

A photograph of three children in a garden. A girl in the center is pointing at a plant, while a boy with red glasses on the right looks on. Another child is partially visible on the left. The scene is outdoors with a building and sky in the background.

# Community Engagement Terms and Meanings

A DEEPER DIVE  
INTO DEFINITIONS

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# Background and Context

The field of community engagement scholarship has grown considerably over the past two decades, affecting academic institutions and community organizations alike. With increasing interest has also come a wide-ranging set and use of terms related to community engagement. In response, there have been widespread calls to reduce confusion and improve understanding not just for specific terms but also for recognizing the value of the work across departmental and institutional uses (Sdvizhkov et al., 2022). Campuses often boast of offering a civically engaged education for their students or ample community-engagement opportunities. The more popular the programs have become, the more entrenched the language at the institution; yet, as a field, there are limited resources to clarify distinctions between terms and, more importantly, differences in their meanings that have implications for student learning or community relationships. The purpose of this document, which is developed as one component of a larger Colonial Academic Alliance IN/CO Grant Program (PI: Mathew Gendle), is to lend clarity on definitions related to community engagement as one component of the grant entitled “Preparing Students and Institutions to Engage in Community-Based Learning.” As part of this work, we have critically reviewed definitions from working documents and leading organizations, as described below. We also have provided examples of critical terms, including civic engagement, community engagement, outreach, community outreach, academic service learning, service learning, community-engaged teaching and learning, community-engaged research and creative activities, community-based research, community-engaged services and practices, community-engaged commercialized activities, and volunteerism. A model depicting the relationship between terms is also provided.

## Introduction

Many critical questions arise in reviewing university documents connected to community-related work. For example, is a study abroad opportunity community-engaged? Does volunteering to run a 5k for charity make you engaged in the community or just a supporter of the cause? These are the questions being asked by institutions and individuals involved in the field. From here, the question was born: what are the most common terms relating to community engagement, and how are they defined and used by the public, universities, and other organizations? While some have elected to create an umbrella term for all terms related to the topic, such as community-engaged scholarship and public engagement (Sdvizhkov et al., 2022), our approach sought to better understand practices and how they are defined across the spectrum of possible uses.

A team at the Colonial Academic Association created a list of terms to define based on their needs and interests; some are basic in nature, but others need more clarity and interchangeability of related terms. All definitions serve to help universities and organizations better identify their community-engaged activities and recognize what type of activity they are promoting, be it community-engaged research, civic engagement, community outreach, or any of the various terms discussed here.

# Research Methods

The research began by analyzing the Carnegie Foundation's Community Engagement Classification application and how the University of Delaware answered the questions. This led to a review of the University of Delaware's community engagement goals and the goals of each college within the university. Many examples of projects were listed as community engagement, but few colleges provided specific details regarding their partnerships and the equity of such relationships. At this point, the groundwork was set to understand the context in which this language is being used, and further resources could be analyzed.

The most vital phase of research consisted of sorting through literature and references provided by major organizations in the academic community engagement field: Campus Compact (including TRUCEN, The Research University Civic Engagement Network), the Carnegie Foundation's Community Engagement Classification, the Kellogg Foundation and the Association of Public & Land-Grant Universities, in addition to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's Principles of Community Engagement, 2nd Edition. These resources led to the Michigan State University's Graduate Certification in Community Engagement 2010-2011 Guidebook. The Guidebook features various resources, scholarly reports, professional organizations, websites, and journals. From there, the snowball approach was used; resources provided by the Guidebook were combed through, then those resources were analyzed, and so on. In addition, a particular focus was placed on the use of the terms in relation to public universities and land-grant institutions, of which community engagement has been an area of interest in recent years.

However, throughout the process, some of the selected terms did not appear at all. For those terms, separate searches had to be done. To find uses of the term, they were put into a search browser to get an idea of how it was most commonly used. In some cases, little to nothing was found. For other terms, many sources had to be combed through to find instances where it was used in an academic or professional context.

