

Empowering communities: Asset-based approaches to community writing partnerships

by

Ania Sonora Payne

B.A., Hendrix College, 2013  
M.F.A., Northern Michigan University, 2016

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Leadership Communication  
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## **Abstract**

The field of community engagement – and within that, the field of community writing – has been moving toward engagement practices that aim to empower communities by prioritizing community knowledge, building on communities’ assets, and creating collaborative, reciprocal partnerships. Although research in the field of community writing has led to many theories of “co-creation, mutuality, and reciprocity...community-based writing practitioners may still find it hard to put such theories into practice” (Knight, 2022, p. 6). Specifically, the field lacks research about the logistical, design, and curricular elements of service-learning experiences (Gilbride-Brown, 2011; Marby, 1998). In response, this work is comprised of three articles that aim to contribute towards that gap. Chapter 3 employs qualitative content analysis to uncover how community partners, partnerships, and community-engaged projects are described on English syllabi included on Campus Compact’s syllabi library. Chapter 4 uses framing analysis to review those same syllabi to understand the diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames that English instructors are using to describe community projects to their students. Chapter 5 argues that writing students can conduct an audience analysis rooted in appreciative inquiry at the onset of a community writing project to begin to learn about their community partners through their assets, rather than their deficits. The findings of the studies presented in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 suggest that 1) English instructors use a wide range of terms to describe community projects and partners to their students, and often fail to connect this work to a course’s disciplinary goals and assigned texts and 2) although the field is aware of the danger of deficit-based language, deficit frames of communities still dominate the language that we use on our syllabi. Each chapter offers a series of recommendations that English instructors can use to elevate community partners’ unique strengths, both on course syllabi and in the classroom.

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Major Professor  
Dr. Trish Gott

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The field of community engagement – and within that, the field of community writing – has been moving toward engagement practices that aim to empower communities by prioritizing community knowledge, building on communities’ assets, and creating collaborative, reciprocal partnerships. Although research in the field of community writing has led to many theories of “co-creation, mutuality, and reciprocity...community-based writing practitioners may still find it hard to put such theories into practice” (Knight, 2022, p. 6). Specifically, the field lacks research about the logistical, design, and curricular elements of service-learning experiences (Gilbride-Brown, 2011; Marby, 1998). In response, this work is comprised of three articles that aim to contribute towards that gap. Chapter 3 employs qualitative content analysis to uncover how community partners, partnerships, and community-engaged projects are described on English syllabi included on Campus Compact’s syllabi library. Chapter 4 uses framing analysis to review those same syllabi to understand the diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames that English instructors are using to describe community projects to their students. Chapter 5 argues that writing students can conduct an audience analysis rooted in appreciative inquiry at the onset of a community writing project to begin to learn about their community partners through their assets, rather than their deficits. The findings of the studies presented in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 suggest that 1) English instructors use a wide range of terms to describe community projects and partners to their students, and often fail to connect this work to a course’s disciplinary goals and assigned texts and 2) although the field is aware of the danger of deficit-based language, deficit frames of communities still dominate the language that we use on our syllabi. Each chapter offers a series of recommendations that English instructors can use to elevate community partners’ unique strengths, both on course syllabi and in the classroom.

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## Chapter 1 – Introduction

Scholars in the field of community writing and the broader field of community engagement are aware of the harm that deficit-based approaches, which emphasize community needs rather than community strengths, can cause to students and community members (Boyle-Baise, 1999; Mitchell et al., 2012; Shah, 2020). For example, within the field of English we often use the term “community writing” to describe the scholarly, pedagogical, and activist work that we do with communities (House et al., 2023), rather than the term service-learning, which invokes imbalanced power dynamics that privilege a group of students providing a “service” to marginalized community groups (Bortolin, 2011; Mitchell, 2007). Deficit approaches to engagement can perpetuate inequality and reinforce an us-them dichotomy between students and communities (Mitchell, 2008), deepen the notion that public outreach and service can only happen within a unidirectional framework where the university provides *for* communities, rather than working *with* (Hammersley, 2012), create savior complexes in students (Mathieu, 2010), and fail to acknowledge community members’ rich knowledges and resources (Saltmarsh et al., 2009).

Aware of these potential problematic outcomes, scholars have developed best practices for service-learning and community-engaged teaching. These best practices often emphasize that instructors communicate clear goals for students’ engagement experiences, incorporate frequent reflective moments into students’ community work, and have students complete projects that meet a community’s priorities and goals (Honnet & Poulsen, 1989; Marby, 1998; Mintz & Hesser, 1996). For example, Welch and Plaxton-Moore (2019) developed a blueprint for community-engaged courses which emphasized that instructors clearly articulate learning outcomes, information about the community partnership, engagement opportunities, reflection,

and assessment expectations. In response, in Chapter 3 of this dissertation I use qualitative content analysis to understand how 26 English syllabi on Campus Compact's syllabus library described community partners and partnerships, community-engaged assignments, and the expectations for students within these partnerships. The findings of this study revealed a noticeable disconnect between students' community projects and the course's learning objectives, as well as an overall absence in assigned readings related to topics about community engagement. Chapter 3 offers English instructors a series of suggestions for how to better align their community-engaged syllabi with the field's best practices, which can help students understand how their community work fits into the course's disciplinary goals.

Additional research has offered instructors strategies for evaluating their community-engaged syllabi. For example, Kieran and Haack (2018) developed a rubric to evaluate course syllabi for quality indicators of community-engagement and service-learning components, such as incorporating moments for students to take active roles planning engagement activities (partnership), multiple opportunities for students to reflect (reflection), having students be engaged, active participators in the collaboration (engagement), offering students a variety of ways to engage in the engagement activity (logistics), articulating academic-centered learning objectives related to students' engagement (objectives), assessing students' outcomes multiple times throughout the project (assessment), and including the institution's definition of engagement on the syllabus (definition). Building on this research, Furco et al. (2023) developed a Service-Learning Quality Assessment Tool to evaluate the design of service-learning courses and the implementation of the pedagogy. However, as Mitchell and Perrotti (2023) argue, "Although best practices, rubrics, and assessment tools exist to guide the development and

implementation of service-learning, few studies have used syllabi as a unit of analysis to explore how syllabi communicate frameworks and expectations of service-learning” (p. 3).

This gap applies both to the larger field of community engagement and the narrower field of community writing. Most of the existing scholarship on community writing consists of instructors describing, reflecting on, and analyzing their own course projects or providing evaluations of community-engaged writing programs (House, 2015). Additionally, much research in the field of community writing has resulted in theories of “co-creation, mutuality, and reciprocity...[but] community-based writing practitioners may still find it hard to put such theories into practice” (Knight, 2022, p. 6). While these existing theories can provide instructors with innovative ideas for incorporating engagement into their courses and evaluating their partnerships, offering broader analyses of community writing curriculums can help us understand *how* we are applying the best-practices of community engagement to our courses and identify areas where we can better align our practices with our well-intentioned theories.

Marby (1998) and Gilbride-Brown (2011) argue that the field of community engagement often celebrates student and community outcomes, but lacks an understanding of the logistical, design, and curricular elements of service-learning experiences. Mitchell and Perrotti (2023) claim that “several decades [after the 2000s], these critiques remain critically relevant” (p. 2). Addressing this gap by examining the discourse used on community writing syllabi can provide instructors with practical suggestions for better articulating community partner information, project goals, and learning outcomes on their syllabi. Evaluating our discourse and identifying how we are framing community partnerships on our syllabi can allow us to reframe existing partnerships so that our language better reflects the relationships that we hope to foster between students and community members, ideally prompting instructors to move away from charity-

oriented frames (Morton, 1995) and toward collaborative frames that center co-creation and social justice outcomes (Knight, 2022). The syllabus is just a start, but by beginning to reexamine our partnership language on the syllabus, we can reflect on *how* we're describing community engagement to our students and the underlying assumptions we may have about the beneficiaries of community engagement. We might also consider reframing our language to center the perspectives and voices of those who make our work possible – the community members.

## **1.1 Theoretical Underpinnings**

In this section, I offer a brief overview of the theoretical basis of this study. Chapter Two will provide a more in-depth discussion of the methodological frameworks underpinning this study.

### **1.1.1 Social Constructionism**

This work aligns with the relativist ontological tradition, acknowledging that reality is intertwined with human practices (Crotty, 1998; Galbin, 2014; Heidegger, 2010). This research embraces social constructionism, which views characteristics as products of human definition and interpretation influenced by cultural and historical contexts (Crotty, 1998). Social constructionism posits that all meaningful reality is socially constructed (Crotty, 1998, p. 54), emphasizing that our interactions with the world stem from social exchanges. Moreover, social constructionism recognizes that cultural contexts shape our perceptions of truth (Dugan, 2017). Unlike essentialism, social constructionism asserts that categories are not inherent or fixed; instead, they are contested and redefined across different historical periods and societies. Thus, this work underscores the social constructionist perspective's focus on the meaning derived from defining and categorizing groups, experiences, and reality within cultural contexts (Crotty,

1998). How students, faculty, and community members see their roles in leading change through community engagement efforts is not fixed or pre-defined and is constantly shifting, depending on the context. Academic partners must be continuously attuned to these fluctuating contexts, and we should adjust our approaches to community partnerships based on evolving cultural dynamics. Discourse plays a significant role in shaping how each participant views their role in a partnership and the types of changes that they evoke – for example, long-term changes or short-term ones – which is one reason why social constructionism influences this research. This will be elaborated on in Chapter 2.

### **1.1.2 Critically Engaged Civic Learning**

Mitchell (2008) outlined the theoretical differences between traditional and critical service-learning, arguing that critical service-learning aims to redistribute power, has a social change orientation, and seeks for all participants to develop authentic relationships. In response, a group of community engagement scholars proposed a new service-learning framework called critically engaged civic learning (CECL) (Vincent et al., 2021). CECL shifts from student-centered pedagogy to an equity-based approach where all stakeholders are seen as equal partners, emphasizing power redistribution for civic learning and social change (Vincent et al., 2021). Unlike traditional service-learning, CECL distributes power among participants to amplify all voices and perspectives (Vincent et al., 2021). CECL challenges the notion that social issues only affect the "served," highlighting their structural and societal nature. Vincent et al. (2021) outline six guiding principles and four overarching outcomes for CECL, focusing on social justice, power dynamics, community, civic learning objectives, reflexivity, and sustainability (p. 108). This research adopts the CECL model's expectations and assumptions about community engagement, emphasizing equality in power and authority among faculty, students, and

community members. For example, Chapter 4 advocates for English instructors to be intentional about using frames that position students to be collaborators who learn with community members on their syllabi, rather than frames that position students to serve communities or use communities as an opportunity to extract resume-building experiences. Chapter 5 argues for English instructors to incorporate appreciative inquiry into students' audience analysis (which is often one of the first steps in a community writing project) so that students can be introduced to their community partners through their assets rather than deficits. Perhaps, in their most fully realized form, the articles in this dissertation may contribute to reshaping the definitions and expectations of how universities engage with communities, promoting more community-oriented, equitable partnerships.

### **1.1.3 Framing Theory**

Framing theory posits that one issue can be seen from various perspectives, influencing multiple values or considerations (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 104). Goffman (1974) defines frames as mental scripts guiding perception and action within one's life space. Key elements include frames, frame building, setting, adoption, and effects, where frames can both highlight and obscure aspects of an issue, shaping public opinion and behavior (Shah, 2020).

Applied to community engagement, framing theory elucidates why instructors value engaged pedagogies. Faculty may introduce community engagement by emphasizing benefits to students' professional development or to the community, or both simultaneously. Frames can also signal thin versions of engagement, which may be paternalistic, or thick versions grounded in deeply held values and transformative visions (Morton, 1995, p. 29). For instance, frames can influence whether students view engagement as self-serving vocational experiences or collaborative social change efforts.

## **1.2 Conceptual Framework**

In this section, I offer an overview of the conceptual framework that guides these articles.

### **1.2.4 Asset-Based Orientations**

Asset-based approaches counter deficit-based approaches to community engagement, which position communities as being powerless and without agency, mere passive recipients of a university collaboration. One particularly dangerous element of deficit-based views is that they position community members as being “fundamentally deficient victims incapable of taking charge of their lives and of their community’s future” (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993, p. 4). In contrast, an asset-based approach prioritizes our community partners’ gains over the university’s gains and builds from the community partners’ strengths (Knight, 2022). Instead, of asking what a community needs and focusing on their deficiencies, a strengths-based view “asks what a community has that can be further developed and utilized by the community” (Cruz & Giles, 2000, p. 31). An asset-based approach “favors the framing of community projects in terms of strengths rather than in the language of problems and solutions” (Knight, 2022, p. 28). As Knight (2022) reminds us, “an asset-based approach to is also a tool to mindfully challenge and confront our own scholarly bias as academics” (p. 18), since we are traditionally trained to “see disciplinary problems and to frame our research as a response to a problem” (p. 18) rather than building from a community’s unique assets and resources.

### **1.2.5 Appreciative Inquiry**

To actualize asset-based approaches to community partnerships, I utilized appreciative inquiry. Appreciative inquiry is an “asset-based approach to organizational and social engagement that utilizes questions and dialogue to help participants uncover existing strengths, advantages, or opportunities in their communities” (Cooperrider et al. 2008). Appreciative

inquiry uses a four-part cycle of *discovering* a community's best assets and strengths, *dreaming* by envisioning what a process, product, or experience could be, *designing* through co-constructing, and *delivering* sustainable results that benefit communities (Cooperrider et al., 2008). What counts as an "asset" can vary depending on the discipline of a community-engaged project. In our writing classroom, our community partners' lived experiences and life stories were considered assets. In the classroom, focusing on community assets through asset-mapping and other positive information-gathering activities, as opposed to defining a community by its needs or problems, is crucial for developing authentic campus/community partnerships (Garoutte & McCarthy-Gilmore, 2014).

### **1.2.6 Co-Creation of Knowledge**

Community-engaged partnerships require that the university and the community partner collaborate to generate new knowledge (Knight, 2022). A co-creation approach materializes differently from a "service" or "outreach" approach, which involves the "'delivery' of expertise, training, or service that travels in one direction from the university to the community" (Knight, 2022, p. 19). Instead, by approaching a partnership from the perspective of co-creation, we can ensure that community partners are positioned as "coproducers of knowledge and practice rather than objects of study" (Costanza-Chock, 2014, p. 207). To create partnerships where knowledge is genuinely co-created between all partners, "we need to consider the relationship-building process, which involves multiple parties, all of whom need to contribute to the construction of the relationship for it to be reciprocal (Powell & Takayoshi, 2003, p. 417). As Knight (2022) reminds us, "this orientation shifts the position of communities from knowledge consumers to capable knowledge producers and acknowledges the inherent expertise that lies within communities" (p. 21).

### **1.3 Engaged Scholarship and Threads that Connect the Articles**

An engaged scholarship approach was central to this research. Chapter 5, “Community-Engaged Writing in the First-Year Composition Course: An Appreciative Inquiry Approach,” builds from seven years of experience that I have teaching community-engaged learning projects in my own writing courses. Interactions and reflections with community partners and students led me to re-envision my approach to community projects by incorporating an Appreciative Inquiry lens within the CECL framework, an approach that has not been written about in the community engagement literature before. Furthermore, reading through my own course materials, I noticed a disconnect between the collaborative, equitable partnerships that I was trying to create between students and community partners and the “service,” “client,” and “writing *for*” language that dominated my own syllabi, lectures, and assignment sheets. This inspired me to examine Campus Compact’s English syllabi because I imagined that like myself, other instructors may be unaware that they are framing their engagements through lenses that contradict their intended pedagogical outcomes. Last, I wanted to understand how community work and community partnerships were described on English syllabi, since I noticed a lack of community partner descriptions on my own syllabi. Throughout this research, I also realized a gap between the extensive literature on the best practices of service-learning and an analysis of the curricular applications articulated within the larger field. All three of these articles advocate for community-centered approaches to engagement in different ways and stem from my own conversations with students and community partners, while also building from existing community-engaged scholarship. All the articles in this dissertation are single authored.

## 1.4 Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of the research described in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 was to reveal the diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames that English instructors use to describe community partnerships on syllabi and to understand how community partnerships and community-engaged projects are described on English syllabi. Service-learning or community-engaged learning projects are mutually beneficial projects where students learn and practice course content while simultaneously collaborating on a project with a community partner.

The research questions guiding the study described in Chapter 3, “Mapping the Landscape of Community-Engaged English Courses: A Content Analysis of Syllabi” were:

1. How did English instructors describe the community-engaged projects in their courses?
2. How were the parameters of students’ projects, their deliverables, and the learning objectives of the community writing projects communicated on syllabi?
3. How did English instructors describe community partners and partnerships on their syllabi?

The research questions guiding the study described in Chapter 4, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Engagement: A Framing Analysis of English Syllabi” were:

1. What problems led English instructors to teach community-engaged projects in their courses?
2. What motivational frames did English instructors evoke when introducing solutions to these problems?
3. What prognostic frames did English instructors evoke when describing why students would be doing this community work?

In summary, the articles in this dissertation aim to offer a starting point for community writing instructors to reflect on the discourse that we use to describe community work to our students on our syllabi, assignments, and other course materials. Together, these articles argue that the discourse we use on these materials contributes to shaping the partnerships between students, faculty, and community partners, ultimately advocating for faculty to intentionally make language choices that contribute toward developing the types of partnerships that they're trying to create. Because Chapters 3, 4, and 5 were each written for different publication outlets, the chapters use different citation styles: Chapter 3 uses Chicago style and Chapters 4 and 5 use MLA style. The rest of the content in this dissertation – Chapters 1, 2, and 6 – use APA citation style, as per the Leadership Communication Program's recommendations. Chapter 2 will provide an in-depth discussion of the different methodological approaches that were used in each of these articles.

## Chapter 2 - Methodology

### 2.1 Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of the research described in Chapters 3 and 4 was 1) to reveal the diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames that English instructors use to describe community partnerships on syllabi and 2) to understand how community partnerships and community-engaged projects are described on English syllabi. Service-learning or community-engaged learning projects are mutually beneficial projects where students learn and practice course content while simultaneously collaborating on a project with a community partner. The research questions and findings from Chapters 3 and 4 are outlined in tables 1 and 2 below.

**Table 1. Research Questions Guiding Chapter 4, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Engagement: A Framing Analysis of English Syllabi.”**

| Research Questions                                                                                                    | Findings                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| What problems led English instructors to teach community-engaged projects in their courses?                           | The community has deficiencies and “needs help.”<br>Students lack real world experiences.<br>Siloed academic experiences detract from rich student and community co-learning experiences. |
| What motivational frames did English instructors evoke when introducing solutions to these problems?                  | Students will serve their communities.<br>Students will get professional development experiences.<br>Students will build reciprocal projects from community knowledge.                    |
| What prognostic frames did English instructors evoke when describing why students would be doing this community work? | Students will perform direct service.<br>Students will write documents for organizations.<br>Students will collaborate with community members.                                            |

**Table 2. Research Questions Guiding Chapter 3, “Mapping the Landscape of Community-Engaged English Courses: A Content Analysis of Syllabi.”**

| <b>Research Questions</b>                                                                                                                                 | <b>Findings</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| How did English instructors describe the community-engaged projects in their courses?                                                                     | Syllabi used a range of terminology, with “service-learning” being the most frequently used term (73%), community engagement, community-based learning, or community-engaged learning as the second most frequent (30%), and variety of other terms spanning 23%-4% frequency.                                                                                                                      |
| How were the parameters of students’ projects, their deliverables, and the learning objectives of the community writing projects communicated on syllabi? | 92% of the syllabi included a reflective writing assignment in combination with other deliverables, such as performing direct service or conducting research or advocacy work for the community. Other than reflective writing, the types of community work and genres produced varied greatly. Direct service projects were described in 27% of the syllabi, reflecting the most popular approach. |
| How did English instructors describe community partners and partnerships on their syllabi?                                                                | 85% (n=22) of the syllabi included some information about the community partner, such as the partner or organization’s name, location, contact information, or website. Of those 22 syllabi, 68% listed the community partner by name and 32% only included vague details about the partner.                                                                                                        |

Note: For more detailed results of the qualitative content analysis, see Chapter 3.

## **2.2 Methodological Considerations**

### **2.2.7 Qualitative Inquiry**

My approach to this research was grounded in qualitative inquiry because I wanted to gain an in-depth understanding of social phenomena within their natural setting (Bhattacharya, 2017). Qualitative research “begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible uses of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2013, p. 37). I used qualitative methods for each of the articles in this dissertation because social relationships and cultural contexts were

crucial for understanding how beliefs, motivations, and attitudes shaped the language that instructors used to describe community projects and partnerships, which in turn, shaped the formation of those partnerships. In the following paragraphs, I'll describe the specific ways that qualitative approaches informed each chapter.

