional development in the future. Overall, chapter five encompasses implications of my findings, the proposed conceptual framework, and areas for further scholarship and professional development.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

My process of discovering findings was deeply meaningful, creative, and joyful. The interviews filled me with gratitude for the conscious and persistent work that each participant is undertaking to advance a social-justice orientation to higher education community engagement. To honor my participants, I provide brief profiles of each to allow an understanding of their context and positionality. I offer similar, but less detailed, profiles of their community partners.

The insights shared by these participants provided fertile grounds for my data analysis, allowing me to illuminate common themes of praxis that offer new insights about the work of CEPs while also weaving together the seemingly disparate scholarship on critical feminism and higher education community engagement. Though my research questions guided development of my literature review, methodological approach, and interview protocols, I am not using them as the organizing framework to report my findings. Rather, the data were most enlivened by the deductive and inductive themes, so that is how they are organized. Also, while the themes are distinct, the reflections and anecdotes shared by participants often comprised multiple thematic elements. There are places in the chapter where the same narrative might be referenced, but analyzed through a different thematic lens. I attend to how these thematic findings answer my research questions at the end of the chapter. Most importantly, the thematic findings provided a foundation for me to create a beautiful conceptual framework to illuminate the ways critical feminist praxis informs the work of CEPs. The framework is presented in chapter 5.
Participant Profiles

As described in the previous chapter, I moved through a process of participant selection that yielded seven CEP participants in the study. The criteria for participation ensured some general commonalities across participants. For example, all identify as staff, not faculty, and all are currently employed full time at a college or university. However, there is also great diversity across participant roles, identities, and contexts. To preserve participant anonymity, I have used pseudonyms. To be honest, I feel great ambivalence about keeping the identities of participants anonymous. Each of them offered powerful wisdom that should be celebrated, honored, and attributed directly to them. However, participants also shared anecdotes that could be perceived as controversial or critical of their institutions, or particular leaders at their institutions, so anonymity protects them from any retribution for these honest critiques. As I hold this tension between celebrating and protecting my colleagues, I present the following participants in my study, including CEPs and community partners (Note that I offered participants the opportunity to review their descriptors to ensure accuracy and appropriateness, and no revisions were requested):

- Sloane identifies as White and as a woman; works at a private research university on the East Coast, serves in a leadership position within a community engagement center, and has been in the field for 15 years. Community partner is Lily, a program director at a youth development organization, has partnered with Sloane and her university for 10 years, and is a current doctoral student at the university
• Henry identifies as Black and as a man, works at a private faith-based university on the West Coast, serves in a leadership position within a community engagement center, and has been in the field for over 19 years. His community partner is Miss M, a recently retired public school teacher who has partnered with Henry and his university for “many, many years,” is also an alum (undergrad), and formerly worked in the community engagement center as a student.

• Dorothy Identifies as White and as a woman, works at a private faith-based college on the West Coast, leads a community engagement center, and has been in the field for 25 years. Her community partner is Margaret, executive director of faith based community organizing coalition, who has partnered with Dorothy and her college for six years.

• Penelope identifies as White, Jewish, and a woman; works at a private ivy-league research university on the East Coast, serves in a leadership position within a community engagement center, and has been in the field for 22 years. Her community partner is Ronnie, a nonprofit consultant who has partnered with Penelope for three years and with the university for years before that.

• Diana- Identifies as Black and as a woman; works at a public research university on the West Coast, leads a community engagement center, and has been in the field for ten years as a community engagement professional and as a faculty member prior to that. Her community partner is Shanti, founding director of a
center for nonviolence, and has partnered with Diana for over a year and the university for many years.

- Lucia- Identifies as Mexican and as a woman; works at a private faith-based university on the West Coast, serves in a leadership position within a community engagement center, and has been in the field for eight years. Her community partner is Gloria, a member of neighborhood community center and director of cultural arts program, who has partnered with Lucia and her university for 12 years, and currently teaches performing arts courses at the university.

- Alethia- Identifies as White and as a woman; works at a public research university on the East Coast, leads a division focused on community engagement and community relations, and has been in the field for over 18 years. Her community partner is Dr. Powe, director of an organization working to improve the lives of children and families in an underserved community, who has partnered with Alethia for four years and the university for at least ten years, and is also an alum (doctoral) of the university.

**Meta-Theme: Critical Feminism as Aspirational Praxis**

My one-on-one interviews with CEPs included a series of questions meant to establish a baseline of their understanding of, and relationship to, critical feminism. I was curious about whether they explicitly espoused critical feminist praxis, or embodied and enacted it without knowing or claiming critical feminism as a guiding influence. To surface this, I was particularly interested in how they define critical feminism, what
informs that definition, and whether they see themselves as critical feminists. Thus, the interview questions were:

1. Do you consider yourself to be a critical feminist? If so, why? If not, why?
2. How do you define critical feminism?
3. Can you describe particular feminist theories, principles, scholars, or activists that inspire you (or your work)?

As an additional scaffold for the conversation, I offered up a list of critical feminist principles gleaned from my literature review:

- Commitment to uplift and advance equity for women of diverse identities (Bleasdale, n.d.; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 2015a, 2015b)
- Recognize the importance of context in shaping one’s experiences and possibilities (Bleasdale, n.d.; hooks, 2003; Iverson & James, 2014; Lorde & Rich, 1981; Ward, 2010)
• Center and value the voices of individuals and groups that have historically been excluded (Ahmed, 2010; Bleasdale, n.d.; Collins, 1989; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Lorde, 1978, Verjee & Butterwick, 2014)

• Engage in self-reflection, including a cycle of praxis that involves synthesis of theory and action (Ahmed, 2010; Collins, 1989; hooks, 2003; Lorde, 1985; Verjee & Butterwick, 2014)

• Work in coalition with others to affect change that leads to greater equity and justice, particularly (but not exclusively) for women (Bleasdale, n.d.; Collins, 1989; hooks, 2015a, 2015b; Lorde & Rich, 1981; Rich, 1973; Ward, 2010)

These principles were also used in my initial outreach email so potential participants could self-identify whether they were qualified to participate in the study. I found that most of the participants referred back to these principles in the course of our interviews, linking anecdotes and practices back to them. Some saw these principles as being not only rooted in feminism, but in other theoretical traditions, as I describe below. One participant noted that she felt less connection to the first and last principle, the only two that explicitly name women. All others found these principles to directly align with their own frameworks for community-engaged praxis.

**Critical feminist identity vs. praxis**

With regard to the first question about whether participants identify as critical feminists, among the seven participants, only two said they identify as critical feminists (Penelope and Henry). Henry offered up the most overt and passionate connection to critical feminism as an aspect of his identity. He described how feminism immediately
resonated with him because of its challenge to authority and the status quo, particularly patriarchy and masculinity. Henry sees feminism as deeply tied to social justice work in all its forms, offering this insight:

As I’m framing myself as a feminist, I see it as an all-inclusive thing that has not only informed me, but pushed the work. I don’t think justice oriented work….would [exist] if it weren’t for feminism...so I don’t think anybody who sees themselves as someone who is working for social justice can say that they’re not a feminist.

In contrast, Penelope said she would respond with a “yes” if someone asked her if she is a “critical feminist” because she tries to take a critical perspective on things and she is a feminist. However, she actually doesn’t necessarily see her feminist identity as relevant to her work as a CEP because it is a field in which women (particularly White women) are well-represented. Instead, she often finds that she is forefronting a critical race analysis in her CEP role.

Three participants asserted that the label or term “critical feminist” did not resonate with them because they find other aspects of their identity or other theoretical traditions to be more salient in their lived experience, but they wouldn’t oppose being described as such (Diana, Dorothy and Lucia). In particular, Diana describes how her Black racial identity is often her primary lens for making meaning of experience, and how she draws on a combination of critical theory, humanism, and othering & belonging frameworks in shaping her community-engaged work. Further, she reflected that she is
guided by real life exemplars of strong women of color who do not identify as feminists, but their actions align with critical feminist praxis. Additionally, Lucia describes how her primary point of reference is thinking about the work through a lens of immigration and her identity as a “Brown woman.” Dorothy said she identifies more with an anti-racist, asset-based community development, and adaptive leadership theories as guides for her work.

Two participants described critical feminism as an aspiration that they are always negotiating and working toward in different contexts, rather than a destination, a box to be checked, or a badge to be earned (Sloane and Alethia). Sloane described critical feminism as a “north star;” and sees it as, “an aspiration for myself, and the person I want to be in the world, [that] helps me make really practical decisions about the sorts of things I want to prioritize.” Alethia recognizes critical feminism as inherently relational, and therefore not a label she gets to assign to herself. Instead, she sees herself as navigating diverse situations and scenarios with different levels of criticality and attention to power dynamics, making her relationship to critical feminism very fluid.

In fact, all participants described the enactment of critical feminist principles as a praxis, and not a static label, whether they claim feminism as part of their identity or not. In other words, being a critical feminist requires a moment-by-moment commitment to making decisions and taking actions congruent with feminist principles in diverse situations that are conducive to outcomes ranging from positive, comfortable, and affirming to negative, contentious, and risky. This tracks with bell hooks’ argument that we must reject feminism as an identity or lifestyle, and rather embrace it as a political movement and revolutionary struggle (hooks, 2015a). Hooks further asserts that we
should intentionally transition away from using the phrase, “I am a feminist” to the phrase, “I advocate feminism” because “it implies that a choice has been made, that commitment to feminism is an act of will” (hooks, 2015a, p 31). In alignment with this perspective, Dorothy describes the iterative nature of her critical feminist praxis, referencing how she tries to be conscious of context, identity, and power dynamics while pushing for change in policies and systems “on her best days,” but acknowledges she might sometimes fall short. Henry affirms that his work is explicitly rooted in feminist traditions, and offers up a more general assessment of how our enactment of critical feminism should emulate the people who are actively doing the work of social change, particularly Black women. Lucia said she does the work of advancing social justice, and while it aligns with critical feminism in practice, she doesn’t label it as such. Instead, she is inspired by the strong women in her life who have no espoused connection to critical feminism, including women from an indigenous community where she briefly lived, that were reshaping what it meant to be an indigenous woman in the way they were raising girls.

Diana situates critical feminism within the broader feminist movement, honoring its dynamic nature as a force for change, while also forefronting the inherent requirement of moving beyond theory and reflection into action. She sees her work as connected to feminist movement in the sense that she is attentive to power dynamics, focuses on relational aspects of engagement, and has an aspiration of achieving social change. She further discussed the importance of prioritizing the work and action over the terminology, describing how feminism can be a term that might alienate folks who would otherwise join in efforts to advance social justice. She compared it to the controversial concept of
“defunding the police,” something she noted was not a new concept, but had recently become a divisive construct in efforts to create authentic safety for diverse communities. In other words, there are situations where it might be most expedient to enact critical feminist principles without claiming them explicitly if doing so might inhibit buy-in from others.

**Critical feminism defined**

When asked to define critical feminism, one participant referred back to the principles I provided as a sufficient definition. Other participants offered definitions in their own words. Lucia described it as “having the awareness that the female experience in all contexts is different than the male one and that it’s not an equal playing field.” Alethia provided a general definition that more explicitly incorporates criticality of the status quo: “It’s a set of paradigms that enable us to...understand the opportunity to disrupt oppression with a particular attention to the ways that paternalism, capitalism, and racism have intertwined to create our current state.” Henry provided a similarly expansive definition, saying:

This is a framing, or way of understanding the world, that is about equity and liberating all peoples, not just women. It’s about the examination of a lot of different dynamics. Feminism [is about] not just saying we need justice, but we want justice on our terms.

Sloane defined critical feminism in more personal terms as “I think mostly about cooperation for collective good and putting collective good before my own personal stake
in anything I’m doing.” Similarly, Dorothy defined it as a combination of analysis and action, saying there’s an aspect of critical feminism that involves “being honest about the experience of how gender shapes the way organizations work, and a willingness and a desire on my part to challenge that.” Diana provided a vision for how critical feminism can more directly and expansively address issues of power than mainstream feminism does:

I would love for us to complexify the notion of power because...there’s this notion of power that is very domination-based. Either I’m going to dominate, or you’re going to dominate. There are so many other ways to think about power...so I would love for critical feminism to take that piece on. To actually critique the power analysis piece…

In another section of the interview transcript, Diana talks about her interest in analyzing “power to,” “power with,” and “power within” as other more generative ways of understanding and deploying power. She argues for reframing power through a more critical feminist lens to open up possibilities for how power can facilitate equity and social justice.

**Critical feminist foundations**

In terms of the foundational scholarship that has formed CEP participants’ understanding of critical feminism, four referenced bell hooks, two referenced Audre Lorde, and two referenced adrienne maree brown. In addition, participants individually referenced Kimberle Crenshaw, Margaret Wheatley, Alice Walker, Maxine Green, Dorothy Day, Patricia Hill Collins, Brenna Hughes, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Grace Lee
Boggs, Starhawk, Barbara Deming, Ruby Sales, Belvie Rooks, and Noliwe Rooks. Additionally, participants noted how critical feminist principles align with other theoretical traditions, including humanism, womanism, anti-racism, and environmentalism. Within the field of community engagement, individual participants also referenced Nadinne Cruz, Tania Mitchell, and Elaine Ward as scholars who bring a critical feminist approach. One overwhelmingly compelling finding was that six out of seven participants said their own praxis was significantly shaped by mentors, peers, and colleagues who exemplify critical feminism in their actions. I go into this in more detail as one of the inductive themes below.

This meta-theme of “critical feminism as aspirational praxis” serves as a crucial starting point for analysis of the rest of the findings. There are significant “takeaways” from participant responses to the series of interview questions about their relationship to critical feminism. First, while participants may or may not claim critical feminism as an identity, they feel a connection to critical feminist principles and see their work as advancing these principles to varying degrees. Second, participants are conscious that their work is iterative, relational, and situated within diverse contexts, meaning they are always adapting their practices to attempt to align with critical feminist principles and negotiate the conditions presented in any particular moment. Third, they are overwhelmingly inspired by the actions and ways of being embodied by mentors, colleagues, and peers; but also draw on critical feminist theorists and scholars to shape their understandings and practices.
Deductive Themes: Emergent Strategy Elements

I coded the seven CEP interview transcripts and seven CEP and community partner co-visioning conversations using themes derived directly from Adrienne Maree Brown’s (2017) *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* book and framework. To convey the spirit of this text, I highlight an excerpt from Brown’s (2017) introduction:

I am offering this content as a cluster of thoughts in development, observations of existing patterns, and questions of how we apply the brilliance of the world around us to our efforts to co-exist in and with this world as humans, particularly for those of us seeking to transform the crises of our time, to turn our legacy towards harmony. (p. 3)

This book is for people who want to radically change the world. To apply natural order and our love of life to the ways we create the next world. To tap into the most ancient systems and patterns for wisdom as we build tomorrow. (p. 4)

I have personally found this text instrumental in reshaping how I do the work of community engagement, as well as how I understand my own identity, relationships to others, and power to participate in social change. Therefore, Emergent Strategy felt like a fitting framework for my dissertation, both because of its impact on me and because my focus is on how CEPs can intentionally influence their institutions toward a more authentic public purpose. Additionally, I am aware of many CEPs who draw on Emergent Strategy to shape their practices. I know of cases where it has been used to guide the
strategic planning processes of community engagement centers, and has been the focus of professional development events.

However, I could not find any publications in our field that currently apply the Emergent Strategy framework, so it is novel and innovative to use the framework in this dissertation to analyze CEP praxis in higher education community engagement. And yet, in contrast to the novelty, applying this framework feels organic to me because critical feminism, and the work of community engagement professionals, are both embodied and dynamic ways of being in relationship to the rest of the world. To analyze these dynamics requires a framework that accounts for the ecology of internal, external, and relational processes that are constantly interacting to produce conditions whereby CEPs can affect institutional change.

Brown (2017) offers up the Emergent Strategy framework as a structure for organizing and guiding social change, based on six core elements that align with principles found in the natural world:

- **Fractals** (p 51): Patterns that repeat at small and large scales in nature; practices and habits that individuals enact in their daily lives can set patterns for whole social systems

- **Intentional Adaptation** (p 67): Organisms change in specific ways in response to their environment to be able to continue living and perpetuating; individuals and movements have to be open to changing tactics and strategies while staying true to their purpose

- **Interdependence and Decentralization** (p 83): Organisms are in relationships of mutual reliance on each other (interdependence) and power and operations within
an ecosystem are distributed across multiple organisms (decentralization); social movements require reciprocal relationships, shared leadership, and distribution of power and responsibilities among participants

- **Nonlinear and Iterative (p 103):** organisms and natural processes often progress erratically and/or cyclically (nonlinear) and through repetition with slight variations (iterative); individuals and movements progress along pathways that are wrought with detours, double-backs, accelerations, and forks in the road but repeating grounding practices and actions can help to stay the course

- **Resilience and Transformative Justice (p 123):** Nature regenerates and heals itself in the wake of destruction; people and movements demonstrate strength and persistence in the face of challenges and defeats and use that learning to dismantle oppressive systems

- **Creating more possibilities (p 151):** the biodiversity of the natural world allows for infinite scenarios to play out; movements thrive on collective visioning that makes space for multiple futures to become reality

Overall, I see my dissertation as an opportunity to expose more CEPs to this framework so they can intentionally employ it in their community-engaged endeavors. As I moved through the coding process, I found a wealth of examples of how study participants were enacting each element of Emergent Strategy, even if they were not doing so intentionally. It’s notable that, of the participants in this study, only two referenced adrienne maree brown and Emergent Strategy as guiding their professional practice. Nonetheless, I discovered evidence of all six themes in every individual
interview and community partner co-visioning conversation. While I have a rich set of data to draw upon, I limit my reference to evidence of each theme to a few examples so as not to overwhelm the reader.

**Fractals**

According to Adrienne Maree Brown, “When we speak of systems change, we need to be fractal. Fractals…move from the micro to the macro level...We are microsystems. Our relationships and communities are systems” (2017, p. 59). I link this construct to my understanding of a “ripple effect,” but more three-dimensional in its approach. Fractals can radiate out in all directions, like how dandelion seeds scatter on the wind and germinate in multiple new places. When one identifies as an educator, the notion of fractals seems inherent in one’s role: to disseminate knowledge, build intellectual capacity, and foster application of learning to real world situations. As CEPs who identify as educators, we imagine and enact the concept of fractals in our community-engaged work at interpersonal, programmatic, and institutional levels.

At the micro level, fractals manifest as interpersonal relationships of learning and growth between CEPs and other stakeholders in community engagement. These relationships allow critical feminist principles to be transmitted and reinforced. For example, five participants described their role to include developing faculty capacity for community-engaged teaching and scholarship. In particular, Alethia asserted the importance of modeling a way of speaking about community engagement that is transparent and honest in defining the scope and limitations of how faculty might work with community, recognizing that there could be the potential for faculty to overpromise and under-deliver, or frame their conversations with community within a patronizing
power dynamic. When CEPs model language use in conversation with faculty, it gives the latter a template to use in their outreach to partners that is congruent with principles guiding a social justice orientation to community engagement.

Similarly, Henry describes how he works with students who come into community engagement programs with a charity or savior orientation. He explained that he and his colleagues are invested in moving students toward a social action orientation to engagement, knowing that these students will bring their worldviews into interactions with community beyond the walls of the institution. Thus, Henry provides scaffolded learning opportunities in the form of individual and group conversations with students where he models vulnerability and his own evolving understanding of power, privilege, and oppression. This creates a space where other students can begin to interrogate their own positionality and complicity in systems of oppression, as well as build their capacities to disrupt these systems individually and collectively.

With regard to staff, Dorothy has introduced colleagues at her center to frameworks that she has found instrumental in shaping her work so they can adapt them in their own ways. Specifically, she has provided professional development on liberatory and anti-racist frameworks, recognizing that staff can adapt and apply them in advancing the public purpose of the institution through their programs. As Dorothy put it, “the more of us who can show up like this differently, that is going to be how we change the system.”

While the interpersonal interactions described above might happen in the context of programs, the design and implementation of programs themselves are another level of fractals. In response to recently amplified incidents of police killings of Black people
across the country, Penelope worked with colleagues to facilitate a faculty learning community focused on anti-racist pedagogy. The purpose was to enhance individual faculty capacity to implement this kind of pedagogy, but also build a cadre of advocates that could share and advance these practices among peers and the administration.

Additionally, all study participants identified student-focused programming as a key component of their center’s offerings, and described varying degrees to which they individually influence those programs. Diana, who runs a community engagement center, says the staff collaboratively “create these engaged learning opportunities for students that are transformational; that give them the skills and lens and perspective so they can be engaged citizens beyond their time at [the institution].” Though she does not facilitate the student programs, she directly engages as an educator in the programs, and specifically teaches frameworks of nonviolence and “othering & belonging” to students.

One exceptional example emerged as a way of implementing fractals at an institutional level. Drawing on her own experience as a student and her ongoing work and scholarship around immigration, Lucia reached outside of the confines of her position description to develop a network of support for DACA and undocumented students at her institution. The work was spurred by her own passions, commitments, and principles, as well as a deep understanding of the opportunities and challenges for this population. Lucia’s efforts were comprehensive, as she described training staff to support these students, working with admissions to do more targeted outreach to them, and seeking funding and other ways of providing access to the institution’s education and resources. Her efforts built a coalition across campus to provide a community of care for DACA and undocumented students.
In a similar way, Diana has trained student orientation leaders and student affairs staff on how to integrate nonviolence and “othering & belonging” frameworks. Though it falls outside of her role as a CEP, she sees it as connected in that “it will help us have a new set of tools and skills and perspectives for addressing how we on campus deal with conflict and social change.” In essence, Diana’s focus on community engagement is both externally oriented beyond the campus, but also internally oriented, so she sees relevance in disseminating frameworks to strengthen the internal campus community.

