

# Tracking Community-Engaged Learning

A Report for Submission to the Office of the Provost, UM-Dearborn

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## **I. Purpose, Scope, and Method**

The purpose of this report is to examine the status of community-engaged learning (CEL) in credit-bearing courses on campus in order to make recommendations for tracking and cataloging such activities. Building upon the white paper “Supporting Community-Engaged Coursework” submitted to the Provost’s Office by Lara Rusch in 2019, which contends that “better tracking of the variety of types of community engagement and experiential education in coursework will assist the university in developing, assessing and maintaining reciprocal relationships in the community,” this report enumerates the reasons tracking of CEL is needed, the types of CEL to be tracked, current barriers to doing effective tracking, and a set of recommendations for developing systems of tracking CEL.

In addition, as of the start of this project in Fall 2019, the Hub for Teaching and Learning, where Academic-Service Learning had previously been housed, had sought to find a new organizational home for ASL coordination due to its limited capacity for supporting such efforts. This report takes into consideration this need for ASL support and tracking.

In conversation with Carla Vecchiola, Director of the Hub for Teaching and Learning, I limited the scope of this investigation to CEL in credit-bearing coursework, which included but was not limited to Academic Service Learning-designated courses. However, to ensure that I covered all possible bases of the types of CEL occurring on campus, I also examined some co-curricular activities happening on campus such as through the Office of Global Engagement and Office of

Student Life. To keep the inquiry broad, I used the following brief definition of CEL from [Cornell University's Office of Engagement Initiatives](#) as a guiding model:

Address a specific community interest, problem or public concern;  
Include working with and learning from a community partner; and  
Connect and integrate community-engaged experiences with educational content

This definition allowed me to consider both formal, ASL-type CEL in which an entire course is organized around a community-engaged project as well as smaller, more informal CEL activities such as guest speakers from community partners or CEL modules integrated within the larger course.

To inform my understanding of CEL writ large, I took part in Campus Compact's four-monthly Community of Practice – Community Engagement Fundamentals, led by Sarah Beth Dempsey, Associate Director for Community Engagement at St. Mary's College of California and Varsha Ghosh, Director of Student Engagement and Leadership in the Center for Public Service and Engaged Scholarship at Harvard University, which brought together faculty, administrators and staff involved in CEL from institutions around the country.

In addition, I conducted interviews and held conversations with the following stakeholders on campus:

Tracy Hall, Director, Office of Metropolitan Impact  
Cheryl Donohoe, Director, Business Engagement Center  
Tyler Guenette, Interim Associate Director, Office of Student Life  
Scott Riggs, Director of Global Engagement  
Neeraja Aravamudan, Ginsberg Center, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor  
Sarah Beth Dempsey, Associate Director for Community Engagement at St. Mary's College of California  
Tim Davis, Assistant Dean for Student Engagement and Success and Director, iLabs, COB  
Kari Kowalski, Project Manager, iLabs  
Kevin Kobelsky, Associate Professor, Accounting, COB  
Yi-Su Chen, Associate Professor, Operations Management, COB  
Marcus Harris, Lecturer, Strategy and Entrepreneurship, COB  
Danielle DeFauw, Associate Professor, Reading and Language Arts and Director, Field Placement, CEHHS  
Natalie Sampson, Associate Professor, Public Health, CEHHS  
Lin Van Nieuwstadt, Associate Professor of Engineering Practice, CECS  
Bruce Maxim, Professor, Computer and Information Science, CECS  
Emily Luxon, Associate Professor of Political Science, CASL  
Marie Waung, Professor, Psychology, CASL

## **II. Defining Community-Engaged Learning**

One of the major obstacles to effectively tracking CEL on campus is that we lack, as an institution, a shared definition of this type of work. As Rusch pointed out in “Supporting Community-Engaged Coursework,” “...it would be worthwhile for UM-Dearborn to clarify what community engagement means to us. A first step could be to revisit UM-Dearborn’s mission for community engagement, focusing on who our students are, how they define their communities, and how they would work in service of those communities.” In my conversations with faculty who do some type of CEL in their courses, the term “community-engaged learning” had a wide variety of resonances, with some units more likely to refer to such work as “experiential” or “active” learning (though, to be clear, experiential and active learning can take place without community engagement). The College of Business, for instance, can often characterize its relationships with community organizations as “stakeholders” or “clients” in experiential learning rather than using terms like “community-engaged learning.” Similarly, there were conflicting views about whether CEL could include internships, work with for-profit entities like corporations, or experiences that involve students addressing a question pertinent to a community issue but without direct engagement with a community partner. Indeed, even the definition of “community” remains nebulous, with questions about whether it can include on-campus partners, international partners, or online partners.