For Chapter 4, where I aimed to understand how English instructors framed community partnerships on their syllabi, I turned to qualitative frame analysis, “an inherently comparative form of thematic analysis which employs an organized structure of inductively- and deductively-derived themes to conduct cross-sectional analysis using a combination of data description and abstraction” (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994; Spencer et al., 2014 as cited in Goldsmith, 2021, p. 2061). The goal of frame analysis is to “identify, describe, and interpret key patterns within and across cases and themes within the phenomenon of interest through being both grounded in and interpreting from the data” (Gale et al., 2013; King & Brooks, 2018; Ritchie & Spencer, 1994; Spencer et al., 2014 as cited in Goldsmith, 2021, p. 2061). Conducting a qualitative frame analysis revealed the frames, which are created by language, that shaped how instructors described the *problems* that inspired them to teach community-engaged projects, the *solutions* that they developed in response to these problems, and the *persuasive ways* that they compelled students to participate in these community projects. As a result of this study, I aim to provide English instructors and other educators who teach community-engaged courses with research about the importance of community partner framing on syllabi, because the framing on this academic contract can significantly influence students' attitudes toward the content being covered in a class (Ishiyama & Hartlaub, 2002).

For Chapter 3, I sought to understand how community partnerships were described on English syllabi. I employed qualitative content analysis, “a research method for the subjective

interpretation of the content of text data through systematic classification processes of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2015, p. 1278). Unlike quantitative content analysis – which identifies statistical significance – qualitative content analysis uncovers patterns, themes, and categories important to understanding a text’s social reality (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). I used qualitative content analysis because this method allowed me to “identify important themes or categories within a body of content, and to provide a rich description of the social reality created by those themes/categories as they are lived out in a particular setting” (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 11). Revealing these important themes indicated much variance in how English instructors described community-engaged work, the types of projects that were taught, and a noticable lack of information about the community partnerships on the syllabi. Using qualitative content analysis to study this collection of syllabi, I realized that these observations were a part of a larger trend and that details about community work were largely left off of course syllabi, even when community engagement was meant to be a focal point of the course. Such omissions may be unconscious or unintentional since writing a syllabus can become a formulaic activity, but given a syllabus’ potential impact to shape students’ interactions with their course content (Ishiyama & Hartlaub, 2002), instructors can become aware of these trends and intentionally add missing details about community partnerships to their syllabi, beginning to set expectations for how students and community partners will be collaborating throughout the semester.

According to Tracy (2010), the eight criteria for validating a project as an excellent candidate for qualitative research are that a project has a worthy topic, rich vigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethical standards, and meaningful coherence (p. 840). This research is relevant and timely, as the field of community engagement lacks research

on the curricular elements of service-learning (Gilbride-Brown, 2011; Mabry, 1998; Mitchell & Perrotti, 2023). Furthermore, most existing research on community writing is comprised of instructors writing about community partnerships and projects that they taught in their own classes, and very little research examines curricular decisions made across the broader field. In this study, I acknowledge my own positionality as a faculty member who teaches community-engaged projects within an English Department. Furthermore, I used thick descriptions to show, rather than tell, my findings (Tracy, 2010). You'll see this in Chapters 3 and 4, where I offer not only quotes from sentences on each of the syllabi, but additional context about where on the syllabi these quotes appear, as a syllabus's organization tends to follow a hierarchical structure regarding how the content is presented.

This research will provide a contribution to the field of community engagement and community writing as it is easy to forget how significantly the seemingly abstract language that we use to describe partnerships shapes the very real relationships that we form with our community partners (Bickford & Reynolds, 2002; Dubinsky, 2002; Shah, 2020b; Scott, 2004). My study considers ethical standards by anonymizing each syllabus. Last, my study aims for meaningful coherence by using methods and procedures that fit the project's stated goals while meaningfully connecting literature, research, and findings and interpretations with each other (Tracy, 2010). Using the theoretical frames (which will be unpacked further in each individual chapter) this work aims to uncover how trends and framing used on community writing syllabi shape social realities – specifically, interactions between academic and community partners – and illuminates the power of discourse used in these contexts. For these reasons, qualitative research is appropriate for this study.

## **2.3 Methodological Framework**

### **2.3.8 Epistemological Perspective**

This work follows in the relativist ontological tradition that recognizes that reality cannot be separated from human practices (Crotty 1998; Galbin, 2014; Heidegger, 2010). Through this study, I lean on social constructionism as a theory of knowledge which asserts that characteristics that are typically considered fixed and unchanging are actually products of human definition and interpretation which are shaped by cultural and historical contexts (Crotty, 1998). Social constructionism acknowledges that “all reality, as meaningful reality, is socially constructed” (Crotty, 1998, pg. 54). Our interactions with the world are created based on the social interactions that occur amongst people. Furthermore, through this research, social constructionism dictates that all judgements of truth exist within a cultural context, and cultural and historical interpretations of the world color all our interactions (Dugan, 2017). Contrary to the essentialist standpoint, categories are not “natural” or fixed, and the boundaries around them are always shifting; these boundaries are contested and redefined in different historical periods across different societies and viewpoints. As a researcher, the ongoing shaping of contexts through interaction has importance for how we design engaged work with communities.

How students, faculty, and community members see their roles in leading change through community engagement efforts is not fixed or pre-defined and is also constantly changing, depending on the context. Discourse impacts how each participant views their roles in these partnerships and the type of changes that they evoke from these partnerships – for example, long-term or short-term partnerships that result in charity or social justice efforts. Discourse reveals and creates power dynamics between individuals and groups, and the language used on syllabi and assignment guidelines begins to frame our students’ expectations for their interactions with

community members. This research builds from the social constructionist perspective as these studies seek to reveal meaning that is created by defining and categorizing groups of people, experiences, and reality in cultural contexts (Crotty, 1998). This matters as faculty and communities may be able to reframe or newly frame interactions to reflect goals and hopes for the partnership.

### **2.3.9 Critically Engaged Civic Learning**

Mitchell (2008) outlined the theoretical differences between traditional and critical service-learning, arguing that critical service-learning aims to redistribute power, has a social change orientation, and seeks for all participants to develop authentic relationships. In response, a group of community engagement scholars proposed a new service-learning framework called critically engaged civic learning (CECL) (Vincent et al., 2021). CECL shifts from student-centered pedagogy to an equity-based approach where all stakeholders are seen as equal partners, emphasizing power redistribution for civic learning and social change (Vincent et al., 2021). Unlike traditional service-learning, CECL distributes power among participants to amplify all voices and perspectives (Vincent et al., 2021). CECL challenges the notion that social issues only affect the "served," highlighting their structural and societal nature (Vincent et al., 2021).

Vincent et al. (2021) offer six guiding principles for CECL, “social justice, power dynamics, community, civic learning objectives, reflexivity, and sustainability” in addition to four overarching outcomes, “increased self-awareness, self-efficacy, and self-empowerment; increased awareness of civic agency; better understanding of community; and workforce preparation” (Vincent et al., 2021, p. 108). The expectations and assumptions about service-learning and community engagement in this study stem from Vincent et al.’s (2021) CECL model, rather than from traditional service-learning models because the CECL model distributes

power, authority, and roles among faculty, students, and community members, aspirations of equality that are considered throughout this study. For example, the framing analysis of English syllabi in Chapter 4 revealed that the syllabi sample I examined predominantly used deficit-based language, describing communities by their needs and deficiencies. These syllabi typically positioned students in 1) roles where they have power over the community members, such as “serving as positive role models,” or 2) stances where they viewed their community work as self-serving professional development experiences. Considering the CECL framework’s guiding principles, neither of these approaches sets participants up to work toward systemic, social change efforts, nor do these approaches redistribute power between university and community members if the university is serving the community or extracting short-term professional development experiences. One could see how these frames may increase students’ workforce preparation and understanding of the community, which are additional elements of Vincent et al.’s (2021) CECL framework, but arguably, the most transformative elements of Vincent et al.’s (2021) framework – redistributing power and contributing to social change – that separate the CECL approach from traditional service-learning are absent in these predominant frames. Using the CECL framework, I offer instructors recommendations for how they can reconsider the language in their syllabi to establish non-hierarchical relationships between students and community members and develop community-driven projects that lead to social change, starting by reframing their language on their syllabi (Shah, 2020b).

### **2.3.10 Methodological Approach**

Because I used different methodologies in each article, my different methodological approaches are broken out below. Each approach reflects on discourse to understand the roles that instructors play in establishing relationships between community members and students.

Chapter 4 uses framing theory to uncover the predominant frames that English instructors are using to introduce community engagement to students on syllabi, and Chapter 3 uses qualitative content analysis to break this discourse down into smaller parts, revealing patterns in the words and phrases that appear across these same syllabi.

### **2.3.10.1 Frame Theory**

A major premise of framing theory is that one issue can be considered from a variety of perspectives and be interpreted as having “implications for multiple values or considerations” (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 104). According to Goffman (1974), frames are “mental scripts for recognizing occurrences and events within one’s life space, which organize/identify experience and guide perception and action” (p. 21). Key elements of framing theory include frames, frame building, frame setting, frame adoption, and frame effects. Frames can both highlight and hide elements of an issue, which can strengthen certain values but weaken others (Shah, 2020b). Frame building occurs when we select and emphasize certain aspects of an issue to create a particular frame (Goffman, 1974). Frame setting involves contextualizing information within a particular frame, which influences the audience’s interpretation and understanding of the information (Goffman, 1974). Frame adoption refers to an audience’s acceptance of a particular frame. Frame effects show the impact of framing on public opinion, attitudes, and behavior, because different frames can create diverse interpretations of the same piece of information, influencing people’s perspectives and decisions (Goffman, 1974).

Applied to community engagement, framing theory can reveal why instructors value and apply engaged pedagogies. Faculty might introduce community engagement through a frame that highlights the benefits to students’ professional development, or a frame emphasizes the potential benefits to the community, or faculty may evoke both frames simultaneously. Frames

can also signal *thin* versions of community engagement, which may be paternalistic, self-serving, or impose service on “unreceptive others,” or *thick* versions that are “grounded in deeply held, internally coherent values” and “suggest a vision of what a transformed world might look like” (Morton, 1995, p. 29). Community-engaged projects are considered thin when they are paternalistic, self-centered, produce negative consequences for students and/or the community, create dependencies and false expectations, and leave others tired and cynical (Morton, 1995, p. 28). On the other end of the spectrum, projects with high levels of integrity possess “deeply held, internally coherent values; match means and ends...and suggest a vision of what a transformed world might look like” (Morton, 1995, p.28). The level of integrity of such projects is considered “thick” “because of the depth of integration between values and action” (Bringle et al., 2006). Knowing this, the frames that we use to describe our community engagement work can lead to students viewing their engagement activities as thin, self-serving professional development experiences meant to provide them with vocational skills and new workplace connections when planned primarily with students as the intended beneficiaries, or thick partnerships that work toward collaborative social change efforts both students and community members as the viewed as the beneficiaries.

Frames have previously been studied in community engagement scholarship because of their ability to impact community engagement practices (Shah, 2020b). How we label and conceptualize our activities matters because our framing impacts what our students do and how they understand what they’re doing – is their project contributing to “change” or simply “helping” someone in need (Bickford & Reynolds, 2002, p. 241)? Morton (1995) established a scale of community engaged projects that range from a charity to a justice spectrum, with charity projects involving participants providing direct services to others and social change and justice

projects resulting in transformational models of systemic change. Shah (2020b) also argues that frames for university-community partnerships might manifest as acts of charity or collaborative activism, which can help us interpret interactions between university and community partners. This then becomes a part of the planning instead of an accidental outcome. For example, if an instructor establishes

volunteerism as a frame for community-based learning [this] leads college students to compare the partnership to previous knowledge of volunteering, which causes them to interpret what is happening in particular ways – ways that differ from frames like ‘working with a client,’ ‘testing ideas in a lab,’ or ‘community organizing.’ (Shah, 2020b, p. 74)

Frame theory has previously been used in rhetoric and composition scholarship, such as to examine public conversations about writing issues (Adler-Kassner, 2008; Adler-Kassner & Harrington, 2010; Adler-Kassner & O’Neill, 2010), to study questions about race in Writing Across the Curriculum initiatives (Poe, 2013), to identify community partner frames (Shah, 2020a), to understand how social, emotional, physical, and spiritual influences affect composition and rhetoric scholars’ development over time (Gannett & Bereton, 2020), and to explore students’ interpretative frames and develop a working theory for change (Flower, 2021). Shah (2020b) argues that frame theory may be particularly valuable for community writing scholars since in addition to studying texts, we study ethical relationship-building. By reflecting on the discourse that we use to describe partnerships to our students, we may be surprised to realize which frames we are evoking and how these frames shape our interactions with students and community members.

#### **2.3.10.2 Frame Analysis**

Frame theory provided a theoretical framework for understanding how individuals mentally structure information. Frame analysis is a practical application of frame theory, which identifies and analyzes specific frames within discourse. Frame analysis, which originates from communication theory, is an interpretative activity that reveals “the general patterns and tendencies of what is being talked about, by whom, and in what ways” (Johnston, 1995, p. 218). This methodology, which emerged from social movement and mass media analysis, offers researchers conceptual strategies for understanding how ideas activate people into action, which can help explain how individuals interpret and make sense of events or issues (Goffman, 1974).

Using frame analysis, I analyzed three distinct types of frames present in Campus Compact’s community-engaged English syllabi in Chapter 4 –diagnostic frames, prognostic frames, and motivational frames. Diagnostic frames identify how a problem or issue is constructed and who or what is to blame (Snow & Benford, 1988). In this case, diagnostic frames exposed the implied social or academic problems that led to instructors teaching service-learning projects. Prognostic frames present solutions to a problem (Snow & Benford, 1988). For example, the prognostic frames I identified outlined the range of pedagogical approaches instructors employed to solve those problems. Finally, motivational frames persuade people to join an event by presenting reasons to support the solutions, which is essential for reaching a social movement’s goals (Benford, 1993). The motivational frames I uncovered identified the underlying values instructors communicated on syllabi to persuade students to partake in community-engaged projects, which also revealed how instructors saw power flowing between university and community members. Because action mobilization does not directly follow consensus mobilization, people involved in social change acts must attend to all three frames at once (Lindekilde, 2014).

### **2.3.10.3 Qualitative Content Analysis**

For Chapter 3, I applied qualitative content analysis to the same corpus of syllabi. According to Zhang and Wildemuth (2009), “qualitative content analysis goes beyond merely counting words or extracting objective content from texts to examine meaning, themes and patterns that may be manifest or latent in a particular text. It allows researchers to understand social reality in a subjective but scientific manner” (p. 1). For example, in my analysis I used percentages of occurrences to identify patterns across the syllabi, but I also contextualized these analyses with thick descriptions and observations about *where* on the syllabi these themes occurred.

Qualitative content analysis is an inductive approach that grounds “the examination of topics and themes, as well as the inferences drawn from them, in the data” (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 1). Additionally, qualitative content analyses use purposively selected texts (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 2), and all the texts that I analyzed in this study were syllabi from Campus Compact’s syllabi library. Finally, qualitative content analysis “pays attention to unique themes that illustrate the range of meanings of the phenomenon rather than the statistical significance of the occurrence of particular texts or concepts” (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009, p. 2). While the percentages that I identified illuminate patterns across the syllabi, these percentages are not meant to illustrate statistical significance. Instead, my goal is that these percentages will reveal discourse patterns that English instructors use on their service-learning syllabi.

## **2.4 Research Design**

### **2.4.11 Researcher Positionality & Membership Role**

As a qualitative researcher, it is important to disclose my positionality within my study. I am a faculty member in an English Department at a state university, and I have been teaching

community-engaged projects in my Writing courses for the past seven years. My initial motivation to include community partnerships in these courses arose from a desire to have my students produce usable texts for non-academic audiences, similar to the diagnostic framing that I noticed in many of the syllabi that I analyzed in the frame analysis. However, as I read more literature about community engagement and listened to my community partners' perspectives on these projects, my own approach began to shift.

Reviewing my own syllabi and lecture materials, I realized how frequently I used words like “client” to describe the community partner and phrases such as “serve” and “write for” in describing students' work. Through the discourse that I used on documents, in lectures, and in conversations, I realized that I was introducing community work through a combination of volunteer + professionalism frames, and that while there is nothing inherently wrong with these frames, this language unintentionally draws boundaries between students and community partners. This language communicated to students that they were short-term volunteers who created writing *for* partnering organizations, rather than invested collaborators creating writing *with* organizations (Deans, 2010). Deans (2010) doesn't attribute values to the three different community writing paradigms – writing about, writing for, or writing with – but I realized that I wanted my students to see their work as being done collaboratively with the community partner rather than *for* them. There was a mismatch between the collaborative efforts that I was hoping to see between my students and our community partners and the language that I was using to describe their partnerships.

As I started to modify my own language to reflect this paradigm shift, I began to wonder if there were broader patterns in the language that English instructors use to describe community partnerships on their own syllabi. The purpose of this research is not to call other instructors out

for the language on their syllabi, but rather to contribute to larger conversations within the field of community writing about how we actualize community partnerships through our discourse. Throughout the course of this research, I was inspired to revise partnership language on my own syllabi, Canvas content, and lectures. My hope is that this research might also inspire other instructors to take a closer look at their own language to reevaluate if it is accurately describing the partnerships that they are hoping to create.

#### **2.4.12 Document Selection and Data Collection**

A syllabus is a written document that describes a course's assignments, rubrics, and learning outcomes over the semester and serves as an academic contract between students and instructors (Ishiyama & Hartlaub, 2002). Syllabi only reflect one version of the institutional curriculum in practice, but “they do provide important insights into the instructor’s intentions through what they decide to omit” (Messineo, 2007, p. 80) or include. Most, if not all college courses use syllabi (Graves et al., 2010), and since syllabi offer permanent descriptions of a course, they are increasingly being used as a unit of analysis for empirical study (Ishiyama & Hartlaub, 2002). Given that “syllabi are an excellent source of information about what is being taught...and how it is being taught” (Priester et al., 2008, p. 29) and serve as contracts for what students should be prepared for in a course, I analyzed twenty-six English service-learning syllabi from two and four-year higher education institutions that were included on Campus Compact’s publicly available syllabi library.

Campus Compact, a national nonprofit organization, is “the largest and oldest higher education association dedicated to higher education civic and community engagement” (Campus Compact, 2024). The nonprofit’s members consist of thousands of university presidents, faculty, researchers, students, and civic and community engagement experts at colleges and universities.

Today, participation in Campus Compact has increased to over 1,079 public and private two-and four-year colleges and universities across the United States (Campus Compact). The organization has significantly influenced how campuses approach service-learning implementation and assessment (Messineo, 2007).

Campus Compact offers instructors a syllabus library to model how community engaged projects have been taught in courses from a variety of disciplines. Syllabi on this site have often been submitted by the faculty member who designed and instructed the course (Messineo, 2007) and recently, the organization has recruited syllabi from faculty who were nominated for their national recognition awards (Hurd, 2024). I chose to assess the English syllabi included on this library because these syllabi were selected by Campus Compact's editors and leadership for their high quality and were deemed as noteworthy examples of community-engaged learning in the United States. Furthermore, as Messineo (2007) argues, "it is likely that only those faculty with a significant commitment to service-learning would submit their syllabi for inclusion" (p. 81), and their dedication to service-learning would most likely be reflected in instructors' approach to the course. Therefore, the documents included in this study were drawn from what are likely the strongest examples of publicly available service-learning syllabi within the English discipline. Most of the syllabi do not include information about the type of institution, but based on the syllabi that do include identifying information, the syllabi range from 2-year community colleges to private colleges to 4-year state institutions. In the next section, I describe data management across these three studies.

#### **2.4.13 Research Site and Data Management**

Navigation of data for this work required me to consider how to manage and approach this work across the three articulated articles. To begin, I downloaded the syllabi from Campus

Compact’s publicly available Syllabi Library and saved all the documents to ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis program. To narrow this search to the English discipline, I refined the results to only include syllabi from the “English” and “Writing” subject areas. After removing duplicate syllabi that were cross listed as both “English” and “Writing,” I had thirty-three total documents. After reading through the documents, seven syllabi were removed because they were duplicates, leaving me with twenty-six original syllabi in the “English” and “Writing” discipline areas.

Most of the syllabi kept identifying information about the institution type, year, or instructor anonymous. However, based on the syllabus’s title or the student learning objectives, I was able to categorize the syllabi by course type (see Table 3).

**Table 3. Types of courses included in the syllabi analysis.**

| <b>Type of Course</b>          | <b>Composition, Rhetoric &amp; Writing Studies</b> | <b>Creative Writing</b> | <b>Literature</b> | <b>Technical and Professional Writing</b> | <b>Reading and Literacy</b> |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <b>Number of Syllabi, n=26</b> | 13                                                 | 1                       | 8                 | 2                                         | 2                           |

#### **2.4.14 Data Analysis**

To organize my research, I uploaded the syllabi into ATLAS.ti. After collecting all the syllabi, I began the process of inductive analysis. Bhattacharya (2017) describes inductive analysis as

The process through which a qualitative researcher might look at all the raw data, chunk them into small analytical units of meaning for further analysis, cluster similar analytical units and label them as categories, and identify salient patterns after looking within an across categories. (p. 150).

To accomplish this, I first read through each syllabus to understand the type of course being described and the scope of the community engagement project included in the course. I kept researcher memos as I read through each syllabus, jotting down notes of my reactions to the syllabi and the patterns that I was noticing.