Further, all study participants proclaimed the importance of their work on institution-wide committees and boards, primarily because their active participation allows them to shape institutional culture, practices, and/or policies to be accountable to the public purpose of the institution. While participants described varying degrees to which they thought they could influence institutional processes, all felt their participation on committees and boards was a crucial aspect of their job. Sloane organizes the institution’s community advisory board and sees the role of that board as making “sure we are all cohesively thinking about our vision and mission and values, and how each of the things that we do are realizing those.” In other words, this board is meant to ensure congruence across the diverse practices that fall under the community engagement umbrella.

Dorothy, as a member of her institution’s strategic planning committee, similarly articulates that, “the most important thing to me is to create a culture where we have a set of shared values and principles so we can figure out how those are enacted across all programs.” Indeed, Diana listed several institution-wide committees on which she plays a role, including an anti-racism committee, an internship council, an advisory board for
student civic engagement, and a community partner grant making board. She further referenced her participation on several external boards and committees relevant to community engagement. As a division leader, Alethia also listed a number of committees on which she participates and articulated her role as “always making sure that community engagement is at the table.”

Most of the CEPs also found ways to facilitate their community partners’ participation on institutional boards and/or committees, leveraging their partners’ capacity to enact fractals as well. Interestingly, this strategy worked in multiple directions. Most obviously, community partners are able to assert their perspectives in institutional decision-making spaces to ensure that community priorities and needs are considered. Penelope’s partner, Ronnie, talked about a recent experience of being on a search committee for a leadership position at the public service center and feeling compelled to speak up to challenge the institutional paradigm for assessing the suitability of candidates, along with the assumptions governing it. To be transparent, Ronnie also reflected that she felt the critiques and insights shared by herself and the other community partners were not necessarily considered in the final hiring decision. Unfortunately, the seeds of change planted by CPs in these settings may not yet be coming to full fruition. Nevertheless, the fact that CPs are in the room and part of the conversation means we are moving in the direction of honoring community wisdom more fully. Conversely, being in institutional decision-making spaces allows community partners to grow their own nuanced understandings of the culture and dynamics of higher education. Ronnie also said of her experience on the search committee, and other boards and committees for the university, that it had helped her grow savvy about how to navigate the institution and
what she could expect from them. She jokingly quipped, “Ya’ll can’t hide your dirty laundry anymore!”

Additionally, CEPs have made their imprints on community partner organizations by sharing their ways of knowing and being. Dorothy’s community partner, Margaret, gave effusive gratitude for a partnership agreement template that Dorothy created to document the expectations and commitments between the college and partner organization. In fact, during our co-visioning conversation, Margaret asked Dorothy if she could do a short workshop with other member organizations and congregations to help them think through the process of developing agreements that reflect each of their unique priorities, needs, and expectations. Later in the conversation Margaret returned to this idea as a way the college could more fully realize reciprocity with the community: offering up the expertise of Dorothy and faculty to provide community-based professional development.

In sum, all CEPs expressed awareness of their capacities and responsibilities to engage in “fractal” practices that model and disseminate a social justice-oriented way of being. They recognized that their professional positions situate them in a way where they can influence others, particularly faculty, students, staff, and administrators around community engagement. Some of that work manifests informally through interpersonal interactions and relationships, some of it falls within the oversight of programming as articulated in the job description, and some extends beyond the intended scope of their role through informal but strategic participation in institution-wide initiatives and even community-based contexts. Further, CEPs honored the role community partners can play as fractals seeding change within decision-making spaces in higher education institutions,
and how access to these spaces builds CP knowledge of how to engage the institutions from a position of empowerment.

**Intentional adaptation**

In *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, adrienne maree brown asserts that intentional adaptation is integral to creating social change:

> Change is definitely going to happen, no matter what we plan or expect or hope for or set in place. We will adapt to that change, or we will become irrelevant. But this element is not about pure adaptation, which has led to every functional and dysfunctional condition we know. I am talking about the combination of adaptation with intention, wherein the orientation and movement towards life, towards longing, is made graceful in the act of adaptation. This is the process of changing while staying in touch with our deeper purpose and longing. (p70)

Brown’s conception of intentional adaptation is presented as a deeply personal process. In my interviews, CEP participants discussed a similarly personal praxis of reflection on their ways of being and knowing within professional spaces. Their reflections were rooted in a sense of their own positionality, identity, and power, as well as the cultural and systemic dynamics at play within any given context. As scholar-practitioners, they also referenced a broad range of scholarship, including feminist, educational, and leadership theories, along with research and practical publications as being influential in guiding their work. They provided examples of how they intentionally adapted to opportunities to expand and enhance their community-engaged
work, clarify their leadership values, and shape their practices of teaching, research, and partnering with community.

Alethia, as leader of a division devoted to community outreach and engagement, recalled a moment when a senior administrator left the institution and there was an opportunity to take over part of that person’s responsibilities for community relations:

I asked to have that portfolio placed under my leadership. I was very torn about doing it. The reason why I wanted to is because community relations...is very much about navigating a set of constituency relationships around the impact of the institution and its decision making...

Alethia was very clear that taking on this work, and bringing the expertise of her staff to bear, would allow her to shape community relations in ways that center equity and mitigate harm. Later in the interview, Alethia talks about the challenge of squashing self doubt in moments like that, when she was taking on something that required her to develop new competencies and increase her workload. However, the anticipation of enhancing equitable outcomes for community drove her to make that adaptation to the scope of her work.

Dorothy describes reflections on her own experience as the leader of a community engagement center, and how she has clarified the priorities that drive her work by critically analyzing leadership and decision-making in her institution. “I’m interested in changing policies and practices and systems….and I want to be a good strategist about that...” Her strategic approach to adaptation entails “paying attention to process, content,
and outcomes...and all three of those need to have a rightness about them…” She described how she has observed or been affected by institutional decision-making processes that were exclusionary, and even though the outcome might have been right, the process was alienating and undermining. Examples like this have become cautionary tales for her as the leader of a center, guiding her to ensure that her leadership practices reflect a more intentionally congruent approach with her values of equity and justice.

With regard to her professional responsibilities, Sloane described her praxis as “constantly needing to think about things as a living breathing ecosystem.” She was preparing to give a presentation about anti-racism and community outreach in a meeting after our interview, and acknowledged that she had been thinking about “which [Sloane] needs to come into this,” referencing her strategic consideration of how to present herself in that particular setting: what to say, how to say it, etc. In the subsequent conversation with her community partner, Sloane divulged that she was trying to influence the institution to be “more strategic about the permeability of those [campus] boundaries and...the narrative and rhetoric that surrounds it…” She was explaining how public safety officers gave an annual presentation to incoming students about which neighborhoods were safe for them to live and socialize, and how the messaging was rooted in racial bias. Sloane worked in collaboration with other colleagues to challenge, educate, and redirect the public safety officers’ messaging about the community.

Relatedly, Sloane confided that she made similar calculations about how to intentionally influence a fraternity she advises, joking that she wasn’t going to show up to their meeting with an “I’m a feminist” shirt, but rather determining more nuanced ways to infiltrate the fraternity space with feminist principles. With regard to the fraternity’s
philanthropic work, she shared that she had provided suggestions of ways the fraternity could more genuinely engage with the surrounding neighborhood through direct service with youth organizations, versus just conducting social fundraisers and donating to organizations.

Other interview participants described similar reflections on how they intentionally adapted their behaviors in any given context based on who was involved and what they were trying to accomplish. Lucia, as a professional working within a community engagement center, stated:

If I want to get stuff done...If I really need to push this initiative through, I’m probably not going to raise it at staff meeting. I’m going to go and do it on my own. And then I’ll talk to the [grad student assistants] about it. And then I’ll tell the full staff what I did. So there’s like all these things that you learn to do, and ….it’s certainly fascinating how, as women of color, we learn, we strategize. It’s like survival of the fittest in some ways.

These examples illustrate how CEPs reflect on the confluence of their own positionality and the broader context of a situation to employ intentional adaptation in their daily work, as well as at key choice points in their careers, and in the broader evolution of their leadership style.

For CEPs, intentional adaptation also shapes their programming and institutional initiatives. Whereas some might perceive strategic planning processes as a performative activity that yields a rigid set of goals and objectives, the CEPs I interviewed embraced
strategic planning as an opportunity to reflect on and clarify collective values, co-develop aspirations, and inspire new directions for the work. Dorothy talked about being on the strategic planning committee for her institution while also facilitating strategic planning for her community engagement center. In both cases, she asserted that, “The most important thing to me is to create a culture where we have a set of shared values and principles so that we can figure out how those are enacted across all the programs.” Specifically with regard to her center’s process, she was guiding staff to engage questions like, “How could we state our purpose in the framework of love? What would that mean? What would that look like?”

She referenced drawing inspiration from the scholarship of bell hooks in this process as well. I noted that Dorothy’s selection of participants in the strategic planning process reflects hooks’ exhortation to integrate community wisdom into academic spaces, as Dorothy has included two community partners on the strategic planning committee. In her conversation with her community partner, Margaret, she shared appreciation for the time and insight Margaret had contributed. In the same conversation, Dorothy provided more details about the scholarship guiding her center’s strategic planning process, referencing foundations of Catholic Social Thought rooted in concepts of human dignity and the common good. In other words, Dorothy is cultivating an intentional adaptation process for her center, shaped by critical feminist scholarship, the institution’s faith tradition, and community wisdom.

Henry offered up a similar example of renaming his institution’s community engagement center to more effectively reflect the social change orientation of the work they had been doing. Though he doesn’t oversee the center, he talked about his leadership
role in pushing to take “community service” out of the name, and replacing it with a title reflective of a “critical, more justice-oriented model.” To be clear, the name change was driven by multiple factors, including a realization that the current title was incongruent with the values and programs of the center. It was additionally meant to be a cultural cue to the institution to shift how they should be thinking about and doing community engagement. Henry divulged that his role in this transition was influenced by his understanding of the broader history of service learning as a fringe activity within higher education until it became institutionalized and normalized in the academy. Guided by wisdom from mentors in the field, he surmised that we might need to go back to our “fringe” roots if we truly want to play an impactful role in advancing social justice. One way to do that is to move away from the term “service,” which often implies “comfortable” relationships of paternalism and power disparities between academia and community that uphold an inequitable status quo.

In conversation with his community partner, Miss M, Henry also talked about how her creative and relationship-driven service-learning project with faculty almost 20 years ago served as a model of what the community engagement center should strive to replicate. In essence, Henry’s push for a change in his center’s title was rooted in an intention to better align their work with exemplary partnerships happening at the institution, learn from the historical evolution of higher education community engagement more broadly, and counter cultural biases inherent in the construct of “service.”

Also embedded in Brown’s definition of intentional adaptation, is its role in subverting irrelevance. While none of the interview participants explicitly articulated
concerns about their work being rendered irrelevant, their descriptions of the thought processes behind how they show up as individuals, and how their programs and centers advance community engagement, demonstrate a consciousness of the precariousness of their work. I root this observation in my own understanding of how neoliberal and positivist ideologies conspire to subvert and sideline community engagement within higher ed. As a professional who has been in the field for 15 years, I resonated with the insights shared by interview participants: reflecting the longing to stay rooted in values of equity, justice, and love while artfully navigating a landscape that values expertise, revenue generation, career preparation, knowledge generation, and elitism. To stay relevant, or rather, to combat misconceptions that community engagement is merely for marketing purposes, CEPs must adapt their tactics, messaging, programming, and relationships to strategically situate their work in ways that prioritize and advance an authentic public purpose for the institution. Similarly, as Henry asserted, intentional adaptation of our programs and centers must account for the possibility that traditional ways of engaging community (e.g. decontextualized and depoliticized service) may be irrelevant in the context of broader social change movements, and instead more revolutionary ways of engaging must be deployed. This critical engagement is predicated on relationships of interdependence and decentralization.

**Interdependence and decentralization**

I don’t think it’s hyperbolic to say that every community engagement professional recognizes the centrality of relationships in our work. After all, at the most basic level, we have to rely on community-based organizations to partner with faculty and students to provide service and engagement activities for community-engaged courses. Our field
usually invokes the concept of reciprocity in describing aspirations for these relationships, a give and take dynamic that allows both parties to achieve benefits. However, CEPs who employ critical feminist praxis have an understanding of relationships that moves beyond seeing them as a transactional exchange of student labor for access to learning in “real world” contexts. CEP interview participants articulated myriad ways that relationships function as foundations and outcomes of community engagement while also fulfilling their need for human to human connections. They conveyed that all aspects of community engagement work lend themselves to collaboration and decentralization. In conversation with their community partners, they also demonstrated these indicators of interdependence in action.

Shaping my analysis of this theme, Adrienne Maree Brown offers up a challenge to the predominance of independence and competition as driving values in our society, arguing that they even show up in social movement work and undermine progress toward social change. Instead, she invites us into interdependence as a value that guides us to “…meet each other’s needs in a variety of ways, that we can truly lean on others and they can lean on us. It means we have to decentralize our idea of where solutions and decisions happen…” (Brown, 2017, p 87). In the context of higher education community engagement, this means building interpersonal relationships as well as institutional connections. It applies not just in CEPs’ work with community partners, but also with students, faculty, staff, and administrators. It means moving beyond the confines of what we need to fulfill our individual objectives or institutional mission, and instead considering what resources and gifts we can share with each other to advance equity and social justice. It means defaulting to collective and collaborative processes, instead of
prioritizing the efficiencies of dispersing the work as individual responsibilities or operating within silos. It means measuring our impact in terms of trust and fulfillment.

As evidence of the centrality of relationships for CEPs in this study, perhaps the strongest message communicated in the interviews was that they do their work as part of a larger team and in collaboration with others. All were hesitant to come across as if they had accomplished anything through their singular efforts. For example, I heard reflections like:

- “It’s teamwork always” (Lucia)
- “…as a team, we do this work…” (Diana)
- “there were moments in this conversation where I felt just a smidge fraudulent because it was focused on my own practice, and so much of my work is teamed…” (Alethia)
- “I could answer [your questions] way more easily about [our community engagement center] as a collective than as [Dorothy]” (Dorothy)

Relatedly, some interview participants described a large portion of their work as supporting others in their endeavors. Alethia said her responsibilities include “supporting staff that do engagement across the institution and supporting faculty who want to do engaged scholarship…” Sloane asserted, “my role is to first and foremost support all of my team members in the administration of different elements of our programming.”

Given that these CEPs are in leadership positions, they could have easily framed their relationships in terms of oversight or management. I think it’s telling that they chose the term “support,” which indicates more of a horizontal orientation. Further, the fact that
they described staff support as central to their roles is an indicator that they appreciate the relational nature of their work.

Expanding beyond relationships to staff as direct reports, interview participants provided examples of collaborative work they had done across campus and a focus on person-to-person relationship-building. Lucia described a very specific initiative to support undocumented and DACA students that required coalition building. Working with another colleague, Lucia gathered endorsements for the proposed “wrap around services” initiative from stakeholders across campus, and their efforts yielded a positive response from every department and unit across campus. They were able to leverage this collective commitment to influence the institution to launch the initiative, and subsequently draw on the resources and expertise of multiple units and staff across campus to sustain the initiative.

Additionally, Alethia told the story of how her institution created a community-engaged course attribute that required a common set of learning outcomes for any course embedding the attribute. She recalled that she “worked with a really fabulous group of people on this, including some students,” and they had to have thoughtful conversations about developing mutually agreeable outcomes. She said they ultimately agreed on one outcome that was central to any community engaged course, and it was about equity. Her description of the process focused on the intellectual fulfillment generated by the conversation, and how the outcome reflected new realizations about her own evolving understanding of community engagement, with no indication that the process felt onerous as a result of broad participation.
Relatedly, Sloane shared some of her tactics for building relationships with colleagues that she considers as potential “co-conspirators” to advance social justice and equity at her institution:

I think about who I build relationships with and how I build relationships with them. I tend to be the type of person, even if I’m only meeting with someone once or twice, I want to know, “How are you?” and “How’d you get here?” At least the first 15 minutes of the meeting is just getting to know people’s experience. I really want to know about their orientation to the world and the work that they do.

Henry articulates a similar orientation to relationships, rejecting the prioritization of transactional conversations about what each party wants to give and get in order to collaborate on a program. Instead he sees his work as:

...an opportunity for me to really engage and build a relationship with another human being, recognizing where I’m coming from, and deliberately trying to figure out and create spaces for them to unpack and look at where they’re coming from.

For every example of how CEPs foster and embrace interdependence and decentralization, there are also situations that are inherently more complex to navigate. Alethia provided a cautionary insight about institutional efforts around investment in community development where institutional leaders’ conversations are guided by a
utilitarian economic lens, saying “I think the minute we reduce this to a transactive relationship, we’ve now prioritized the devaluation of collaboration and relationship and indigenous ways of doing.” In these moments, her job entails artfully and compellingly providing alternative ideas that reflect more humanizing relationships.

In fact, humanizing relationships were evident in the co-visioning conversations between CEPs and their community partners. By their nature, these conversations were meant to illustrate how CEPs and partners work together. Based on the content of these conversations, as well as my observations, relational sub-themes emerged that indicate interdependence and decentralization. The first among them was deep listening. In every conversation, I observed how CEPs kept their Zoom cameras on, looked into the computer while their partners were talking, and referenced partners’ ideas and words in their own comments. Connected to this was the theme of affirmation. CEPs nodded and smiled to indicate not only that they were listening, but that they agreed with, and appreciated, what was being shared. Phrases from CEPs, in response to ideas shared by their partners, served as indicators of deep listening and affirmation:

- “You’re just reading my mind because you’re totally right about that.” (Diana)
- “Yes to all of that.” (Lucia)
- “I completely agree with that.” (Sloane)
- “That, to me...is a bit like what you were just saying.” (Dorothy)

Another sub-theme in these conversations was critique of the institution, rooted in shared understanding of the limitations of its community-engaged work and trust that the community partner would hold the CEP’s critique with integrity. Thus, Penelope confided, “I’m smiling because I just get to be completely honest here, right? The people
in powerful positions at the university are mostly trying to align the university with other people in positions of traditional power.” Similarly, Henry reflected, “I feel like there is a real desire for real systemic change, but…I definitely know it’s not coming from the institution….I think we can try to push the university in that direction.” Lucia also divulged:

I’ve been sitting with this and frustrated with this for the past year...I think the university should be better at sharing our campus space. We have had very few students on our campus for the past year [due to COVID]….And I can think of a number of incredible ways our campus could have been used this year.

Even as CEPs shared candid critical analysis of their institutions’ shortcomings, they also shared humor with their partners, indicative of joy and ease in their relationships. In the conversation between Sloane and her partner, Lily, the latter provided a metaphor for how the university had changed in the past decade, “It’s like it went on vacation and came back with a facelift and a boob job. And we were like, you know, what happened?” Later in the conversation, Sloane provided a similarly witty metaphor about the university, “If [the university] were an individual...I’d be like, ‘you need to go to therapy. You need to work through some things. You have control issues, and those things are holding you back from being a better version of yourself.’” In another conversation, Diana’s humor reflected admiration for her partner, Shanti: “You know, I follow you, and I’m a little bit of a stalker. I’m a friendly stalker. I read your books. I look at your Facebook.” In response to his partner’s reflections on how the
university should support an educational pathway for children in the community, Henry laughingly asserted, “Thank you for volunteering to head that committee, [Miss M].” In addition to humorous exchanges, laughter and smiles punctuated the conversations. Together with the affirmations, deep listening, and critiques rooted in shared aspirations and trust, these sub-themes indicate a human to human connection of interdependence. The CEPs and CPs demonstrated a relationship as thought partners and co-conspirators engaged in shared (and often joyful) work.

CEPs also candidly acknowledged the struggles inherent in interdependence, particularly when working with others who have different values and perspectives. In conversation with her community partner, Diana confided:

I say this all the time: whether we like it or not, we are connected to each other….Sometimes, I’ll be honest, I don’t like it. Sometimes I’m really struggling with the fact that I am connected to people who are doing things that I find abhorrent. At the same time, I want to approach that from a standpoint of recognizing our shared humanity because I think it will help me think about not just whatever encounter we’re in now, but what it is that we’re trying to create.

Penelope talked about the unexpected impact of joining a large community engagement center with several staff and trying to navigate the interdependence inherent in the work:

I was surprised and somewhat drained by the amount of energy it takes to
maintain all the relationships that exist within the center, and to learn how to be okay with drama. You know, more people means more drama and everybody is awesome and smart and passionate and all that. But they come from really different perspectives and ages and within that context, I think it’s [draining] because I care a lot about developing relationships.

I appreciate Diana and Penelope’s acknowledgement of the emotional labor of honoring our interdependence and participating in collective work to advance a common cause. Not all relationships come easily or are ones we would choose to enter into. Even when people are part of the same team, purportedly working toward the same vision, there are divergent ways of thinking and being that complicate the process of bringing about positive change. Diana’s reminder of recognizing each other’s humanity is a helpful orientation, and in alignment with feminist principles. It is in these situations where we might experience the nonlinear and iterative nature of higher education community engagement.

**Nonlinear and iterative**

Adrienne maree brown declares that “Transformation doesn’t happen in a linear way...It happens in cycles, convergences, explosions. If we release the framework of failure, we can realize that we are in iterative cycles, and we can keep asking ourselves--how do I learn from this?” (brown, 2017, p 105). In contrast to intentional adaptation, there’s an element of finding one’s way on an unknown path in the nonlinear and iterative process. CEPs shared anecdotes and reflections of working through their own development as people and professionals, as well as iterating through programs and
practices. Brown (2017) emphasizes the role of feedback in our learning cycles, which might be reflected by others who care about us and the shared work, or communicated to us through outcomes that aren’t quite what we desire or aspire toward.