Additionally, for this project, I opted to omit a key final element of CEL from Cornell’s definition cited above, which is “Include structured, documented critical reflection,” also an essential component of ASL. The process of student reflection of their CEL experiences was integrated only sporadically among faculty I spoke to, which again speaks to the range of implementations of CEL on campus.

Until we, as an institution, establish a clear definition of what constitutes CEL, tracking such activities will remain elusive and likely result in over-reporting from some units and under-reporting from others.

## **III. Snapshot of perceptions of community-engaged learning**

In Winter 2021, I conducted a survey targeting the MCommunity list provided by the Hub, which includes faculty who have had some kind of touchpoint with the Hub in the past. 44 faculty responded, with pertinent results summarized below (See Appendix 1 for the full survey report). The vast majority of respondents (34) represented CASL and tenured or tenure-track professors (32).

- Of the 44 respondents, 26 engaged in CEL as defined in this report.
- Typically, CEL activities in courses taught by these faculty take up 11-75% of the course (ranging from a single project or module to a major project or scaffolded set of activities), whereas only 3 faculty devote an entire course to CEL.
- A significant number of respondents indicated that their CEL teaching is NOT designated as ASL in the course catalog (13)
- Most courses with CEL are relatively small, capping at 25, although in a few cases these activities were reported as reaching over 100 students per year.
- The average number of hours per week faculty devote to their CEL offerings is 6.29.
- 16 faculty report that the amount of time they devote to CEL-based courses compared with traditional courses is “somewhat more” or “significantly more.”
- Several faculty report receiving no support for their CEL work. In at least one case a faculty member reports using their own money to support it.
- The two areas faculty place as their highest priority for needing support are finding community partners and assistance with logistics and coordination (staffing).
- Of those faculty who don’t teach in a CEL modality, the two main reasons reported for not doing so are “I don’t know how to find an appropriate community partner” (10) and “it’s too time-consuming” (9)

This survey not only identifies needs for supporting CEL through funding, administration and staffing, and professional development, but also identifies a gap in our ability to track these activities. Whereas we are currently able track some CEL through the ASL designation in some courses, this survey indicates that a significant number of faculty do CEL outside of our ASL system.

In addition, I interviewed individual faculty who participate in some version of CEL to better understand the implementation of CEL across units. To protect confidentiality of these interviews, I won’t cite individuals here, but rather provide an overview of the feedback.

To address the function of tracking, it was clear that there is little to no tracking of CEL taking place at any level on campus, whether by individual faculty or by their units. Some faculty maintain their own spreadsheets of data, but this is entirely of their own volition and is not shared or reported anywhere formally.

In terms of motivation to participate in CEL, overwhelmingly, the faculty who do this work do so, first and foremost, because they believe in it and believe it is essential for their students’ learning and success. Additionally, faculty engage in this approach to teaching not because of, but in spite of, the campus’s level of support for CEL. Across the board, faculty reported doing CEL and ASL largely independently and with little institutional support, typically finding community partners through their own networking and relationship-building, organizing and

facilitating site visits on their own, and, in some cases, investing their own personal funds to support this work. More than one instructor expressed concerns about the loss of relationships, institutional memory, and opportunities for students when faculty retire because of this individualistic and siloed approach to CEL.

Although instructors repeated their commitment to his pedagogical approach, many also expressed frustration at the lack of support for it, even though the campus promotes community engagement as a core value. The lack of recognition in annual reviews and promotion and tenure cases was a particular frustration and, in some cases, a disincentive to doing CEL. Additionally, one faculty member shared concerns about the risks involved around student evaluations, where students who might not fully understand the goals, time investment, or educational benefits of CEL share negative feedback. Again, the impact of such evaluations on annual reviews or T&P cases can disincentivize faculty from starting, or continuing, the work of CEL and ASL, at least until there is clearer communication from the campus or unit level about its commitment to students engaging in this kind of learning and what it entails.

#### **IV. Purpose of tracking and administrating community-engaged learning**

Centralized tracking of community-engaged learning on campus serves manifold purposes, and this array of purposes informs how we decide to implement systems of tracking. Any system we adopt will need to be able to address the many needs that tracking serves. Although some individual faculty track their own community partnerships, and occasionally a unit like iLabs does the same, in general, there is no tracking or reporting mechanism in place in any unit on campus or communication among units about active partnerships or activities taking place.