I used an inductive approach to Chapter 5, the framing analysis, working “up” from the data without any “preestablished testable hypothesis” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 150). Following Bhattacharya’s (2017) advice, I chunked the raw data into small analytical units of meaning (or codes), clustered similar analytic units into categories, and identified salient patterns after looking within and across categories (or themes). I then used Microsoft Word to create tables of these themes and codes. Next, I created initial categories for the syllabi, including syllabi that presented the community as “Sites for Students to Perform. A Service or Charity,” syllabi that presented the community as “Sites for Student Learning and Professional Development,” and syllabi that presented the community as “Sites for Students and Community Members to Co-Create Knowledge Together.” Recognizing that data analysis is iterative (Bhattacharya, 2017), I moved back and forth through these stages. For example, I used these initial categories as starting points but continued to refine them to better reflect relevant literature about framing analysis, especially framing analysis within a community writing context.

For Chapter 4, I built from Mitchell and Perrotti’s (2023) findings for the content analysis by adopting and modifying a coding scheme from their study about how service-learning is communicated through syllabi at four-year institutions. Adopting coding schemes that have been developed in previous studies “has the advantage of supporting the accumulation and comparison of research findings across multiple [content analysis] studies” (Zhang & Wildemuth 2009, p. 4). Building from Mitchell and Perrotti’s (2023) study, I read this collection of English syllabi to

uncover the terminology being used to describe community engagement, the learning outcomes related to community engagement, the service requirements, community partner information, readings, and assignments. Like Mitchell and Perrotti (2023), I also used a “text search” query of terms that I selected (e.g. service-learning, community writing, and community engagement) after reading the syllabi and reviewing the literature. Next, I reread the syllabi and used second-level coding to reveal more information about how community engagement is being taught in these classes and the parameters of engagement being described on these documents. I used conceptual analysis, which determines the existence and frequency of concepts in a text, to examine the occurrence of selected terms in the data (Beaney, 2014).

Noticing some reappearing themes across the syllabi and building from literature in community writing, I added additional coding schemes beyond Mitchell and Perrotti’s (2023), including an analysis of the types of deliverables and genres that students were producing, the moments when community engagement outcomes were broken out separately from the course’s primary learning objectives, instances when projects were designed by the community partner or the instructor, dress code policies, and the range of community partner organizations that were described across the syllabi. Following Saldana’s (2021) recommendations, my coding process consisted of pre-coding, first-cycle coding, and second-cycle coding.

***Precoding.*** I used precoding for both the frame analysis and the qualitative content analysis. During precoding, I used different colored highlighters to mark instances in the syllabi that stood out, such as syllabi that included lots of detail about the community partner or syllabi that used extreme deficit-based framing to describe the community. I also kept researcher journals to remain aware of how I was responding to each of these syllabi.

***First-Cycle Coding.*** I used in vivo codes during first-cycle coding of the frame analysis (Saldana, 2021). I pulled phrases and sentences from the syllabi so that I could capture direct language from the syllabus and begin to categorize this language into applicable codes. Tables 4, 5, and 6 show the results of first cycle in-vivo coding. I completed this coding in ATLAS.ti, but I created these tables first to start to make sense of how these frames were emerging through instructors' language.

**Table 4. Phrases that Frame Communities Members as Equal Co-Creators.**

| <b>Codes</b>          | <b>Code Definition</b>                                                                                                                  | <b>Examples from the Syllabi</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Project is Co-Created | The project was planned <i>with</i> the community, prioritizing the community's interests, assets, and desired outcomes from the start. | "Students will work collaboratively to research this issue, as well as co-create knowledge with those in the community who are affected by the new (Jan. 1, 1998) welfare reform policy." "Your public storytelling project – and collaboratively (with participants) writing 'Neighborhood narratives'..." "[Did the student] engage reciprocally in knowledge exchange with community partners and become co-creators of knowledge?"                                                                                                                |
| Community Expertise   | Community members are described as knowledgeable contributors to the project.                                                           | "We will always treat them with the utmost respect and dignity, which means deeply listening to their contributions and treating them as intellectual equals. We have much to learn from their perspectives." "You will work with a group of 3-4 high school students...you will give them feedback on their writing; and since you will be writing the same papers right along with them, they can give you feedback on yours, as well." "[Did the project] build responsively on community knowledge and responsively contribute to the community?" |
| Community Agency      | The community has a say in the project's direction and the final deliverable.                                                           | "Do the faith communities see themselves as taking rhetorical action with this project? How does each faith community see its own rhetorical agency vis-à-vis this project?"                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |

**Table 5. Phrases that Frame Communities as Sites for Student Learning and Professional Development**

| <b>Codes</b>     | <b>Code Definition</b>                                                                                      | <b>Examples from the Syllabi</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Student Learning | The syllabi explicitly state that student learning is the primary goal of a community-engaged project.      | “The first and most important goal of the course will be to acquaint students with the very literal phenomenon of hunger as it is experienced in Utah today.” “The chief aim of service learning is to connect real-world experience (working & interacting at your service site) with learning in the academic setting.” “The goal of the service learning component of this class is to further our examination of the importance of oral tradition in African Diasporic communities.” |
| Rewarding        | College students’ involvement in the community is described as a rewarding or valuable experience for them. | “The work is physically intensive and very rewarding.” “These are just some of the ways, however, that doing service learning for your semester project will approximate a real-world work experience, and that is just one of the reasons that it could be a valuable experience for you.”                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Resume-builder   | College students’ work in the community is described as a resume-builder or professionally beneficial.      | “Through service-learning, you can improve your learning and your resume, regardless of your career field, because you are applying your knowledge and skills to real-life situations.” “It is critical for literacy professionals and educators to develop their understandings of the members of their community and literacy issues.”                                                                                                                                                 |

**Table 6. Phrases that Frame Communities as Sites for Students to Provide Service or a Charity.**

| <b>Codes</b>                         | <b>Code Definitions</b>                                                                       | <b>Examples from the Syllabi</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Deficits                             | The community members are introduced through their deficits.                                  | “The failure to learn to read or to read well has many ramifications including diminished self-confidence and motivation to learn, poor school performance, and an increase in the probability of dropping out of high school.” “[Students will] provide a counterpoint to the harsh socio-economic realities many of these children face on a daily basis.” “By [date], post a 260-word entry about what you’ve perceived at your service site to be the main cause(s) of hunger, homelessness, or illiteracy in the appropriate Discussion Forum.” |
| Positive Influences                  | The college students are positioned as positive influences who serve community members.       | “Even more fundamentally, interns will serve as a positive influence in their students’ lives.” “Upon completing this service-learning course, students will be able to recognize needs in the community [and] respond to community needs with service.” “[Students will] improve the basic literacy skills of third graders at [school].”                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Community Benefit is an Afterthought | Student benefit is emphasized, but the community benefit is an afterthought or not explained. | “Studies show that students process academic material more deeply and thoroughly and remember it longer if they’ve engaged with it, applied it in “real” and meaningful situations. In addition to our learning goals, I anticipate that your work will benefit the community and make the world a better place!”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |

I used a similar in vivo approach to the content analysis, but I began the content analysis by building from the phrases that Mitchell and Perrotti (2023) identified in their recent analysis of service-learning syllabi. Table 7 (below) shows the initial results of a text search I performed

to understand terminology that instructors used to describe community engagement projects on their syllabi, which provided a starting point for how I wanted to analyze the rest of the data.

**Table 7. Terminology Used to Describe Engagement Across the Syllabi.**

| Terminology                                                                   | Percentage of Documents | N (Number of documents) |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Service-learning                                                              | 73%                     | 19                      |
| Community engagement, community-based learning, or community-engaged learning | 30%                     | 8                       |
| Civic learning, civic engagement, and civic dialogue                          | 23%                     | 6                       |
| Experiential learning, experiential event, or experiential component          | 15%                     | 4                       |
| Volunteer                                                                     | 15%                     | 4                       |
| Fieldwork or fieldtrip                                                        | 12%                     | 3                       |
| Partnership                                                                   | 8%                      | 2                       |
| Critical Inquiry                                                              | 8%                      | 2                       |
| Community writing                                                             | 4%                      | 1                       |
| CBL or community-based learning                                               | 4%                      | 1                       |
| Internship                                                                    | 4%                      | 1                       |
| Outreach                                                                      | 4%                      | 1                       |

*Note:* Because multiple terms were used throughout many of the documents, the percentages in Table 7 are greater than 100%. n=26.

***Second-Cycle Coding.*** To enhance credibility and trustworthiness (Saldana, 2021), I performed a second cycle of coding. For the frame analysis, I approached second cycle coding through code mapping (Saldana, 2021) to re-categorize the codes so that they aligned with the diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames that I was exploring. I created new code groups within ATLAS.ti to reflect each of these frames and re-categorized my codes through this code mapping process. During this process, I relied heavily on framing analysis literature to ensure

that the codes were being categorized into frames that applied to this method of analysis. This process of code mapping contributed to the “auditing process” of my research study that provided me with a “condensed textual view” of my study, transforming my codes into organized categories and then higher-level concepts that aligned with framing analysis methodologies (Saldana, 2021, p. 285).

I also applied second-cycle coding to the qualitative content analysis. During the second cycle, I reorganized my themes to create patterns that reflected different elements of the syllabi’s components (Saldana, 2021). This allowed me to identify the salient themes that were the most closely connected to my research questions. For example, upon reflecting on my data, I realized that the pattern of some syllabi breaking out their “Service Learning” outcomes separately from the course’s broader “Learning Outcomes” was significant and worth examining further. I also realized that identifying if a syllabus included information about the community partner or not didn’t provide insights that were quite as impactful as I had hoped, because I anticipated that any syllabus that included information about community partners would have specific and detailed information (such as the partners’ name(s), the type of work they do in the community, etc.), but what I found was that many of the syllabi included vague information, such as simply referencing “your community partner” without providing any context about who the partner is. Instead, I broke these themes down further to examine if the syllabi had vague information about the community partner (such as “the residents of Reading, PA”) or specific information (such as the Spady Cultural Heritage Museum, which also had contact information listed) or simply referenced a “service learning project” without ever mentioning a community partner. These more nuanced categories revealed deeper insights into the specific ways that community partners

were or were not being described on “service learning” syllabi. I’ll describe these insights more in Chapter Three, “Mapping the Landscape of Community-Engaged English Courses.”

**Table 8. Preview of Publication Process**

| Articles                                                                                           | Proposed/Submitted Journals and Books                                                                                                                                                                  | Timeline                                                                      |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| “Community-Engaged Writing in the First-Year Composition Course: An Appreciative Inquiry Approach” | The proposal for this chapter was accepted to be included in <i>Beyond the Frontier: Innovations in First-Year Composition, Vol. 4</i> .                                                               | The full chapter is under review by the editors.                              |
| “What We Talk About When We Talk About Engagement: A Framing Analysis of English Syllabi”          | I will be submitting this paper to <i>College Composition and Communication</i> . If it is rejected, I will revise and submit to <i>College English</i> .                                              | The article is under review at <i>College Composition and Communication</i> . |
| “Mapping the Landscape of Community-Engaged English Courses”                                       | I will be submitting this paper to <i>Reflections: A Journal of Community-Engaged Writing and Rhetoric</i> . If it is rejected, I will revise and submit it to <i>The Community Literacy Journal</i> . | The article is under review at <i>Reflections</i> .                           |

## 2.4.15 Conclusion

In conclusion, the three studies presented in this study employ a variety of qualitative methods, but they all demonstrate a commitment to an overarching theoretical framework, built from social constructionism. This lens recognizes that our interactions with communities are constantly changing depending on contexts and circumstances, which requires academic partners to be continuously modifying their approaches to the partnership. The next chapter uses qualitative content analysis to understand how community partnerships are described across the syllabi.

## **Chapter 3 – Mapping the Landscape of Community-Engaged English Courses: A Content Analysis of Syllabi**

Since the public turn in rhetoric and composition, instructors across the English discipline have integrated the community into their pedagogical approach, embracing projects where students produce writing for the greater public, develop authentic partnerships with communities, and co-create knowledge with community partners (Ackerman and Coogan 2010; Cushman 1996; Flower 2008; Farmer 2013; Holmes 2016; Mathieu 2005; Russell 2022; Shah 2020; Weisser 2002; Welch 2005). Community writing projects (also referred to across disciplines as service-learning, community engagement, and community-based learning projects) have the potential to enhance students' understanding of the course content (Silverman 2012; Vizenor et al. 2017), increase students' empathetic skills and teach them to build relationships with people who are different from themselves (Flower 2008; Goldblatt 2005; Grobman 2015; Shah 2020; Silverman 2012; Vizenor et al. 2017), help students form connections with people outside of the university and develop a sense of purpose for their writing tasks (Soria & Weiner, 2013) and significantly enhance students' overall writing skills (Astin 2000). In addition to producing rich student learning experiences through high impact practices (Huston and Williford 2018; Kuh 2008), community writing projects should also yield reciprocal benefits for the community partner (Dostilio et al. 2012; Green 2023). When instructors fail to design a project that benefits both the students and the community partner, students might develop a savior complex (Cushman 1996) and perceive themselves as being privileged saviors of underprivileged 'others,' or students' projects might create more work and confusion for their community partners (Mathieu 2005) by misrepresenting the partnering organization or delivering unusable work products, or students could leave the course before the community project is completed

(Gogan 2014), or even face legal consequences, such as Welch's (2005) student who was detained and fined by a cop for pasting political poems on a public utility box. This led to an unintended (and problematic) outcome for the student, partner, instructor, and university-community partnership.

Although best practices in community engagement encourage instructors to clearly define learning objectives that align academic goals with the community's interests (Eyler & Giles 1999), integrate reflective activities to help students connect their community work to course content (Eyler and Giles 1996; Welch and Plaxton-Moore 2019), build collaborative partnerships that ensure mutually-beneficial outcomes (Bringle and Hatcher 2002), and provide orientation and training so that students and community partners can have a shared understanding of goals and expectations (Furco 1996), little research has examined instructors' existing pedagogical approaches and offered guidance for improving our instruction of community-engaged projects. In order to begin to offer this guidance, we need research that examines how English faculty are communicating community-engaged projects in their syllabi. Table 9 illustrates the disconnect between what the literature on the best practices of service-learning tells instructors to do and what remains unclear about how we are actualizing these best practices in our English courses.

**Table 9. Best Practices in Community Engagement.**

| <b>What We Know</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <b>What Remains Unclear</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Clearly define learning objectives that align academic goals with community partners' interests (Eyler and Giles 1999).</li><li>2. Integrate reflective activities to help students connect their community work to course content (Eyler and Giles 1996; Welch and Plaxton-Moore 2019).</li><li>3. Build collaborative partnerships that ensure mutually-beneficial outcomes (Bringle and Hatcher 2002).</li><li>4. Provide orientation and training so that students and community partners share an understanding of the course or project's goals and expectations (Furco 1996).</li><li>5. Reinforce instructors' intentions and communicate those intentions and expectations on syllabi (Mitchell and Perrotti 2023).</li></ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. How are community-engaged syllabi within the English discipline aligning learning objectives with community work?</li><li>2. How are community partners and partnerships being described on these syllabi – what types of details are communicated to students?</li><li>3. Are syllabi within the English discipline using consistent language to describe community projects, or is there variance?</li><li>4. What types of deliverables are students producing, and what are the parameters of those projects?</li></ol> |

Of the existing research on community-engaged syllabi, Messineo (2007) conducted a content analysis of assessment strategies on a sample of 127 service-learning syllabi posted on Campus Compact's syllabi library and the Guide to College and University Service-Learning Programs website. Messineo's (2007) findings revealed that these syllabi offered a wide range of service-learning experiences and assessment strategies, but often lacked consistency in how the projects were described and evaluated. One-third of the syllabi granted credit for the hours that students served, rather than evaluating the quality of students' work (Messineo, 2007). In response, Messineo (2007) called for instructors to connect community-based learning assignments to the course's learning outcomes and to provide critical feedback on those assignments, following best practices in the field (Eyler and Giles 1996; Eyler and Giles 1999;

Welch and Plaxton-Moore 2019), rather than assigning students a grade simply for performing service hours.

Mitchell and Perrotti (2023) uncovered similar findings through a content analysis of 270 syllabi from 193 four-institutions that were recipients of the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement (a nation-wide recognition of community engagement status for colleges and universities; institutions that apply and are included as classified campuses have shown a dedication to the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity). Their study also revealed that syllabi varied in how service-learning was communicated, noting that instructors used a wide range of terms to describe students' community-based experiences. Many of the syllabi analyzed in their study lacked clarity on students' community work, which may lead students to believe that they can pass the course whether or not they complete the community engagement assignment (Mitchell & Perrotti 2023). Mitchell and Perrotti (2023) also revealed discrepancies in how community partners were described on syllabi – if they were described at all – and found the lack of specifics on community partnerships concerning, “because service-learning cannot exist in the absence of a partnership,” (12) leading the authors to question how valuable a partnership really *is* when it is not visible on a syllabus.

Incorporating reciprocal and mutually-beneficial community-engaged partnerships into a writing course is a complex task, and while faculty may embrace the ideals of community engagement, the logistics of coordinating partnerships, the time required to plan projects that meet both a course's learning objectives and a community partner's goals, and the difficulty of assessing how student learning objectives have been met may discourage instructors from engaged pedagogical approaches. Although the value of community-engaged learning on students

has been thoroughly explored, the field lacks research about the logistical, design, and curricular elements of community-engaged projects (Gillbride-Brown 2011; Marby 1998), and Mitchell and Perrotti (2023) argue that “several decades later, [Gillbride-Brown and Marby’s] critiques remain critically relevant” (2). While some studies have used content analysis to reveal how community-engaged syllabi describe community work across disciplines, no studies have analyzed community-engaged syllabi within the English discipline. In fact, most existing research about community engagement in English courses comes from instructors writing about their own classes and projects, indicating a gap in research about the broader curricular elements of community writing. The purpose of this study is to contribute toward this gap. I began this project with three questions in mind:

1. How did English instructors describe the community-engaged projects in their courses?
2. How were the parameters of students’ projects, their deliverables, and the learning objectives of the community writing projects communicated on syllabi?
3. How did English instructors describe community partners and partnerships on syllabi?

To answer these questions, I used qualitative content analysis to uncover how all the English syllabi on Campus Compact’s syllabi bank described community-engaged projects and the community partners.

## **3.1 Methods**

### **3.1.16 Campus Compact Syllabi as a Unit of Study**

Most, if not all college courses use syllabi (Graves et al. 2010), and since syllabi offer permanent descriptions of a course, they are increasingly being used as a unit of analysis for empirical study (Ishiyama & Hartlaub 2002). A syllabus tends to be “the initial communicative tool that students receive” and is the most formal mechanism that instructors have for sharing

course information with students (Eberly, Newton, and Wiggins 2001, 56). Focusing on course content alone overlooks important issues related to “communication and goal setting that occur at the course level” (Eberly, Newton, & Wiggins 2001, p. 56). Much like a contract, the syllabus makes the responsibilities of the instructor and students explicit (Grunert 1997; McKeachie 1999). Syllabi only reflect one version of the institutional curriculum in practice, but “they do provide important insights into the instructor’s intentions through what they decide to omit” (Messineo 2007, 80) or include. Given that “syllabi are an excellent source of information about what is being taught...and how it is being taught” (Priester et al. 2008, 29), I analyzed twenty-six service-learning syllabi within the English discipline from two and four-year higher education institutions that were included on Campus Compact’s publicly available syllabi library.

Campus Compact, a national nonprofit organization, is “the largest and oldest higher education association dedicated to higher education civic and community engagement” (Campus Compact). The nonprofit’s members consist of thousands of university presidents, faculty, researchers, students, and civic and community engagement experts at colleges and universities. Campus Compact was founded in 1985 with a mission to connect one hundred college and university presidents to help students develop the values and skills of citizenship through participation in public and community service (Messineo 2007). Today, participation in Campus Compact has increased to over 1,079 public and private two-and four-year colleges and universities across the United States (Campus Compact). Campus Compact has significantly influenced how campuses approach service-learning implementation and assessment (Messineo 2007).

Campus Compact offers instructors a syllabus library to model how community engaged projects have been taught in courses from a variety of disciplines. Syllabi on this site have often

been submitted by the faculty member who designed and instructed the course (Messineo 2007) and recently, Campus Compact has also recruited syllabi from faculty who were nominated for the organization's national recognition awards (Hurd 2024). I chose to assess Campus Compact's English syllabi because these documents were selected by Campus Compact's editors and leadership for their high quality and were deemed as noteworthy examples of college-level community-engaged learning in the United States. Furthermore, as Messineo (2007) argues, "it is likely that only those faculty with a significant commitment to service-learning would submit their syllabi for inclusion," and their dedication to service-learning would most likely be reflected in instructors' approach to the course (81). Therefore, the syllabi included in this study have been drawn from what are assumed to be the strongest examples of English syllabi that are publicly available as models to other English instructors who want to include community engagement in their courses.

Of the syllabi within the English discipline that were examined in this study, 50% ( $n=13$ ) were from writing studies courses, 30% ( $n=8$ ) were from literature courses, 8% ( $n=2$ ) were from technical writing courses, 8% ( $n=2$ ) were from reading and literacy courses, and 4% ( $n=1$ ) was from a creative writing course.

### **3.1.17 Data Analysis**

Qualitative content analysis is "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification processes of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, 1278). Unlike quantitative content analysis which identifies statistical significance, qualitative content analysis uncovers patterns, themes, and categories important to understanding a text's social reality (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). Qualitative content analysis allowed me to "identify important themes or categories within a

body of content, and to provide a rich description of the social reality created by those themes/categories as they are lived out in a particular setting” (Zhang and Wildemuth 2009, 11).