During our interview, Henry talked about the evolution of his professional decision-making processes:

I think decision-making, for me, when I started...was oriented toward the success of the organization. Not like I was doing what I was told, but I was seeing it through the lens of what’s best for the institution. And I was perfectly happy doing that because [the university’s] mission says we do compassionate service, and I’m all for it…. I think the longer I was in the field, the more I started to read feminist authors and think about justice and equity….and I started to look for it in myself and in the institution I was working with. So my decision-making started to shift toward not what was good for the institution, but what was good for the values and what it is that the institution said it espoused…and trying to hold the institution accountable...And then it shifted really toward what the community wants and needs, and what the students want and need. And then toward, you know, how I want and need to sustain myself….So I was saying yes to everything...but now “no, no, no…” if it’s not something that’s going to be sustainable for me.
Diana demonstrated her own openness to her ongoing learning process in the conversation with her community partner. As Shanti described her an anecdote about working with students to advance social entrepreneurship, Diana chimed in:

....what I love about that story too, is that I tend to be somewhat, you know, ‘raised eyebrows’ sometimes to social enterprise because I feel like oftentimes it’s like, ‘if only you turn it into a business…’ but what’s interesting to me about that is….this is where I have to question my own biases….Sometimes it’s just a lack of perspective because it wasn’t necessarily that they were against thinking about policy.

Reflection also centered on how CEPs adapted to aspects of their roles that they hadn’t anticipated. Penelope gave an example of her realization about how she was perceived by younger staff, some of whom identify as people of color,”...In my current role, having younger staff who feel undervalued or expected to do more than they’re paid to do...or they’re not being advanced in the way they should be....And that [I’m seen as] the problem....It’s been a new experience to me....” She subsequently described how she worked with HR to do reviews of staff positions to try to address staff concerns, but institutional policies did not allow for her to make changes. She felt like she was navigating an incongruence between the institution’s policies and her community engagement center’s values of equity and justice. She lamented, “That’s been a hard part. Living out my principles in the ways I want to have those relationships [with staff]....It is also very much for me about creating a center that...we’re never going to be perfect, but
we need to do our best to address inequities…” Later in the interview, Penelope talked about redesigning a position description for a recent staff vacancy to make it accessible to a more diverse candidate pool. She said, “I can’t change what happened in the past, but I can take steps now to try and operate more justly.”

Alethia provided an equally profound retrospective assessment of how she had been socialized into the community engagement field through a singular historical narrative and narrow construct of what community engagement entails. It was through her praxis as a professional, and her pursuit of learning about the context of her institution, that she came to understand the multiple and activist origins of community engagement:

I came [to my position] through the door or service learning….and knowing where I’m at right now, I feel really icky about that. And the history we tell ourselves about how we got to do this work in the academy, it’s very paternalistic. It’s very reverent of our White forefathers….and I espoused that and I pushed that. And now, I have a radically different understanding of how the work came to be. And part of the understanding is that it was always there….I had to do the archeology of, “where have been the roots of this work for the last 50 years at this institution?” And what I was getting was the stories of the student computer lab takeover, the demonstrations in the 60’s with really tight civic mentorship between our black students and black activists….It was….this notion of really turning the institution inside out.
What resonates in the examples above is these CEPs’ willingness to critically reflect on their own positionality, understandings, and actions in light of new information and feedback from others. There is a recognition that learning is constant and iterative, and our ability to put our values into practice can be subverted by our own biases, others’ expectations, and institutional parameters. Even as the CEPs divulge mistakes or misconceptions they have made in the past, they allow the anecdotes to be part of their story of development as humans and professionals.

Adrienne maree brown warns that, for humans, “emotional growth is nonlinear... As movements are made up of humans, movement growth is also nonlinear,” (2017, p. 106). Interpreting this in the context of higher education community engagement, I assert that programs and institutions similarly manifest misdirection, growing pains, and setbacks as CEPs strive toward authentic attainment of their institution’s public purpose. Here, I am drawing a connection between broader movements toward social justice with their component parts: programs, strategies, policies, etc. that build power to advance the movement. To the extent that CEPs see their work as part of a social justice movement, their programming and practices reflect alignment with that movement. For example, fundraising is a necessary part of higher education community engagement, as it supports implementation of programming for students, faculty, and community partners. Dorothy talked about the fundraising part of her job and how she has reconsidered the extent to which she is willing to adapt her programs to align with funders’ requirements:

I’ve become less interested in trying to make our work sound like anything other than what it is, particularly in talking to funders... There was a time when
Advancement would send me a grant...and I would spend time [thinking], how might this work? And maybe that means changing something slightly, or we’re going to frame it in this way and maybe we’ll get the $10,000 to help do the thing. And maybe I’ve just had the luxury of it, but I honestly think it’s become a principle: This is who we are and the work we do, and I’m not going to pretend it’s something else.

Dorothy went on to give an example of a grant from a religious foundation that included a requirement for her institution to agree to religious sexual ethics (e.g. against gay marriage, contraception, abortion). This requirement felt counter to the values of the community engagement center, and to the CEP’s own values, so she met with the Advancement officer and they determined that, even though the program for which they were seeking funding aligned with all other requirements of the foundation, they could not agree to the sexual ethics requirement. In this case, they passed on the funding opportunity that they might have pursued in the past.

Whereas Dorothy found support from an institutional colleague in her iterative approach to fundraising, Lucia provides a critique of her institution’s ongoing mistakes:

The university has led with the belief that the institution itself knows how communities should work. That they know best. I think that’s where the biggest disconnect has come and it keeps happening over and over. At its best, it could be an opportunity for growth and change for universities. And at its worst, it’s
imperialism. It’s continuing to colonize from a white male perspective because that’s who is at the top for the most part in higher ed institutions.

Later in the interview, Lucia articulates how this history of institutional “disconnect” and mistakes shapes her thinking as she works to develop a partnership hub with a cross-border community:

We still run the same risks, right? Even at the invitation of the community, we could still go in and gentrify. We could still go in and get it wrong. So we’re super careful with the process. Hence, so much time being invested in these stakeholder sessions and gathering feedback and really finding the ideal location for this space, because “to hell with good intentions” right?

Lucia and others expressed a sense of personal accountability to staff, students, and community partners, even as their aspirations toward implementing justice-oriented work have been hampered by institutional hubris. The interviews illuminated how CEPs see themselves as individual works in progress evolving within institutional works in progress, learning from their own mistakes as they attempt to hold their institutions accountable for the harms they have committed. Through these experiences, they build resilience; and “one core practice of resilience is transformative justice, transforming conditions that make injustice possible” (brown, 2017, p 126).
Transformative justice

CEPs who enact critical feminist praxis take opportunities to transform the programs and initiatives within their control to make them more just, and hold a vision of ambitious transformation that extends beyond their immediate purview to encompass the institution, community, and society. In this way, they take on the role of movement builders, even if that is not how their positions have been defined.

In her chapter on transformative justice and resilience, Adrienne Maree Brown (2017) frames transformative justice as both a practice and an aspiration:

...transformative justice-- justice that transforms the root causes of injustice-- is necessary at every scale...While we often put our attention on the state and demand transformative and restorative justice, it is important that individuals begin practicing in our personal, familial, and communal lives....Eventually, transformative practices that begin small will demand new societal structures. (p. 133)

She also invites us to use transformative justice as a lens for creating a shared vision, and to ask ourselves tough questions about the world we are trying to create and what work needs to be done to get there (Brown, 2017). In my interviews with CEPs, I found evidence that they are both creating small-scale transformative justice experiments, while also cultivating and adapting a broader vision of a more just institution, community, and world.
In my interview with Alethia, I asked a question about how critical feminism informs aspects of her work as the leader of an entire division focused on community outreach and engagement. She specifically discussed staffing, stating directly and unequivocally, “We pay our own team equitably. We have an exceptionally racially diverse and gender diverse team, so part of the hands-on budgeting for me is how we allocate resources to value internal people.” In response to this statement, I asked how she accomplished this equitable pay distribution and what it actually looked like, confiding that our own center has grappled with the idea of pay equity without really achieving full resolution. Alethia provided the following anecdote by way of description:

So over the last few years, I’ve built this team. So I [went to HR] and just said, “I want to see parallel positions to these [positions] broken down by race and gender. I want to understand where’s the midpoint for everybody. Where’s the midpoint for black women? Where’s the midpoint for men of color?” And then I could look at the data and come back and say, “Your midpoint that you’re telling me is low. We’re going to go higher than that, because if we look at the White counterparts, their midpoint is actually higher.” That was fun. Did not earn me any friends. So the second hire that I made took like three times as long...Also, I have a number of people on my team who do not have college degrees, and I had to really go to bat for why those individuals required the title and the compensation of other parallel peers that might've had a degree, but these colleagues had work experience and expertise from their lived background.
In essence, Alethia challenged the institution’s unjust pay structures and managed to create equitable pay distribution within her division. She alludes to the cost, both in terms of professional relationships and perceptions of her, as well as the time it took to make it happen. And yet, the result was real tangible economic transformation on a small scale, and one that has the potential to be replicated and expanded across the institution. Alethia’s efforts have the possibility of paving the way toward institutional change.

In conversation with Lucia, I learned of a similarly ambitious effort she took up that stretched outside of her role within the community engagement center, but leveraged her life experience and scholarly expertise to transform experiences of undocumented and DACA students at her institution. She described the initiative as a “comprehensive support network for all DACA and undocumented students that includes mental health services, legal services, financial services, career services...anything and everything that the students will need.” The initiative is housed within the community engagement center, but only because that is where Lucia’s position is situated. She cultivated and sustains the initiative with support from collaborators across campus. Like Alethia, Lucia describes the administrative and emotional labor that went into this effort:

I mean, I literally pushed the institution...in every way possible: in meetings, in writing, in research, in presentations, in collaboration with students as well. But the only way I can think of describing it is pushing the institution to do the right thing. I had been pushing with a number of other folks prior to the Trump administration...And it wasn’t until the Trump administration came in that the upper administration at the university started asking, “What could we be doing?”
And so the timing was right, both politically, because we had to respond, and I had the energy to develop something...and I wrote it out and pitched it in many different spaces...and it got a positive response. And then I just started doing the work. I mean, I think I didn’t wait. I pushed the university and then also didn’t care much what the response would be. I started training people...working with admissions to do more targeted outreach to this population. So it was a combination of grassroots guerilla work, and also knowing that we had to keep pushing at the top because in terms of financial aid, we needed the university to support providing more financial aid.

Lucia and Alethia’s examples show what’s possible when a CEP has the commitment to transformative justice and the resiliency to move through obstacles. Their efforts, while not fully dismantling the oppressive systems within their institutions, do much to create a “bubble” of equity and justice within the system, showing an alternative way to function within a structure often constrained by bureaucracy and tradition. It is possible that these specific models of pay equity and holistic academic support can be adapted within and beyond CEPs’ own institutions.

Such ambitious initiatives grow out of transformative visions, collectively cultivated and advanced by CEPs, community partners, and other stakeholders. I gained insight into powerful collaborative visions for institutional transformation through my conversations with CEPs and their community partners. Penelope and her partner, Ronnie, engaged in the following exchange:
Penelope: I wish that [my university] would be a place where instead of trying to be excellent in the traditional hierarchy of higher ed institutions and in the capitalist economic system, it could become driven by the desire to be innovative in a co-creative way around equity. As [Ronnie] said to me before...we’re a state that, if we really want to make an investment in ending youth homelessness, for instance, we could do it… I think this [university] is a place where there could be that transformative approach and it could have real value for the educational mission, but also for the place we are.

Ronnie: I would definitely agree that there’s so much opportunity for transformation that it wouldn’t be difficult. It’s not asking [the university] to create new things. It’s about shifting the focus of the resources you already have, and recognizing that it’s ultimately leading you to your goal too, right? The goal is everyone’s liberation, right? A just community, that’s the goal.

Similarly, Henry and Miss M engaged in shared dreaming about an educational pipeline for children and youth in the community surrounding the university:

Miss M: If you have this institution up on the hill, and you don’t want to be seen as the institution up on the hill, and you have a department or part of your institution that really wants to open up those windows and doors and arms and welcome the community…[you must ask] How are we really opening our doors to our neighbors? If you talk about systemic change, who gets to be educated? Who
has access to higher education? And if it’s just about who can afford it when we talk about access, then the conversation is over... I just want to tear the whole system up and beat it up and start all over.

Henry: And I think that’s the beauty of what community engagement can do if we were to value it and uplift it in the way we should. In that, there’s a way that you could offer scholarships to [neighborhood] kids and be this kind of benevolent outsider doing these things for the community. But I also think there’s a way, because we’re in community, we shouldn’t be an outsider. We should be doing it because we don’t see [the neighborhood] as an “other.” We see them as, we’re part of it. And I know it’s not an easy thing for an institution to be integrated into the community, but there are deliberate steps that can undo some of the culture we have established on campus. I think if we’re going to live up to our public purpose, we have to stop being gatekeepers of wisdom.

Miss M: Well, that’s where we need to be. That needs to be the paradigm shift of what it means to have access to education.

The visioning conversations also included a re-imagining of faculty, community, and student relationships. As Shanti and Diana framed it:

Shanti: The institutions of higher education that I’ve worked with that really inspire me are the ones where faculty are invested in community. The ones where
[faculty] have a sense of themselves as learners. And that’s asking for a paradigm shift.

Diana: When you are trained to be an academic, you’re trained to be an expert… So it’s a bit of an identity shift that needs to happen, and to give faculty space and permission to do that and not feel like they’re going to lose something… And it occurs to me that universities are, by design, intergenerational learning environments. But we never talk about the eldership aspect of that….So, I wonder, what if we intentionally cultivated eldership within our faculty, rather than just the transmission of knowledge?

Shanti: There’s something about it being more than a knowledge transference, and more of a building community, passing on wisdom, and passing on practices that is breathtaking to me.

In this exchange, as in the others described above, there is the acknowledgement of a needed paradigm shift, a challenging of the status quo, to make our institutions and their members accountable for contributing to transformative justice. Whether it is reframing the institution’s relationship with the broader community, reallocating resources to address community injustices, rendering our institutions more accessible to young people in our communities, or reshaping learning-teaching relationships between faculty, students, and community; each vision encompasses an aspiration for transformative change, wrapped in an acknowledgement of the labor and commitment
needed to implement such change. Knowing that resistance is inevitable as they strive for transformation, CEPs must find ways to create more possibilities instead of pursuing a singular laser-focused approach to achieve a goal.

Creating more possibilities

Creating more possibilities starts with the premise that “a multitude of realities have, do, and will exist” (Brown, 2017, 158). Our role as CEPs is to account for the diversity of realities experienced by faculty, students, and community as we guide the work of community engagement for our institution and our field to advance social justice. The scope of this accountability can feel paralyzing, but Adrienne Maree Brown argues that “...we live in a system that thrives when conditions are abundant and diverse, in a universe that holds contradictions and multitudes, and we often reject that chaotic fertile reality too soon, as if we can’t tolerate the scale of our own collective brilliance” (2017, p 156). What does it look like to open ourselves and our work up to “multitudes” of voices, ideas, and opportunities? And how might abundance be both a foundation for the work and also an outcome? To be clear, this is counternormative in a society that operates on capitalist notions of scarcity, and within institutions that have limited human capital, resources, and space. To overcome these barriers, CEPs must engage in advocacy, organizing, creative redistribution, collaboration, and imagination to build toward abundance in our work.

As a systems-level thinker, Diana describes her role as “not just the implementation of our own programs and relationships and partnerships, but lifting up this [engaged citizen] perspective across the university. How do we help the university see our work as integral to...a 21st century education?” For Diana, creating the possibility
that community engagement is core to the university’s educational mission has involved founding and co-chairing the Vice Chancellor’s Advisory Board for Student Civic Engagement. She envisioned this board as a way to leverage her institution’s ability to mobilize students for the 2020 election (and beyond), and brought together representation from 12 university departments to co-create the initiative. Together under Diana’s leadership, this group developed a logic model and theory of change for institutionalizing engaged learning; and they are currently working to identify funding and resources.

Seeing himself as a participant in shaping the broader field of higher education community engagement, Henry described ways that he has participated in collective capacity building through informal professional networks: “I’m working a lot with the Epistemic Justice [group] and the Place-Based Justice Network on thinking about community engagement as a whole field and how we can play out the edges a lot more.” To give some context, the Epistemic Justice group formed as a collaboration on a series of regional, national, and international conference sessions about applying the epistemic in/justice framework (Fricker, 2014) to higher education community engagement. The group has developed a website with resources and narratives, and has continued to meet monthly to read and discuss scholarship that pushes our work in new directions. The Place-Based Justice Network is a consortium of higher education institutions organized as a learning community that addresses oppressive systems through place-based engagement. Given the purpose and scope of these trans-institutional groups, it is powerful to imagine how they can be mobilized to push our edges and boundaries and cultivate more space for creative and transformative community engaged work. Henry frames this kind of convening as capacity building, and throughout our interview, he
described what this could look like not just in these professional networks, but also within our institutions and programs:

It’s not that we’re converting people to some kind of doctrine. I think we’re having them build capacity to start thinking and challenging themselves. We can start to hold the conversations we need to have...When we have enough people to have the conversation, and they all are able to examine, dissect, and not feel judged, not blame, not shame, not do any of that stuff to themselves, to other people, then we’re in a whole new space to explore and dissect what we are really up to. And then actually start to examine where we need to make some systems and structural changes.

Continuing with the idea of capacity building, Penelope worked with students, faculty, staff, and community partners to create her institution’s Community Based Learning and Research (CBLR) Fellowship, which pays students to work as teaching assistants for community-engaged courses. The premise is that these students can share some of the administrative, logistical, and relationship-management aspects of community-engaged teaching and learning with the faculty member, requiring less of the latter’s direct labor and making the courses more manageable and sustainable. The idea for this came from a tradition at Penelope’s university of developing peer advisor frameworks for different types of courses. She explained, “There’s just this tradition, so it kind of made sense if we’re trying to expand this work. We had some focus groups with faculty to get their ideas about what they would want to see [from teaching assistants].”
Now Penelope is facing the encouraging challenge of increased demand among faculty for CBLR Fellows as word is getting out about the students’ ability to enhance community-engaged courses. Penelope said there is also plenty of student interest as evidenced by a high number of applications in the first year of the program, and her community engagement center has funds to create paid opportunities for students who need financial aid. Based on this, we can see that the program was set up to be generative and meet multiple needs/demands at the individual and institutional level.

At Lucia’s university, she and her colleagues were similarly innovative when they created their Open University model, a collaboration with a local community center to build the capacity of community-based leaders to enact social change. In conversation with Lucia’s community partner, Gloria, I learned that Gloria participated in Open University and was able to take five courses offered by the university. Though community participants did not receive college credit, they were able to gain new learning from joining the courses. Gloria described how valuable it was to bring what she learned in the program back to her own work with her community, and how she hopes the institution will expand this offering:

There’s a lot of potential as community members. Even young parents like myself, right? We really have to train to continue our studies. Unfortunately, we don’t have the opportunity in our [home] country, but I think it’s never too late to embrace the opportunity if a university gave it to us... I feel this passion to continue learning…. It’s not like I want to go to the university as a selfish dream. Not for myself only, but I really want to do it so I can give back to the community.
Even while Gloria and Lucia acknowledged how Open University created opportunities for learning for community leaders, they also expressed aspirations for how it could be even more impactful, including figuring out how participants could get course credit, how to make the program curriculum more coherent, and how to increase access to participate.

Indeed, the conversations between CEPs and community partners allowed for collaborative dreaming as well as more immediate “scheming.” Diana and Shanti ended our conversation with the following exchange:

Diana: I would love to think about if we could do anything more together. I’d love to put on our thinking caps about that.

Shanti: Yes! That would be beautiful. I would love that. And actually, one thing I’ve been kicking around in the back of my head for a long time has been a religious left think tank, like our version of the Heritage Foundation...But as you’re talking about the intergenerational [learning] component, I’m like, it doesn’t have to be a think tank that looks like the Heritage Foundation. It could be a completely different thing, so let’s talk.

Diana: Yes! Let’s co-conspire.
For CEPs, creating more possibilities can manifest as founding institution-wide committees, developing professional learning communities and/or joining trans-institutional associations, creating student leadership programs that support faculty capacity for community-engaged teaching, opening institutional learning spaces to community members, and even co-conspiring to build alternative institutions. The theme across all of these examples is abundance: seeing our collective ideating and laboring as a means of making community engagement more accessible, more responsive, and more accountable to a public purpose.