However, the issues that arise from considering the need for tracking extend beyond simply cataloging activities, and instead speak to the need for central administration of community-engaged learning on campus. Tracking alone will not create the levels of communication and support needed for our campus to more effectively and efficiently implement CEL, nor will it solve the problems identified by the lack of tracking on campus.

Centralized tracking is needed for the following:

*To maintain our designation as an institution that meets the Carnegie Foundation's Classification for Community Engagement.* As part of our reporting requirements for this classification, we need to gather data about engagement happening on campus. Currently, this is done through the Office of Metropolitan Impact's Engagement Inventory, but participation in this survey is voluntary, meaning that data is not as complete as it could be.

*To maintain positive and productive relationships with community partners working with our campus.* Because little communication or data is available about which community partners the various units on our campus work with, some community partners find themselves overburdened by requests for collaboration from our university. Opportunities are missed for productive collaborations between units (and even within units) who might be working with the same community partners or on similar community issues. Work or projects are sometimes duplicated or overlap because too little information is shared about community partnerships. Individual faculty who have developed longstanding relationships with community partners often take those relationships with them when they leave or retire. The culture around maintaining these partnerships is highly individualistic, rather than based in the campus community as a whole.

*To maintain positive and productive relationships with community partners working across the UM campuses.* Similar to the issues outlined above, our campus often overlaps in its community engagement with UM-Ann Arbor and UM-Flint, (not to mention other regional campuses) which can further overburden community partners receiving requests from all three and create missed opportunities for valuable collaborations or, alternatively, for carving out long-term individual relationships between our campus and community partners. Tracking and administering CEL will build critical institutional memory.

*To assess the impact of community partnerships.* Because there is typically no “exit survey” or other opportunity for faculty, students, and community partners to assess their experiences in community-engaged learning activities, we have no means for determining the value any particular community partner is providing to students and faculty involved in CEL, what value they are receiving from their experience with UM-Dearborn, or what interventions might need to be made to ensure positive and productive experiences for all involved in future partnerships. Similarly, if students or faculty have had a negative experience, there is no means for communicating that information to other units on campus who might seek a partnership with the community organization.

*To address questions of safety, confidentiality, and liability.* While the major legal issues related to off-campus, community-engaged experiences with students is beyond the scope of this paper, an examination of the legal ramifications of the variety of CEL experiences on campus is likely warranted. Although many faculty who do CEL and ASL in their courses possess training in the field, many do not, and thus our students (and faculty) are not always well-prepared for this kind of work. Questions about student safety and university liability emerge in the case that, for instance, a student should become injured at a community site, be sexually harassed by an employee, or encounter other workplace malfeasance, or, on the other hand, should a student damage a site or behave inappropriately or criminally. Additionally, in cases where students are working for for-profits, issues of intellectual property and confidentiality arise. Beyond that,

however, an ethos of minimizing harm is central to CEL, and without proper training and tracking, we are ill-equipped to ensure this principle as an institution.<sup>[1]</sup>

*To identify needed support for successful implementation of CEL on campus.* As of now, support for CEL is inconsistent across units and across faculty. Some units have a culture of CEL with staff or monetary support, but in many cases faculty do this work on the basis of their own interests, values, and relevance to areas of study. Many faculty report receiving no support – financial, logistical, or developmental – while also devoting significantly more time to CEL courses than to their traditional classes. Across the board, recognition of this extra achievement is rare and unacknowledged in promotion and tenure cases or other merit programs. Faculty who are interested in teaching in the CEL mode hesitate to do so because of the lack of identifiable resources.

*To ensure work equity across faculty.* Faculty who teach ASL and CEL put in significant amounts of time to organize courses, develop relationships with community partners, and mediate student issues, with little to no financial reward or recognition, even though public and community engagement is promoted as a cornerstone value of the university and a key facet of our strategic plan. As one contingent faculty member who carefully tracks the hours she devotes to engaged teaching put it, she has three to four months of uncompensated time accrued for her efforts. Many faculty acknowledge that they develop CEL because they believe in it and feel that it is pedagogically necessary for their students, but the disproportionate amount of effort they put into this form of teaching should be tracked – and rewarded – as a measure of equity of labor on campus.