I analyzed the syllabi using ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software program. I first read through each syllabus to understand how community engagement was being described in each course. I then adopted and modified a coding scheme used in Mitchell and Perrotti’s (2023) study about how service-learning is communicated through syllabi at four-year institutions, because adopting coding schemes that have been developed in previous studies “has the advantage of supporting the accumulation and comparison of research findings across multiple [content analysis] studies” (Zhang and Wildemuth 2009, 4). Building from Mitchell and Perrotti’s (2023) study, I read this collection of English syllabi to uncover the terminology being used to describe community engagement, the learning outcomes related to community engagement, the service requirements, community partner information, readings, and assignments. Like Mitchell and Perrotti (2023), I also used a “text search” query of terms that I selected (e.g. service-learning, community writing, and community engagement) after reading the syllabi and reviewing the literature. Next, I reread and coded the syllabi to reveal more information about how community engagement is being taught in these classes and the parameters of engagement being described on these documents. Noticing some reappearing themes across the syllabi and building from literature in community writing, I added additional coding schemes beyond Mitchell and Perrotti’s (2023), including an analysis of the types of deliverables and genres that students were producing, the moments when community engagement outcomes were broken out separately from the course’s main learning objectives, instances when projects were designed by the community partner or the instructor, dress code

policies, and the range of community partner organizations that were described across the syllabi. In the next section, I outline the findings of this work.

## **3.2 Findings**

This content analysis revealed that English instructors use a variety of terms to describe community work and that students across the discipline produce a wide range of deliverables and genres for community-engaged projects. Service-learning outcomes, expectations, and community partner descriptions also varied across syllabi. These findings are portrayed below to visualize how the field of community writing varies in communicating engagement frameworks and expectations on course syllabi.

### **3.2.18 Terminology Used to Describe Service-Learning on Syllabi**

The term “service-learning” was used across 73% ( $n=19$ ) of all documents ( $n=26$  syllabi). Other frequently used terms included “community engagement,” “community-based learning,” or “community-engaged learning” (30%,  $n=8$ ); “civic learning,” “civic engagement,” and “civic dialogue” (23%,  $n=6$ ); “experiential learning,” “experiential event,” or “experiential component” (15%,  $n=4$ ); or “volunteer” (15%,  $n=4$ ). Table 10 displays the frequency of terms used to describe community work across all documents.

**Table 10. Frequency Of Terms Used to Describe Engaged Projects Across All Syllabi.**

| <b>Terminology</b>                                                            | <b>Percentage of Documents</b> | <b>N (Number of documents)</b> |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Service-learning                                                              | 73%                            | 19                             |
| Community engagement, community-based learning, or community-engaged learning | 30%                            | 8                              |
| Civic learning, civic engagement, and civic dialogue                          | 23%                            | 6                              |
| Experiential learning, experiential event, or experiential component          | 15%                            | 4                              |
| Volunteer                                                                     | 15%                            | 4                              |
| Fieldwork or fieldtrip                                                        | 12%                            | 3                              |
| Partnership                                                                   | 8%                             | 2                              |
| Critical Inquiry                                                              | 8%                             | 2                              |
| Community writing                                                             | 4%                             | 1                              |
| CBL or community-based learning                                               | 4%                             | 1                              |
| Internship                                                                    | 4%                             | 1                              |
| Outreach                                                                      | 4%                             | 1                              |

*Note:* Because multiple terms were used throughout many of the documents, the percentages in Table 10 are greater than 100%. n=26.

Many instructors used multiple terms to describe community-engaged projects on their syllabi, such as referring to the project as “service-learning” on one page and calling it an example of “civic learning” on another. This is noteworthy because “service-learning” and “civic learning” have different theoretical commitments, and pedagogical approaches to each style of engagement vary – for example, is an instructor hoping to instill in students as commitment to *serving* others or a commitment to civic engagement? To gain a clearer picture of how these projects were taught in class, I also analyzed the deliverables and genres that students produced for their community projects.

### 3.2.19 Student Deliverables and Genres

Most (92%,  $n=24$ ) of the syllabi included a reflective writing assignment in combination with other deliverables, such as performing direct service or conducting research or advocacy work for the community. But aside from reflective writing assignments, the types of community work and genres that students produced varied greatly. Performing direct service at charitable organizations, such as serving at soup kitchens, volunteering in a shelter for the unhoused, or serving at a food pantry was a student deliverable described in 27% ( $n=7$ ) of the syllabi. 23% ( $n=6$ ) of the syllabi described students teaching or reading to children at elementary schools, and another 23% ( $n=6$ ) had students developing oral and multimedia presentations, writing analysis essays, research papers and reports, or interviewing community members to write stories about their lived experiences. Table 11 shows the wide range of deliverables and genres that students produced in their English courses.

**Table 11. Frequency of student deliverables and genres produced across documents.**

| <b>Student Deliverables</b>                                                                                                      | <b>Percentage of Documents</b> | <b><i>N</i> (Number of documents)</b> |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Reflective writing assignments                                                                                                   | 92%                            | 24                                    |
| Performing direct service at charitable organizations (serving at soup kitchens, shelters for the unhoused, food pantries, etc.) | 27%                            | 7                                     |
| Teaching, reading to children, and drafting lesson plans or mentoring programs                                                   | 23%                            | 6                                     |
| Delivering oral and multimedia presentations (for instructor/class and/or community partner)                                     | 23%                            | 6                                     |
| Writing analysis essays, research papers, and reports (for the instructor, not the community partner)                            | 23%                            | 6                                     |
| Interviewing or researching community members' lives, transcribing the interviews, or turning them into stories                  | 23%                            | 6                                     |
| Writing website content                                                                                                          | 19%                            | 5                                     |
| Creating a project determined by the community partner                                                                           | 12%                            | 3                                     |
| Facilitating community story circles                                                                                             | 8%                             | 2                                     |
| Creating community resource guides                                                                                               | 8%                             | 2                                     |
| Writing grants                                                                                                                   | 8%                             | 2                                     |
| Writing letters                                                                                                                  | 8%                             | 2                                     |
| Developing print magazines or newsletters                                                                                        | 8%                             | 2                                     |
| Writing budgets                                                                                                                  | 4%                             | 1                                     |
| Planning a public event                                                                                                          | 4%                             | 1                                     |

*Note:* Because multiple assignments were used throughout most of the documents, the percentages in Table 11 are greater than 100%.

A noteworthy takeaway from Table 11 is that only 12% ( $n=3$ ) of the student deliverables were decided by the community partner. A significant 85% ( $n=22$ ) of the syllabi described community-engaged partnerships that were pre-planned and coordinated by the instructor, and only 12% ( $n=3$ ) described partnerships that were initiated and coordinated by the students. Only one syllabus (4%) did not specify if the community partnership was coordinated by the student or instructor. To better understand how students were expected to engage in these partnerships, I analyzed the syllabi for service-learning outcomes, expectations of dress and conduct, and hour requirements.

### **3.2.20 Describing the Parameters of Students' Engagement**

#### **3.2.20.1 Service-Learning Outcomes and Expectations**

Half of the syllabi (50%,  $n=13$ ) included learning outcomes related to community engagement. For example, one syllabus included a statement that read, "The process of critical inquiry will help all students to carry out the service-learning component of this course, but it will also help class members who are pre-service teachers to understand how to teach their future students to think critically about children's literature and thereby to enjoy texts on a number of different levels." Several learning objectives emphasized critical thinking skills developed through community work, such as one objective that read, "Students will reflect on how race, class, gender, and sexuality are figured in writing about health care and illness and experienced at their service site." Another syllabus outlined a goal "to engage you in critical thinking about the complexities of community/communal life and about the impact of an individual's actions within a community." Some of the syllabi also emphasized leadership skills as an outcome of students' community work through objectives such as, "The student will demonstrate leadership

skills by addressing community needs through collaboration with other students in community engagements.”

Of the 50% ( $n=13$ ) of syllabi that included outcomes related to community engagement, 38% of those syllabi ( $n=5$ ) had the service outcomes listed separately from the course’s primary objectives. These syllabi listed their community engagement outcomes under headings such as “Service-Learning Outcomes” or “Service Objectives” in a separate section from the “Course Learning Objectives.” The syllabi that broke these outcomes separately from the rest of the course’s objectives included outcomes such as how the student will “recognize needs in the community” and “respond to community needs with service.” These objectives often tied the student’s service work to the course’s previously listed outcomes with phrases such as, “Students will apply course lessons to real-life situations from the community engagement activities and draw on community engagement activities to help expand on class lessons” or students will “reflect on how the service experience reinforces course learning outcomes.” Of the 26 syllabi examined, 38% ( $n=10$ ) did not include any learning outcomes related to community engagement and 12% ( $n=3$ ) of the syllabi had no student learning outcomes at all.

### **3.2.20.2 Optional Versus Required, Dress Codes, and Transportation**

85% ( $n=22$ ) of the syllabi required students to partake in the community-engaged project and 15% ( $n=4$ ) described projects that were optional. Of the 22 required projects, 27% ( $n=6$ ) required that students participate in trainings or orientations of their community partner’s site. 8% of the total syllabi ( $n=2$ ) included dress codes that students had to follow their service sites, which were an elementary school and a prison. One syllabus tied students’ dress to their grade with a warning that “violations of this code will result in a loss of points” and another stated,

“All participants must be dressed in a conservative manner. This means no cleavage, and no shirts with drug, alcohol, gang, or political slogans.”

Few (8%,  $n=2$ ) of the syllabi offered support for students’ transportation to their community partner sites. One instructor offered Metro cards: “Students engaged in off-campus service learning projects will be provided Metro cards and be required to sign liability waivers and release forms. These forms will be provided in class and Metro cards will be distributed in class each week,” and another offered guidance on how to schedule transportation through the university: “For more information about how the logistical aspect of the course’s service-learning component (how to keep track of your service hours, how to schedule transportation, etc.), you may click here.”

### **3.2.20.3 Assigned Texts**

23% ( $n=6$ ) of the syllabi assigned readings related to community engagement, citizenship, community, or service-learning. However, none of the syllabi assigned the same two texts. Two courses assigned manuals that their universities had written, such as the “Service Learning Program Reflection Manual.” Two courses assigned pieces from Ann Green, including “‘But You Aren’t White:’ Racial Perceptions and Service-Learning,” which argues that teaching white privilege is a crucial component of service-learning courses, especially when most of the students are white and most of the community partners or community members are people of color (Green 2001) and “Difficult Stories: Service-Learning, Race, Class, and Whiteness,” which argues for instructors to address race and class through the stories that they tell about service-learning (Green 2003). Two courses assigned relevant books; one assigned *Building Communities From the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community’s Assets* (Kretzmann & McKnight 2008) and another assigned *Telling Stories to Change the*

*World: Global Voices on the Power of Narrative to Build Community and Make Social Justice Claims* (Solinger, Fox, and Irani 2008). However, most syllabi (77%,  $n=20$ ) did not include any readings related to service, community engagement, or citizenship.

#### **3.2.20.4 Hour Requirements**

58% ( $n=15$ ) of the syllabi did not specify the number of hours that students were expected to spend working on their community projects or being present at the community site. However, this approach is common within the discipline, especially for English courses that have students conducting research and producing projects for community partners, rather than performing *direct service* (person-to-person projects where the students' work directly impacts community individuals, e.g. tutoring kids, serving at a soup kitchen, etc.). It can be difficult to estimate how much time each student will spend collaborating with the community partner or researching their writing topic, so including an hour requirement may not make sense for many *indirect service* projects (projects that address broad issues and have clear benefits to the community but don't necessarily require person-to-person contact, e.g. writing a brochure for a nonprofit, writing a community's history, etc.). However, of the 42% ( $n=11$ ) of the syllabi that outlined how many hours students were expected to spend on their community work, most (14%,  $n=4$ ) required students to spend 16-20 hours with their community partner. Table 12 represents the distribution of hours required across the syllabi. To understand the course's community partners, I categorized the types of organizations that faculty were collaborating with and analyzed how these community partners were being described on the syllabi.

**Table 12. Service Hours Required Per Semester.**

| <b>Hours Required</b>    | <b>Frequency (%)</b> | <b><i>n</i></b> |
|--------------------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| Service hours not listed | 58%                  | 15              |
| 21-25 hours/semester     | 4%                   | 1               |
| 16-20 hours/semester     | 14%                  | 4               |
| 11-15 hours/semester     | 8%                   | 2               |
| 6-10 hours/semester      | 8%                   | 2               |
| 1-5 hours/semester       | 8%                   | 2               |

### **3.2.21 Describing the Community Partners**

85% ( $n=22$ ) of the syllabi included some information about the class's community partner, such as the partner or organization's name, location, contact information, or website. Of the 22 syllabi that included information about their community partners, 68% ( $n=15$ ) listed the specific community partner by name (such as the Spady Cultural Heritage Museum, AIDS Partnership Michigan, Utahns Against Hunger, the Utah AIDS foundation, Meals on Wheels, and other organizations). Of the same 22 syllabi that included information about their community partners, 32% of those syllabi ( $n=7$ ) spoke vaguely about their community partners, using phrases such as students will be "manning a food-drive table," "working with kindergarteners," volunteering at a "homeless shelter," working with "the residents of Reading, PA," serving at "designated schools," or visiting "religious communities in the greater Des Moines area." Figure 1 outlines the types of community partners that college English courses partnered with across these syllabi.

**Figure 1. Community Partner Organizations Described Across English Syllabi.**

|                                                       |                            |                                         |                                         |
|-------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Elementary schools, high schools, and nearby colleges | Food Drives/ Food Pantries | Farmers' Markets                        | Soup Kitchens/Meal Sites                |
| Community Centers                                     | Child Development Centers  | Literacy Centers                        | Environmental Restoration Organizations |
| Youth Nonprofits                                      | Prisons                    | Hospitals, Hospices, and Health Clinics | Social Service Agencies                 |
| Community Gardens                                     | Religious Communities      | Shelters for the Unhoused               | Cultural Museums and Cultural Centers   |

Partnering with elementary schools, high schools, and other colleges was mentioned across 42% ( $n=11$ ) of the syllabi. 19% ( $n=5$ ) of the syllabi listed students working with soup kitchens or meal sites. 12% ( $n=3$ ) of the syllabi mentioned students working with food drives/food pantries, shelters for the unhoused, cultural museums, or literacy centers, and 8% ( $n=2$ ) of the syllabi had students working with community centers and cultural museums. The remaining types of community partner organizations (depicted on Figure 1) were only mentioned once and did not appear multiple times across the syllabi.

15% ( $n=4$ ) of the syllabi did not include any community partner information at all. Instead, these syllabi had extremely vague sentences such as, “Your community partners rely on you for professional-level performance, so participate as scheduled and provide superb service.” Another syllabus only mentioned that students had “various options available for the community service.” One syllabus referred to the community partners only as “the agencies” and another

syllabus simply included a statement that students could choose between “over fifty nonprofits.” These findings reveal much variance in how community engagement expectations and parameters are communicated in English syllabi.

### **3.3 Discussion**

This content analysis of community-engaged English syllabi reveals several important findings. First, although 92% of the syllabi included writing assignments for students to reflect on their community work, only 50% of the syllabi integrated community work into the course’s learning objectives. Not incorporating students’ community work into the course objectives may signal to students that this work is less valuable than the other assignments included on the syllabi and could also make it difficult for students to understand how their community projects fit into the broader course goals. Notably, 38% of those syllabi broke the service-learning objectives into a separate section underneath the course’s main objectives. For instructors who are working with course objectives that were set by their department, this approach may be an effective way to emphasize the pedagogical significance of their community work while still adhering to the department’s standardized learning objectives.

Second, the terminology used to describe community engagement across these syllabi varies greatly. Although community-engaged work does not all fit into one narrow definition, each term has unique theoretical implications. For example, “volunteer” implies a relationship where students are providing free labor or services to the community, “internship” establishes expectations that students will gain pragmatic work experiences, including a hyphen between “service” and “learning” attempts to signal equal student learning and service outcomes (Mitchell and Perrotti 2023), “civic learning” implies that students will learn and practice skills to help them participate in civic and democratic life, and “community based learning” aims to

empower all participants to evoke measurable change in community systems while also meeting course objectives. The challenge is for instructors to reflect on *why* they're incorporating community-engaged projects into their course, identify *how* they want their students and themselves to participate in the community work, and carefully choose and repeatedly use terminology that best captures these intended goals and outcomes.

Third, although 85% of the syllabi included some information about the course's community partners, 32% of those syllabi only included vague information about the community partners, and only 23% of the total syllabi included readings related to community or civic engagement. A course's reading list is especially important to classes within the English discipline, which are often designed around assigned texts, in-class discussions of those texts, and writing assignments built from the assigned texts. Including assigned readings about how to form arguments in a persuasive paper but neglecting to teach texts about power imbalances that occur when the university enters the community may signal to students that their community work is ancillary, something that can be easily learned through practice and not rooted in relevant, disciplinary literature.

### **3.4 Recommendations for Practice**

Given these challenges, faculty who teach community writing projects in their English courses may want to consider these recommendations as they draft their course syllabi.

#### **3.4.22 Choose One Term That Aligns with Your Theoretical Approach to Engagement**

Although there is no universally agreed upon term for the community work that we do in our courses (Eyler and Giles 1999; Mooney and Edwards 2001), instructors can develop a more cohesive structure to their course's community engagement project by intentionally choosing one

term that reflects their theoretical approach to community work. For example, identify if you want to teach a “critically engaged civic learning project” (CECL), (Vincent et al. 2021) which aims to redistribute power and authority to promote civic learning and social change or a “service-learning” project that combines learning objectives with community service to provide a pragmatic learning experience to students. Given the range of terms that instructors use to characterize engagement work (Messineo 2007; Mitchell and Perrotti 2023), faculty should research the different terminology and decide on one term that aligns with their holistic vision for how students, faculty, and community partners will interact throughout the project. However, instructors considering “volunteer,” “internship,” or “field work” should observe Thomas Deans’ (2001) warning that “service-learning is not volunteerism or community service; nor is it simply an academic internship or field placement” (1) and instead consider terms that foreground reciprocal engagements, contribute to sustainable and justice-oriented change efforts, and result in impactful learning experiences. Once an instructor picks a term, they should use it consistently throughout the syllabus, additional course materials, and lectures, and ensure that all the assignments being taught within a community writing unit align with the theoretical principles of this terminology (e.g. if you are using Vincent et al.’s (2021) CECL approach, do your scaffolding assignments have students learning about the community partner through their assets rather than their deficits? Is power redistributed throughout each step of the project? Are community and student voices equally valued?)

### **3.4.23 Align Students’ Deliverables with the Course’s Learning Objectives and the Community Partner’s Objectives**

Because a course’s learning objectives are so important to our justification of the course’s design and content, these objectives often appear on the first page of a syllabus. Incorporating a

community writing project into those objectives instantly shows students that this work is significant and tied to the course's overall goals. If you are unable to adjust departmental student learning objectives, consider adding a separate "Community Engagement Objectives" section next to the course's larger goals. Additionally, make sure to plan the project with the community partner to ensure that the students' work will be valuable to them, and if possible, compensate the community partner for their efforts. Avoid planning the project on your own and simply informing the community partner that they will be receiving your students' deliverables or services, since this can lead to a disconnect between students' work and the organization's needs. If you are having students initiate and coordinate their own partnerships, still consider connecting with their community partners to discuss the types of projects that can be useful for the partner's organization and for your course's learning objectives. If you are asking the community partner to evaluate the students' work at the end of the semester, offer them compensation for that labor.

### **3.4.24 Include Specific Details About the Community Partnership in the Syllabus**

Our syllabi often have many contractual statements about how students will be penalized for using cell phones during class or for taking too many absences, so why would we leave important information about our community partnerships off the syllabus? If you are not having your students choose their own community partners, plan your community partnerships early enough that you *can* include information about your partners on the syllabus, such as their names, contact information, and important background information that will help students contextualize their upcoming project(s). Community-based learning cannot happen without the community partner, so the partner's presence should be made prominently visible on the course's most important contractual document, the syllabus.

### **3.4.25 4. Assign Texts Related to Community Engagement**

The field of English has many books and journals that can introduce students to critical approaches to their community work (for example, *Reflections*, *Community Literacy Journal*, *Spark: A 4C4Equality Journal*, and relevant articles throughout *College Composition and Communication*, *College English*, and elsewhere). Having students read some of this rich disciplinary literature about community engagement before they begin interacting with the community can provide them with essential knowledge about how engagement can be harmful when it's poorly executed and how engagement can be mutually beneficial when well-planned. Additionally, reading literature about civic or community engagement can help students understand *why* they are using an engaged approach to pursue a project in your class. With this knowledge, students can collaborate with communities being fully aware of service-learning's historical context of domination, coercion, and extraction (Hammersley 2012; Mitchell, Donahue, and Young-Law 2012) that has led to these newer, critical models for community engagement, and they can make informed decisions about *how* they want to show up in their communities.

## **3.5 Limitations and Future Research**

This study only analyzed English syllabi that were publicly available on Campus Compact's syllabi library, which are arguably the strongest community engaged syllabi within the discipline that are available to the public. However, this sample did not have equal representation from courses across the discipline, such as creative writing and technical and professional writing. A future study could examine a corpus of engaged creative writing syllabi or engaged professional and technical writing syllabi, for example, to better understand how these unique courses describe and approach community engagement. Additionally, a syllabus

does not fully represent how a project is taught and assessed in a course. Future studies could go further, assessing a course's assignments, prompts, lectures, and other course materials in addition to the syllabi to gain a more comprehensive picture of how community projects are being taught.