**Inductive Themes: Critical Feminist Principles in Action**

Whereas adrienne maree brown’s (2017) Emergent Strategy framework guided the design of my research questions, interview questions, and preliminary data analysis, it didn’t accommodate all of my findings. Themes emerged that very much aligned with feminist theories and principles and warranted their own unique analysis within the study. In particular, there were three themes that I could have predicted, including power analysis, disrupting the status quo, and reverence for community wisdom. These align with the scholarship of feminists of color who have shaped my own understanding of feminist praxis: Audre Lorde, Particia Hill Collins, Kimberle Crenshaw, bell hooks, and Sara Ahmed. There was also one surprising theme that I hadn’t originally expected or accounted for: mentorship. In combination with the Emergent Strategy elements, these themes provide fertile ground for a comprehensive conceptual framework of how CEPs can and should engage in critical feminist praxis to re-imagine and re-shape the public purpose of higher education.
**Intersectional power analysis**

Every CEP I interviewed was familiar with the construct of intersectionality and demonstrated intersectional power analysis repeatedly during our conversations. Kimberle Crenshaw, who coined the term “intersectionality” provides the following description of the concept:

...To say that a category such as race or gender is socially constructed is not to say that that category has no significance in our world. [Rather] this [intersectionality] project attempts to unveil the processes of subordination and the various ways those processes are experienced by people who are subordinated and people who are privileged. It is, then, a project that presumes that categories have meaning and consequences. This project’s most pressing problem...is not in the existence of the categories, but rather the particular values attached to them, and the way those values foster and create social hierarchies. (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1293)

CEPs applied intersectional power analysis in describing their own positionality, the experiences and relationships of students, community partners, and faculty, as well as institutional dynamics. They were acutely aware of how multiple intersecting forces of oppression were deeply embedded within the culture, policies, and practices of academia. They noted how these same forces undergirded their community partnerships and student and faculty participation in community engagement. It was clear that these considerations were at the forefront of CEPs’ minds as they moved through their daily work spaces, and as they engaged in strategic planning and implementation of programs and initiatives.
In fact, Sloane offered up numerous reflective questions throughout her interview that were also implicit in other interview participants’ reflections:

- What power dynamics are inherent in the relationships that we are facilitating?
- Who is served by our institution?
- Who are we working with? How are we working with them? Why are we working with them?
- Who are we reading? Who are we bringing in as guest [speakers]?
- How are we interacting with the community?
- Who do I have in my class and how do their unique identities bring different takes on this topic?
- How can we create infrastructures that either even the playing ground or give more power to those who have historically had less?

CEPs additionally considered how their own identities affect the way they show up in professional spaces and how they are perceived. For CEPs who identify as people of color, there’s recognition of a tension between wanting their voices to shape institutional work, but also feeling a sense of fatigue that they are often called upon to represent certain identity groups and perspectives. In talking about her work to advance cross border initiatives at her institution, Lucia reflected:

I know that I’m invited to the table because I’m a brown woman; and I understand the border; and I come from the border; and I’m a product of the border myself. And it’s a double-edged sword because I wish that I didn’t have to always carry
the work of the border, but then also I don’t like knowing that conversations about
the border are taking place [at my university] and that I haven’t been invited. If
there’s a conversation going on, and I know folks that I work with and folks on
the border will be impacted somehow, I want to be part of the conversation, but I
also don’t want to be tapped for every single conversation.

Alethia, a CEP who identifies as White, shared her own thought process about
navigating university and community spaces:

I’m very attentive to my positionality: White woman, college educated, you
know, all the things that go into that. And I think it’s on my mind when I walk
into a room...Now it’s by default, but I think when I was first in the work, it was a
practice... I can’t help but understand the situation that I’m in, in this work,
whether that’s a room or a community or an endeavor. I can’t help but to
understand it contextually. What are the interwoven social, political, economic
histories that are happening? It’s like a script running in the back of my head...and
it got more complicated when I took this [leadership] role because there’s stuff
wrapped up in this role that is laden with power and hierarchy.

CEPs applied similar analysis to the experiences of their students and faculty,
connecting this analysis to how they do their work. With regard to students, multiple
interview participants described how they have structured programs and interactions with
students to create spaces of belonging, particularly for historically marginalized students,
while also fostering critical reflection and discussions about systemic oppression that engage students with more privileged identities. Dorothy talked about attending to the wholeness of students’ identities and experiences:

I think about acknowledgement of our students as they come in. [Whether] they are first generation college students, or BIPOC students, or White and wealthy, or White and poor, all of our students show up with both wisdom and woundedness. So what does it mean to draw out their wisdom and make it part of the conversation? They are not an empty slate that just showed up at [university]. So, our students’ stories...How do we honor them? I guess that’s a whole person kind of approach.

Further, as CEPs work with faculty, they hold the reality of how community-engaged work is often marginalized and devalued by the academy, and how it is also disproportionately contingent faculty, women, and people of color who do community-engaged teaching and research. Penelope provides her analysis:

There are faculty in really different positions, right? The tenure track faculty are in pretty different situations. We have visiting professors, essentially adjuncts, who’ve been teaching engaged courses [for us] for ten year and may always be “visiting.” And some of those faculty are considered second class citizens in the faculty world, and are more engaged because they’re more committed to this place and have more connections and relationships [here].
Dorothy also confided that, “Honestly, on our campus, disproportionately, the people [teaching community engaged courses] are women and BIPOC. And they are getting totally burned out by their passion. So how do we rectify that?” She indicated that this was something that she was thinking about, but is not a priority for the institution to figure out with regard to compensation and recognition for faculty labor: “The institution has a willingness to let people [over]work themselves...and some of these things are uncompensated labor or unrecognized labor.” She and other interview participants articulated an understanding that one way to address this issue of structural inequity among faculty is to revise tenure and promotion guidelines to identify and value community-engaged teaching and scholarship equally with other forms of teaching and research.

In addition, CEPs’ power analysis extended to how they understand the nature of their individual and institutional relationships with community. Henry talked about how he bristles at the dominant power dynamic between campus representatives and community members:

I think the normal narrative is, present yourself as a university employee or official, and that sets the tone for how conversations look when you’re with a partner. In thinking about how you approach a community partner, I think there’s always this one up position...A positionality that the university has over the community. And if you’re going in there and presenting yourself as an expert, I think it just reinforces some power dynamics that I don’t want to reinforce.
Henry extended his analysis of this problematic power dynamic to how students show up with community as well. He noted that, “[The university] is a predominantly White institution. Lots of students who come here have means.” When students engage with the local public school, which primarily serves low income families of color, he describes how they express fear and judgment as an expression of their biases. But meaningful interactions with community can help, “eliminate internal biases and preconceived notions of what those communities are” if they are combined with opportunities to learn about systems of privilege and oppression, and process their own positionality within those systems.

To provide an institutional-level example, in conversation with Sloane, her community partner, Lily, shared how she and her neighbors experienced the university’s campus expansion into her historically Black neighborhood, “These are neighborhoods where families and generations have lived. Some are being pushed out, but some still live there….And I don’t believe that, as things are being built or updated or changed [by the university], that the community’s voice is being heard, or considered.” She provided a specific observation:

[The university] built this building just kind of towering over [inaudible] Street housing. And I went to church and was baptized at [the church] next door. And now, [the church] is literally in a shadow. It’s a beautiful building and it's in a shadow now. And I’m pretty sure the [church]community was never thought of. I
don’t know if the university is really truly considering the larger impact of the way that it builds.

The ensuing conversation between Sloane and her partner, Lily, was about how the university does just enough “outreach” to the community to say that they have done it, but does not actually go so far as to allow community voices to influence their building projects. Underlying the conversation was an analysis of economic, racial, and political systems conspiring to fuel the university’s expansion at the expense of the Black community’s culture, history, and physical presence in the neighborhood.

Finally, Diana talks about how intersectional power dynamics continue to shape the broader field of community engagement through the lens of her own experiences in various professional networks:

You know, I’m in a variety of different circles of folks who hold jobs similar to mine at [prestigious institutions], and it’s interesting to me how many of the “big players” [in community engagement] are men. When we look at who the “pioneers” in the field are, I think other than Nadinne [Cruz], it’s all men. So when you talk about power, it’s interesting because I also feel this way as a Black woman, which is that: Nothing I’m saying is new. Nothing I’m doing is new. People have been doing this forever, whether it’s women or Black folks who have been doing these things and asking these questions around education for the longest time, but they aren’t considered important until people who are at the top of these power structures, particularly if they’re White and men, are saying it and
are using the terms. Then all of a sudden it becomes validated. We’re doing all this work, but it’s not recognized until those people in positions of power [do it]. And I don’t see that changing. Even as some of those people leave [the field], they just hire other White men to fill those jobs.

In sum, CEPs provided a wealth of examples of how they use intersectional power analysis to frame their work. It was a challenge to select from among their rich reflections on specific experiences or scenarios. It also feels insufficient to leave out some of their more general contemplations on intersectionality, as these served as indicators that the interview participants had a nuanced and thorough understanding of the construct as it was conceived by Kimberle Crenshaw. Henry may have best encapsulated this with the following comments, sprinkled throughout our interview:

- If we think racism exists in the system, how does it exist in the interaction we’re having right now?
- ...the status quo is patriarch and masculinity…
- Women and Black folks have borne the brunt of a lot of inequities in this country, and it’s not something that I wish upon anybody... but [we need] to understand that as the cornerstone for work that we need to do for justice.
- What power dynamics are in place that perpetuate systemic racism and systemic oppression in our country? You can’t not look at education itself and say they’re a big contributor to that.
If you’re not willing to actually sit there and look at your own positionality and your own relationship with power and where you are structured, you’re never really going to get it.

**Disrupting the status quo**

Disrupting the status quo is so integral to critical feminist theory, that I am not surprised it was a common theme among my interviews with CEPs. Nevertheless, anytime one challenges dominant norms and systems, it is an act of courage and risk. Feminist scholars identify the values that fuel our capacity to disrupt-- love, authenticity, openness, courage-- and the driving factor that inhibits it. Bell hooks asserts, “Fear is the primary force upholding structures of domination” (2000, p 93). She links fear specifically to our individual and collective inaction in response to oppressive dynamics that should spur us to empathy, outrage, and resistance. People choose silence and inaction because they misunderstand it as a way to ensure self-preservation.

Further, in her 1978 essay, *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action*, Audre Lorde proclaims, “In the cause of silence, each of us draws the face of her own fear-- fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation” (p 42). In other words, fear guides us to keep calm (and quiet), and carry on. In our work lives, this translates into staying silent when something is said or done to harm ourselves and others, adhering to oppressive policies and practices mandated by the institution, and allowing a culture of domination and exploitation to shape our relationships with each other.

Instead, we must call upon our deepest values to compel us toward action. In an interview with Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde offers up the essential question, “How do
you deal with things you believe, live them not as theory, not even as emotion, but right on the line of action and effect and change?” (Lorde & Rich, 1981, p 734). Feminist scholars have responded to this call to action, with hooks arguing, “we can collectively regain our faith in the transformative power of love by cultivating courage, the strength to stand up for what we believe in, to be accountable in both word and deed” (hooks, 2000, p 92). Sarah Ahmed, in her (2010) essay entitled Feminist Killjoys (and Other Willful Subjects), puts forward the construct of a feminist killjoy as a framework for disruptive action. She critiques the false joy that springs from widespread denial that oppression exists, and the dominant response to those who call out oppression: defining the disruptors as killjoys and rendering them as the problem. She invites us to embrace this label of killjoy and fortify ourselves with the willfulness to challenge oppression in all its forms.

Returning to Lorde, her poetry and essays not only call herself and others to resistance, but they also illuminate the disproportionate dangers and costs of such resistance for particular individuals and groups. She was acutely aware that her identity as a black woman-identified lesbian made her more vulnerable to retribution and harm than disruptors who are White, man-identified, and straight (Lorde & Rich, 1981). Thus it is with these feminist scholars’ critical insights in mind that I illuminate how CEPs think about, and enact, disruption of the status quo.

CEPs provided several examples of “gentle” strategies for disruption. For example, asking critical questions in meetings or suggesting humanizing frameworks for programming and decision-making. At her institution, Dorothy is very clear about one of the informal roles she and her staff must play:
I think one of our unstated roles in the institution is to be present in a bunch of
different places, either myself or members of our staff, where we’re asking
questions around justice and equity practices that shape both our internal
institutional practices as well as the way we are approaching our work with
external partners...We need to take advantage of the influence and informal power
we’ve built as a unit, but also there are several of us who have worked at the
college for a long time now, so we have the cultural capital and social capital to
do some things we couldn’t have done before. And we’ve talked about, as a
group, to work on anti-racist practices at the institution.

Along the same lines, Alethia talked about how her role as a division head allows
her to be in many decision-making spaces regarding real estate development at the
institution, and how she finds opportunities to subvert the status quo:

I was really pleased to be part of those conversations. And I believe that I was
able to change the future of some of those conversations just by stopping and
saying, “Let me explain to you that gentrification is not just about who lives in the
neighborhood. It’s about the displacement of culture.” It’s like, the neighborhood
doesn’t want a whole bunch of White people in the middle of the neighborhood.
And it doesn’t just happen to do with who owns the houses; it has to do with
displacement of culture. That kind of policy influence isn’t charismatic...It can’t
go through with just the voice of one person, but sometimes just one person
raising the objection is really where you start to chip away at the policy portfolio and you can have an impact.

Channeling Lorde’s assertion about the amplified dangers for Black women in disrupting the status quo, Diana reflected:

We’re a small unit in a large institution. I’m a Black woman. One of very few among senior managers, mid level managers. So there are many instances in which I’m at the table and in a decision-making or policy making role. And it’s a question of how am I managing that so that I’m not going to get dismissed. And also that [I’m] still seen as a valued colleague. That can be very tricky in many circumstances that I come across at the university. And some of that I think is just [university] culture, but I do think that one of the things you have to be mindful of, is being a Black woman and all the tropes that exist out there of Black women and the stereotypes. So that [I] can’t be angry. I can’t be too assertive. I do try to ground myself in what needs to be said, and not be deterred from saying that, even though the playing field may not be even for me.

Diana went on to provide an example of a situation in which a Black student, who was a resident advisor (and not affiliated with the community engagement center), went on social media to post the room number of a student who had committed an egregious racist incident. University leadership contacted Diana to ask her to talk with the resident advisor about how her behavior put the other student at risk. Diana was very clear that,
“They were calling me to say, because I was the only Black person they could find on
campus, ‘You need to go talk to her.’” At that moment, she responded with, “It’s not my
job to mitigate this. I don’t work in residential life. There’s no reason for me to do that.”
Just before she told this anecdote, she talked about the unseen and uncompensated labor
of mentoring and supporting students of color within the institution, and how she and
other faculty and administrators of color took this on because there was a need for
students to connect with them. Yet, this incident crossed the line and it was a point at
which Diana could disrupt the assumption that she would always be available to provide
mentorship to students of color in any situation.

While individual acts of disruption look like speaking up in decision-making
spaces or resisting additional uncompensated labor, CEPs also incorporate a disruptive
lens into how they do the work. Lucia reflected on how she built a team of graduate
students, all of whom are women of color, to support her community-engaged programs.
In our conversation, she made an emergent realization that the flow of their meetings is
very different from her experience of other meetings, particularly those facilitated and
attended by men. She explained:

I don’t know if it’s conscious or unconscious, but I know that I surround myself
with powerful women. I create teams of powerful women. And it’s interesting
because on our professional [staff] team, I’m the only woman voice there. I had
never thought about that before, but I know that when I’m sitting with my team of
graduate assistants and Americorps members and support staff, our conversations
are really different than when I’m sitting in a room with [three male colleagues]
and talking about the work there. You might want to step into one of our meetings when it’s just the girls because the tone changes, the speed, the depth of the conversations...everything is different....We notice as women...we notice and name things that can go unseen when we’re in “the other room.” And we’re comfortable naming them and noticing them and bringing them to the table and making them a topic of conversation....We’re super comfortable giving time and space to discuss...

Lucia’s acts of disruption are subtle but impactful: focusing on hiring women of color and allowing meeting spaces to be a site of deep processing and connection unbound by dominant norms about efficiency and productivity. But there were also examples of more overt disruption to the status quo. Henry discussed his very vocal and proactive role in pushing his institution to change the name of the community engagement center as one strategy to disrupt traditional paradigms of campus-community engagement and service. Through his advocacy, and the support of like-minded colleagues, they removed the term “service” from the center’s name and replaced it with language that prioritized awareness and action to advance social change. For Henry, the name change was also about, “moving from that more traditional model [of service-learning] to a more critical, more justice-oriented model.” In terms of his specific role in this renaming action, he said, “I feel I had a very heavy hand...As an individual who has always had an interesting relationship with authority, I feel I’m the one that is unafraid to press boundaries and challenge authority regardless of the consequences.” This institutional change is a manifestation of Henry’s more ambitious commitment, “to push
harder and start challenging the system of higher education as a whole.” He shared that he is putting a lot of energy into that effort right now.

In addition, Penelope shared reflections on her battle to gain compensation for community partners as a component of a faculty award for community engagement given by her university:

A few years ago, we were creating an award for faculty around engaged research and engaged teaching. I really wanted half the money to go to the partner and half the money to go to the faculty member because in general the faculty member probably earns more and has more resources at their disposal, and because they couldn’t do the work without a partner. It just felt really important that, if there were money involved, it would be shared…. But, I mean, even [director of community engagement center], who was supportive, wasn’t pushing once he got the “no” from the dean. And I was like, “No. We just need to do this.” And it took a few rounds of advocating; and I didn’t actually get half. You know, now 40% goes to the community partner. But I feel we need to keep on it. As we’ve been talking about, partners are absolutely essential and are co-educators and co-creators of the work, so that’s one area where I feel like I’ve seen resistance and we need to keep advocating.

Penelope’s reflection on compensating and honoring community partners is indicative of another broad critical feminist theme evident in my interviews: reverence for community wisdom and how it necessarily shapes learning for students, faculty, and staff.
Reverence for community wisdom

Bell hooks invokes the approach of pluralism to exhort us to embrace and value diverse ways of knowing. She says, “In pluralism, we commit to engage with the other person or the other community. Pluralism is a commitment to communicate and relate to the larger world” (2003, p 47). She situates this call for pluralism within a critique of academia as advancing and rewarding limited ways of knowing that perpetuate domination and oppression. Instead, hooks explicitly calls for “linking struggles for justice outside the academy with ways of knowing within the academy” (2003, p 46).

For CEPs, there is an inherent connection between academia and community, rooted in the service-learning paradigm of faculty setting up service for students at nonprofits in connection with credit-bearing courses. However, there are ways that this relationship between students, faculty, and community can be very transactional and defined by service hours instead of deep learning and contributions to community change. There are also ways that this relationship can remain tenuous in its reliance on committed individuals versus institutional commitments. This is where critical feminist praxis emerges as a means of weaving community wisdom more authentically into academia in ways that enhance our understandings of the world and our capacities to make social change.

In the conversations between CEPs and community partners, there were multiple ways that the former demonstrated appreciation of the latter group’s perspectives. The conversations were peppered with “yeses” and “I love that’s” and “I agrees.” In addition, most CEPs showed deference to their partners to be the first to respond to my
conversation prompts, and expressed encouragement like “I’d love to hear what you have to say about that first.” To further illustrate, in the individual CEP interviews, participants provided additional evidence of their reverence for partners’ wisdom with the following comments:

- “…universities hold a lot of wisdom, and so do communities, and so do people like [community partner] who have immense experience and knowledge that should be more accessible to our students.” (Lucia)
- “We’re thinking alongside, and honoring the wisdom of, all the people that play an educational role in our students’ lives, meaning also our community partners and community members.” (Sloane)
- “It’s kind of beholden on us as a center to have [students] see, like there’s a lot of wisdom and knowledge that comes from community…. This is an opportunity to learn in an extended classroom…. These [community partners] are co-educators” (Henry)
- “Our mantra is…to leverage the entirety of the institution’s assets to come alongside the agendas and wisdom of the community…” (Alethia)
- “We have an established commitment that we compensate all [community-based] knowers, all experts for what they contribute to our practice.” (Alethia)
- “I think the key for the public purpose of higher education…is really engaging with, and learning from the communities we’re in, and uplifting that knowledge and those voices that haven’t always been valued…” (Penelope)
In terms of positioning community partners as co-educators of students, as well as of staff and faculty, a few examples emerged. At the beginning of Diana’s conversation with Shanti, she expressed effusive gratitude:

One of the things I love about [Shanti] is deep, deep commitment to the work grounded in really deep intellectual thinking, but also action. It’s not separate from actually doing the work. And also she’s a prolific writer. And what I love about that is…our students are doing [social] action work, but we’re also asking them to be intellectually engaged. We’re also asking them to write things. And so it’s really wonderful to have a partner who is also in that process as a true co-educator. And that’s one of the things I love about the time you spent with [student intern]…We’re asking [students] to both hold themselves whole and to care for themselves, and yet sometimes the [social justice] work itself is the peril, right?…And so I just appreciate your partnership in that.

In another conversation between Dorothy and her partner, Margaret, they discussed an anecdote of a community-engaged learning student who was perpetually showing up late for meetings. Margaret talked about how she turned it into a teachable moment for the students, and Dorothy expressed appreciation for the wisdom she imparted:

Margaret: And [the student] said in front of all her classmates, “Are you friends with the professor? Will you please not tell her that I’ve been late?” And I said,
‘You don’t ask that of a colleague. Your behavior is on you.’ And so I did a training [with all of the students] right after that about how we are in a public arena and that you have private life stuff that you go through, but we’re in a public arena and what we should do as colleagues.

Dorothy: I remember that. And I just remember thinking what gratitude that those students hopefully had for you, if not in the moment, maybe later. That you were like, okay, we need to take a moment and talk about all the things that you just described...There’s learning your political theory...but then there’s like, we’re in the world doing a thing that affects real people’s lives.

Another CEP described how her institution has taken integration of community partner knowledge to the next level by employing her to teach performing arts courses for students. Lucia introduced her partner to me in our co-visioning conversation in this way: “[Gloria] teaches ballet folklorico at [university]...so she’s taught our students for years at this point.” Toward the end of the interview, she described the particular value that Gloria brings to campus by uplifting the voices of Mexican immigrant communities and bringing those perspectives to campus through her teaching. Lucia specifically noted that Gloria’s classes are spaces that “attract brown women” who feel connected to those stories.