## **V. Obstacles to tracking CEL on campus**

The current barriers that prevent effective tracking of CEL are rooted in structural and infrastructural misalignments. For one, in order to develop and maintain systems of tracking, and to analyze and take action on the results, the campus needs leadership in CEL and ASL in the form of administration and staff support. Currently, there are pockets of support, with the Office of Metropolitan Impact offering limited resources, the Hub providing instructional support and training, and so on, but there exists no central administration to take on the role of tracking.

The Office of Metropolitan Impact has repeatedly emphasized its willingness, ability, and unique qualifications for taking on the administration of CEL and ASL on campus. OMI, certainly, maintains the university's engagement inventory, is responsible for applying for, maintaining, and reporting on our Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement, and already works with some faculty on development community partnerships for their CEL courses. As an office, it has a robust relationship with community partners throughout the region already in place.

However, its organizational position in the Chancellor's Office keeps it at a significant remove from Academic Affairs, resulting in limited communication about, knowledge of, and ability to support the academic concerns of CEL. Additionally, OMI currently lacks the staffing capacity to support the amount and range of CEL taking place on campus.

While the designation on ASL-approved courses helps to track some CEL activities, as noted in the survey above, a not insignificant number of faculty report that they perceive the effort involved to list their courses as ASL is not worth it, so that they continue to do ASL (or CEL) projects in their courses without reporting or designating them as such. Similarly, the financial incentive that comes along with the ASL designation is not sufficient to overcome this barrier – as a few faculty members reported to me in our interviews, they will teach classes using ASL regardless of the compensation. Alternatively, in some cases, the work occurring in ASL-designated courses may not meet traditional definitions of ASL, so this means of tracking is unreliable.

Ultimately, to the degree that any tracking or data is collected at all, the university relies on occasional, self-reported, and voluntary reporting which limits the accuracy of the information.

Finally, the university lacks the software to effectively track activities on campus in accordance with the needs enumerated above, which entails a CRM that can manage a database of community partners and contact histories, historical and current course offerings, a catalog of faculty doing CEL, types of CEL offered, and so on. Two primary candidates have emerged for this work: Collaboratory, which would require the purchase of a license, and a customized instance of Salesforce, developed for the Ginsberg Center in Ann Arbor, which will also incur expenses but is already integrated into the UM system. Potentially, Faculty180 could track faculty-reported activities, but it couldn't do the work of all the areas noted above. However, unless the decided-upon CRM is administered from a central office, tracking will likely remain piecemeal and fragmented.

## **VI. Recommendations for Tracking CEL**

To overcome the barriers outlined here and create a sustainable tracking and support system for CEL, I recommend the following, with certain caveats: The campus, led by CASL, is currently in a state of transition in adopting PBL (alternatively identified as practice-based or problem-based learning) as a major initiative, as well as building out its Urban Futures planning, both of which align explicitly with the goals and outcomes of CEL. The role of PBL in CEL was beyond the scope of this study, but should be considered in adopting any recommendations.

Additionally, the amount of effort involved in CEL, and the bureaucratic “hoops” faculty need to jump through to engage in this kind of work (even the rather minimal requirements of ASL

designations), are frequently cited as a barrier to engaging in this pedagogical approach. Certainly, adding to the existing workload faculty already undertake is not a recommendation I make lightly. Therefore, it is imperative that if the systems of tracking and reporting recommended below were to be implemented, incentives, support, and recognition for CEL need to come along with them.

1. *Place leadership and coordination for ASL and all other CEL activities, including professional development for community engagement in the Office of Metropolitan Impact.* To make this transition successful, OMI will also need to be restructured to be housed in Academic Affairs and report to the Provost's Office. Additionally, OMI will need expanded staffing to take on the full range of CEL on campus.

2. *Adopt the customized instance of Salesforce* (primary recommendation) or Collaboratory (secondary recommendation) as a systematized tracking system for CEL

3. *Institute short but mandatory reporting mechanisms for all faculty engaged in CEL.* to be determined by OMI, but to include the following steps:

- Initial consultation: faculty report to or register CEL activity, community partner, and course with OMI via a short automated form
- Support: OMI responds to consultation form to follow up with regular support as required (finding a community partner, checking in on progress, resolving issues, etc.)
- Liaising: Once community partner is in place, OMI works with faculty and partner to determine and put in writing common expectations between partner and faculty/course
- Exit consultation: faculty reports to or registers close of CEL activity via automated form
- Assessment: OMI conducts short review with faculty member, community partner, and students

4. *Based on the process above, create a consistent designation and language for all CEL courses in the course catalog* to better ensure both accurate tracking and clear communication of expectations to students taking these courses (see Footnote 1).