Furthermore, this study did not include any correspondence with faculty, so I had to make interpretations based on the syllabus content and relevant literature. Interviewing faculty, in addition to studying their course documents, can offer a more cohesive understanding of how faculty make choices in designing community writing projects. Finally, further research could examine the crucial perspective of the community partners who make this work possible. Additional studies could examine terms that community partners prefer for university collaborations, course designs that align well with community partners' schedules, preferences for communicating with students and faculty, preferences for the types of projects and genres that students produce, and preferences for how involved they want to be in designing and evaluating the students' work.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

Although literature on community engagement offers best practices for integrating community projects into college courses, this study reveals a disconnect between the literature and how we design our community-engaged English syllabi. Specifically, this study revealed that while many syllabi include crucial reflective assignments for students, syllabi often tended to lack vital details about our community partners. This research also revealed a disconnect between our students' community work and the course's learning objectives and identified a wide range of terms, all with different theoretical underpinnings, that we are using to describe our engaged partnerships. The findings of this study offer opportunities for instructors, in

collaboration with their campus offices of engagement, to redesign their syllabi so that community work is clearly communicated and integrated into the course's reading list, assignment plans, and student learning objectives. We all have access to research on best practices for implementing engagement into our courses, but putting those recommendations into practice is a task that may be done most effectively in collaboration between faculty members, community partners, administrative support offices, and students. This study reveals possibilities for these groups to collaborate and design community writing projects that put their shared values into practice.

## **Chapter 4 – What We Talk About When We Talk About**

### **Engagement: A Framing Analysis of English Syllabi**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

Many instructors of writing courses, traditionally situated in English departments, have eagerly embraced community engagement ever since composition studies’ social turn in the ‘90s (Deans et al.). Building on this momentum, courses across the English discipline – including first-year composition, creative writing, and upper-level technical writing – have recognized the disciplinary value of incorporating community engagement into the classroom. For example, collaborating with community partners on writing projects can enhance students’ understanding of a course’s content (Silverman; Vizenor et al.), increase students’ empathic skills and teach them to build relationships with people who are different from themselves (Flower; Goldblatt; Grobman; Shah; Silverman; Vizenor), help students make real-world connections and develop a sense of purpose for their writing tasks (Soria), and significantly enhance students’ overall writing skills (Astin et al.). However, these student benefits sometimes manifest at the expense of the community partner.

When instructors fail to consider the stakes for both students and community partners, engaged learning can create more harm than good. For example, a project might frame community members as being “helpless” and “in need of external others” by prioritizing unidirectional knowledge flows *from* the university *to* the community (Hammersley), or perpetuate notions of charity that lead students to accept that “certain injustices are inevitable rather than the result of ongoing discriminatory processes” (Vaccaro as cited in Mitchell et al. 616), or even take up nonprofit partners’ valuable time, only to leave them with unusable student deliverables (Mathieu). If public higher education institutions intend to fulfill their democratic

missions and address societal concerns through community-focused research and teaching, it is crucial that university not replicate harmful engagement practices. To mitigate the risks to students, community partners, and the university, recent community writing scholarship asks us to reorient our focus toward community partner perspectives (Dubinsky; Leon and Sura; *Tactics*; Lindenman and Lohr; Shah) and away from the exhaustively studied student benefits.

Unveiling community perspectives is an important step toward designing equitable partnerships that attempt to distribute power between the university and the community. However, the field of community engagement – and more specifically, community writing – lacks research about the logistical, design, and curricular elements of service-learning projects (Mabry; Gilbride-Brown). Understanding best practices and applying those practices to our classrooms are two different tasks. While we might have the best intentions to create reciprocal partnerships that result in valuable outcomes for both the community and our students (Dostilio et al.), we may be unaware of how the language framing our partnerships signals conflicting values and motivations for doing community work. According to Rachael Shah, “community members experience writing collaborations in significantly different ways than college students or university teachers: when an activity is ‘volunteer work’ for a student, what is it for the community member?” (87). Shah argues that we need to pay “explicit attention to how frames are working for community partners” (87), but we need more research to examine the existing frames that English faculty are using to introduce community partnerships in their courses.

In response, I draw on framing theory and frame analysis to identify the diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames that instructors evoke when describing community partnerships on English syllabi. Revealing the dominant discourses that shape our language around community writing may encourage reflection: Is this what I’m wanting to communicate

to students about the value of engaged pedagogy? Is this how I intended to frame the community to my students? How is this language situating power between the class and the community? The next section offers a brief review of framing scholarship within the field of community writing and a review of syllabi analyses in community engaged research.

## **4.2 Review of Literature**

### **4.2.26 Framing Community Writing**

How we frame our community partnerships is an important topic among community writing scholars, who recognize the power of words in affecting reality. For example, Ellen Cushman offers a distinction between “missionary activism, which introduces certain literacies to promote an ideology, and scholarly activism, which facilitates the literate activities that *already* take place in the community” (241). Framing a project as missionary activism, which promotes top-down engagements dependent on university expertise, versus scholarly activism, which builds from community action, signals to students whether they are interacting with charitable recipients or equal collaborators. Within a classroom context, Dubinsky suggests that framing students’ community projects as “volunteering” may influence them to see their work as “feel good” experiences or “charitable contributions” that don’t contribute to long-term, systemic changes (63). While there are moments when a charitable approach may be necessary, “focusing on volunteering tends to result in a sense of altruism in students” (Dubinsky 63), which produces few, if any, long-term societal benefits (Kahne and Westheimer; Morton; Roads, as cited in Dubinsky). Instead, Dubinsky suggests framing students’ engagements as “change” work by switching the language we use from “working for” to “working with” “*partners*” rather than “clients” (69-70). This reframing shifted his students’ perceptions of their work from a career

preparation lens to a social change lens; students still learned valuable skills for the workplace, but through this new lens they approached their community work as critical citizens (Dubinsky).

Similarly, J. Blake Scott suggests that instructors of service-learning Technical Writing courses shift away from “hyperpragmatist” ideologies that focus myopic lenses on students’ professional success and instead towards cultural studies methods that lead to “a robust critical pedagogy of civic engagement” (290). Several scholars have critiqued the practice of assigning reflection through journals or logs, arguing that these writing exercises rarely lead to critical thinking and tend to “encourage students to view their work in the community narrowly as charity and/or as a journey of personal discovery” (Anson; Herzberg as cited in Scott, 150). Scott asserts that teachers of service-learning are challenged to ensure that students’ reflections are grounded in “critical civic (rather than personal) deliberation and tied to ethical civic action” (150). This critical reflection begins by asking students to critique the root causes of the larger sociopolitical pressures that their partnering organization addresses (Scott).

By incorporating such cultural studies methods into service-learning approaches, students interact with the community as a partner rather than a client and can “critique and intervene in community-based practices rather than merely conform to them” (Scott 290). For example, applying this hybrid pedagogy to service-learning projects in the technical writing classroom might mean asking students to critique the ways that “their texts’ production process excludes some perspectives and privileges some values at the expense of others” or may involve students interrogating “spatial and other boundaries maintained by institutional structures” (Scott 298). Such approaches closely align with shared missions of higher education institutions: to teach students useful skills while also instilling in them a sense of civic virtue. Bickford and Reynolds also assert that “it does matter how we label and conceptualize our activities” within the

classroom and offer the phrase “activism” rather than “service” or “volunteerism” (241).

Reframing students’ community work as “activism” can encourage students to “enter relationships in ways that help destabilize hierarchical relations and encourage the formation of more egalitarian structures” (Bickford and Reynolds 241).

Shah pushes these frameworks further, offering community partner frames for engagement that drive us away from dominant discourses about how universities “serve” communities. Instead, Shah describes an ongoing collaboration between her college composition students and a local high school English course. Shah’s interviews with her community partner, the high school teacher, revealed that the teacher was framing Shah’s college students as “the community” and emphasizing the ways the high schoolers could collaborate with and support the college students “by establishing the cultural and local knowledges of the youth – a very different starting point than a charity or tutoring frame, which would be more likely to begin with their knowledge gaps or needs” (82). Rather than introducing partners by their deficits and needs, this approach builds from each group’s strengths by placing both college and high school students in collaborations where they will learn from and with each other. Shah argues that “local knowledge from community partners may be able to guide reimagined frames for engagement partnerships – frames that could generatively shape the experience for *both* university and community representatives” (87). These reimagined frames, built from community perspectives, can be a starting point for establishing partnerships where power is more equitably shared between university and community members. There are many ways to evoke these frames throughout a semester, but instructors should start creating intentional frames on the first document that students encounter: the syllabus.

#### **4.2.27 Studying Engagement Through Syllabi**

Although scholars of community writing have acknowledged the importance of framing, no existing research has examined community writing syllabi to reveal the dominant discourses that frame our community engagements to our students. However, syllabi analyses have uncovered instructors' motivations for teaching community engaged projects in other disciplines. For example, Steiner and Watson examined syllabi from 100 undergraduate business courses across 60 U.S. higher education institutions to understand how service-learning may increase students' civic-mindedness and social responsibility. After analyzing student learning outcomes and assessment strategies, Steiner and Watson found that most business instructors are not promoting civic-mindedness and social responsibility through engaged pedagogies but are instead using service-learning as a utilitarian tool to teach disciplinary skills.

Hoping to uncover how successfully syllabi applied Campus Compact's recommended service-learning grading criteria, which included evidence of student engagement, reflection, reciprocity, and public dissemination, Messino conducted a content analysis of assessment strategies on a sample of 127 service-learning syllabi posted on Campus Compact's syllabi library and the Guide to College and University Service-Learning Programs websites. Messino's findings revealed that the syllabi lacked consistency and offered a wide range of service-learning experiences and assessment strategies. This may not necessarily represent a problem, since existing research indicates that higher education community engagement manifests in many ways because of varying institutional characteristics, such as the type of institution, the mission, and values (Welch). But Messino also found that one-third of the syllabi granted credit for the hours that students served, arguing that focusing on hours for credit risks becoming "predominant, perhaps to the exclusion of more important learning objectives" (96). In response,

Messino called for instructors to assess students' service experiences by creating assignments connected to learning outcomes and by providing critical feedback on those assignments.

Building on this line of research, Mitchell and Perrotti analyzed how 270 syllabi from 193 four-year institutions that were recipients of the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement (a nation-wide recognition of community engagement status for colleges and universities) described their frameworks and expectations of service-learning courses. Mitchell and Perrotti's study revealed that the syllabi varied in how service-learning was identified and defined, including terms ranging from "service-learning" to "volunteering" to "internship" and even "charity." Mitchell and Perrotti also uncovered a lack of clarity regarding community work, such as if students' engagements were optional or required in order to pass the class, or had requirements for how many hours they were expected to work with their community partners, and found few specific details about community partnerships listed on the syllabi.

Mitchell and Perrotti suggest teaching and learning centers, community-engaged learning offices, and state and national organizations that elevate civic and community engagement "be attentive to distinctions between those practices and values embraced by the field and those articulated in service-learning syllabi" (14). Research on best-practices in service-learning have little value if faculty are not actually applying these concepts to the classroom. The content on a syllabus starts to establish how students and instructors will interact throughout the semester and failing to include pertinent information about our community partnerships on this document can leave students confused about how such projects fit into the course's broader goals, or even indicate that community engagement isn't as important as their academic essays.

Finally, Mitchell and Perrotti conducted another review of those same Carnegie Classification syllabi, this time using critical content analysis to explore how the language used

in service-learning syllabi perpetuates and sustains racialized hierarchies in higher education community engagement experiences. Their research revealed that instructors' language often positions communities as being "in need" of service, but "disguises issues of race and racism despite their prevalence in the locations often identified as service placements" (Mitchell and Perrotti 27). Their findings identified how frequently instructors describe the community as "vulnerable," "underserved," or "disadvantaged," and they pushed instructors to "acknowledge the conscious or unconscious (mis)understandings that drive those characterizations" (Mitchell and Perrotti 26). Mitchell and Perrotti's findings reveal how "individual instructors can translate their personal beliefs, values, attitudes, assumptions, and biases about the racialized contexts of service learning, including placements, to their students through both syllabus language and their interactions and enactments in the classroom and community" (27).

Aside from the aforementioned research, syllabi remain an under-studied unit of analysis for uncovering how instructors are framing and actualizing community-based pedagogies in the classroom – especially within the field of community writing – but the important findings presented in the literature suggest the need for this study. To further this line of research, the following sections introduce framing theory and frame analysis as a methodology for studying syllabi to uncover instructors' underlying motivations and assumptions about community-engaged projects.

## **4.3 Theoretical Framework and Methods**

### **4.3.28 Framing Theory**

A major premise of framing theory is that one issue can be considered from a variety of perspectives and be interpreted as having "implications for multiple values or considerations" (Chong and Druckman 104). According to Goffman, frames are "mental scripts for recognizing

occurrences and events within one's life space, which organize/identify experience and guide perception and action" (21). Key elements of framing theory include frames, frame building, frame setting, frame adoption, and frame effects. Frames can both highlight and hide elements of an issue, which can strengthen certain values but weaken others ("What is"). Frame building occurs when we select and emphasize certain aspects of an issue to create a particular frame (Goffman). Frame setting involves contextualizing information within a particular frame, which influences the audience's interpretation and understanding of the information (Goffman). Frame adoption refers to an audience's acceptance of a particular frame. Frame effects show the impact of framing on public opinion, attitudes, and behavior, because different frames can create diverse interpretations of the same piece of information, influencing people's perspectives and decisions (Goffman). In the next section, I will discuss a frame's impact on students.

#### **4.3.28.1 Impact on Students**

Applied to community engagement, framing theory can reveal why instructors value and apply engaged pedagogies. Faculty might introduce community engagement through a frame that highlights the benefits to students' professional development, or a frame emphasizes the potential benefits to the community, or faculty may evoke both frames simultaneously. Frames can also signal *thin* versions of community engagement, which may be paternalistic, self-serving, or impose service on "unreceptive others," or *thick* versions that are "grounded in deeply held, internally coherent values" and "suggest a vision of what a transformed world might look like" (Morton 29). For example, frames can lead to students viewing their engagement activities as thin, self-serving professional development experiences meant solely to provide them with vocational skills and new workplace connections with little attention paid to how or even *if*

students' work is benefiting the community, or thick actions working toward collaborative social change efforts.

#### **4.3.28.2 Impact on Community**

Frames have previously been studied in community engagement scholarship because of their ability to impact community engagement practices (“What is”). How we label and conceptualize our activities matters because our framing impacts what our students do and how they understand what they’re doing – is their project contributing to “change” or simply “helping” someone in need (Bickford and Reynolds 241)? Shah argues that frames for university-community partnerships might manifest as acts of charity or collaborative activism, which can help us interpret interactions between university and community partners. For example, if an instructor establishes

volunteerism as a frame for community-based learning [this] leads college students to compare the partnership to previous knowledge of volunteering, which causes them to interpret what is happening in particular ways – ways that differ from frames like ‘working with a client,’ ‘testing ideas in a lab,’ or ‘community organizing’ (“What is” 74).

#### **4.3.28.3 Uses by Faculty**

Frame theory has previously been used in rhetoric and composition scholarship, such as to examine public conversations about writing issues (Adler-Kassner; Adler-Kassner and Harrington; Adler-Kassner and O’Neill), to study questions about race in Writing Across the Curriculum initiatives (Poe), to identify community partner frames (*Rewriting*), to understand how social, emotional, physical, and spiritual influences affect composition and rhetoric scholars’ development over time (Gannett and Bereton), and to explore students’ interpretative

frames and develop a working theory for change (“Hidden”). Shah argues that frame theory may be particularly valuable for community writing scholars since in addition to studying texts, we study ethical relationship-building. By reflecting on the discourse that we use to describe partnerships to our students, we may be surprised to realize which frames we are evoking and how these frames shape our interactions with students and community members.

#### **4.3.29 Frame Analysis**

Frame theory provides a theoretical framework for understanding how individuals mentally structure information, which guides this analysis. Frame analysis is a practical application of frame theory, which identifies and analyzes specific frames within discourse. Frame analysis, which originates from communication theory, is an interpretative activity that reveals “the general patterns and tendencies of what is being talked about, by whom, and in what ways” (Johnston 218). This methodology, which emerged from social movement and mass media analysis, offers researchers conceptual strategies for understanding how ideas activate people into action, which can help explain how individuals interpret and make sense of events or issues (Goffman).

Using frame analysis, I analyzed three distinct types of frames present in Campus Compact’s community-engaged English syllabi –diagnostic frames, prognostic frames, and motivational frames. Diagnostic frames identify how a problem or issue is constructed and who or what is to blame (Snow and Benford). In this case, diagnostic frames exposed the implied social or academic problems that led to instructors teaching service-learning projects. Prognostic frames present solutions to a problem (Snow and Benford). For example, the prognostic frames I identified outlined the range of pedagogical approaches instructors employed to solve those problems. Finally, motivational frames persuade people to join an event by presenting reasons to

support the solutions, which is essential for reaching a social movement's goals (Benford).

Similarly, instructors use motivational frames to show students why community work is valued in their courses. The motivational frames that I list below identify the underlying values instructors communicated on syllabi to persuade students to partake in community-engaged projects.

#### **4.3.30 Campus Compact Syllabi as a Genre of Analysis**

A syllabus is a written document that describes a course's assignments, rubrics, and learning outcomes over the semester and serves as an academic contract between students and instructors (Ishiyama and Hartlaub). Syllabi only reflect one version of the institutional curriculum in practice, but "they do provide important insights into the instructor's intentions through what they decide to omit" (Messineo 80) or include. Most, if not all college courses use syllabi (Graves et al.), and since syllabi offer permanent descriptions of a course, they are increasingly being used as a unit of analysis for empirical study (Ishiyama and Hartlaub). Given that "syllabi are an excellent source of information about what is being taught...and how it is being taught" (Priester et al. 29), I analyzed twenty-six English service-learning syllabi from two and four-year higher education institutions that were included on Campus Compact's publicly available syllabi library.

Campus Compact, a national nonprofit organization, is "the largest and oldest higher education association dedicated to higher education civic and community engagement" (Campus Compact). The nonprofit's members consist of thousands of university presidents, faculty, researchers, students, and civic and community engagement experts at colleges and universities. Today, participation in Campus Compact has increased to over 1,079 public and private two-and four-year colleges and universities across the United States (Campus Compact). The organization

has significantly influenced how campuses approach service-learning implementation and assessment (Messineo).

Campus Compact offers instructors a syllabus library to model how community engaged projects have been taught in courses from a variety of disciplines, making a case that course syllabi are key to how instructors organize their service-learning work. Syllabi on this site have often been submitted by the faculty member who designed and instructed the course (Messineo) and recently, the organization has recruited syllabi from faculty who were nominated for their national recognition awards (Hurd). I chose to assess the English syllabi included on this library because these syllabi were selected by Campus Compact's editors and leadership for their high quality and were deemed as noteworthy examples of community-engaged learning in the United States. Furthermore, as Messineo argues, "it is likely that only those faculty with a significant commitment to service-learning would submit their syllabi for inclusion" (81), and their dedication to service-learning would most likely be reflected in instructors' approach to the course. Therefore, the documents included in this study were drawn from what are likely the strongest examples of publicly available service-learning syllabi within the English discipline.

#### **4.4 Research Design, Data Collection, and Analysis**

My goal in conducting this qualitative study was to understand the dominant discourses framing English instructors' community engagement projects through course descriptions, assignment prompts, and student learning outcomes included on course syllabi. How faculty frame their students' engagements with community partners can greatly influence how students and community partners see their roles in a project, and a project's framing can also impact how students understand their work in the community (Shah). Given these high stakes, I wanted to understand what frames emerged from the syllabi. Reading the documents, I began to see

commonalities in how English instructors framed these projects and I hoped that synthesizing these perspectives could help instructors make informed decisions about the language we use on our syllabi.

Drawing on ideas from frame analysis, I considered three questions:

1. What problems led English instructors to teach community engaged projects in their courses?
2. What motivational frames did English instructors evoke when introducing solutions to these problems?
3. What prognostic frames did English instructors evoke when describing why students would be doing this community work?

First, I downloaded the syllabi from Campus Compact's Syllabi Library. To narrow this search to the English discipline, I refined the results to only include syllabi from the "English" and "Writing" subject areas. After removing duplicate syllabi that were cross listed as both "English" and "Writing," I had thirty-three total documents. After reading through the documents, seven more syllabi were removed because they were duplicates, leaving me with twenty-six original syllabi in the "English" and "Writing" discipline areas.

Most of the syllabi kept identifying information about the institution type, year, or instructor anonymous. However, based on the syllabus's title or the student learning objectives, I was able to categorize the syllabi by course type (see Table 13).