CEPs have also found ways to infuse community perspectives into decision-making spaces on campus. Sloane and her partner, Lily, co-chair a community advisory board for the university, explaining that an important part of their shared work is,
“bringing our community partner organizations into [educational] opportunities and conversations…” They noted that some of the questions in the co-visioning conversation I facilitated, paralleled discussions they have had with the advisory board group, and agreed that some of my questions might be adapted to help them guide new conversations. Similarly, in my introduction to Penelope’s partner, Ronnie, I learned that Ronnie sits on the community engagement center’s advisory board and was part of the search committee for the new executive director of the center. While Ronnie acknowledged that it is a big and important step to ensure community voices are in these spaces, she questions how much her voice, and the perspectives of other partners in these groups are actually heard. Nevertheless, she has felt empowered in these spaces to speak from her own expertise and experience, and call for accountability to community, knowing that her colleagues at the community engagement center value her capacity to play that role.

Additionally, Dorothy has included two community partners on her community engagement center’s strategic planning committee, including Margaret, who participated in the co-visioning conversation I facilitated. Dorothy explicitly acknowledged Margaret’s contribution in this way:

So [Margaret] has been great because...I think one of the key questions we’re curious about, and I think you brought it up, [Margaret], at one of the meetings was, “How does [community engagement center], particularly given that we are part of a college, actually get involved and participate in structural change and policy work?” So I think the [strategic planning] process we’ve been doing has
really elevated that question because most of the CE stuff is more...direct service...So it’s been good for us to be kind of prompted to consider more closely, “What would it mean to be involved in policy work?”

In sum, the CEPs in my study made a resounding case for how and why community wisdom belongs in the academy. Every interview participant indicated that community-based knowledge must be valued and integrated in order for our institutions to truly serve a public purpose and be accountable to contributing to the good of our communities. Further, CEPs recognized the generosity of community partners in taking on the role of co-educators for students, providing them with access to community organizations as sites of learning and opportunities to grow their skills as change agents and professionals. CEPs similarly sought out ways to infuse community partner insight and expertise into boards and committees, allowing them to inform the academy’s functions in ways that might otherwise be overlooked. Reverence for community wisdom ran so deep, some CEPs specifically described community leaders and partners as mentors.

**Mentorship**

Mentorship was an unexpected nascent theme that bubbled up primarily in response to my interview question: Can you describe particular feminist theories, principles, scholars, or activists that inspire you (or your work)? I anticipated that interview participants would name well-known feminist theorists and/or activists, which most did, but they also took the opportunity to name people they knew personally. While they did not always use the term “mentor” explicitly, their description of the relationship
positioned themselves as learning from these individuals in a way that implied mentorship. CEPs referenced both academic colleagues and community leaders as inspiring figures in their lives. Some CEPs also indicated that their roles include mentorship of staff and students.

Reflecting on who had inspired her professional formation, Diana said, “I think as a Black woman, particularly of my generation, [I have] known a lot of incredibly powerful amazing Black women that would not have called themselves feminists necessarily.” Diana went on to name one woman in particular as a personal mentor; and talked about how she was historically involved with local activists and worked in South Africa as well “doing a lot of work in the Black Empowerment Movement. And then somewhere in the 80’s or 90’s, she started incorporating an environmental justice lens into her work…” This person is also a writer and educator. Diana is inspired by this person because, as she said, “I’m really drawn to people who are looking at a larger understanding of who we are in the world and our place in it as an ecosystem...How are we managing and working within that given the web of relationships that we exist within, whether human or planetar?” While this particular mentor might not identify overtly as a feminist, Diana said there’s something about her work that offers “a very feminine way of looking at [the world].”

In conversation with his community partner, Miss M, Henry, credited her specifically as a mentor to him throughout his career. He gave an example of how he looks to her as a role model because they are both alumni of color from the university who live in the adjacent neighborhood to campus and have remained involved through community engagement. “[Miss M] was already out of [university] and representing
both...as a [community partner] and Black-identified alum...having to have two hats…”

Her community-engaged partnership with a faculty member was the first model that Henry saw as he entered the field as a professional and was learning the ropes. He went on to reflect about what Miss M’s way of doing partnership taught him, “These are lessons that I wouldn’t even know that I needed until later on, like in terms of code switching and which self do you bring to these meetings. And I think the key takeaway from getting to know [Miss M] over the years is that [she’s} authentic.” Throughout his interview and conversation, it was clear that Henry had internalized the importance of authenticity in how she shows up and how he thinks about the work.

Dorothy had a revelation in retrospect about how a group of nuns who taught her in highschool formed her as a feminist in her teen years. She said, “I don’t know if they would have called themselves feminists or not, but [they had] this idea that we have a responsibility to be engaged in processes that bring about more freedom and more justice and more equity….and my little hungry soul took to them in that way.” Later, she reflected further that:

The nuns represented this faith in a calling...but also this kind of bad-assery, if you will. They were educators. They were willing to ask questions that I didn’t get to hear other places. The ones that were most influential to me could really hold complexity. And they could hold people with care. When I think about that, they were really influential.

Lucia looked even closer to home when she lifted up “feminists” who had inspired her. She explained:
I think of women, very strong women, that have shaped my life. Not necessarily theorists, but the women I worked with when I lived in a village in [Mexico] who are part of the indigenous community and are reshaping what it means to be an indiginous woman and teaching that to the younger girls….I think of my grandmother. I think of my mom...Strong female characters who have shaped my life, but haven’t read critical feminist theory. My identity is strongly defined by really powerful women back home and in the communities I’ve worked with in [city] as well.

Similarly, Sloane singled out one person with whom she had collaborated when she was doing research on farm workers. The woman she worked with oversaw health and safety at the state level farm workers’ association, and according to Sloane, “she embodies what it means to humbly work alongside people and not even think about service to them but really truly be in community [with them]” In addition, Sloane said there is a core group of people who she has considered to be mentors in her life, listing peers from grad school, her first supervisor out of her masters program, and other colleagues in higher education. However, she went on to say that most of the mentors she thought of probably would not identify as feminists, rather, in her mind, they are “people who, without naming it as a theory, live these [feminist] principles in their lives.”

Like Sloane, Henry and Lucia also named colleagues within higher education as mentors and guides. For Lucia, she said her immediate colleagues within the community engagement center “pushed me a ton, and mentored me a ton to find my voice” as a new community engagement staff member while also allowing her to feel supported, trusted,
and valued as a competent professional from the start. Henry talked about two mentors who are considered elders and pioneers in the field of community engagement and how they have encouraged him to push the field in new directions.

Most CEPs I interviewed also see themselves as mentors, coaches, and guides. Sloane and Dorothy both framed their roles to include mentoring staff, with Dorothy elaborating that, “I really think of [my role] as providing an environment for other people to succeed in their work... I’m coaching my direct reports...helping provide guidance and a framework...and then kind of letting people do their thing.” Lucia situated her relationship with graduate students and Americorps members as consisting of mentoring, training, and overseeing their development. Additionally, Diana said that a large part of her role is “mentoring students from all over the campus, Black and Brown students because there are so few of us [faculty and staff of color] and they feel like they have nowhere to go.” In other words, the CEPs in my study understand the importance of defining aspects of their role using the construct of mentorship to articulate their commitment to coaching, supporting, guiding, building, and modeling the work for others. Similarly, they identify peers, colleagues, partners, supervisors, etc. who function as mentors to them in intentional and unintentional ways through the way they do the work and the relationships they build with the CEPs.

Synthesis

I feel absolutely jubilant about the findings from this study! CEP participants, and their community partners brought vulnerability and authenticity to the conversations in ways that illuminated their values and motivations for the work of community engagement, their strategies and approaches for reimagining and reshaping their
institution’s public purpose, and their own processes of learning and formation as community engagement professionals. While they all had varying relationships and comfort levels with feminism as a theory, identity, and praxis, their anecdotes and reflections illustrated congruence with critical feminist principles.

Though I organized the findings thematically using Emergent Strategy framework (brown, 2017) and inductive coding, I want to return to my original research questions to confirm that they have been answered. For each question, I refer back to my thematic analysis, using italics to draw attention to each theme.

What critical feminist principles and theories guide community engagement professionals (CEPs) in their work?

In essence, the themes parallel principles of critical feminism. The first six themes are directly drawn from adrienne maree brown’s (2017) Emergent Strategy framework for creating social change, including principles of fractals (moving from small scale to large scale change), intentional adaptation, interdependence and decentralization, nonlinear and iterative change, resilience and transformative justice, and creating more possibilities. In addition, principles of power analysis, disrupting the status quo, honoring community wisdom, and mentoring also grew out of the data. In most cases, interview participants did not use these exact thematic phrases and words to describe what was driving their work, but they used language that aligned with how these principles are defined. For example, using the phrase “planting seeds in students’ minds” connects with the construct of fractals, or describing how one learned from their mistakes would indicate nonlinear and iterative growth.
How do critical feminist CEPs understand the relationship between community engagement and higher education?

The responses to this question reach across multiple themes. CEPs described how they intentionally adapt their community engaged work to sometimes center it in their higher education institutions for the purpose of gaining funding and legitimacy, or push the boundaries of their institution’s public purpose to create more innovative and impactful engagement. They see community engagement as involving interdependence between not only the institution and partner organizations, but also between individuals representing faculty, staff, students, and community partners to make the work authentic, educational, and responsive to community priorities. They recognize how systems and cultures of power within the institution--- and academia more broadly--- conspire to perpetuate a status quo of transactional and extractive community engagement (power analysis) that they must work to disrupt in order to more effectively achieve their institution’s public purpose.

How do critical feminist CEPs define their roles and responsibilities within their institutions and the broader community?

The CEPs in this study understood that they had a responsibility to be mentors to students and colleagues by offering support, coaching, role modeling, etc. The outgrowths of this mentoring, and other educational and professional development programming that they provide, include building individual and collective capacity to advance social justice on the small and large scale (fractals). They also understand that they have the power and responsibility to resist and disrupt the status quo within their
programs, centers, divisions, and institutions. Simultaneously they are called to *create* new opportunities and synergies that advance their various community engagement efforts toward *transformative justice*.

*How do critical feminist principles and theories guide the practices and policies developed by CEPs? Specifically, how do CEPs collaborate with community partners?*

As leaders of divisions, community engagement centers, or programs, CEPs shape their practices and policies through *intentional adaptation* informed by scholarship and life experience, and through *nonlinear and iterative processes* of ideation and “failing forward.” Further, policy-making and program design are rooted in *interdependence and decentralization*, relying on multiple voices to inform creative processes and trusting individuals to play guiding roles regardless of their positional stature. CEPs provided multiple examples of how they invite and *honor community partners’ wisdom* and expertise as co-educators in the community-engaged learning process and guiding voices in institutional boards and committees with community-facing missions.

*How do critical feminist CEPs envision the ideal community-engaged institution? In what ways does that vision reflect the collective aspirations of community partners?*

I created the CEP and community partner co-visioning conversation to explicitly surface answers to this question. Through authentic and vulnerable exchanges, CEPs and partners shared insights, critiques, questions and aspirations as they worked together to create a vision for how their higher education institution could more fully express its public purpose. CEPs affirmed and built on the ideas of partners, as well as expressed appreciation for new insights that they had not previously considered (*reverence for*...
community wisdom). The dynamic I observed between them was very much interdependence and decentralization, with each having an equitable stake in the conversation and partners not showing any need for deference to CEPs because of their role or situation within the institution. They reflected on the trajectory of the institution’s relationship with community, surfaced past and current mistakes, and wondered aloud what could be learned from them in an iterative process. They expressed specific goals and aspirations to work toward through intentional adaptation and creating more possibilities for exchanges of knowledge and resources, and building coalition to advance transformative justice.

What theories or strategies for institutional change do critical feminist CEPs employ to work toward their vision?

In terms of advancing institutional change, CEPs shared examples of intentional adaptation of programs and initiatives by building on scholarship, stakeholder wisdom, and their own expertise and experience. They also saw their roles, and the roles of other stakeholders as disruptors of the status quo and architects of new more inclusive and effective ways of doing community engaged work (creating more possibilities). Through “fractal” practices, CEPs recognized that their work in collaboration with others (interdependence) could ultimately transform the culture of their institutions to make them more accountable for a social justice orientation to their public purpose.
CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS

I began this study with a few goals in mind. The first was to pursue a line of inquiry that integrates my passions for higher education community engagement and critical feminist theory. Leading up to my dissertation, so many mentors encouraged me to find a topic that would hold my interest throughout the research and writing process. I am pleased to confirm that my topic has been an ongoing source of curiosity, excitement, and creativity. My second goal was to contribute to filling a gap in the literature in my field. Namely, I found that there was limited scholarship on how feminism informs higher education community engagement, and no publications on how it guides community engagement professionals in their practice. This led to my desire to produce a conceptual framework that draws on the critical feminist praxis of experienced community engagement professionals.

My goals were rooted in an analysis of the problem that higher education is not fully realizing its public purpose through community engagement. Though many scholars applaud the proliferation and recognition of community engagement becoming a common practice across academia over the past forty years, “the challenge for higher education is to find ways to avoid tokenism and make engagement central” (Fitzgerald et al, 2012, p 26). In other words, scholars critique how community engagement will remain on the margins of the academy, and remain ineffective at contributing meaningfully to the common good, until it is able to transcend disciplinary silos, co-curricular ghettoization, feel good marketing stunts, and traditional positivist frameworks for valuing teaching and research that devalue engaged faculty work (Fear & Sandmann, 2019, Fitzgerald et al, 2012, Purcell, 2019, Ramaley, 2019). However, I believe higher education community
engagement can truly contribute to advancing social justice by leveraging its knowledge and resources in coalition with community-based wisdom and people power. Other scholars have similarly expressed their aspirations for our field/movement, saying:

...we seek a means to expand and shift from the established internally focused, discipline-based framework of higher education to a framework focused on a stronger level of societal relevance that improves both society and the overarching goals of higher education. (Fitzgerald et al, 2012, p. 7)

As we enter more deeply into the twenty-first century, community engagement is shifting from being about how colleges and universities “serve” the community through their research and their approach to educating their students to a much more integrative and collaborative model of engagement that draws on knowledge, experiences, and interests of both the academic community and the broader community… (Ramaley, 2019, p. 253)

The extant literature points to an opportunity at this moment, when community engagement is widely implemented across higher education but still constrained by neoliberal ideology, to facilitate a shift in the culture and systems within the academy to make it more oriented toward an authentic public purpose (Fear & Sandmann, 2019, Sandmann, Saltmarsh & O’Meara, 2008). While most of the scholarship on community engagement identifies faculty as the facilitators of institutional change, there’s emerging scholarship that asserts that CEPs can play an integral role as well. Their positionality
within higher education institutions allow them to function as movement builders (Dostilio & Perry, 2017). To be clear, they must do this work in collaboration with faculty, administrators, students, and community partners, but they have the capacity to be catalysts and organizers. They just need the foundational understandings, competencies, critical commitments, and relationships to do this work effectively.

My qualitative grounded theory research process allowed me to surface important information about how CEPs enact critical feminist praxis to advance a social justice agenda in their work. Through a series of seven interviews with individual CEPs and seven co-visioning conversations between CEPs and their community partners, I gathered anecdotes, insights, and aspirations that aligned with adrienne maree brown’s (2017) Emergent Strategy framework and illuminated four additional themes that connect with critical feminist principles. I also identified a meta-theme of critical feminism as an aspirational praxis versus an identity marker for participants. In the findings section, I provided multiple pieces of evidence for each theme and rooted the themes in the extant literature. I subsequently connected the thematic findings to my original research questions.

Out of this iterative process of analysis, a conceptual framework took shape. It situates CEPs within an ecosystem of dynamics connecting their institution, field, and community where they operate as changemakers who leverage myriad foundations, relationships, values, and critical thought processes to enact “fractal practices” that simultaneously disrupt oppression, create new possibilities, and advance an authentic public purpose for their institutions. I assert that my conceptual framework can be integrated into professional development opportunities, and degree and certificate
programs, to enhance the learning and formation processes for CEPs. I believe it also provides a fertile foundation for future research on the intersections of feminist theory and higher education community engagement.

It is important to me to honor how this framework parallels and complements the theoretical framework advanced by Elaine Ward in her 2010 dissertation, *Women’s Ways of Engagement: An Exploration of Gender, the Scholarship of Engagement, and Institutional Reward Policy and Practice*. Ward developed three distinct but connected components of the theory that focused on identity, context, and ways of engaging. The identity component accounted for the intersections between personal, professional, and civic aspects of women’s identities and how that informs their engaged scholarship. The context component articulated an overarching theme of connectedness whereby women engaged scholars participate in reciprocal relationships with various people (e.g. faculty peers, community partners, etc.); reflect a sense of rootedness within their institutions, disciplines, and communities; and assert an understanding of their responsibility to take political action to respond to inequities. The third aspect of Ward’s (2010) theory is a list of the characteristics of Women’s Ways of Engagement. According to Ward, women’s engaged scholarship is connected and collaborative, socially constructed, change oriented, grounded in personal values and identity, and rooted in epistemological and ontological values. The framework I present below suggests many parallels with Dr. Ward’s, including themes of relationships and networks of support, orientation toward social change, accounting for one’s values and identity, engaging in acts of resistance, and honoring lived experiences and community-rooted wisdom.
Conceptual Framework

Adrienne maree brown defines Emergent Strategy as “how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for” (2017, p 24). She roots the strategy in change processes that happen in the natural world, recognizing the interconnections between us and all beings. This was my inspiration as I began to sketch out a conceptual framework to capture the themes from my research. I wanted to develop a visual that situates CEPs within a broader ecosystem of dynamics and relationships. I also wanted to lift up the importance of the internal work of building one’s capacity to advance social justice, drawing on one’s values, experiences, and cognitive and emotional processes. Additionally, it was crucial to honor the tendrils of change that CEPs are extending into their professional spaces through the synthesis of external and internal forces. The resulting conceptual framework is an

_Ecosystem of Critical Feminist Praxis for Community Engagement Professionals_ (Figure 1). For each component of the framework, I provide a description of what it entails and how it bloomed from the research findings.
Figure 1. Ecosystem of Critical Feminist Praxis for Community Engagement Professionals. Graphic by Natalie Ferrer
**Fertile grounds**

Each CEP in my study built their praxis upon common thematic foundations. Unsurprisingly, these foundations reflected their formal academic and professional trajectories, including learning about critical theories and activist movements, as well as consuming scholarship on community engagement. Some of their praxis foundations also reflect informal contributions to their formation, including learning from lived experiences, and finding mentorship inside and outside of the field of higher education community engagement. I frame these foundations as fertile grounds, recognizing that they integrate into a rich germination site for CEPs to seed and grow their thinking and actions.

With regard to the foundation of critical theory, participants referenced a range of theoretical traditions from the fields of education, leadership, law, and sociology. Most were exposed to these in their graduate or even undergraduate studies, but some came upon them through professional development as CEPs. Of course, the nature of my study lent itself to surfacing participants’ connections to critical feminism, with some mentioning Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality and adrienne maree brown’s Emergent Strategy framework directly. Diana and Sloane also mentioned ecofeminism as a guiding force in their understanding of their work. However, CEPs noted that other theories drive their work as well. Diana talked about relating to humanism as a more expansive framework than feminism that focuses on our shared humanity as an organizing principle. Dorothy and Penelope both mentioned anti-racism as a guiding framework and specifically critical race theory, which emerged from his legal scholarship in the 1970s and 80s in response to the shortcomings of progress promised by civil rights laws. They
talked about infusing anti-racism into the operations and programs of their community engagement centers and also doing individual “self-work” on unlearning racism. Penelope also mentioned adaptive leadership and servant leadership theories as shaping her practices as the leader of a community engagement center and supervisor to multiple staff. When talking about how they design undergraduate programming, Diana discussed transformative learning theory and Penelope talked about liberatory pedagogy and Maxine Greene’s aesthetic educational theory. Diana also talked about Kingian nonviolence and the framework of Othering & Belonging as integral to her work and the programming designed by the community engagement center. In other words, participants were drawing from a deep well of theories to inform their praxis.

In addition, I was unsurprised to find that CEPs were steeped in the scholarly literature on higher education community engagement. Henry referenced Tania Mitchell’s critical service learning model as a guiding force for his community engagement center’s evolution. Alethia shared appreciation of scholarship produced by Elaine Ward on women faculty members’ experiences of doing community engaged teaching and research. Penelope talked about how she was influenced by Kerrissa Heffernan’s legacy of linking women’s studies and community engagement as well. In addition to referencing particular scholars, participants also referenced concepts emerging from literature and practice in the field of community engagement. In particular, Dorothy and Alethia discussed how they are integrating a place-based approach to community engagement, and also bringing an anchor institution lens to their campus’ relationship with the broader community. Further, Sloane described recently joining a professional learning community hosted by an academic association outside of her institution, and
reflected on the value of getting to put scholarship and peer perspectives into conversation with her professional practice in real time. In essence, integrating scholarship from the field is part of these CEPs’ praxis, and they are finding ways to stay current with emerging research and theory in this field, while also engaging with it through ongoing professional development.