Throughout this process, a common pitfall was the use of words or terms without a definition. Many sources would reference community engagement initiatives but never clarify the institution or organization's definition of community engagement or related activities. Therefore, many definitions were vague or had to be inferred from the related information; these sources were not used. To find uses of the term in the correct context, the words "academic," "definition," or "university" were often added to narrow down wide-reaching search results.

There have been widespread calls to reduce confusion and improve understanding not just for specific terms related to community engagement but also for recognizing the value of the work across departmental and institutional uses.





# Supporting

# Community

**/// A group of individuals connected by a commonality; subject to change; fluid**

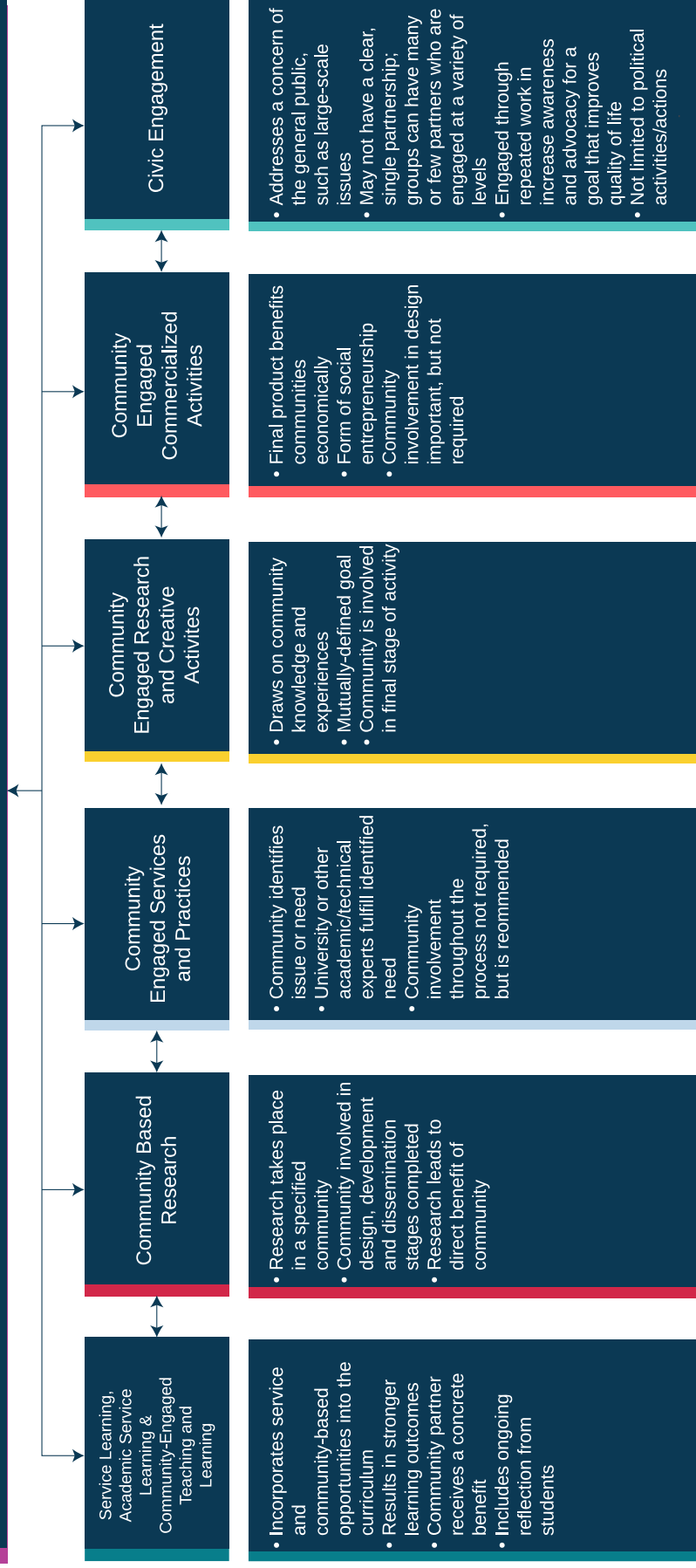
“Community” has been defined countless times amid research, organization mission statements, and other institutional statements. It was immediately apparent that the definition of “community” would focus on the ways in which individuals are connected. The Department of Health and Human Services identified communities as the “social and political networks that link individuals, community organizations, and leaders” (McCloskey et al., 2011, p. 5). Overall, these definitions focused on the ways in which people are connected while referencing the variety of formats in which connection could occur. Commonalities that create communities include geography, identity, interests, and circumstance (Fraser, 2005, p. 286). It is also important to note that communities are fluctuating and fluid; they will change throughout time as the circumstances of the individuals within that community change (CTSA, 2012; McCloskey et al., 2011). For example, someone who moves from the Northeast to the Southwest region of the United States may still have connections in the Northeast area, but they will leave one geographical community for another. “Community” is best defined as a group of people, connected by commonalities, that form a relationship with one another based on such commonalities, regardless of the method of connection and membership of other communities.