**Table 13. Types of Courses Included in the Syllabi Analysis.**

| <b>Type of Course</b>          | <b>Composition, Rhetoric &amp; Writing Studies</b> | <b>Creative Writing</b> | <b>Literature</b> | <b>Technical and Professional Writing</b> | <b>Reading and Literacy</b> |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <b>Number of Syllabi, n=26</b> | 13                                                 | 1                       | 8                 | 2                                         | 2                           |

To begin analyzing the data, I first uploaded the documents into ATLAS.ti, a qualitative analysis software program. I then read through each syllabus to understand the type of course being described and the scope of the community engagement project included in the course. Next, I used general thematic methods of qualitative research (Miles et al.) to code each syllabus for emergent and recurring themes in the discourse. I looked for overlapping and thematic consistency in the language of the assignment descriptions, course descriptions, and student learning objectives to categorize text into diagnostic, motivational, and prognostic language. Next, I applied these codes to each syllabus and stored direct passages of text in a table that allowed me to examine coded material in adjacent cells to generate assertions about each frame (Saldaña). Last, I coded thematic repetition across the excerpts to identify the frames that English instructors repeatedly evoked when describing community engaged projects to their students.

#### **4.5 Study Findings: Diagnostic, Prognostic, and Motivational Framings that English Instructors Evoked When Describing Community Partnerships on their Syllabi**

I divided the study findings into diagnostic framings, prognostic framings, and motivational framings (see Figure 2). Together, these findings can help English instructors understand why we use community engagement, how we communicate the value of community

work to students, how we see power flowing in our partnerships, and how we actualize community work in our classrooms.

**Figure 2. Diagnostic, Motivational, and Prognostic Frames Evoked by English Instructors.**

| Diagnostic Framing                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Prognostic Framing                                                                                                                                                                               | Motivational Framing                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community has deficiencies and "needs help"</li> <li>• Students lack real world experiences</li> <li>• Siloed academic experiences detract from rich student and community co-learning opportunities</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students perform direct service</li> <li>• Students write documents for organizations</li> <li>• Students collaborate with community members</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students will serve their communities</li> <li>• Students will get professional development</li> <li>• Students will build reciprocal projects from community knowledge</li> </ul> |

**Key:** The color gradient in Figure 2 illustrates how power is distributed between university and community partners. Lighter yellow indicates frames where university partners hold the power; darker yellow indicates frames where power is shared among all collaborators.

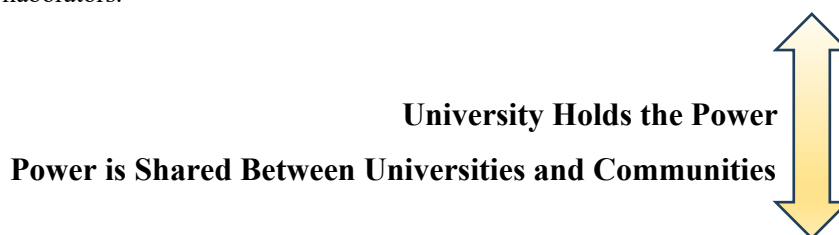


Figure 2 not only illustrates the types of frames that I identified across the syllabi, but also indicates how power flows from the “thin” engagements that fall within the light color gradient, toward the “thick” engagements that fall within the darker color gradient. “Thin” engagements within the lighter shade of yellow represent unidirectional engagements that position students and faculty to partake in short-term partnerships that are based on addressing a community’s needs and deficiencies. Alternatively, “thick” engagements, displayed in darker shades of

yellow, reflect the guiding principles of Vincent et al.'s critically engaged civic learning framework (CECL), which reimagines service-learning through an equity-based framework that “views all constituent stakeholders as invested partners in the co-design, implementation, and evaluation of CECL initiatives and is founded on redistributed power and authority to promote civic learning and social change” (107). For example, frames that position students to work as co-creators with community members and encourage students to build projects from community knowledges fall within the darker gradient of this figure. The next section provides a detailed analysis of the diagnostic frames that I identified throughout this study.

#### **4.5.31 The Diagnostic Frame**

The first section of this analysis identifies diagnostic frames, which revealed the societal and academic problems that led instructors to teach service-learning projects in their courses. Three diagnostic frames emerged: the community has deficiencies and “needs help,” students lack real world experiences, and siloed academic experiences detract from student and community co-learning opportunities. Together, these frames start to illuminate our underlying values about community engaged work and who we want to benefit from these efforts.

##### **4.5.31.1 Community has deficiencies and “needs help” frame**

Several syllabi used language indicating that the community partner's lack of resources and deficiencies created problems prompting service-learning. For example, one syllabus from a Multicultural Children's Literature course opened with a statement reading,

According to the federal reading excellence Act of 1999, national assessments reflect “serious deficiencies in children's ability to read, especially in high-poverty schools” such as those served by Service Learning Program internships...The failure to learn to read or to read well has many ramifications including diminished self-confidence and

motivation to learn, poor school performance, and an increase in the probability of dropping out of high school.

Even if the university's service was requested by the school, introducing the children by their "serious deficiencies" can evoke a savior complex in college students (Mathieu), which is detrimental to creating long-lasting, systemic changes around social issues, like improving generational illiteracy. Such framing assumes a charity approach to the project, where "little, if any, attempt is made to understand or effect the structural causes of the problem" (Morton 21). A charity-oriented approach names the deficits of those being served rather than their strengths and "creates a long-term dependency of those served on those with resources" (Morton 21), deepening problematic notions of "us" versus "them" that complicate university engagements in communities.

Likewise, a Composition syllabus explained the course's service-learning component with the context that

service-learning is an experiential from of learning that combines an academic course with volunteering. You have probably engaged in community projects already: you may have volunteered at a soup kitchen, at a literacy agency, or in the clean-up after a storm. Through these activities, you helped other people, and you may have learned a life-or-career-lesson.

Framing students' work through a volunteer lens communicates that the goal of the project is to "help other people" without acknowledging how the skills students are learning in the course equip them to *be* helpful. A volunteer frame also assumes a unidirectional flow of power where students serve the community. This frame fails to tie students' community work back to the course's outcomes, only briefly mentioning that students "may have" learned a life-or-career

lesson. Charity emerges “as giving of the self, expecting nothing in return, and with no expectation that any lasting impact will be made” (Morton 20). The only risk that students assume when performing charity is the brief “risk of caring for another human being” (Morton 20). This syllabus also fails to explain what the students will be doing or how their community work is connected to the course; the most descriptive sentence in the assignment instructs students to “provide superb service.” The only risk that students assume when performing charity is the brief “risk of caring for another human being,” since students performing charity work have a low investment in the community relationship (Morton 20). Thin engagements like these, which ask students to “help other people” often without understanding the systemic causes of an issue first, create unidirectional learning experiences where students’ charitable work often leads to nothing more than “a long term-dependency of those served on those with resources” (Morton 21). Thin forms of engagement also fail to show students that they are responsible to their community since these brief, charitable interactions don’t allow students to take ownership of the roles they play in contributing to or addressing society’s wicked problems.

#### **4.5.31.2 Students need real world experiences frame**

Often, language on the syllabus implied that students’ lack of “real world” experiences was a problem that could be addressed through service-learning. For example, a Writing Studios syllabus outlined some of the transferrable skills that students would gain from working with a nonprofit organization, such as learning to adapt to “unexpected things [that] happen,” practicing “patience and flexibility,” and making “phone calls and appointments around regular business hours.” The description ended with a sentence that read, “These are just some of the ways, however, that doing service-learning for your semester project will approximate a real-world work experience, and that is just one of the reasons that it could be a valuable experience for

you.” This framing indicates another form of thin service and unidirectional learning, but instead of performing charity, students engage with the community to extract professional experiences. The danger of such unilateral engagements occurs when projects are framed to center the student as the beneficiary, providing them with impressive experiences that bolster their resumes but may offer little to nothing in return to the community partner.

In a similar vein, a Community Writing syllabus framed service-learning as being valuable because of its impact on students’ learning, defining engagement as when “courses combine traditional academic research and readings with community-based work to enhance the educational experience and encourage students to understand real world applications of rhetorical situations and theories.” Another instructor for a Composition course introduced community engagement through a related lens, stating, “I find, however, that students write best when they are deeply invested in the subject matter. Therefore, we will be enacting a concept called service learning.” When we communicate to students that the community is a site for them to gain real-world experiences and “practice patience and flexibility,” this framing can restrictively define the community as a passive, low-stakes laboratory for students to practice “real world” skills that they can’t learn in classroom settings. The argument that we combine traditional academic approaches with community-based work to enhance students’ educational experiences may be fitting for administrative audiences, but this framing immediately positions students as the ones who will benefit from a community project without even mentioning how or why their work will be impactful to the community partner. Instead, a frame that first contextualizes an important community issue that students will be addressing and communicates *why* their work is crucial to the community partner *before* explaining the value to students could shift students’ mindset about their work, reminding them that their educational experiences are

meant to benefit themselves, but their community work has a broader impact and should be approached collaboratively.

#### **4.5.31.3 Siloed academic experiences detract from student and community co-learning opportunities**

A few syllabi included language implying that learning is enhanced when students collaborate with community members, positioning both the students and the community as the beneficiaries. As one syllabus for a Prison Writing course stated, “We will always treat [the incarcerated students] with the utmost respect and dignity, which means deeply listening to their contributions and treating them as intellectual equals. We have much to learn from their perspectives.” The last sentence, that college students have “much to learn” from incarcerated students’ perspectives, introduces a new diagnostic frame that siloed academic experiences detract from student and community co-learning experiences. This frame assumes shared power between university and incarcerated students while also positioning both sets of students to learn from each other. This framing creates a bidirectional, reciprocal educational relationship, where students see themselves as both learners and collaborators in a partnership, rather than simply being there to “serve” or “gain professional development experiences.”

Likewise, a syllabus for a course titled Writers Helping Writers included a description of the service-learning component that read, “During this part of the course, you will work with a group of 3-4 high school students, guiding them through the processes of writing two different essays. You will give them feedback on their writing and since you will be writing the same papers right along with them, they can give you feedback on yours, as well.” This framing implies that the instructor values the learning that occurs when college and high school students collaborate, which establishes a more equitable relationship than hierarchical charity language or

language that describes the community as a site for students to gain “real world” experiences. Such framing also asks students to take on more risks within the relationship, since they’re building relationships with the community partners and exchanging ideas rather than briefly delivering ideas or resources to distant strangers.

#### **4.5.32 The Prognostic Frame**

The second section of this analysis looks at prognostic frames to reveal instructors’ proposed solutions and the specific ways that students’ community work was actualized. Three prognostic frames emerged: students performing a direct service, students writing documents for an organization, and students collaborating with community members. Not surprisingly, given the close relationship between diagnostic and prognostic frames, there were parallels in these frames. Instructors who framed community engagement as a way for students to serve underserved communities often required students to perform direct service through acts such as volunteering at social service sites. Instructors who framed community engagement as an opportunity to gain real word writing experiences tended to have students write documents for partnering organizations. And instructors who framed engagement as an opportunity for community members and students to learn together created collaborative projects that required co-creation between both parties.

##### **4.5.32.1 Students perform direct service frame**

Many instructors presented solutions by having students perform direct service (which requires hands-on person-to-person interactions between students and the community partner and is often difficult to replicate in online courses) and then write reflective or analytical papers about their experiences. For example, a syllabus for a Literature course required students to “fulfill their service requirement by working in their choice of a variety of elective venues,

including soup kitchens, food pantries, social service agencies, and community gardens.” A syllabus for a Composition course required that students “provide a service to the community” such as “work[ing] in a soup kitchen or conduct[ing] a food drive for a local food bank.” Likewise, a syllabus for a College Writing course described students’ direct service work as “rewarding,” stating that students would “work with [the instructor] and a Cape Florida biologist to help restore a portion of park land. The work is physically intensive and very rewarding.”

Similarly, a College Writing syllabus included a requirement that students serve at homeless shelters, illiteracy organizations, food pantries, or community meal sites. A syllabus for another Literature course required students to “perform three hours of service per week at a hospital, hospice, or clinic. These settings will provide students with an opportunity to learn about ‘difference’ both through explorations of health and wellness and through differences in race, class, sexuality, and gender.” Some of these frames also shared commonalities with language from the “real world” experiences diagnostic frames. For example, in addition to requiring students to perform direct service, the Literature course’s language implies that the community settings will be a place for students to “learn about ‘difference,’” something that they assumedly cannot do in the classroom.

#### **4.5.32.2 Students write documents for organizations frame**

Syllabi also presented solutions to social and academic problems by requiring students to write documents for a nonprofit organization. For example, a Writing and Research syllabus course included an assignment description that read,

In groups of two or three, you will collect and document sources for a resource guide that will assist the youth in [the nonprofit partner’s organization] in their endeavor to find

stable housing, child-care, medical and dental service, legal assistance, banking assistance, employment, and other resources.

A syllabus for a Business Communication course described a similar project, asking students to “take the skills of creating a budget, presentation skills, and marketing skills...and work with families in a homeless shelter to create and to keep their budgets” or use “editing and presentation skills...and work with children in a homeless shelter or afterschool program to create a magazine/newsletter” or “help design a budget and/or business plan for a potential farmers market.” Likewise, a Service-Learning syllabus had students writing two essays for the course’s partnering organization – one essay profiling a person from the glossary of the Tulsa 1912: Reporting a Massacre database, and another essay about a location that was important to the history of the Tulsa Race Massacre. A syllabus for a course titled “Literary New Orleans” had students interviewing and writing profile articles about the people who were engaged with the New Orleans Healing Center, so that the organization could publish the profiles on their newsletter and website. The results of this frame provide examples of instructor-identified solutions that have students producing course assignments for partnering organizations to practice their “real world” writing skills while addressing societal issues, paralleling objectives described through the “students need real world experiences” diagnostic frame.

#### **4.5.32.3 Students collaborate with community members frame**

The instructors who saw the siloed academic experiences as limiting to both students and the community developed projects where students collaborated directly with community members. These syllabi also tended to outline specific guidelines for how students were expected to work *with* the community. For example, a Social Action Writing syllabus stated that “students will work collaboratively to research this issue, as well as co-create knowledge with

those in the community who are affected by the new welfare reform policy.” That same syllabus also included a section titled “Community Involvement,” which articulated the expectations for students engaging with the community: “You will interview the community involved, and co-create/transform their stories into art. We’re committed to mutual sensitivity, thoughtfulness, and respect with our community partners, and working together to witness, break silences, and transform lives” through a creative writing project that “is aware of its context in and impact on the larger community” by performing “social action writing/art [as] a form of critical inquiry.”

Another syllabus for a course titled Current Theories of Writing and Reading emphasized that students’

public scholarship storytelling project – leading story circles and collaboratively (with community participants) writing “Neighborhood narratives” – is part of a larger project to tell new stories about the residents of Reading, PA...the writing, revising, editing, and review process for the stories will be highly collaborative.

Unlike syllabi that offered solutions by having students ‘give back’ to their communities or produce usable documents for partnering nonprofits, these frames put students in collaboration with the community partners, often using words like “working together,” working “collaboratively,” or writing “with” others, rather than “serving” or working “for” the community.

#### **4.5.33 The Motivational Frame**

Analyzing motivational frames revealed how instructors motivated students to do these service-learning projects. Three distinct frames emerged, including a motivation for students to serve their communities, a motivation for students to gain professional development experiences, and a motivation for students to co-create knowledge with community members. Although it is

unclear whether these syllabi were from programs that mandated community engagement or not, these motivational frames can reveal the instructors' implied beliefs about who benefits from community-engaged projects.

#### **4.5.33.1 Students will serve their communities frame**

Several of the syllabi included language that implied community projects were included in the course so that students would “give back” to their communities. For example, a syllabus from a Multicultural Children’s Literature course emphasized that “interns will serve as a positive influence in their students’ lives, providing a counterpoint to the harsh socio-economic realities many of these children face on a daily basis.” This framing reveals a belief that college students’ presence will improve children’s lives in some way. Even if the school requested college students to serve as “positive influences” to the children, framing these children as all having “harsh socio-economic realities” instantly establishes the college students as holding power and privilege over the school children, with their assumedly rough lives. Furthermore, like many conversations around community engagement, this framing presumes “a tacit level of difference between [students] and the communities that they partner with, and this unstated premise of difference obscures practices of reciprocity that emerge when academics and communities share similar identities or social locations” (Green 40). Framing college students as being a “positive influence” discourages them from sharing experiences about their own, potentially similar, upbringings and doesn’t leave room for the relational sustainability that could emerge when college students work with their home communities or have overlapping positionalities with community members (Green). Instructing college students that they must approach the partnership as if they are “positive influences” restricts them from showing up as

themselves, which could lead to the students and community members developing more authentic interactions and relationships with each other.

Additionally, many of the student learning objectives across syllabi also included requirements that students would “recognize needs in the community” and “respond to community needs with service.” For example, a Technical Writing syllabus required students to “meet with representatives from the agency [they] are placed with and work with them to plan the best way to meet their needs.” Framing students’ collaborations with community partners as “meeting their needs” invokes a motivational frame that students’ skills will be useful to community partners, who are assumed to be understaffed and have deficits that students’ undefined service activities will address. Instead of a deficit-based approach, many scholars within service-learning have relied on principles of asset-based community development (Kretzmann and McKnight), which builds from a community’s strengths, is relationship-driven, grounded in personal connections with community members and builds from a community’s momentum. While the partnering organization may find it helpful that the instructor has left the project open-ended enough for the staff to determine the students’ projects, the framing of community “needs” met by student “service” implies another thin, unidirectional relationship, where students drop in to fulfill their required hours and then leave, never realizing the full reciprocity that can occur when they become invested in an organization’s causes, recipients, and staff. Such drop-in projects might provide organizations with brief stop-gap solutions to their “needs” *if* the students are trained and have the skills necessary to add capacity to the organization, but deficit-based framing can communicate to students that they are temporary volunteers fulfilling an assignment, rather than deep collaborators with their partners. Each aspect of a community partnership is constantly shaping and reshaping if it is not tended to

deliberately, which could lead to partnerships becoming shaped in ways that don't meet an instructor or community partner's goals and intended outcomes.

#### **4.5.33.2 Students will gain professional development frame**

Motivational frames persuading students to do community work to gain professional development experiences also appeared across the syllabi. For example, a syllabus for a Language and Literacy course included an assignment description that stated

It is critical for literacy professionals and educators to develop their understandings of the members of their community and literacy issues. Your career as an educator will involve you in professional development and community service and it is important that you begin learning what this means while you are engaged in your university course work and preparing to become a teacher.

Similarly, a Business Communication syllabus stated, "Through service-learning, you can improve your learning and your resume, regardless of your career field, because you are applying your knowledge and skills to real-life situations." Such motivational frames communicate to students that they are doing community work to gain "professional development" and "improve their resumes." A syllabus for a Writing and Learning in the Community course even went so far as to describe students' final reflective essay with a description reading,

overall, you may want to think of this essay as an introduction of yourself and your position on service...this essay should be something you'd be willing to show the volunteer coordinator at your site or something you'd share with a prospective employer (sorry to those who think this is a crass reason for doing service).

This hyper pragmatist framing of community engagement prioritizes the vocational skills students will learn through their service-learning experiences, asking students to reflect only on

how this project benefitted themselves, not prompting them to think critically about the impact of their contributions or the systemic issues that their community partner works on; in other words, this approach focuses only on students' success and career preparation. Additionally, such thin engagements may not equip students to critique their community interventions; as Scott observed, "students' excitement about gaining valuable real-world experience and working on worthwhile community projects can prevent them from critiquing the discursive practices that they operate and participate in" (295). Such framing can actually limit students' civic engagement, since this frame encourages students to interact with the community as nothing more than a temporary site to enhance their "professional development." Instead, students could be developing an invested, reciprocal partnership where they become collaborators on community issues, not only addressing societal problems but also critiquing our approaches and thinking critically about the roles that different stakeholders, technological interventions, and discourses play in addressing these wicked problems.

#### **4.5.33.3 Students will build reciprocal projects from community knowledge**

There was overlap between the syllabi that invoked the diagnostic frame that students and community members could benefit by learning together and the motivational frame that students would co-create projects with community members, but only five syllabi invoked this frame. For example, a syllabus for a course titled Community Writing included a set of guidelines for students' weekly reports, including one that read, "[Did the student] participate reciprocally in knowledge exchange with community partners and become co-creators of knowledge?" and "Do the faith communities see themselves as taking rhetorical action with this project? How does each faith community see its own rhetorical agency vis-à-vis this project?" This set of assignment guidelines implies that the community's knowledge is a foundational element of the

course, in addition to the disciplinary content students learn in class. These questions also signal that community agency is central to the design of the service-learning project, implying that the community is an asset to learn from, not a problem to be solved. Such projects actualize Morton's description of social change work, given that "most social change or social transformation models of service focus directly and indirectly on politically empowering the powerless" (23).

Similarly, a syllabus for a course titled Social Action Writing included a Service Learning Outcome that read, "[Did the project] build responsively on community knowledge and responsively contribute to the community?" which suggests that students aren't coming into the community and suggesting their own solutions but are building their projects from the community's situated expertise and experiences. This framing situates students to participate in thick forms of engagement where they must first build relationships with the community to *understand* the community's knowledge. The emphasis to build responsively on community knowledge and contribute to the community addresses problems with "charity" and "professional development" frames that position students to do stop-gap projects or view themselves as the beneficiary of community engagement. Instead of a unidirectional approach, this frame positions students and community members as reciprocal partners who equally rely on each other's skills and knowledges to collaboratively move a project forward.