Interestingly, some CEPs also talked about how they drew inspiration and learning from studying contemporary and historical social justice movements. Again, the focus of the study solicited overt connections from CEPs to feminist movement, or particular strands of the movement (e.g. third world feminism, Black feminism, queer feminism, etc.). Diana also described how the Black Liberation movement shaped her work through particular connections to scholars and activists. Also, in conversation with her community partner, Diana linked community engagement efforts to nonviolent civil rights movements. Alethia also referenced the civil rights movement, specifically naming the role of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) as a precursor to more formalized higher education community engagement. Henry asserted the importance of looking to the current Black Lives Matter Movement to understand how community engagement can facilitate solidarity with their platform. Lucia similarly connects her work with border communities and DACA and undocumented students to the immigrants’ rights movement. Additionally, a few CEPs mentioned decolonization movements and their influence on higher education community engagement, as well as histories of student activism at their particular institutions. For these CEPs, social movements are foundations and inspirations, but also current guiding forces for higher education community engagement.
More specifically, some of the CEPs described being connected to these movements and/or to the field of community engagement through mentors. As described in chapter four, the mentoring theme was somewhat of a surprise that emerged from my findings. Nevertheless, it was common among six out of the seven CEP participants.

Alethia referenced two local community activists by name and offered appreciation for their role in her formation as a community engagement practitioner and scholar. Similarly, Lucia and Sloane described working alongside women who taught them about the importance of community organizing. Henry and Diana also referred to their community partners, with whom I facilitated the co-visioning conversations, as mentors, and explicitly described what had been learned from them. Within the field of community engagement, Henry talked about how two well-known scholars, Nadinne Cruz and Dick Cone, influenced his desire to keep pushing the boundaries of community engagement to make it more social justice oriented. Sloane talked about prior supervisors playing a crucial mentoring role in her professional development. In all of the anecdotes and explanations shared in my interviews, the CEPs articulated that these mentoring relationships were informal and organic, but profoundly formative for them as people and professionals.

The participants’ formation was further infused with learning from their own lived experiences. Diana explained how her past role as a tenure track faculty member and her stint outside of academia in philanthropy provide valuable perspective on how to support faculty and community partners while guiding them toward equitable and just collaborative work. Henry similarly talked about how his succession of prior professional experiences helped him to build his capacity and commitment as a disruptor of the status
quo. Lucia additionally reflected on her experiences as an immigrant woman and undergraduate student at the institution where she is currently employed, and how much of her work now is guided by trying to create inclusive experiences for students like her. Further, participants talked in vulnerable and authentic ways about how their lived experiences as community engagement professionals were shaped by aspects of their racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, and gender identities.

In sum, the fertile grounds of my conceptual framework comprise critical theories, community engagement scholarship, activist traditions, mentoring, and lived experience. In terms of their connections to my thematic findings from the interviews and community partner co-visioning conversations, they showed up most consistently in “intentional adaptation,” “non-linear and iterative,” “mentorship,” and “reverence for community wisdom.” Anecdotes and reflections within each of these themes referenced growing and learning from extant scholarship and prior experience, as well as adapting and evolving through relationships with elders and mentors, many of whom are rooted in community and connected to justice movements.

In the air

Critical feminist CEPs recognize the importance of the context in which they do their work, as if it were the air that gives them life, keeps them firmly on the ground, blows them in different directions, and cradles them in warmth. They understand how cultural, historical, social, economic, political and environmental dynamics influence their individual thinking and actions, as well as the possibilities for advancing institutional change. These forces can be simultaneously fortifying and limiting, requiring artful navigation. At any given moment, CEPs in my study expressed attention to the
norms and constructs of academia, the field of community engagement, broader society, and community. In most cases, they offered anecdotes of working against the dominant forces around them, but they also appreciated the ways they felt held and nurtured by the community engagement field (or a subsection of it) and their partner communities.

Perhaps the most commonly mentioned source of constraint was the culture and norms of academia. Both Alethia and Penelope described how it impeded their ability to hire and compensate staff who do not conform to dominant standards of qualification for particular paid positions. In Alethia’s case, she was able to push back and get equitable compensation for staff who do not have college degrees, but she admitted it was a hard fought battle against the status quo. Additionally, both Henry and Diana describe the academic culture of glorifying faculty as experts in their field, and the requisite expectation that they assert authority over knowledge production and dissemination in the classroom and community. In their conversations with community partners, Diana and Henry talked about the challenge of reorienting faculty to practice community engagement and enter community with humility and a desire to learn, rather than with an agenda and an assertion of expertise. Community partners confirmed the potential for extractivism and exploitation when faculty bring a mentality of using the community as their research laboratory. Sloane and her partner, Lily, also discussed the trend in academia of expanding campus footprints into surrounding community as a way of enhancing recreational offerings for students, creating more space for residence halls, and ultimately generating greater revenues. Neoliberal ideology seems to guide higher education institutions to perpetually expand with little accountability for the displacement they cause. Lily provided keen insights into how this particular dynamic was playing out
in her home community, a historically Black neighborhood, adjacent to Sloane’s institution. Relatedly, Lily lamented how students seem to see higher education as a commodity, and don’t pursue community engaged learning with a mentality of being accountable to community and developing civic skills. Instead, students might see it as a distraction or as a resume builder, which negatively affects how they engage community. Further, multiple CEPs talked about how community engagement remains on the margins at their institutions, primarily because it is not regarded as a valuable or legitimate manifestation of teaching and research. It is a common lament in our field that faculty who do community engaged teaching and research risk not being rewarded with tenure or promotion because it is not seen as equally valuable or rigorous as traditional forms of teaching and research. Interview participants expressed frustration at the limitations created by neoliberal, positivist, and elitist norms in the academy.

However, CEPs also mentioned the promise of academia as an institution that was originally created to fulfill a public purpose. They recognized how they could leverage this history to justify and extend their work in certain ways. At her public university Diana described how she finds opportunities to remind leaders and faculty that their public university has a huge imprint on the local community, and therefore a huge responsibility to use their resources in service to the community. At their faith-based colleges and universities, Henry, Dorothy, and Lucia invoked faith traditions of service and social justice to make the case for their work. Savvy CEPs have also figured out how to connect community engagement with diversity, equity, and retention initiatives that have become a priority across higher education as student demographics have shifted in the past few decades. Dorothy specifically talked about how she made the case to keep a
significant amount of work study funding within her community engagement center to pay students in the Jumpstart program, which primarily employs students of color with financial need at her institution.

Within the field of community engagement, there was a sense among interview participants that professional networks and associations, scholarship, and professional development offerings are influencing the work in important ways. I highlight this dynamic as distinct from how CEPs intentionally and actively consume scholarship, mentorship, and professional development opportunities as a foundation for their evolving practices. Rather, this dynamic is more reflective of how CEPs respond to the trends in the field that are disseminated through these different paths. For example, Dorothy talked about pressure to compose an ambitious civic action plan for her institution that potentially committed them to deep partnerships with three different geographic communities, even though her institution was not in adjacent proximity to any of them. She had to advocate for limiting the focus of the plan to just one community so the institution could make a more reasonable commitment given its proximity and resources. Additionally, CEPs described how they used prestigious academic recognitions like the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement to critique and advance community engagement at their institutions. Henry expressed appreciation for how his affiliation with both informal and formal learning communities in the field had fortified his capacity and commitment to a social justice orientation to community engagement. However, multiple participants acknowledged inherent issues in the field, namely Dorothy talked about the pervasive influence of Whiteness on community engagement principles and practices, Penelope specifically talked about the problem of
the predominance of White women in CEP positions and the need for greater diversity in staff to better reflect student and community demographics, and Alethia reflected that much of the foundational scholarship in the field was written by White men. Indeed, the field of community engagement simultaneously reflects the issues of broader society and holds promise for new paradigms to emerge. It pushes and cradles CEPs, requiring adept navigation to stay the course of advancing their institution’s public purpose.

To expand on CEPs’ situation within broader societal forces, interviewers offered anecdotes of how events and systems impact their work. Lucia provided an example of how Trump’s election catalyzed the creation of a cohesive support system for DACA and undocumented students at her institution. In the context of COVID-19, Dorothy and Margaret discussed an anecdote of a community engaged student who did not have reliable access to wifi, but was expected to host community meetings on Zoom by the community partner. When Margaret, the community partner, discovered that the student did not have reliable wifi, she took on the role of helping the student problem-solve the issue. In their co-visioning conversation, Penelope described how educational inequity is a statewide issue and her partner, Ronnie, remarked that Penelope’s university should be actively addressing the issue since it is not paying taxes to support the public education system. Henry and Miss M also specifically discussed educational inequity and how it creates a barrier to neighborhood students attending Henry’s university (but also to private universities more generally), effectively rendering it inaccessible to community as a mechanism for social mobility. Also, multiple interview participants articulated the challenge of addressing university students’ socialized biases about underserved communities, which are rooted in systemic racism and classism. In sum, societal forces
and events ranging from the digital divide to racism to a presidential transition have created both opportunities and barriers to CEPs efforts to advance the public purpose of their institutions.

Communities are microcosms of societal dynamics, manifesting issues in unique ways, and requiring careful attention and responses from CEPs. Both Alethia and Sloane talked about the relationship between their institutions and the historically Black neighborhoods adjacent to their campuses, citing the problems of gentrification and displacement tied directly to campus expansion in addition to general real estate speculation in the community. Lucia described how her institution’s work with the surrounding community must account for the large population of immigrant residents, many of whom are undocumented and face economic and legal barriers to making a life in the US. Conversely, CEPs describe the necessity of understanding the strength, power, and assets emanating from their communities in response to the issues imposed on them. Each CEP talked with their community partner about how the latter’s organization serves to advance community priorities and amplify their voices. Lucia and her partner, Gloria, described how the local community center activated and convened emerging community leaders, which it eventually connected to Lucia’s institution through an open university model. Henry talked about a particular community leader who has worked with his institution for years, and is not afraid to really question and challenge faculty about why they want to work with her community. Through her advocacy, the will of the community is at the forefront of Henry’s and faculty members’ considerations when they partner. Likewise, Penelope recounted to her partner, Ronnie, an admonition from someone in their local school district who said the university should first address the racial disparities
on its own campus before attempting to address racism in the public schools. In other words, CEPs understand the community is a site of systemic oppression and also resistance, shaped by dynamics imposed upon them while also asserting community-rooted power of self-determination and dictating their relationships with higher education institutions.

So many dynamics surround the CEP, requiring attention, consideration, accountability, deflection, or integration. Like the air, these dynamics give life to their work, but also constrain it and push it in positive or negative directions. I assert that this component of the framework most readily connects with the themes of “nonlinear and iterative,” “power analysis,” and “reverence for community wisdom” in the findings chapter. CEPs described how they have had to iterate ways of overcoming entrenched systemic and cultural barriers rooted in ideologies of elitism, neoliberalism, and positivism designed to maintain dominant power structures in academia. Similarly, they have directly engaged forces of racism and capitalist conquest in relationship with the broader society and community. Positive influences have included proliferation of supportive resources, scholarship, and professional associations in the field of community engagement. Also to the extent that CEPs are able to be in relationship with the broader community surrounding their institutions, they are able to integrate community voices, priorities, concerns, and needs to guide their institution’s public purpose.

The source of light and heat

Just as communities are microcosms of society, colleges and universities are each unique amalgamations of societal, community, and higher education dynamics. In addition, these institutions boast resources, gifts, and capacities that can be leveraged to
serve the public good. As employees of these institutions, CEPs can absorb and direct the institution’s energy, much in the same way a human being absorbs and directs the light and heat from the sun. Alethia divulged in her interview that learning her institution’s administrative processes and policies, along with budgeting and governance procedures, has allowed her to figure out how to use those processes to advance her division’s community engagement work. Dorothy determined how to use her center’s funds to pay for her institution’s membership in a local faith-based community organizing association. Penelope lobbied to have community partners receive an honorarium in addition to funds for faculty who receive the community engaged scholarship award from her institution. Multiple CEPs also pushed to have community partner representation on search committees and strategic planning groups, recognizing that infiltrating these structures with community voices can make institutions more accountable to their public purpose.

In addition to implementing strategies to direct institutional power in service to a public purpose, CEPs and their community partners expressed aspirations for further leveraging of institutional resources and gifts. Lucia and her partner, Gloria, co-constructed a vision of Lucia’s university responding to the amplified housing and education inequities during the pandemic by opening residence halls to unhoused families and academic spaces for K-12 learning hubs with reliable wifi access. Diana and Shanti imagined an evolution toward an intergenerational learning paradigm at Diana’s university that reshapes the relationship between students, faculty, and the broader community for multidirectional learning. Penelope and Ronnie envisioned a participatory university budgeting process whereby students, faculty, and community members have a significant say in how the institution’s funding is allocated. The participants in my study
showed themselves to be strategic in maneuvering institutional resources and power to support their community engaged work, and were also pragmatic dreamers about how they would extend their leverage in ways that would radically transform institutional culture and practice. Thematic connections to this component of the conceptual framework include “power analysis,” “disrupting the status quo” and “creating more possibilities.” CEPs harness the power within their institutions to subvert problematic practices and policies, redirect resources to support community engaged work, and reshape institutional culture and processes.

*Embodied praxis*

Even as CEPs recognize their situation upon a fertile foundation and in relationship to the external dynamics all around them, they are also cultivating an internal process of embodied praxis to guide their work. Embodied praxis, in this framework, is the integration of values, thought processes, and actions meant to advance a social justice orientation to community engagement. Multiple feminist scholars theorize embodied praxis and the role of feelings and emotions in constructing our understanding of ourselves and our worlds and acting in congruence with this understanding. Sara Ahmed (2010) describes how there are times when women literally use their presence, their bodies in patriarchal spaces, to disrupt a status quo that they understand and feel to be oppressive. Adrienne maree brown (2017) invites us to pay attention to our feelings as legitimate ways of knowing. Bell hooks (2000) talks about the supreme value of love as an action rather than a feeling, which implies responsibility and accountability in relationship to others. Inspired by these holistic integrative frameworks for our internal processes of
knowing and being, my framework identifies the components that synergize and mobilize within CEPs to drive their work.

Every interview participant made explicit references to the values guiding them professionally, as represented by the heart in the framework. The most common value among them was equity, which six out of seven CEPs named. In some cases, they gave specific anecdotes of how it guided their actions. For example, both Alethia and Penelope talked about concerns about pay equity among their staff and worked to resolve them. In other cases, they identified equity as a general guiding principle at their community engagement centers. Another commonly mentioned value was love. Four of the interview participants used the term in describing what drives their work. Dorothy talked about how she is actually using bell hooks (2000) book, *All About Love*, as a framework for her facilitating her center’s strategic planning process. Henry asserted that he felt responsible for creating a loving environment in which students can be vulnerable in their learning process. Every CEP also named justice as a driving value, though the term was often prefaced with diverse specifiers like social, racial, food, environmental, and epistemic. Often, the mention of justice was coupled with the mention of equity (e.g. equity and racial justice, equity and social justice). In most use cases, the interview participant offered the term as an aspiration that they are working toward, but it was clear that this aspiration shaped their thinking and actions. Dorothy and Penelope both described a recently increased focus on racial justice in their centers, which included the creation of professional development, student-facing curricula, strategic planning objectives, etc. I reference values in my findings section within the “intentional adaptation” and “resilience and transformative justice” themes.
The values of equity, love, and justice integrate with CEPs’ thought processes, including power analysis and self-reflection. These components of the conceptual framework are located in the CEP figure’s head. As power analysis is one of the thematic categories in my findings chapter, I have provided extensive examples of how CEPs engage in it to examine personal, interpersonal, institutional, and systemic power relations. Here, I will focus more on the self-reflection process, which was not a distinct theme in my findings, but was folded primarily into the “intentional adaptation” and “nonlinear and iterative” themes. Multiple interview participants asserted the importance of reflection in their work; and all demonstrated self reflection by telling stories of their experiences as illustrations of their enactment of critical feminist principles. Sloane talked about her process of self reflection in different contexts and the questions she asks herself about how to show up in those spaces in order to have her voice heard and be an ally to others whose voices are not often heard. Penelope similarly described reflecting on her own identities and how they shape her understandings and actions in different contexts. During our interview, Alethia explained how she comes into decision making spaces and makes a point of reading the context and her positionality to help her figure out how to act. Then Alethia confided that her answer may make her “appear super reflective,” but she actually feels like she is not consistently reflective in those spaces….which in itself is a form of reflection.

The integration of values, self-reflection, and power analysis leads to informed actions, which can mostly be categorized around two main themes described in the findings: disrupting the status quo and creating more possibilities. In the conceptual framework, these actions are “tattooed” on the CEP figure’s shoulders. In the early phase
of creating this conceptual framework, I imagined multiple action verbs tattooed on the figures' arms and shoulders, but as I wrote down the verbs, they were all sub-categories of disrupt and create: support, uplift, protect, mediate, build, collaborate, conspire, challenge, push, invite. Thus, I simplified the conceptual framework, though it belies the complexity, breadth, and depth of what it takes for CEPs to daily enact the practices of disruption and creation. Because I provide extensive examples of acts of disruption and creation in chapter four, I will not reiterate them in detail here. Examples of acts of disruption include CEPs speaking up in an opportune moment or setting to challenge problematic ways of thinking, reorganizing staffing to be less hierarchical within the organization, and reframing institutional messaging to students about safety and the community surrounding campus. Acts of creating more possibilities include developing a comprehensive support system for DACA and undocumented students, disseminating a culture of civic engagement across campus, and developing a student leadership program that supports faculty in implementing community engaged courses.

To take these themes further, I offer some CEP reflections that show why the “disrupt” and “create” tattooed on the figure’s shoulders are sort of a nod to the phrase “carrying the weight of the world on one’s shoulders.” I noticed there were times in the individual interviews and community partner conversations when CEPs expressed a deep sense of gravity and accountability, recognizing that they touch so many people through their work. They felt that students, community partners, and faculty were counting on them to act with integrity to interrupt and mitigate problematic practices, and create opportunities and possibilities for advancing community engagement. For example, Alethia described how tenaciously advocating for equitable pay for her staff “didn’t win
me any friends,” implying that it made some colleagues frustrated with her. Also, Diana talked about walking the line as a Black woman in academia between not wanting to play into stereotypes about the angry Black woman, but also feeling compelled to speak truth to power in decision-making spaces that affect students and community. An example of the struggle of creating more possibilities was Penelope’s story of having to lobby her supervisor to help her make the case for a community partner honorarium, even after the leadership said no multiple times. There was a recognition that their persistence might damage their relationships or standing with leadership, but Penelope felt it was a necessary battle to align with their center’s values.

True to critical feminist traditions, the participants in my study demonstrated and articulated an embodied praxis of integrating values, self-reflection, and power analysis to guide their disruptive and creative actions. This praxis both emerges from the foundations that the CEP has cultivated, and responds to the contextual climate encompassing them.

**Tendrils of change**

The figure in the conceptual framework has voluminous hair, representing tendrils of change: the ways that CEPs connect with others to work toward transformative justice and a public purpose for their institutions. These tendrils are mostly constituted by components found in the themes of “fractals” and “interdependence and decentralization” in the findings. Among the fractal practices described in the prior chapter, CEPs create and facilitate student programming and faculty development as a way of disseminating community engagement practices and building community among and across constituencies committed to community engagement. Additionally, the interview
participants, all of whom oversee staff, described their efforts to mentor their staff by exposing them to learning opportunities and giving them autonomy to apply their learning in their work. Further, CEPs both lead and participate in strategic planning processes for their community engagement centers and broader institutions, imprinting these processes with their particular expertise, values, and commitments. In fact, CEPs do the same on multiple boards and committees, both at their universities and in the community, to play a role in shaping decision-making on an institutional level.

Within the theme of “interdependence and decentralization,” interview participants described the importance of relationships, and demonstrated authenticity in their relationships with community partners through the co-visioning conversations I facilitated. Inherent in the conversations were indicators of trust, appreciation, humor, a willingness to share honest critique, and a propensity for dreaming of what is possible together. For these CEPs, community partnerships move beyond transactional institutional exchanges of labor and learning opportunities to mutually enriching interpersonal relationships that have the power to transform community engagement. And the value of relationships extended beyond community partners to professional networks internal and external to the CEP’s institution. Reiterating some of the reflections from my findings, Sloane talked about her approach to meeting new colleagues and the questions she asks to truly get to know them and feel out the extent to which they might be “co-conspirators” in advancing the public purpose of the institution. Lucia also talked about the power of mobilizing with colleagues (and students) to advance a new initiative. Additionally, Henry described powerful learning and inspiration he is gaining from participating in formal and informal professional networks in the community engagement
field. Among all participants, there was a recognition that the work of advancing a social justice approach to community engagement within institutions and across the field required interdependence and collaboration.

There is one additional tendril of change that I did not describe in the findings: scholarship. It is another powerful way for CEPs to shape the community engagement field, and it is often done in collaboration with others. Three of the interview participants shared reflections on collaborative scholarship experiences and how formative they were for themselves. As someone who has consumed the publications they produced, I can attest that this literature is decidedly making an impact. Alethia reminisced that the best piece of scholarship she felt she had ever produced was one on reciprocity in community engagement because it was a deeply collaborative project. Penelope talked about a project she led in her previous position at a national membership association for colleges and universities with a public purpose. She used funding to develop a community engagement scholars cohort composed of diverse emerging voices in the field of community engagement, and the group collaboratively produced a book of vignettes about the tensions inherent in community-engaged teaching and research. In addition, Dorothy mentioned that she was in the process of reviewing final page proofs for a publication on women in leadership, which she is co-authoring with a colleague. She reflected that the process of thinking and writing with a peer helped her see her work as being inspired by feminism in ways she hadn’t previously realized. In sum, the production of scholarship functions to simultaneously build CEPs’ understandings and capacities through creative and generative writing processes with their collaborators, and
also allows CEPs to shape the field by disseminating perspectives, theories, and curricula for community engagement constituencies to integrate into their practices.