## **VII. Recommendations for Ensuring Success of Tracking CEL**

The university's current strategic plan highlights the following guiding principles under ["Student Experience and Success"](#):

- Promote and support interdisciplinary collaboration to further develop curriculum that is responsive to issues facing or communities and prepares our students for high-demand careers
- Emphasize the expansion of problem-based learning, and other high impact experiential practices, for all students and highlight UM-Dearborn as a ‘problem-solving’ campus
- Coordinate and expand community-based teaching and scholarship, and leverage our Carnegie Community Engagement status.

And under “[Faculty and Staff Excellence](#)”:

- Ensure community-based scholarship and teaching, as well as research on teaching pedagogies, are valued and rewarded.

These principles of the strategic plan connect to the need for tracking CEL but, significantly, point to the need for tracking as one prong of a broader approach to supporting CEL on campus.

Because tracking, as recommended here, would add an additional layer to the already burdensome workload of CEL, the supports mentioned in the strategic plan will be essential to its success. In particular, to ensure that faculty will participate in not only tracking their CEL activities, but in doing CEL at all, the following recommendations apply:

1. *Provide incentives in the form of course releases.* Borrowing from the Eastern Michigan University model outlined in “Supporting Community-Engaged Coursework,” provide a course release to faculty for every three CEL courses taught or a similar model. Multiple faculty indicated that the financial stipend provided for ASL courses was not a true incentive, and that they would teach these courses regardless. Instead, what the faculty need in order to do this work, and to do it well, is time.
2. *Explicitly recognize CEL in tenure and promotion for both tenure-track faculty and LEO lecturers.* Almost all faculty interviewed stated that they receive no formal recognition for the CEL work they do, despite the extra labor involved, and that there is concern that diverting time to this kind of teaching could actually jeopardize their tenure or promotion changes. Again, if the university embraces this model as a guiding principle and states as part of its strategic plan that such teaching should be valued and rewarded, then recognizing it as an explicit and exceptional achievement in tenure and promotion cases will not only align this work with the strategic plan, but create an additional incentive for faculty to both engage in it and report it.

3. *Expand staffing.* As recommended above, increasing the staffing capacity of OMI to serve faculty teaching CEL, from partner matching to assistance with logistics to mediating conflict, is necessary to the success of all other recommendations.

4. *Expand professional development.* Because community engagement requires cultural responsiveness, specialized pedagogical skills, and knowledge of the community, creating professional development programs devoted to this approach will additionally ensure the success of both CEL implementation and tracking.

5. *Improve visibility of CEL.* Although community engagement is promoted as a key principle on campus, our CEL activities remain rather quiet and invisible both internally and externally. Instead, the university should seek to highlight these efforts and, in doing so, raise the status of this work as a faculty incentive and, similarly, raise the importance of this kind of learning for students.

6. *Define CEL.* Finally, as noted earlier in this report, the campus lacks a clear and unified definition of CEL, which hinders tracking. While a single definition might not uniformly apply to all types of community-engaged activities across all units on campus, an effort to more clearly communicate how the institution conceives of this work will help to bring a range of activities under a particular umbrella to be tracked.

## VIII. Appendix: CEL Survey Results

For the full report of the CEL survey conducted with members of the Hub's MCommunity list, click here:

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1sz2jBxgZT\\_QSd7d\\_ZiL-e\\_OVyQcHmVTW/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1sz2jBxgZT_QSd7d_ZiL-e_OVyQcHmVTW/view?usp=sharing)

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[1] It's worth noting that at least one institution I spoke with, St. Mary's College of California, partly tracks its CEL work through MOUs, which are required for community partners by its legal office. Although, again, whether we should implement this level of legal communication is beyond the scope of this report, a conversation with Maya Kobersky and Kelly Cruz in UM's legal office suggested that, at the very least, a coordinator should share a letter outlining common expectations between all involved in a CEL experience.

Cruz also suggested the following language be included in syllabi with CEL, which should also be repeated in the course catalog: "This course has an engaged learning component that offers students opportunities to learn in unscripted, authentic settings, where community stakeholders are invested in the outcome. The engaged learning component for this course [*insert description like* "requires students to travel to an off campus location on a weekly basis to meet with community members and work together to advance a social impact project."] Further details will

be shared during the first week of the course. By registering for this course, you are expected to partake in the engaged learning component and to respect and follow the rules or requirements of the community organization with whom we will partner.” Email with Cruz, March 23, 2021.