#### **4.6 Reframing Community Work in English Syllabi**

The missions of higher education institutions have been always "inextricably intertwined" with larger societal goals (Boyer A48). The mission statement of almost every college and university in the country includes research, teaching, and service. As Boyer acknowledges, "higher education has more intellectual talent than any other institution in our

culture” (A48). Because colleges and universities have so much talent, resources (often funded by tax payers’ dollars), and potential, our institutions have a responsibility to respond to community concerns by addressing “the challenges that confront our children, our schools, and our cities, just as the land-grant colleges responded to the needs of agriculture and industry a century ago” (Boyer A48), and should do so in ethical, mutually-beneficial, and reciprocal ways.

Considering the English discipline, writing instructors tend to value “holistic education that promotes critical thinking, leadership, and self-efficacy,” which are all proven benefits of community-engaged pedagogies (Young and Morgan 3). However, although recent scholarship within the field of community writing argues for engagement practices that center community voices and assets, frames that position community work as a way for students to gain professional experiences or to serve disempowered “others” still largely dominate the discourse on our syllabi. Perhaps this is natural, since as educators, our first impulse may be to design projects that have a direct benefit to the student, and the community may be more of an afterthought. But for instructors who do community-engaged work, we must push ourselves to think beyond charity and professional development mindsets, since there is the potential for thin, unidirectional engagements to harm both our students and our community partners. Students may leave thin community engagements having an inflated sense of self, a newly developed savior mindset (Mathieu), and a destructive belief that the issues many of their nonprofit partners are addressing – housing insecurity, food insecurity, poverty, access to medical care, and so on – are at the fault of the individual, rather than systemic problems. Community partners may find the students’ efforts to be unhelpful to the organization – or worse, detrimental to the organization’s work – and leave a partnership viewing university engagement as something that is not worth their time.

#### 4.6.34 Discussion of Findings

Since a syllabus is the first document that students are introduced to in a course, the way that we frame our engagements with community partners on syllabi sets the tone for how students approach their work in the community. From this research, I have outlined a series of findings and recommendations to advance the field. One recommendation for developing intentional frames on our syllabi is for instructors to clearly outline how they envision students interacting with community partners – for example, will students be “serving” the community through charitable acts, or will they be collaborating as “co-creators” or “co-investigators?” Using deliberate, repeating language across the document can start to signal how these relationships will work and how power flow.

Additionally, instructors who are already doing community work in their classrooms but want to change the way they are framing the community may consider reframing. Chong and Druckman posit that “traditional” issues can potentially be transformed into “new” issues through reframing (108). Shah outlines three levels on which reframing can occur: by making new frames available, repeating existing frames to make them more mentally accessible, and by persuading others that these frames are strong. There is nothing inherently superior about an “applicable” or “strong” frame, other than its ability to appeal to audiences (Chong and Druckman). Chong and Druckman warn that “strong frames should not be confused with intellectually or morally superior arguments. They can be built around exaggerations and outright lies playing on the fears and prejudices of the public” (111). What makes a frame strong is its ability to rely on symbols, endorsements, and links to relevant ideologies (Chong and Druckman 86), which requires the language and action to align. Furthermore, as the field of community writing continues to realize new frames, Lakoff warns that we should avoid “spin” or

manipulation, instead crafting frames that “reflect our deeply held beliefs about what engagement is and could be” (Lakoff, as cited in Shah).

Once we have decided how we want to intentionally frame our engagements, we must make our frames accessible by referencing them frequently and using language and imagery to reinforce them (Shah). Reframing cannot happen simply by rewriting a course’s syllabus – it must be repeated throughout the duration of the partnership, through course activities, lessons, communication exchanges, and interactions with students and community partners – but starting our reframing on the syllabus is an important first step. Finally, we must make our frames strong by promoting them to help others see how they align with their values or experiences (Shah). Shah argues that frames for engagement “can be intentionally built through repetition in words and experiences, even in the midst of framing contests with powerful frame sponsors that may seek to attach different meanings to our work” (87), such as administrators who may want to emphasize student learning and professional development. Realizing this and crafting frames that reflect our values is crucial, because our framing has the potential to “have concrete consequences on partnership power dynamics, ethics, and outcomes” (Shah 87). And as Lakoff argues, “frames shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions...reframing is social change” (xi). Starting our reframing with the syllabus, this contractual document, can help instructors reevaluate *why* we are doing engaged work, prompting us to promote frames that elevate community voices rather than othering our community partners.

#### **4.6.35 Limitations and Areas for Future Research**

This study is not without limitations. Many of the syllabi examined did not include dates, but examining a corpus of recent syllabi would allow us to see if our framing shifts as

conversations about community engagement evolve. Additionally, these syllabi all came from Campus Compact's publicly available syllabi library, which arguably includes some of the strongest representations of community engaged syllabi within the English discipline. Expanding the analysis to include a broader range of syllabi could give us a more diverse sample of how community writing is framed on syllabi.

Many of the syllabi included in this analysis did not include information about institutional type, so a more focused analysis could look for trends among land-grant institutions, liberal arts college, two-year colleges, and other institutional categorizations. Additionally, since this analysis only studied syllabi, it is possible that instructors' framing of community partnerships shifted during class discussions, lectures, and other educational moments. Future research could examine more sets of documents including lecture notes, assignments, and activities, to draw additional conclusions about the frames instructors are evoking and how we are actualizing community work.

## **4.7 Conclusion**

As we craft new frames for our first community writing partnerships or reframe our existing partnerships, we should consider the weight of the words on our syllabi. Not only can the descriptions of our community partnerships impact our students' interactions with the community, but these descriptions can also determine who holds power and expertise in these partnerships. Frames that elevate community voices do not weaken students' civic ideals or make professional development experiences any less relevant. Instead, these frames have the potential to engage students as more critical writers and agents of social change, while simultaneously providing them with applicable writing skills and professional experiences. Reflecting on our

partnerships and reframing our language to evoke the types of relationships we hope to elevate lies at the heart of teaching students the transformative power of language.

## **Chapter 5 – Community-Engaged Writing in the First-Year Composition Course: An Appreciative Inquiry Approach**

Many students enrolled in first-year composition courses have just moved to a new town, know very little about the community that they now live in, and are still trying to figure out how to navigate a college campus. Often, instructors of first-year courses find that they are teaching students how to transition to this new phase of life in addition to teaching the course material. Instructors of first-year composition who also want to introduce students to the social issues of the local community might choose to include a community-based learning project in their course, a pedagogical approach that integrates meaningful community engagement with instruction and reflection to enrich students' learning experiences through reciprocal learning (Glossary of Education Reform). I've chosen to use the term community-based learning, a pedagogical approach motivated by the belief that "all communities have intrinsic educational assets and resources that educators can use to enhance learning experiences for students" (Glossary of Education Reform) rather than service-learning, defined as "a form of experiential education where learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection as students...seek to achieve real objectives for the community and deeper understanding and skills for themselves" (Eyler and Giles) because of community-based learning's emphasis on a community's intrinsic educational assets. While "service-learning" still "seeks to achieve real objectives for the community," (Eyler and Giles) this approach places students in a hierarchical position to "serve" the community, whereas community-based learning emphasizes the community's assets and resources, placing students and community members in collaboration with each other to learn from each other's unique assets.

When first-year composition students partake in community-engaged writing projects, these projects tend to serve as students' initial introduction to the social and political landscape of their college town. Thomas Deans outlines three main paradigms for community-engaged writing projects in composition courses:

- Writing *about* the community, where students use writing to describe, analyze, or contextualize experiences emerging from, or social issues related to, student outreach activities.
- Writing *for* the community, where students adopt a client-like relationship to compose purpose-driven documents like newsletter articles, brochures, and websites, or to conduct internal research for nonprofit agencies.
- Writing *with* the community, where students collaborate directly with local citizens, without a nonprofit or other organization serving as a mediator, and use writing to address social issues.

Participating in a community-engaged writing project can help first-year composition students become more connected to their new communities, and they may even continue volunteering with the partnering organization after the semester is over. However, when instructors do not fully prepare their students to understand and appreciate the nuances of the audiences they are engaging with, and do not frame community engagement through a critical lens that asks students to critique societal problems as systemic issues while considering their own roles in these matters, a community writing project may “involve students in the community in a way that perpetuates inequality and reinforces an ‘us-them’ dichotomy” (Mitchell 51).

Traditional approaches to community engagement tend to introduce community partners through a deficit-based lens, focusing on how students' projects can solve a community's

shortcomings (Powell and Takayoshi). These attitudes can enforce in students a belief that there is a distinct difference between the people on campus and the people in the community, solidifying already implicit town-gown hierarchies that position the university as holding power and *serving* the community. However, structuring the project around Vincent et al.'s critically engaged civic learning framework and leading students through an audience analysis exercise rooted in appreciative inquiry can position students to collaborate with community members as equally empowered co-authors in a community writing project, avoiding a pedagogy that instills a "top-down, missionary approach" (Cushman 61). The following sections provide an overview of the benefits of community engagement for first-year composition students, a summary of how the service-learning paradigm is shifting away from a "service" mentality, an overview of the critically engaged civic learning framework, and a discussion of how appreciative inquiry and the critically engaged civic learning framework can be used in a composition classroom to teach students a shared agency approach to co-authoring a piece of writing with community members.

## **5.1 Benefits of Community-Based Learning on First Year Composition**

### **Students**

Community-based learning is motivated by "the belief that all communities have intrinsic educational assets and resources that educators can use to enhance learning experiences for students" ("Community-Based Learning Definition"). In such projects, the learning occurs when students form connections between their community experiences and the course objectives (Zivi). Students become active learners through their work in the community; they bring skills and information from the community and integrate them with the theory and curriculum of the classroom to produce new knowledge (Mitchell). Simultaneously, students' learning in the classroom informs their work in the community (Mitchell). Existing research also indicates that

undergraduate service participation is a high-impact practice that positively impacts academic performance (GPA, writing skills, critical thinking skills), values (commitment to activism and to promoting racial understanding), self-efficacy, leadership (leadership activities, self-rated leadership ability, interpersonal skills), choice of a service career, and their plans to participate in service after college (Astin et al., Kuh). First-year students who participated in service also reported higher levels of satisfaction with various levels of campus life, and service participation during the first college year was positively related to student retention (Vogelgesang et al.). Community-based learning projects have also been proven to significantly enhance students' writing skills (Astin et al.).

Because theory and practice are closely entwined in writing studies, community engagement is often considered to be a natural fit for the student learning objectives of a first-year composition course (Deans and Bacon). After the social turn that composition studies took in the 1990s, writing was regarded as a situated social activity rather than just a set of skills or a process that leads to words appearing on paper (Deans and Bacon). This shift revealed the inadequacies of restricting student writing to a composition classroom (Deans and Bacon). This social turn also inspired many composition instructors to embrace community-based writing assignments “as an opportunity for students to deploy critical thinking and writing skills in analyses of social issues, to develop rhetorical awareness and flexibility necessary for writing in unfamiliar settings, and to find their places and their voices both within and beyond the academy” (Deans and Bacon 126). Finally, since nearly all incoming students take first-year composition early in their college careers, academically rigorous, rhetorically oriented, and ethically provocative community engagement experiences in first-year composition courses may

encourage students to pursue other engagement and outreach opportunities throughout their remaining years in college (Deans and Bacon).

### **5.1.36 Shifting Away from the “Service” Mentality**

However, the many benefits that can come from community-based learning depend on how successfully an instructor implements these pedagogical approaches into the classroom. Public institutions – especially land-grant institutions that have a particular mission that faculty, students, and extension agents contribute to local and global issues – play an important role in contributing to our communities and preparing students to be civically engaged, both during and after their college careers. However, discursive ways that we introduce community-engaged writing partnerships to students influences our approach to the partnership and our students’ levels of engagement with the project (Goffman). Within a colonial context of dominance, invasion, and intervention, service-learning might be viewed as a coercive intervention within highly complex, potentially vulnerable contexts (Butin 18-19). Traditional understandings of public outreach and service have placed service-learning within a unidirectional framework of doing *for* rather than doing *with* (Hammersley). These traditional understandings of public outreach echo missionary forms of engagement and service, which assume that academic partners hold all the knowledge and “correct” ideals about how communities should function, leaving community members to simply “learn” from academic partners’ wisdom and follow in their footsteps. This emphasis placed on the one-way transfer of knowledge, expertise, and service *from* universities *to* communities reinforces stereotypes of community members as being “helpless” and “in need of external others” (Hammersley).

In fact, many faculty have moved away from the term “service learning” for fear that the word “service” places students and faculty in an unequal position of power to “serve” a needy

community recipient. For example, Linda Flower writes, “I am cautious with the word ‘service.’ I don’t want my students to see themselves as the donors of knowledge or expertise to others in need, but as partners in collaborative planning and mutual learning” (4). The terms community-based learning, community-engaged learning, critically engaged civic learning, or the more discipline-specific community-engaged writing or community writing have become common for instructors who aim to create non-hierarchical partnerships between their class and the community. These newer terms not only replace “service” language with “community” oriented language but also use shifts in discourse to distribute power away from universities and toward communities.

Furthermore, if an instructor does not consider the demographics of their students and the demographics of the community members they are partnering with, community engagement can become what Mitchell et al. describe as a part of a “pedagogy of whiteness” – strategies of instruction that reinforce norms and privileges developed by and for the benefit of white people in the US, based on color-blind, ahistorical understandings of social problems in societies where race is a crucial factor (Mitchell et al. 613). Community engagement tends to be implemented by predominantly white faculty with mostly white students at predominantly white institutions that serve primarily poor individuals and individuals of color (Green, as cited in Mitchell et al.). Consequently, community-engaged projects that are based on a pedagogy of whiteness often “have minimal impact on the community and result in mis-educative experiences for students, such as unchallenged racism for White students and isolating experiences for students of color and missed opportunities for educators to make their own instruction more transformative” (Mitchell et al. 613). For example, students are frequently placed in service settings that an instructor deems “safe,” or “comfortable,” perpetuating notions that the community is a

“dangerous” “other,” so these settings are less challenging and fail to expose students to the visible privileges of whiteness (Mitchell and Donahue, as cited in Mitchell et al.). Placing students in settings that are focused on charitable service can lead students to accept that “certain injustices are inevitable rather than the result of ongoing discriminatory processes” (Vaccaro as cited in Mitchell et al. 616). This missionary approach to service-learning can instill in students a belief that the goal of service is to make “them,” the community members, more like “us,” the students (Mitchell et al. 616).

In response to these critiques of service-learning, a collective of community engagement scholars proposed a comprehensive restructuring of service-learning approaches, offering what they call the critically engaged civic learning (CECL) framework (Vincent et al.). The CECL framework “shifts service-learning from a student-centered pedagogy to an equity-based framework that views all constituent stakeholders as invested partners and is founded on redistributed power and authority to promote civic learning and social change” (Vincent et al., 108). As opposed to a traditional approach to service-learning that prioritizes students and places them in positions to serve community members, CECL redistributes power and authority among all participants to leverage the voices and perspectives of each group (Vincent et al.). The CECL approach challenges the notion that social issues only affect those “served,” instead implying that these issues are structural, shared by all, and societal. Vincent et al. offer six guiding principles for CECL, “social justice, power dynamics, community, civic learning objectives, reflexivity, and sustainability” in addition to four overarching outcomes, “increased self-awareness, self-efficacy, and self-empowerment; increased awareness of civic agency; better understanding of community; and workforce preparation” (Vincent et al. 108).

### 5.1.37 Designing Community Writing around the CECL Framework

In a writing class that I teach at a Midwest land-grant institution, our most recent community writing project was structured around the CECL framework because I wanted students to co-create a piece of writing with our community partner, the Manhattan Area Habitat for Humanity, a local nonprofit community housing developer. Technically, this project fits what Thomas Deans calls writing *for* the community; in this case, a community writing project where college students create written documents for a nonprofit agency, but the project also includes some elements of writing *with* the community, since students do interact directly with community members. For the project, students worked in groups of three to interview local Habitat homeowners and write profile articles spotlighting the homeowner. The idea of the profile article genre stemmed from a discussion between me and Habitat for Humanity's Development Manager, resulting in a co-designed project that would help Habitat increase its online publicity through storytelling, while also meeting my course's learning objectives that require students to use primary and secondary research to produce audience-driven writing with a specific purpose that guides readers with appropriate organizational strategies.

The profile articles would be used for Habitat's publicity and fundraising efforts and were supposed to highlight the interviewee's involvement in the organization, tell the story of their path to homeownership, and show a few of the interviewees' most memorable takeaways from becoming a Habitat for Humanity homeowner. Structuring this project around the CECL principles encouraged students to interact with the community members as co-authors. Presenting all participants of the project as equal stakeholders meant that students and community partners were co-creators who shared stories, ideas, and information to produce a piece of writing together. Students also wrote short reflexive writing assignments throughout the

semester to reflect on their roles as co-authors and civically engaged members of our community. Last, by researching Habitat for Humanity, learning about the work that the organization does in the community, and listening to Habitat homeowners' stories, students also became aware of broader social issues, such how a lack of affordable housing in our community impacts citizens' quality of life in our town.

When the Development Manager came to meet with the class, he mentioned how many people in the community falsely believe that Habitat for Humanity “gives away free homes to poor people.” He told the class that people are only eligible to become Habitat homeowners after going through a lengthy financial counseling process. After that, potential homeowners must put in 200 hours of “sweat equity” toward building Habitat homes. Finally, once they’ve signed their contract, they make monthly payments to a 0% interest mortgage. Because of this, he emphasized how important it was that the students’ articles include accurate facts about Habitat’s homeownership process, embedded in the homeowners’ narratives, to clear up this misconception. Before the students began interacting with the community members, it was important that they understood Habitat for Humanity’s role in the community – specifically the impact that their work has on the community, the reasons why their work is needed, and who is impacted by this work.

### **5.1.38 Audience Analysis in Community Writing**

One of the first mistakes students tend to make when starting a community writing project is failing to rhetorically understand their audience. Many community writing projects, including the one I am describing here, begin with students emailing community members or nonprofit staff, often asking for more information or requesting a time to meet. Although I coordinated this project with the staff at Habitat for Humanity before the semester started, each

student group has a unique topic (a distinct homeowner's story), so students do most of their primary research by talking with homeowners. A student's initial email to their community partner can set the tone for their entire partnership, and a poorly written email can even discourage a community partner from participating in a community-based learning project. If a student writes an email asking a community partner to spend a significant amount of time informing them about information that they could have already found online, or proposing a project that does not sound useful or interesting, the community partner may choose to ignore the email entirely, rightfully killing the project.

Nonprofits, especially small, local ones, are often short-staffed and “lack the material resources that would make quick and easy ‘student service’ useful” (Mathieu 284). Many nonprofit staff don't have time to explain the intricacies of their operations to students, or to send students examples of all their existing written documents. In such cases, well-intentioned faculty who imagine that their students' projects will add capacity to a nonprofit actually take up a nonprofit partner's limited time, creating more work by having staff mentor unprepared students or receiving unusable student work. However, when faculty lead students in a detailed audience analysis assignment rooted in appreciative inquiry, this initial step can help students discover a nonprofit's history, work, and assets *before* they start asking staff members to spend time informing them about the agency's operations. This initial activity can also set the tone for how the students view their community writing projects and shape how students interact with community members – through an appreciative, asset-based lens, rather than a deficit-based one.

## **5.2 An Appreciative Inquiry Approach to Audience Analysis**

Analyzing one's audience is an essential first step for all writing tasks. I first adapted Thomas Deans' audience analysis prompt from *Writing and Community Action: A Service-*

*Learning Rhetoric and Reader* to lead students in analyzing their primary audiences: the Habitat for Humanity homeowner who they were profiling and Habitat's staff, who would have to approve the profile article before sharing it publicly. These adapted questions included:

1. Who does the Manhattan Area Habitat for Humanity serve?
2. How does the Manhattan Area Habitat for Humanity help this group/population?
3. What community needs or issues does the organization address?
4. What are the root causes of these needs – where do these needs stem from?
5. What larger social, political, and economic forces shape those needs?
6. What historical and cultural knowledge helps contextualize how Habitat addresses community needs?

However, I worried that the framing of these questions would introduce Habitat for Humanity and the community members through their deficits, since many of the questions included phrases that emphasized a community's *needs* or presented groups as being *served* or *helped*. As O'Grady argues, introducing communities by their "needs" to students can reinforce deficit-based orientations that encourage stereotypes and put community members in situations where they are interacting with students who hold and act on deeply problematic views.

Instead, I wanted students to learn about Habitat for Humanity and their homeowners through a research approach that revealed their audience's strengths, advantages, and opportunities, so I reframed their audience analysis and project approach through appreciative inquiry. Appreciative inquiry uses a four-part cycle of *discovering* a community's best assets and strengths, *dreaming* by envisioning what a process, product, or experience could be, *designing* through co-constructing, and *delivering* sustainable results that benefit communities (Cooperrider et al.). What counts as an "asset" can vary depending on the discipline of a community-engaged

project. In our writing classroom, Habitat homeowners' lived experiences and life stories were considered assets since students were writing profiles about the homeowners' lives. An asset-orientation and the co-creation of knowledge between students and community members is also a grounding principle of Vincent et al.'s CECL framework. In the classroom, focusing on community assets through asset-mapping and other positive information-gathering activities, as opposed to defining a community by its needs or problems, is crucial for developing authentic campus/community partnerships (Garoutte and McCarthy-Gilmore).