**Bloom of possibility**

Critical feminist CEPs are purpose-driven, working toward a vision of the truest and fullest realization of their institution’s capacity to advance transformative justice. The blooming flower in the conceptual framework represents the imaginative aspirations shared by multiple interview participants. Most of the components of the bloom are drawn from findings across the “creating more possibilities,” “interdependence and decentralization,” “intentional adaptation,” “reverence for community wisdom,” and “transformative justice” themes. Each aspiration in the bloom unfolded from both the individual interviews and the community partner co-visioning conversations.

A common aspiration was to provide students with holistic development opportunities that extend beyond traditional academic disciplinary learning. Henry talked about creating space for students to examine their own identities, positionalities, and relationships to systems of injustice as a starting point for helping students develop the commitment and capacity to contribute to positive social change. Diana and her partner, Shanti, described the value of students supporting social change movements that do not necessarily directly affect them as a way of building solidarity, citing powerful examples of students learning about laborers’ rights and organizing tactics from labor organizers. Dorothy and her partner, Margaret, discussed community engagement as a way to help students to develop their sense of professionalism and accountability to others beyond themselves. These are all examples of experiences that CEPs co-create, but also want to
expand and enhance to ensure all students have learning experiences that develop their minds and hearts.

CEPs also expressed a desire to proliferate co-constructed knowledge that emanates from collaborations between community wisdom-holders and academics. Diana and Shanti, during their co-visioning conversation, concretely discussed the possibility of co-authoring a publication on co-developing a learning space that centers practices of nonviolence. Penelope and Ronnie asserted a vision of the university looking to community to set agendas and expectations for how to address pervasive injustice issues and then mobilizing the institution’s resources and faculty research and teaching labor to help advance the community agendas. Alethia boldly asserted that deepening our collective understanding of the social world can only happen if we integrate the perspectives and experiences of diverse communities with scholarly inquiry. Henry called out the whole educational system as a space where we are systematically misinformed about how the world works, and specifically points to the active exclusion of community-rooted wisdom as an example of how dominant systems remain in power. For him, bringing community wisdom-holders into the institution as legitimate, compensated, and valued educators is an important step toward a paradigm of co-constructed knowledge permeating the academy.

While various types of relationships are embedded in different aspects of the conceptual frameworks as contributors to CEP praxis, interview participants also asserted that authentic relationships are also a goal of their work. To reiterate prior analysis of the relationships that CEPs envision, they entail trust, accountability, humor, grace, appreciation, and critique. CEPs find fulfillment in these relationships and strive to
ensure that their partners, faculty, staff, and students feel mutually fulfilled. In fact, a few of the CEPs and their partners commented about how nice it was to just be together in conversation with each other during the co-visioning activity and not be working toward a particular deliverable or outcome. They just enjoyed each other’s company and being in a creative process together.

Related to relationships, but important enough to occupy a distinct petal in the bloom, is accountability to community. The distinction is that CEPs expressed the goal of making their institutions accountable to community in a similar fashion to how they individually felt accountable to their partners. Sloane, in conversation with her partner, Lily, suggested that her university needs to get beyond the cursory community input gathering processes that take place before campus expansions occur but after construction plans have already been made. Rather, the institution should move toward true accountability by collecting community input before planning any campus expansions and actually allowing that input to inform the process and design of the buildings. Henry and Miss M critiqued the university’s messaging that neighborhood students could go from preschool to graduate school without having to leave the community, calling out that very few children from the low income neighborhood surrounding the university were actually accepted there as students. They contended that the university should truly make good on its marketing statement by creating pathways and scholarships specifically for youth in their neighborhood to matriculate at the university. Additionally, Penelope and Ronnie talked about how the university, as a tax exempt organization that doesn’t contribute funds to support the public K-12 school system, should demonstrate accountability by finding alternative ways to invest in educational equity in the city’s
schools. Interestingly, very few conversations yielded fully realized examples of colleges and universities demonstrating significant accountability to community, so this aspiration seemed particularly lofty, but not out of reach, given that CEPs and their partners were willing and able to imagine the possibilities.

Finally, transformative justice sits at the center of the bloom as the ultimate goal expressed by all of the interview participants. I use the term “transformative justice” because it is part of the Emergent Strategy framework, though CEPs used different terms like social justice or social transformation that seemed to have the same meaning. Because transformative justice was one of the thematic organizers in the findings section, I implore readers to return to the detailed examples I share in that section. By way of summary, transformative justice was often expressed as an amalgam of the other aspirations in the bloom: tending to the holistic development of students in such a way that they are equipped and empowered to contribute to positive social change, fostering and sustaining interpersonal and institutional relationships that are mutually fulfilling and fortifying in the face of unjust systems and structures, and co-constructing and leveraging contextualized knowledge that moves us toward deeper understandings of our social and natural worlds and developing more humane institutions and cultures for supporting the realization of every person’s potential to thrive. Transformative justice is really about weaving these aspirations together into a new paradigm that centers equity, justice, liberation, and love.

**Recommendations for Advancing Practice**

This study has illuminated so many possibilities for driving positive change in the field of higher education community engagement. As stated previously, higher education
boasts origins rooted in a public purpose, and scholars assert that multifaceted community engagement approaches are a promising way to realize this vision. However, dominant paradigms in the academy, shaped by neoliberalism, positivism, and elitism, often subvert community engagement efforts from growing into their potential to advance social justice. As professionals situated within academia who are also attentive and accountable to relationships with the broader community, CEPs have the capacity to re-imagine and reshape their institutions’ realizations of their public purpose. By synthesizing the wisdom of seasoned CEPs, insights from community partners, and critical feminist theories, I have developed a conceptual framework to guide the formation of community engagement professionals as movement builders. The *Ecosystem of Critical Feminist Praxis for Community Engagement Professionals* illustrates opportunities to enhance professional development and can be used as a tool for reflection.

**Focus on fertile grounds**

Referring back to the conceptual framework, I think the community engagement field should focus on enriching the “fertile grounds” out of which it grows. In other words, we need to consciously and proactively diversify the foundations of our field. As described in the literature review, there is almost a singular story of the origin and trajectory of higher education community engagement replicated across the scholarship and in professional development and educational programs. This history largely leaves out feminist movement, and insufficiently includes other activist movements like student strikes, the movement for Black liberation, etc. as contributors to the birth of higher education community engagement. What could our field look like if we patterned our
current community engagement activities off of the visions and strategies of historic activist movements that have a proven record of catalyzing social change?

Additionally, I contend that we must expand our theoretical underpinnings of the field beyond Schon’s (1983) reflective practitioner, Mezirow’s (1997) transformative learning, Freire’s (1970) popular education, and Boyer’s (1996) engaged scholarship models to include critical feminist theories of intersectionality, liberatory feminism, feminist killjoy, and emergent strategy. These theories offer new ways of thinking about community engagement beyond the focus on student learning and faculty career trajectories. As previously asserted, feminist principles directly support more equitable and critical community engagement than traditional models by prioritizing the following:

- Commitment to uplift and advance equity for women of diverse identities
- Focus on building equitable and mutually fulfilling relationships
- Recognize the importance of context in shaping one’s experiences and possibilities
- Employ intersectional analysis, or an examination of how systems of power and oppression overlap to disproportionately affect particular identity groups
- Seek opportunities to challenge unjust practices, policies, and systems
- Center and value the voices of individuals and groups that have historically been excluded
- Engage in self-reflection, including a cycle of praxis that involves synthesis of theory and action
- Work in coalition with others to affect change that leads to greater equity and justice, particularly (but not exclusively) for women
To be clear, many of the principles above can be found in other bodies of theory as well, so our field should present feminist theory in conversation with other theoretical traditions in education, leadership, law, and social change. In fact, a takeaway from the interviews was that most participants had exposure to feminist theory, but it was during undergraduate or graduate education programs unrelated to their specific professional trajectory as CEPs. This means they were not engaging with this body of theory in the context of the community engagement field, making it a gap and also an opportunity to fulfill. To be fair, some CEPs did reference other valuable theoretical frames, including critical race theory and humanism, that they had come upon through their own self-directed professional and personal development. However, in general, there was a clear sense that critical feminist theory, and other critical theoretical traditions are not commonly integrated into CEPs’ scholarly and professional development within the field. How might we create space for CEPs (and faculty, students, and community partners, for that matter) to study and apply critical feminism and other diverse theoretical traditions in service to re-imagining and reshaping our institutions’ public purpose?

Additionally, in recognition of participants’ appreciation for how mentors shaped their formation, I argue that our field should develop a more expansive culture and practice of mentorship. This should include senior scholars in the field, but also peer mentorship among CEPs, and community-based mentors. In fairness, I am aware of a few national and international associations in the community engagement field that offer mentor programs, connecting senior scholars and practitioners with emerging professionals. However, I am not aware of any formally constructed peer mentoring
programs, or any scholarship on peer mentoring within higher education community engagement that might shape our efforts on this path. As the field stands now, I see peer mentoring happening informally through collegial relationships that form within and across institutions. Indeed, I have developed authentic relationships with peers who I consider to be “critical friends,” or the people I go to when I need a “reality check” about the work. But when I was new to the field, I did not know I could benefit from peer mentoring relationships. Therefore, I did not seek them out or cherish them when they accidentally happened to me. An even more radical and potentially impactful model would be mentoring initiatives that pair community engagement professionals with community-rooted change leaders. Just as we assert that students can learn so much from working alongside folks in the community, we must recognize that CEPs can experience deep learning from them too. Multiple interview participants confirmed this in their reflections about who inspires and guides their work. I do not mean to argue that we co-opt or undermine the organic emergence of mentoring relationships for CEPs. Rather, how might we better understand and communicate the value of peer-to-peer and community leader-to-CEP mentorship models so CEPs can cultivate such relationships? In addition, how might these mentoring relationships fortify CEPs to embrace their capacity as movement builders?

**Use the framework**

Beyond expanding CEPs’ formative foundations to include diverse critical theories and mentoring relationships, I argue that we should use the *Ecosystem of Critical Feminist Praxis for Community Engagement Professionals* as a tool for self-reflection and professional development. The conceptual framework illuminates myriad forces
shaping the CEP’s work, diverse ways CEPs can position themselves to be change makers, and radical aspirations for the public purpose of higher education. While CEPs might be conscious of the various components of the framework as part of their professional experience, they likely are not looking at it as an entire coherent ecosystem. This “big picture” recognition might lead the CEP to realizations about 1) untapped foundations for their professional development, 2) previously unnoticed cultural, social, political, economic, or historical dynamics manifesting at their institution and/or in community, 3) the cycle of praxis guiding their actions, 4) ways their professional activities and relationships can affect change, and 4) aspirations for their institution, the field, and the community.

In anticipation that the “Ecosystem” framework could be helpful in prompting reflection, I worked with the graphic designer to create a blank framework worksheet (Appendix I). It can be used by individuals or in group professional development settings to prompt CEPs to reflect on their work. The reflection process will include an invitation for CEPs to write down the foundations undergirding their work in the “fertile grounds” section. The facilitator might prompt CEPs to think of particular theories, articles, scholars, mentors, experiences, etc. that have been crucial to developing their understanding of community engagement. Next, the facilitator prompts CEPs to write down the name of their institution in the sun and anything notable about their institution (e.g. faith-based, rural, community college, etc.). CEPs fill in the clouds and air after that with other dynamics that shape their work. The facilitator might prompt them to think about the specific forces that they are paying attention to in community (e.g.
gentrification), in the field (e.g. place-based initiatives), and in higher education (e.g. focus on career preparation over liberal arts).

The next phase of the activity invites CEPs to list their values in the heart, and imagine how those values integrate with their own processes of reflection and power analysis. This is where they might articulate understandings of their identities, positionalities, and experiences of power and oppression. Then, CEPs can write down the verbs that represent their professional actions and commitments day to day, recognizing the extent to which these actions are informed by the interplay of values, reflection, and power analysis. CEPs might write down verbs like teaching, partnering, supporting, etc.

Next, the facilitator directs CEPs to the tendrils of change, represented by the hair, and asks them to write down the different things they do that they think contribute to making positive change in their institutions, field, and community. Finally, CEPs culminate the activity by writing aspirations for the outcomes of community engagement in the petals of the bloom.

Time should be allocated for CEPs to review their completed framework and notice anything that is surprising, exciting, frustrating, etc. Ideally, there would also be an opportunity for CEPs to discuss their frameworks with peers in pairs or small groups so they can learn from each other’s reflections. After this reflective activity, the facilitator might show the actual “Ecosystem” conceptual framework and explain all the components, then invite CEPs to compare, contrast, and critique it in light of what they created. I envision this as a creative process that builds CEPs’ understanding of their own positionality and capacity to influence community engagement.
Create co-visioning opportunities

It was a pleasant surprise to be met with effusive gratitude from CEPs and community partners for creating an opportunity for them to engage in co-visioning. I had been so worried that the partners would find it to be a burdensome activity because there’s no tangible inherent benefit for them in joining the conversation, hence the gift card incentive. However, I was relieved to discover that partners 1) responded quickly and enthusiastically to CEPs’ invitations to dialogue, 2) took the time to complete the informed consent form and review the conversation prompts in advance, and 3) engaged in earnest, humorous, critical, and imaginative conversations with the CEPs, and did not appear to hold back in my presence.

Some of the CEP and community partner pairs stated right at the beginning of the conversation that it was going to be useful. Sloane and Lily said they may use the conversation prompts to facilitate discussion in the community advisory board that they co-lead. Penelope and Ronnie said it was a chance for them to catch up after both being too busy to connect for their ritual coffee dates, though they also credited the pandemic with keeping them apart. Other CEPs and partners reflected on the power of the conversation at the end. For example, Diana and Shanti mused that the conversation had seeded some ideas for future collaborations.

Overall, my takeaway from this component of the data gathering process was that there is value in creating opportunities for semi-structured conversations in which CEPs and community partners discuss their frustrations and inspirations regarding community engagement, and dream together about where they want to see the work grow in the future. Even if the aspirations are lofty and not immediately ripe for achievement,
discussing them clarifies the expectations and commitments of each party and can germinate new opportunities for collaboration. My hope is that this study prompts CEPs to make a regular habit of having visionary conversations with community partners as a way of strengthening their relationships and fostering new ideas.

**Limitations and Future Research Opportunities**

This study begins to fill a significant gap in the field of community engagement, namely, a lack of scholarship on the intersections between critical feminism, the community engagement field, and the role of community engagement professionals as movement builders. There is not a single publication on this specific topic, and few publications on feminism and community engagement. Those that exist focus on faculty teaching and research practices or institutional relationships and power dynamics vis-a-vis community. Therefore, this study can be a springboard for a new subcategory of scholarship within higher education community engagement.

Nevertheless, I am aware of its limitations. Because my study is qualitative and includes a small sample size of seven CEPs and seven community partners, findings cannot be generalized. Rather, my purpose was to use a grounded theory approach to synthesize findings into a conceptual framework that communicates common themes across CEP narratives through a critical feminist lens. My hope is this study makes critical feminist praxis more prevalent and intentional in the field of community engagement. I also imagine that the conceptual framework I have put forward in this study will evolve over time as I continue my scholarship and invite others to be in conversation with it in ways that will push our collective thinking and practice.
Also, I am aware that some scholars might see my feminist research approach as problematic. For me, it was important to interview CEPs with whom I had a relationship or who were connected to my mentors. I theorized that this would provide a foundation of trust that would allow them to share candidly with me. I found this to be true as the interview process played out. However, critics might argue that my relationship with participants could bias my analysis and findings. I am sure it is notable that I did not include any critiques of the insights, anecdotes, and practices shared by CEPs. The closest I got was recounting their own vignettes about mistakes they had made and biases they held. While it might appear that my analysis is naively rosy, I argue that my intent from the beginning was to lift up the ways CEPs engage in critical feminist praxis to reimagine and reshape the public purpose of higher education. The point was to create a blueprint of promising practices that could inspire others in our field. In honesty, this is a small, but hopefully impactful contribution that leaves much room for future research.

**Critical feminism, community engagement, and the CEP**

As I have said multiple times in this study, currently no literature has been published on how critical feminism informs the work of community engagement professionals. However, this field is growing, creating more professional staffing opportunities. It is imperative to welcome and support new professionals by providing coherent peer-reviewed models to guide their practice. Further, we must bring new professionals into the field with an eye toward building our collective power to guide higher education and our institutions toward a fuller expression of their public purpose through community engagement. Existing scholarship and professional development curricula do not integrate a critical feminist lens, which prioritizes the relational,
emotional, and social change aspects of the work in unique ways. I assert that feminist theory should be more widely integrated into research and scholarship, in conversation with traditional community engagement paradigms and other theories and models that guide social change. We need scholars to advance the study of feminism and community engagement by pursuing the following inquiries:

- To what extent are feminist theories and perspectives included in existing community engagement scholarship and professional development curricula?
- To what extent do CEPs draw on feminist theoretical traditions to shape their work?
- How do directors of community engagement centers employ critical feminist leadership approaches?
- What is the impact of adrienne maree brown’s (2017) Emergent Strategy framework on the field of community engagement?
- How can critical feminist theories of change explain the evolution of community engagement over time?
- What can feminist movement teach CEPs about creating institutional change?

Alternative models of CEP mentoring

A clear theme that emerged in my study is the power of mentoring relationships, specifically when the mentors model revolutionary ways of doing community engagement. Whether in academia or in community, there is power in the organic relationships that CEPs develop with folks they admire and want to learn from. While programs and scholarship exist on traditional mentoring relationships within the community engagement field, partnering emerging professionals with seasoned mentors,
very little attention has been paid in the scholarship to alternative mentoring models. I am excited about the possibility of new studies that might explore questions like:

- How do CEPs cultivate mentoring relationships with community wisdom holders?
- What do CEPs gain from having mentors outside of higher education?
- What do community wisdom-holders gain from acting as mentors to CEPs?
- What factors lead to sustainability and mutual benefit in the CEP’s relationship with a community-based mentor?
- How do CEPs cultivate and sustain peer mentoring relationships?
- What do CEPs gain from peer mentoring relationships?
- What factors lead to sustainability and mutual benefit in the CEP peer mentoring relationship?

**CEP and community partner relationships**

One area of exploration I hope to pursue is the study of interpersonal relationships between CEPs and community partners. In the conversations I facilitated, I was struck by the intimacy of the exchanges: participants divulged personal information, asserted critical feedback, made irreverent comments, confided about deep admiration for each other, ate lunch (“because it was the one meeting during the day where I knew I wouldn’t be judged for eating”). I felt as though I was observing, and lightly facilitating, chats between friends, rather than “business discussions.” I would love to peel back the layers, or see how other scholars peel back the layers, of these interpersonal relationships with questions like:

- What factors contribute to cultivating and sustaining mutually fulfilling interpersonal relationships between CEPs and community partners?
● How do CEPs understand the benefits of maintaining interpersonal relationships with community partners?

● What benefits to community partners gain from maintaining interpersonal relationships with CEPs?

● To what extent do interpersonal relationships between CEPs and community partners matter in fostering and sustaining institutional relationships between the university and nonprofit?

● To what extent do CEPs and community partners understand authentic relationships as an outcome or impact of community engagement endeavors?

● What does a co-constructed vision of higher education community engagement look like when shaped by a community engagement professional and their community partner?

**Conclusion**

It is not hyperbolic to proclaim that this dissertation has helped me through one of the most challenging periods of my life. It has been a little over a year since the pandemic drove our family into shelter-in-place. The early months were so disorienting and emotional as I navigated the challenge of working from home while (poorly) managing my kids’ remote schooling situations, running my household while negotiating new barriers to accessing food and services, and trying to keep my dissertation process moving forward. There was a substantial period of time when I did not have the cognitive capacity or emotional bandwidth to focus on research and writing, as I was consumed with worry, grief, and frustration.
My experience tracks with emerging research on how the pandemic has affected women’s productivity in academia and beyond. Kim and Patterson (2020) conducted an analysis of tweets produced by political science faculty between June 2019 and June 2020 as a proxy for measuring changes in work productivity, and found that the content and frequency of tweets indicated that women (particularly pre-tenure women faculty) experienced greater barriers to maintaining productivity during the pandemic. They assert, based on the content of tweets and reference to extant research, that women’s productivity decline is due to increased family responsibilities in the absence of consistent childcare and schooling outside of the home. Additionally, Colleen Flaherty, staff reporter for Inside Higher Ed, has written multiple articles on emerging trends in women’s research productivity over the past year based on interviews with peer-reviewed journal editors and faculty. In general, she’s found that women’s submissions to journals have either declined or stayed flat compared with increases in submissions from men (Flaherty, April 2020; Flaherty, October 2020). She similarly attributes this to not only increased childcare responsibilities, but also the related emotional labor of managing competing family and work dynamics.

Then summer came with an unpaid furlough on Fridays, and I embraced it as a welcome opportunity to focus on writing my literature review deeply and intensively once a week. I buried myself in bodies of literature on higher education community engagement, critical feminism, and feminist engagement. I reread canonical texts with new curiosity, and discovered provocative scholarship that I hadn’t yet encountered during my formation as a CEP, synthesizing it into a foundation that clarified a unique and innovative path forward for my research. My research methodology evolved to
reflect the principles and traditions of critical feminism, integrate the relational nature and transformative aspirations of higher education community engagement, and account for the gaps in community engagement literature. I stuck to the weekly writing habit and entered fall semester ready to defend my proposal. At my defense, the affirmations I received from my committee were a boost to my overall morale. Committee members made me feel like I was doing something that mattered, something that would transcend the confines of sheltering in place and fending off a pandemic.

