

Community Engagement Fellows Project Report

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CE Fellows Reflection

My time with the Community Engagement Fellows program was invaluable in my work as the First Year Engagement Coordinator at WWU's Center for Service-Learning. I attended a CE Fellows meeting my very first day of work! Then I participated in several more cohort meetings throughout my first week and the months that followed, including the Okanogan, Yakima, and Tacoma cohorts. (I liked the cohorts' placenames – seeing these names in my calendar regularly reminded me that for each of us, our work is situated in this region and state and helped to attune my thinking toward regional concerns and local impacts.)

Meeting so many committed educators at WWU, WCC, and NWIC, as well as community leaders in Bellingham and Whatcom County, deeply informed my thinking and questions about how to involve first-year students in community-engaged learning. I was grateful for the regular opportunity to reflect together about how to enrich learning experiences and connect across differences, disciplines, sectors, and issues. I especially appreciated the opportunity to think together about how our shared efforts might collectively contribute to making our campus and our region more inclusive and equitable.

It's difficult to chronologically chronicle the cumulative process of learning that developed through listening and giving/receiving feedback at the cohort meetings. Here are just a few lessons I learned over time as well as questions that emerged for me through my time with CE Fellows cohorts...

- We all need opportunities to reflect and connect with each other and with our communities – not just students! So how can educators and leaders actively cultivate community connections ourselves so that we're not just *telling* students they should learn in this way, but we're also *modeling* that it's important and that we do it too?
- How can we welcome first year students into a campus community that is more integrated across units, departments, and resources? How can we cultivate a campus and broader community that helps students find support they need, get involved in enriching learning experiences, and build community with each other and wider networks?
- Not all learning experiences are equally accessible to all students. First generation students in particular may not know what questions to ask to find support they need or how to get involved in great learning opportunities. Many students live on campus their first year and don't always begin exploring off-campus until later in their time at university. How can we encourage students to build a practice early on in their time at Western to seek support when they need it, to get oriented to the wider area and its offerings and opportunities, to be reflective about their learning experiences, and to recognize that learning happens all the time – not just in the classroom? What are some strategic ways to work across units and departments to cultivate this practice? What are some barriers?

CE Fellows Project & Evolution

Through these lessons and questions, I began to develop my CE Fellows project, which I named 'TREE: Track Record of Engaged Education.' I worked with three first-year work study students to map out the

significant network of resources and opportunities available to WWU students and to create a system to help students connect the dots of their lives, work, and education from quarter to quarter, year to year. We used the metaphor of a tree to build a framework for students to better identify and narrate their engaged experiences:

- **Roots:** resources and support available to help students thrive (examples: Tutoring Center, Academic Advising, Residential Halls and programming, the Student Health Center)
- **Branches:** high impact educational practices and engaged learning opportunities (examples: FIGs, Teaching and Learning Academy, capstone courses across the colleges, Global Learning)

I spent my workshop time in CE Fellows asking about how to invite students to begin growing and mapping out their 'trees,' to encourage their reflection as they develop their roots and grow their branches to become well-grounded and well-rounded learners. (Ugh, metaphors... so cheesy sometimes and also helpful for visual and conceptual learners like myself... ☺) I offered an initial set of possibilities like: quarterly letters to self as a way to develop regular reflective practice, some way of setting up a mentorship and cohort network through existing learning communities like FIG seminars or Res Hall floors and stacks, and/or a portfolio platform that students can use to document their longitudinal learning experience by collecting evidence of engagement and reflection over time. I asked fellow CE Fellows for feedback on how to make this conceptual idea come to life... if and how to operationalize it. I asked: how would something like this work? Is it scalable? How could faculty and staff support something like this? How might other stakeholders, like community partners, fit into this vision?

Through their feedback, I recognized that there was no simple 'next step' for creating this system. Instead, it would be helpful to continue having conversations with CE Fellows and people across different disciplines, units, and sectors, and working together to identify opportunities to make a more integrative campus come to life. I also decided to keep this TREE metaphor in mind but not let it overdetermine the process of creating a system of connected learning for students. (Well actually, on that note, I also keep needing to remind myself that whatever system develops should be designed for all learners – including staff and faculty – so that we're again *modeling* not just *telling* students how to learn, connect, engage, and build community.)

In the spring, I transitioned to a new role on campus, working as the Assistant Director of Canada House Programs. This shift offered an opportunity to walk the talk of shaping a more integrated and connected campus. Even though it's no longer the primary mandate of my position to support first-year students in building a practice of community-engaged learning and reflective practice, I now recognize that this can and should be a shared goal and a shared mandate for all of us at the university – that we all play a role. For me, I do this by:

- continuing to engage in cross-campus conversations amongst staff and faculty about building sustained communities and connections amongst learners
- teaching a FIG seminar this fall about the Salish Sea, where I'm piloting some of the TREE ideas as part of the course's design and inviting students to document their experiences learning about themselves, campus, and the region in their first year in Bellingham
- trying to become a more reflective practitioner myself by writing more about my ongoing learning processes (this reflective piece on CE Fellows is one example!).
- participating again in the CE Fellows program to continue to prioritize relationship-building and reflective practice as central to my professional and personal life