### **5.2.39 Discovering**

To emphasize the community's strengths, I revised the previous set of audience analysis questions to replace words such as "serve," "help," and "needs" with "benefits," "contribute," and "discover." In doing so, I wanted the students to be introduced to Habitat for Humanity through the powerful ways that their work has helped our community flourish – by advocating for affordable housing solutions, empowering qualified people become first time homebuyers, building affordable, energy efficient homes, repairing low-income citizens' homes at subsidized rates, leading community conversations about housing solutions, and by running the ReStore, which recycles used tools and appliances to sell at discounted prices – rather than through negative language that introduced Habitat and the recipients of their work through their "needs." The revised set of questions that students used to analyze their audience through an appreciative inquiry lens were:

1. Why does Habitat for Humanity exist?
2. Who benefits from the Manhattan Area Habitat for Humanity's operations and mission?

3. How does the Manhattan Area Habitat for Humanity contribute to our community?
4. What larger social, political, and economic forces have influenced the organization's contributions to our community?
5. What historical and cultural knowledge helps contextualize Habitat's contributions to our community?
6. How has your interviewee contributed Habitat's work and upheld its mission?
7. What is unique about your interviewee's contributions to Habitat? What makes this person's contributions unique?
8. What else do you hope to discover about the person who you are profiling during your interview?

In this *discover* phase, students researched Habitat for Humanity by compiling a list of the nonprofit's valuable contributions to our community. Students' responses used similar asset-based language as my prompt, and they came to understand their Habitat audience through these strengths. For example, students wrote about how Habitat for Humanity's homeownership program "empowers" eligible applicants to become first-time homebuyers and how the organization's mission and work strives to create communities where "everyone has a decent place to live." Nowhere in their responses did students write that Habitat "gives homes to poor people" or describe the recipients of Habitat's services as being "in need."

#### **5.2.40 Dreaming and Co-Designing**

During the *dream* phase, students reviewed homeowner profile articles written by other Habitat for Humanity affiliates and imagined a co-authored writing process where the homeowner has agency in the production of their profile article. This project asks the community

members to trust students to present their life stories ethically and respectfully, and some community members who have had poor experiences with a university may be reluctant to share their life stories with students. But by leading students through an audience analysis rooted in appreciative inquiry early in the project, I prepare students to be *co-designers* in this process. Additionally, structuring the project with the principles of the CECL framework showed students that they were writing profile articles *with* Habitat homeowners, not telling their stories *for* them.

#### **5.2.41 Delivering**

After conducting the audience analysis in the dreaming phase, we discussed strategies for equitable co-authorship, including sharing multiple drafts with the homeowner, inviting them to participate in writing sections of the article, if they wished to do so, and taking seriously all their feedback and critiques. Once students had a draft of their article ready, they shared their drafts with the homeowners on Google Docs and invited them to be collaborators on the document. So that this article met homeowners' expectations, students partook in an iterative process of revising the document until the homeowner was satisfied with the article that they were *delivering*. In fact, many groups found themselves writing more than five drafts before their interviewee was satisfied with their article.

This community writing project pushed students to strive for co-authorship in their composition practice, one that is rooted in authentic, respectful relationships with community partners and recognizes writerly agency among all collaborators involved. Although this section is about one type of project – the profile article – the approaches described here can be modified for a variety of community writing projects with different rhetorical goals and audiences. By integrating appreciative inquiry within the critically engaged civic learning framework, this project challenged students to approach writing as a co-constructed process, moving beyond

traditional ideas of “doing for” the community and embracing practices of “doing with” the community.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

This chapter touches on one component of a community-engaged writing project, ultimately advocating for composition instructors who teach community writing to integrate appreciative inquiry within the critically engaged civic learning framework. This only speaks to one part of facilitating a community writing project, and more decisions about how to engage ethically with community members will have to be made throughout the duration of a project, depending on the project’s scope and genre. But by investing a significant amount of time into ensuring that students not only understand their community writing partners and nonprofit audiences at the beginning of a project but also value their audiences’ knowledge and experiences, we can prepare first-year composition students to engage with community members as co-authors who are equally capable of producing writing that is used for academic purposes and beyond.

When we refuse to broaden our teaching to include the community, academics may be seen as doing self-interested work that fails to prepare students to engage in society’s wicked problems. But long-held beliefs about what we teach and who holds knowledge are confronted when community members become active participants in the writing process and are given agency on students’ formation. Integrating community engagement into our pedagogical approaches can be one way to show that the work of the academy is valuable both inside and outside of the campus walls. However, university partners must be careful and deliberate in how they engage with local communities, or they risk taking advantage of community members by not positioning them as equally valuable sources of knowledge and contributors in a community-

based learning partnership. How instructors frame community partnerships to our students shapes how students engage with community members throughout the entire project, and this framing can even set the tone for how first-year composition students interact with their local community for the duration of their college career. The stakes are high, but by framing a community writing project around the critically engaged civic learning principles and conducting an appreciative inquiry into our community partners' strengths, we can take one small step toward rewriting academia's fraught history of community exploitation with a new narrative of community empowerment.

## Chapter 6 – Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to discover dominant trends in the discourse that English instructors use on syllabi for their community-engaged writing courses and to offer suggestions to help instructors deliberately frame, communicate, and create intentional community partnerships. Chapter 4 revealed the prognostic, diagnostic, and motivational frames present in English instructors' syllabi. Exposing the diagnostic frames showed that service-learning projects often occur when instructors feel a need to "help" a community "in need," provide students with "real world" writing skills or address the insufficiencies of siloed academic experiences by collaborating with the community. The prognostic frames, which uncovered how instructors presented solutions to these problems, revealed that students were performing direct services, writing documents for partnering organizations, or collaborating with community members. Last, the motivational frames, which illuminated instructors' underlying values about community engagement, included motivations for students to serve their communities, gain professional development experiences for their resumes, or build reciprocal projects from community knowledge. These frames indicated that while the field of service-learning and community engagement has acknowledged the importance of shifting away from charity-based models of engagement and moving toward community-empowering, asset-based models, much of the language in these Campus Compact English syllabi still creates us-them dichotomies between academic and community partners, often placing students in positions of power to "serve" the community or use the community as a space to develop "real world" skills for their resumes.

The qualitative content analysis, presented in Chapter 3, revealed that 92% of the Campus Compact syllabi that I analyzed followed best practices in service-learning by including

frequent assignments for students to reflect on their community work (Honnet & Poulsen, 1989; Kieran & Haack, 2018; Marby, 1998; Mintz & Hesser, 1996; Welch & Plaxton-Moore, 2019). However, only 50% of the syllabi integrated community work into the course's learning objectives. Not incorporating students' community work into the course objectives can make it difficult for students to understand how their community project fits into the course's broader objectives and may even communicate to students that community work is less valued than their traditional academic assignments (Messineo, 2007). This analysis also revealed that the terminology instructors used to describe community-engaged work varied greatly across the syllabi, ranging from terms such as "service-learning," "community-based learning," "civic learning," and "experiential learning," to "volunteer," "internship," "outreach," and "fieldwork," echoing similar findings as Mitchell and Perrotti's (2023) study of community engaged syllabi. Last, although 85% of the syllabi included some information about the course's community partners, 32% of those syllabi only included vague information (such as students will "man a food table" or "volunteer at a homeless shelter") and only 23% of the syllabi included readings related to community or civic engagement, which is an extremely low number given that English courses are largely structured around reading and discussing assigned texts.

Chapter 5 offers a firsthand perspective on how I reframed my own writing course to position students and community members as being equal collaborators in a community writing partnership. By integrating an audience analysis rooted in Appreciative Inquiry into the Critically Engaged Civic Learning (Vincent et al., 2021) framework at the beginning of the community project, students shifted away from deficit-based ways of thinking about the community and participated in a more equitable partnership where power is shared between all groups, encouraging students and community members to write together as co-authors.

## 6.1 Recommendations and Implications

All three of these articles consider the how instructors' discourses shape their pedagogical approaches to community engagement, and each article offers distinct recommendations for how instructors can shift away from deficit-based and student-centered models, toward more equitable and collaborative models. For example, Chapter 4 identifies the predominant frames present in community-engaged English syllabi and offers recommendations for reframing community work, starting with the syllabi. Reframing can occur on three levels: by making new frames available, repeating existing frames to make them more mentally accessible, and by persuading others that these frames are strong (Shah, 2020). Once we have decided how we want to intentionally frame our engagements, we must make our frames accessible by referencing them frequently and using language and imagery to reinforce them (Shah, 2020). Reframing cannot happen simply by rewriting a course's syllabus – it must be repeated throughout the duration of the partnership, through course activities, lessons, communication exchanges, and interactions with students and community partners – but starting our reframing on the syllabus is an important first step. Lakoff (2014) argues that “reframing is social change,” (p. xi), and by starting our reframing with the syllabus, this contractual document, instructors can reevaluate *why* we are doing engaged work and hopefully promote frames that elevate community voices rather than othering our community partners.

Chapter 3 offers recommendations for how instructors can more clearly describe expectations for community partnerships on syllabi and tie community work to assigned texts and course outcomes. One recommendation is for instructors to choose one term that aligns with their theoretical approaches to engagement and use that term consistently throughout the semester, rather than switching between terms. For example, instructors hoping to inspire

partnerships where power is distributed between students and community members may consider using Vincent et al.'s (2021) critically engaged civic learning approach, both as a consistent terminology and as a pedagogical practice. Instructors should also align students' deliverables with the course's learning objectives and the community partner's objectives, because incorporating a community writing project into a course's student learning objectives instantly shows students that community work is significant and pedagogically crucial. It is also important to include specific details about their community partnerships on syllabi, so that students know from the first day of class that they will be collaborating with a specific community partner and can begin to understand how their community partnership fits into the larger landscape of the course. Last, instructors should assign texts related to community engagement. The English discipline has so many books and journals that offer discipline-specific articles about community engagement (for example, *Reflections*, *Community Literacy Journal*, *Spark: A 4C4Equality Journal*, and relevant articles throughout *College Composition and Communication*, *College English*, and elsewhere), and having students read and discuss some of this rich literature about community engagement before they begin interacting with the community can show students how engagement can be harmful when poorly executed and how it can be mutually beneficial when well-planned, while also tying their projects back to a course's disciplinary content.

More broadly, the research in this dissertation could serve as reference guides for campus engagement offices, service-learning centers, and centers for teaching and learning. These offices and centers could use this research to offer instructors practical recommendations for revamping their syllabi and curricula to embody asset-based orientations and collaborative partnerships that result in truly co-created knowledge with community partners. Additionally, these offices and centers might run workshops to discuss these recommendations in small chunks – for example,

one workshop might discuss how to write a community-engaged syllabus that includes pertinent information about the community partner and project, another workshop might explain where instructors can look for relevant and discipline-specific readings that they can assign related to community engagement, another workshop might explain different community partner frames and lead instructors through an activities where they start to brainstorm frames that work for their intended partnerships, and another workshop might show instructors how they can develop a community partnership around the CECL framework and Appreciative Inquiry. By utilizing some of the recommendations from this research, instructors can develop or redevelop their community partnerships so that a project's ownership, direction, goals, and outputs are shared by students, faculty, and the community, embodying asset-based orientations rather than deficit-based, harmful orientations.

## **6.2 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

The content analysis and framing analysis only examined English syllabi that were publicly available on Campus Compact's syllabi library, which are arguably the strongest community engaged syllabi within the discipline that are available to the public. However, this sample did not have equal representation from courses across the discipline, such as creative writing and technical and professional writing. A future study could examine a corpus of engaged creative writing syllabi, or engaged professional and technical writing syllabi, for example, to better understand how these unique courses describe and approach community engagement. Additionally, a syllabus does not fully represent how a project is taught and assessed in a course. Future studies could go further, assessing a course's assignments, prompts, lectures, and other course materials in addition to the syllabi to gain a more comprehensive picture of how community projects are being taught.

Furthermore, this study did not include any correspondence with faculty, so I had to make interpretations based on the syllabus content and relevant literature. Interviewing faculty, in addition to studying their course documents, can offer a more cohesive understanding of how faculty make choices in designing community writing projects. Finally, further research could examine the crucial perspective of the community partners, who make this work possible. Additional studies could examine terms that community partners prefer for university collaborations, course designs that align well with community partners' schedules, preferences for communicating with students and faculty, preferences for the types of projects and genres that students produce, and preferences for how involved they want to be in designing and evaluating the students' work.

Last, Chapter 5 offers a recommendation for how to integrate Appreciative Inquiry into Vincent et al.'s (2021) critically engaged civic learning framework, but this article does not examine the impact that this approach had on the community partners. Further research could uncover how this shift was experienced by the community partners, and if this shift had the intended collaborative outcome that I had intended for all participants.

In conclusion, all three of these articles aim to contribute to a gap in the community engagement and community writing literature: that the field of community engagement celebrates student and community outcomes from service-learning projects, but lacks an understanding of the logistical, design, and curricular elements of service-learning experiences (Marby, 1998; Mitchell & Perrotti, 2023; Gilbride-Brown, 2011), and although research in the field of community writing has led to many theories of "co-creation, mutuality, and reciprocity...community-based writing practitioners may still find it hard to put such theories into practice" (Knight, 2022, p. 6). Additionally, most of the existing articles in the community

writing space offer instructors' evaluations and reflections of community engagement projects from their own courses, but we lack broader, curricular analyses of our work. By analyzing the discourse used on community writing syllabi in Chapters 3 and 4, I hope to provide instructors with practical suggestions for better articulating community partner information, project goals, and learning outcomes on their syllabi. Additionally, in Chapter 5, I hope to offer instructors one concrete step for how to reframe an existing community writing partnership into one that elevates a community's strengths and encourages collaborative co-authorship between students and community members. The syllabus is just a start, but by beginning to reexamine the partnership language on the syllabus, we can start to reflect on *how* we're describing community engagement to our students and the underlying assumptions we may have about the beneficiaries of community engagement, and we might consider reframing our language to center the perspectives and voices of those who make our work possible – the community partners.

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## Appendix A – IRB Approval Letter



TO: Trisha Gott  
Manhattan, KS 66506  
School of Leadership Studies

Proposal Number: IRB-11981

FROM: Lisa Rubin, Chair  
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

SUBJECT: Clearance for Non-Research Project

DATE: 01/26/2024

RE: "A Framing Analysis of English Syllabi and a Comprehensive Analysis of Projects and Genres."

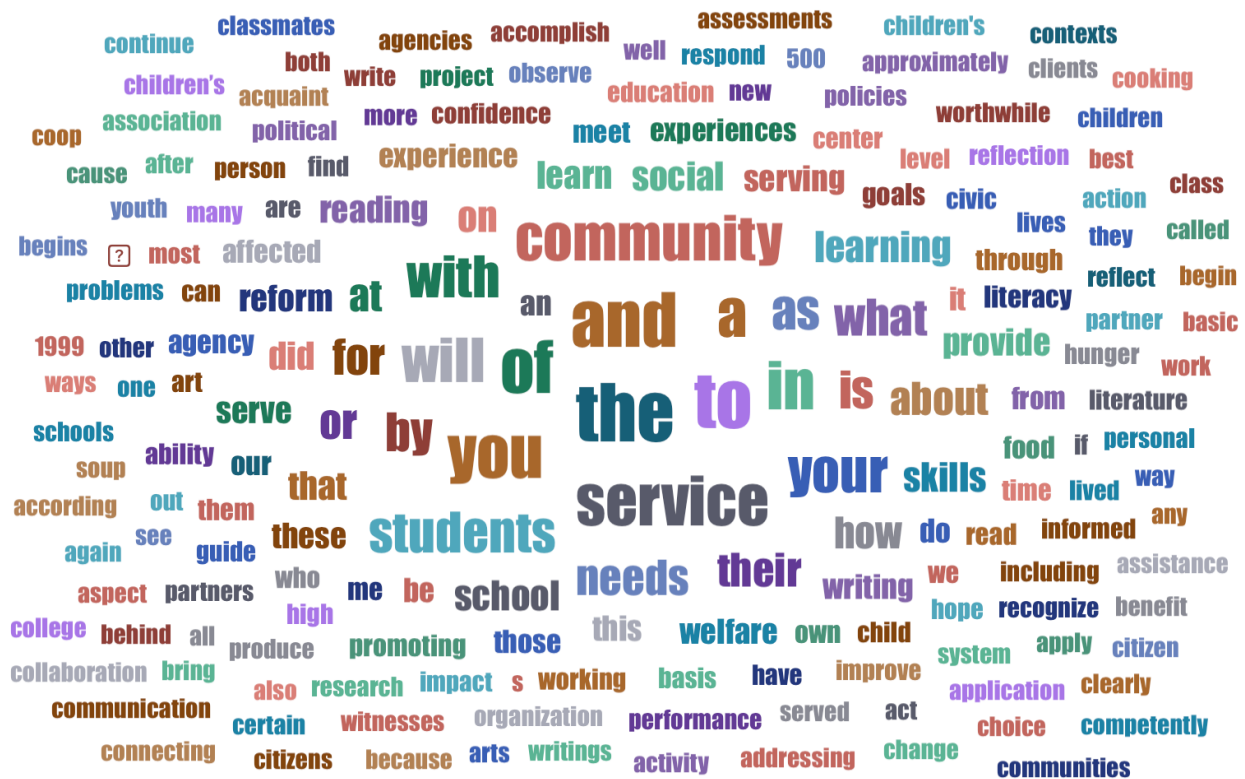
The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Kansas State University has reviewed the proposal identified above and has determined that this is a **Non-Research Application**. The proposed activity as described does not meet the criteria in 45 CFR 46 for the definition of "research" involving human subjects, and therefore does not require review by the Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects (IRB).

This determination applies only to the proposal/document currently on file with the IRB. Any change affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

Feel free to call our office if you have any questions.

Electronically signed by Lisa Rubin on 01/26/2024 4:11 PM ET  
\$\$Designee Signature Letter Language\$\$

## Appendix B – Word Cloud from Syllabi Presenting Communities as Deficient



This word cloud was created by ATLAS.ti. This word cloud represents the most frequently used words in the syllabi that framed communities as having deficiencies. Notable from this word cloud is the prominence of the words “service,” “needs,” “welfare,” “provide,” and “serving.”

[illegible]

## Appendix D – Word Cloud from Syllabi Presenting Community Members as Co-Creators



This word cloud was created by ATLAS.ti. This word cloud represents the most frequently used words that appeared in the syllabi where community members were framed as co-creators. Notable from this word cloud is the prominence of the words “community,” “knowledge,” “responsively,” “exchange,” “reciprocally,” and “partner.”

## Appendix E – Proposal Acceptance for Chapter 5

**From:** Jill Dahlman jilldahlman@yahoo.com   
**Subject:** Beyond the Frontier Vol 4  
**Date:** September 20, 2023 at 6:58 PM  
**To:** Ania Payne ania@ksu.edu  
**Cc:** Gloria Poveda gloria.poveda@cnsu.edu, Chris Field christopherfield67@gmail.com, hcn5ue@virginia.edu

JD

**This email originated from outside of K-State.**

Hi, Ania--

Thank you for your submission to *Beyond the Frontier: Innovations in First-Year Composition, Vol. 4*. We were fortunate to receive a plethora of great abstracts—we received nearly 50 abstracts, and we could only accept 25 of those abstracts. We liked your abstract and want to see the completed essay.

As you know, acceptance is the first step in a process of preparing the book volume and in our consideration of articles that will be part of the final volume. The next step is that the abstract will be turned into an article of 12-15 pages or 3,500-4,500 words for chapters, exclusive of appendices and works cited, and submitted to us by January 15, 2024.

Please consider the following suggestions as you prepare the chapter for submission:

- Please stay within the word count parameters for your submission.

Once we receive your final version, the next step is full peer-editing, which may include an outside reader. Although we have great hopes for the abstracts we have chosen, it is possible that those articles may not move on to the next stage of the process leading to publication.

Please let us know whether you will be submitting the article to us in time for the next deadline of January 15, 2024.

On behalf of the editors, thank you!

All the best,

--Jill

Jill Dahlman, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of English  
California Northstate University  
College of Health Sciences  
Rancho Cordova, CA  
Series co-editor - *Beyond the Frontier: Innovations in FYC*  
Blog: <https://writingthemarket.wordpress.com>

Mother Nature hates lost — 2023

## Appendix F – Editor’s Response for Chapter 3



Gonzales, Laura

Your Submission to Reflections

To: ania@ksu.edu

June 17, 2024 at 2:55 PM



**This email originated from outside of K-State.**

Dear Professor Payne:

Thank you so much for submitting your manuscript, "Mapping the Landscape of Community-Engaged English Courses: A Content Analysis of Syllabi" to Reflections. I found the article to be compelling and of interest to Reflections readers. I'm in the process of securing external reviewers to provide feedback on your manuscript. Once the reviewers confirm, they will have 8 weeks to submit the review. I'll keep you posted at each stage of the review process.

Thank you again for sharing your work!  
Laura

Laura Gonzales, PhD  
Associate Professor of Digital Writing and Cultural Rhetorics  
Associate Director, [TRACE Innovation Initiative](#)  
Department of English  
University of Florida

Editor, [Reflections: A Journal of Community-Engaged Writing and Rhetoric](#)  
Vice President, [Association of Teachers of Technical Writing \(ATTW\)](#)  
Diversity Committee Chair, [Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication](#) (CPTSC)