However, the most fulfilling part of this journey was the data gathering process. The interviews with CEPs and conversions with community partners were so life-giving. I was able to connect deeply with people I admire at a time when I felt so isolated from friends, family, and colleagues. I got to be a learner, imagining myself sitting at the knee of each elder as they imparted their wisdom. I came away from each interview and conversation with a head full of ideas, deductive and inductive themes tumbling around in my mind. I was surprised to find myself enjoying transcript reviews and subsequent close reads for the coding process. I had anticipated it would feel tedious, as it had in some of my prior research projects, but it was like rediscovering hidden treasures. By the time I sat down to write about my findings, I felt intimately connected to participants’ reflections and anecdotes. And this level of intimacy with the data inspired the beginnings of a conceptual framework, and image forming in my head of a CEP rooted in critical foundations, surrounded by a unique and complex context, engaged in a cycle of praxis, and extending their power to advance a social justice orientation to community engagement. I reached out to find a graphic design student to turn my poorly drawn framework into a professional graphic, and the creative process with her was similarly
fortifying and inspiring. The final version of the framework is a tribute to my research participants, an attempt to encapsulate their power and wisdom.

In sum, this dissertation study has been nothing short of joyful, transformative, and essential to my ability to thrive and grow during the pandemic. It was my creative outlet, the one thing I could control, and a way to connect with other humans in the absence of social engagements. It truly is a love letter to my professional field and to critical feminism, an affirmation that I am living my calling as a community engagement professional. It is also a reminder of the gift of being in relationship with generous and visionary change agents, and working collectively with them, to transform our institutions, the higher education field, and our communities to advance a shared vision of equity, love, and justice.
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APPENDIX A: USF IRB Approval Confirmation

Attachments:
- Expedited Review Approved by Chair - IRB ID: 1486.pdf

IRBPHS - Approval Notification

To: Patricia Moore  
From: Richard Gregory Johnson III, IRB Chair  
Subject: Protocol #1486  
Date: 12/01/2020

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) at the University of San Francisco (USF) has reviewed your request for human subjects approval regarding your study.

Your research (IRB Protocol #1486) with the project title Engaging Feminism, Transforming Institutions: How Community Engagement Professionals Employ Critical Feminist Praxis to Reimagine and Reshape the Public Purpose of Higher Education has been approved by the IRB Chair under the rules for expedited review on 12/01/2020.

Any modifications, adverse reactions or complications must be reported using a modification application to the IRBPHS within ten (10) working days.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRBPHS via email at IRBPHS@usfca.edu. Please include the Protocol number assigned to your application in your correspondence.

On behalf of the IRBPHS committee, I wish you much success in your research.

Sincerely,

Dr. Richard Gregory Johnson III  
Professor & Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects  
University of San Francisco  
irbphs@usfca.edu  
IRBPHS Website
APPENDIX B: Invitation Letter to Community Engagement Professionals

Dear _____,

I hope you are staying strong and healthy through this challenging historical moment.

I write to invite you to share your insights and expertise as a participant in my doctoral dissertation study. The title of my dissertation is *Engaging Feminism, Transforming Institutions: How Community Engagement Professionals Employ Critical Feminist Praxis to Reimagine and Reshape the Public Purpose of Higher Education*. I am conducting qualitative research that involves interviews and a collaborative visioning project, which I explain in more detail below. I am reaching out to you specifically because our relationship has afforded me insight into how you do community-engaged work, and I feel your particular perspective and narrative will be important to inform the grounded theory I’m creating. (or, I am reaching out to you specifically at the recommendation of a peer in the field who thinks your perspective and narrative will be important to inform the grounded theory I’m creating.)

**Eligibility:** My hope is that you are willing and able to participate in my dissertation research, which requires that you meet the following eligibility criteria:

- You work as a fulltime community engagement professional (CEP) at a college or university
- You hold a leadership position of assistant director or above
- Your role is defined as staff/administrator, not faculty
- You have been in the field for at least 5 years
- You either explicitly espouse critical feminist principles OR implicitly embody critical feminist principles, including:
  - Commitment to uplift and advance equity for women of diverse identities
  - Focus on building equitable and mutually fulfilling relationships
  - Recognize the importance of context in shaping one’s experiences and possibilities
  - Employ intersectional analysis, or an examination of how systems of power and oppression overlap to disproportionately affect particular identity groups
  - Seek opportunities to challenge unjust practices, policies, and systems
  - Center and value the voices of individuals and groups that have historically been excluded
  - Engage in self-reflection, including a cycle of praxis that involves synthesis of theory and action
● Work in coalition with others to facilitate change that leads to greater equity and justice, particularly (but not exclusively) for women

**Commitment and Timeline:** The data collection phase of this study will run December 2020 to February 2021, and involves two components: an individual interview and a collaborative visioning activity with a community partner that you will identify and invite to participate. I will provide a small amount of compensation to the community partner for their time. As a research participant, I’m asking you to commit to the following:

- Participate in an individual interview on Zoom, will be recorded (one hour)
- Participate in a co-visioning activity with community partner on Zoom, will be recorded (45 minutes)
- Reach out to invite community partner to participate in activity
- Review transcripts and notes from interview and visioning activity and offer feedback on accuracy (optional)

If you are willing to participate in my research study, and you meet the criteria above, please let me know and I will respond to share more information, provide a consent form, and begin the scheduling process for our initial interview. If you have questions and would like to learn more before determining whether to commit to this study, I’m happy to talk by phone/zoom or answer questions by email based on whatever is most convenient for you. Thank you in advance for considering this opportunity to inform my research, and the field of higher education community engagement with your unique perspective and insights.

Warm regards,

Star Plaxton-Moore  
Doctoral Candidate  
Leadership Studies  
School of Education  
University of San Francisco
APPENDIX C: Informed Consent Form for CEPs

Consent Form for Community Engagement Professional Participants in

Dissertation Research Study

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Below is a description of the research procedures and an explanation of your rights as a research participant. You should read this information carefully. If you agree to participate, you will sign in the space provided to indicate that you have read and understand the information on this consent form. You are entitled to and will receive a copy of this form.

You have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by Star Plaxton-Moore, a graduate student in the Department of Leadership Studies at University of San Francisco School of Education. The faculty supervisor for this study is Dr. Jane Bleasdale, a professor in the Department of Leadership Studies at University of San Francisco School of Education.

WHAT THE STUDY IS ABOUT:

The purpose of this research study is to illuminate and legitimize the value of critical feminist praxis in influencing how community engagement professionals (CEPs) at higher education institutions understand the field of community engagement, situate themselves within the field and institution, implement policies and practices, and engage in relationships to advance social justice-oriented community engagement as a means of reclaiming and re-envisioning the public purpose of higher education. The researcher will synthesize findings into a conceptual framework and recommendations to guide CEPs’ professional development and practice.

The research questions guiding this study are:
● What critical feminist principles and theories guide community engagement professionals (CEPs) in their work?
● How do critical feminist CEPs understand the relationship between community engagement and higher education?
● How do critical feminist CEPs define their roles and responsibilities within their institutions and the broader community?
● How do critical feminist principles and theories guide the practices and policies developed by CEPs? Specifically, how do CEPs collaborate with community partners?
● How do critical feminist CEPs envision the ideal community-engaged institution? In what ways does that vision reflect the collective aspirations of community partners?
● What theories or strategies for institutional change do critical feminist CEPs employ to work toward their vision?

WHAT WE WILL ASK YOU TO DO:
During this study, the following will happen: The researcher will work with each study participant to schedule a one-hour individual Zoom interview. The interview will be video and audio recorded, and transcribed. The second phase will require each CEP to identify a community partner (CP) to participate in a collaborative visioning activity. The CEP will use an invitation template provided by the researcher to invite their chosen CP to participate. The visioning activity will last 45 minutes and be conducted on Zoom. It will be recorded and transcribed. Additionally, the researcher will keep observation notes as they facilitate and watch the interactions between CEP and CP. The researcher will share transcripts and observation notes with participants for member checking to ensure accuracy. The researcher will review all transcripts and observation notes and conduct inductive coding to identify emergent themes common across the data. The researcher will also use Emergent Strategy framework (Brown, 2017) to do deductive coding in alignment with the six elements of emergent strategy. Findings will be organized into a conceptual framework and recommendations for CEP professional development and practice.

DURATION AND LOCATION OF THE STUDY:
Your participation in this study will involve two phases: participation in a one-hour Zoom interview and participation in a 45-minute collaborative visioning activity with a community partner on Zoom. There will also be a minimal amount of time/labor involved in identifying and reaching out to a community partner for the visioning activity. You will be invited to review your transcript and observation notes from the visioning activity to offer feedback on whether the documents accurately reflect your narrative and participation. This aspect of the study is optional. The study will take place entirely on Zoom, and will be conducted between December 2020-February 2021.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:
The research procedures described above may involve the following risks and/or discomforts:
1) Participation in the study will involve up to two hours of time on Zoom and up to two additional hours for community partner outreach and transcript review (optional) which takes away time from other responsibilities.
2) Depending on what you choose to share about your experiences, you may feel triggered by specific memories.
3) There is a very low risk of participant and/or institution being identified by readers based on specificity of details shared in interviews.

If you wish, you may choose to withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time during the study without penalty.

BENEFITS:
The possible benefits to you of participating in this study are:

- A chance to reflect on your professional trajectory and accomplishments
- An opportunity to share your story to shape the field of community engagement
- Researcher will share the completed dissertation directly with participants

PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY:
Any data you provide in this study will be kept confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In any report we publish, we will not include information that will make it possible to identify you or any individual participant. Specifically, we will keep recordings and transcripts with identifying information under secure password protection in the researcher’s professional Zoom account. The researcher will scrub personal identifying information from transcripts and observation notes before saving them in the researcher’s scholarly files in Google drive or sharing with the researcher’s dissertation committee. All participants will be given a pseudonym in the publication. The master list of participants and signed informed consent forms will be saved in an external hard drive and destroyed after 3 years. Additionally, video and audio recordings, and original transcripts, will be deleted from the researcher’s Zoom account after 3 years.

COMPENSATION/PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION:
There is no payment or other form of compensation for your participation in this study.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:
Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits. Furthermore, you may skip any questions or tasks that make you uncomfortable and may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. In addition, the researcher has the right to withdraw you from participation in the study at any time.
OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS:
Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you should contact the principal investigator, Star Plaxton-Moore at smoore3@usfca.edu or the faculty advisor for this dissertation, Dr. Jane Bleasdale at jbleasdale@usfca.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board at IRBPHS@usfca.edu.

I HAVE READ THE ABOVE INFORMATION. ANY QUESTIONS I HAVE ASKED HAVE BEEN ANSWERED. I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT AND I WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM.

__________________________  _______________________
PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE     DATE
APPENDIX D: CEP Interview Protocol

Participants: Community Engagement Professionals (CEPs)

Format: Zoom, one hour interview, recorded and transcribed

Interview framework:

- Introduction to research study (2 minutes)
- Ensure that participants have signed consent forms (1 minute)
- Define critical feminism
  - Commitment to uplift and advance equity for women of diverse identities
  - Focus on building equitable and mutually fulfilling relationships
  - Recognize the importance of context in shaping one’s experiences and possibilities
  - Employ intersectional analysis, or an examination of how systems of power and oppression overlap to disproportionately affect particular identity groups
  - Seek opportunities to challenge unjust practices, policies, and systems
  - Center and value the voices of individuals and groups that have historically been excluded
  - Engage in self-reflection, including a cycle of praxis that involves synthesis of theory and action
  - Work in coalition with others to affect change that leads to greater equity and justice, particularly (but not exclusively) for women

Interview Questions (55 minutes- 3-5 minutes per question)

“What do you do?” category

1. For the record, can you state your name, title, institutional affiliation, and how long have you worked in higher education community engagement?
2. Can you describe your position/role at your current institution and share the most important aspects of your job?
3. In your time at this institution, what are some specific policies and initiatives you have shaped or contributed to shaping?

“What do you stand for?” category

4. (Based on the descriptors I provided in my outreach email), do you consider yourself to be a critical feminist? If so, why? If not, why?
5. How do you define critical feminism? (R1)
6. Can you describe particular feminist theories, principles, scholars, or activists that inspire you (or your work)? (R1)

“How do you manifest it?” category

7. In what ways does critical feminism shape your understanding of the relationship between community engagement and higher education? (R2)

8. In what ways does critical feminism shape your working relationships? (R4)

9. In what ways does critical feminism shape your professional practices (e.g. teaching, staff oversight, fundraising, budgeting, program design, research, etc.)? (R3, 4)

10. In what ways does critical feminism shape your participation in decision-making and policy-making situations? (R3, 4)

11. Have you participated in any change efforts related to the public purpose of your institution? If so, how has critical feminism shaped your participation in that? (R6)

“What are you working toward?” category

12. What is your vision for the public purpose of higher education? (R5)

13. In what ways does critical feminism shape your vision for higher education community engagement? (R5)

● Next steps (1 minute): Let participants know I will work on developing a clean transcript and share it back with them to invite them to ensure I’ve accurately captured their perspectives. Participants should feel empowered to review and offer feedback, or to pass on the opportunity if it is too onerous to perform a review. Additionally, the second phase of the study will involve a collaborative visioning activity with a community partner. More info will be provided by email.
Dear _____,

I write to invite you into a creative conversation meant to strengthen our partnership and shape higher education community engagement. The conversation topic is “*imagining a new vision for community-campus engagement.*” This conversation will be on Zoom and last about 45 minutes, facilitated by a doctoral student from University of San Francisco to inform her research on higher education community engagement for social justice. You and I will be the only participants in the conversation.

I am specifically reaching out to you because (FILL IN REASONS WHY YOU SELECTED THIS PARTNER). I see this as an opportunity for us to speak honestly about the benefits and challenges of our partnership, and aspirations for how our engagement might better propel our community toward social justice. While I can’t promise that our conversation will yield any changes in how (INSERT NAME OF INSTITUTION) works with community partners, I assure you that your perspective will shape how I continue to engage with you as a partner. Further, your perspective will be incorporated into a dissertation research study that will inform the broader field of community engagement.

If you’re willing to participate, the next steps include:

- Identify at least three 1-hour time blocks when you would be free to participate in a conversation between now and February 26. Star and I will select one of these time blocks that works with our schedules.
- Sign an informed consent form that will be shared by Star Plaxton-Moore in advance of our conversation.

To compensate you for your participation, the doctoral student will provide a $20 Visa gift card. You will also have the optional opportunity to review our conversation transcript. Further, Star is happy to share the results of her research study, if you are interested.

Please let me know if you have any questions or need more information before deciding whether to participate, and I can work with the doctoral student to answer them. I recognize that this request requires your valuable time and energy during a period of great strain and stress, so I understand if you’re unable to participate. However, I hope you see this invitation as a testament to how much I value the expertise and insight you bring to your work as a community partner and co-educator of (INSERT NAME OF
INSTITUTION)’s students. Thank you in advance for considering this opportunity to share your voice and shape our work.

Warm regards,
APPENDIX F: Informed Consent Form for Community Partners

Consent Form for Community Partner Participants in

Dissertation Research Study

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY
Below is a description of the research procedures and an explanation of your rights as a research participant. You should read this information carefully. If you agree to participate, you will sign in the space provided to indicate that you have read and understand the information on this consent form. You are entitled to and will receive a copy of this form.

You have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by Star Plaxton-Moore, a graduate student in the Department of Leadership Studies at University of San Francisco School of Education. The faculty supervisor for this study is Dr. Jane Bleasdale, a professor in the Department of Leadership Studies at University of San Francisco School of Education.

WHAT THE STUDY IS ABOUT:
The purpose of this research study is to illuminate and legitimize the value of critical feminist praxis in influencing how community engagement professionals (CEPs) at colleges and universities understand the field of community engagement, situate themselves within the field and institution, implement policies and practices, and engage in relationships to advance social justice-oriented community engagement as a means of reclaiming and re-envisioning the public purpose of higher education. The researcher will synthesize findings into a conceptual framework and recommendations to guide CEPs’ professional development and practice.

You play a crucial role as a community partner in this study because it is designed, in part, to examine the extent to which community engagement professionals demonstrate
equitable and respectful relationships with community partners and engage in collaborative visioning in alignment with critical feminist praxis. Note that the researcher has italicized language that emphasizes the role of community partners in the study.

The research questions guiding this study are:

- What critical feminist principles and theories guide community engagement professionals (CEPs) in their work?
- How do critical feminist CEPs understand the relationship between community engagement and higher education?
- How do critical feminist CEPs define their roles and responsibilities within their institutions and the broader community?
- How do critical feminist principles and theories guide the practices and policies developed by CEPs? Specifically, how do CEPs collaborate with community partners?
- How do critical feminist CEPs envision the ideal community-engaged institution? In what ways does that vision reflect the collective aspirations of community partners?
- What theories or strategies for institutional change do critical feminist CEPs employ to work toward their vision?

WHAT WE WILL ASK YOU TO DO:

During this study, the following will happen: You will be invited to a collaborative visioning activity that will last 45 minutes and be conducted on Zoom. The researcher will work with you and your community engagement professional (CEP) contact to arrange a meeting date and time that are convenient to you. The visioning activity will be recorded and transcribed. Additionally, the researcher will keep observation notes as they facilitate and watch the interactions between you and the community engagement professional. The researcher will share transcripts and observation notes with participants for member checking to ensure accuracy. The researcher will review all transcripts and observation notes and conduct inductive coding to identify emergent themes common across the data. The researcher will also use Emergent Strategy framework (Brown, 2017) to do deductive coding in alignment with the six elements of emergent strategy. Findings will be organized into a conceptual framework and recommendations for CEP professional development and practice.

DURATION AND LOCATION OF THE STUDY:
Your participation in this study will involve:
Participation in a 45-minute collaborative visioning activity with your partnering community engagement professional on Zoom (conducted between December 2020-February 2021)

Optional invitation to review transcript and observation notes from the visioning activity to offer feedback on whether the documents accurately reflect your narrative and participation.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:

The research procedures described above may involve the following risks and/or discomforts:

1) Participation in the study will involve 45 minutes on Zoom and up to one additional hour for transcript review (optional), which takes away time from your other responsibilities
2) Depending on what you choose to share about your experiences, you may feel triggered by specific memories
3) There is a very low risk of participant and/or institution being identified by readers based on specificity of details shared in interviews

If you wish, you may choose to withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time during the study without penalty.

BENEFITS:

The possible benefits to you of participating in this study are:

- A chance to share your vision for what the public purpose of higher education should look like
- An opportunity to deepen your relationship with your CEP through conversation
- An opportunity for your voice to shape the field of higher education community engagement

PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY:

Any data you provide in this study will be kept confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In any report we publish, we will not include information that will make it possible to identify you or any individual participant. Specifically, we will keep recordings and transcripts with identifying information under secure password protection in the researcher’s professional Zoom account. The researcher will scrub personal identifying information from transcripts and observation notes before saving them in the researcher’s scholarly files in Google drive or sharing with the researcher’s dissertation committee. All participants will be given a pseudonym in the publication. The master list
of participants and signed informed consent forms will be saved in a XXXXX and
destroyed after 3 years. Additionally, video and audio recordings, and original transcripts,
will be deleted from the researcher’s Zoom account after 3 years.

COMPENSATION/PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION:
You will receive a $20 Visa gift card for your participation in this study. If you choose to
withdraw before completing the study, you will not receive the gift card.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:
Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate without penalty or loss
of benefits. Furthermore, you may skip any questions or tasks that make you
uncomfortable and may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss
of benefits. In addition, the researcher has the right to withdraw you from participation in
the study at any time.

OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS:
Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you should contact
the principal investigator, Star Plaxton-Moore at smoore3@usfca.edu or the faculty
advisor for this dissertation, Dr. Jane Bleasdale at jbleasdale@usfca.edu. If you have
questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the
University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board at IRBPHS@usfca.edu.
I HAVE READ THE ABOVE INFORMATION. ANY QUESTIONS I HAVE ASKED
HAVE BEEN ANSWERED. I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH
PROJECT AND I WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM.

PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE
DATE
APPENDIX G: Co-Visioning Activity Framework

Participants: CEP and community partner identified by CEP

Format: Zoom, 45 minute conversation, prompting questions meant to solicit discussion, recorded and transcribed

Framework for Visioning Activity

- Introduction to research study (5 minutes)
- Ensure that participants have signed consent forms (2 minutes)
- Tell participants I will pose questions and invite them to share their ideas/responses in a conversational format with each other. They should feel like they are in a dialogue versus responding directly to me as the facilitator. They are encouraged to respond to, build on, and ask questions related to each other’s ideas. (2 minutes)
- Co-creating a vision (15 minutes): If you were to imagine _______ college/university as an institution that is truly fulfilling its public purpose...
  - What would you see with regard to students?
  - What would you see with regard to faculty?
  - What would learning look like?
  - What would the relationship between the institution and broader community look like?
- Road map to the vision (15 minutes): In order for _______ college/university to achieve this vision, what would the institution, and/or individuals connected to the institution need to:
  - Keep doing?
  - Stop doing?
  - Start doing?
- Final question (4 minutes): Is there anything else you’d like to say as we close this activity?
- Next steps (2 minutes): Let participants know I will work on developing a clean transcript and share it back with them, along with some notes about my observations of them during the activity, to invite them to ensure I’ve accurately captured their perspectives. Participants should feel empowered to review and offer feedback or to pass on the opportunity if it is too onerous to perform a review.
## APPENDIX H: Coding Key

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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>ES- Nonlinear and Iterative</td>
<td>coral</td>
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<td>ES- Resilience and Transformative Justice</td>
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APPENDIX I: Ecosystem of Critical Feminist Praxis for Community Engagement

Professionals Worksheet