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# Community Engagement

- Reciprocal partnership between two organizations
- Reciprocal benefit: project benefits all partners
- Engagement continues throughout the process (idea, design, implementation, results)
- Community expertise guides decision making



## Community Outreach

- Provides awareness of available services or expertise to a community
- Conducted by an institution or organization
- Is not collaborative in nature
- Communities can and should be consulted so their needs are better addressed via outreach initiatives

## Volunteering

- Service provided by individual, not organization
- Uncompensated for service
- Does not require continued involvement or reflection

Note: This graphic seeks to help describe the many ways that terms related to community engagement are used and the most common ways they are defined. The purpose is to help bring clarity to distinctions between terms, not to restrict.

# Engagement

- Occurs between two or more participants (individuals, communities, organizations, etc.); mutual respect between partners; sharing of resources, including knowledge and expertise; a common goal for the public good

Definitions of engagement were found to emphasize collaboration and reciprocity among participants. The Kellogg Commission, born out of the need to reform higher education at public universities, wrote that “embedded in the engagement ideal is a commitment to sharing and reciprocity. By “engagement,” the Commission envisions partnerships, two-way streets defined by mutual respect among the partners for what each brings to the table” (2001, p. 13). Engagement definitions mentioned mutual benefits, partnership, and contributing to the public good through connections with university knowledge and resources (Abel, 2021; Brown, 2010; Bloomfield, 2005). A truly engaged relationship between two parties requires the ability to share resources and expertise for one another’s benefit. Engagement is defined as a collaborative relationship between partners that values reciprocity and mutual respect for each partner’s respective knowledge and expertise.



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# Community engagement

**/ A reciprocal partnership between two organizations; work benefits the targeted community partner; engagement continues throughout the process (idea, design, implementation, results); community expertise guides decision-making**

Many institutions have defined community engagement and how it occurs in their respective organizations. All definitions involve a form of partnership between the institution and a specified community, though the level of engagement between the two groups falls on a continuum of varied reciprocity.

The most basic definition comes from the CDC: community engagement is “the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people” (1997, p. 9). They go on to note that “community engagement is grounded in the principles of community organization: fairness, justice, empowerment, participation, and self-determination” (McCloskey et al., 2011). These definitions are a starting point when discussing what community engagement means to different institutions.

In one instance, community engagement was defined as “a process of working collaboratively with individuals and through groups of people by providing them with skills needed to affect change and to address issues” while “including the views of a community in planning and decision-making processes” (Woodroffe et al., 2011, p. 59). Another definition focuses on empowerment and active partnerships, yet another claims that partnerships must result in a “mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources” (Community-Centered Libraries, 2018; Scott, 2012). Yet others reference long-term sustainability and commitments between partners (Walters et al., 2011, p. 39; Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences, n.d.).

All of these variations in definitions serve to explain that community engagement is best understood as a continuum of engagement. At its heart, community engagement is always rooted in equitable partnerships that account for unequal balances of power and resources and in ensuring that the community partner at hand has ample opportunities to be a part of the process and share their wisdom and expertise. The community engagement initiative may be a one-time instance or a multi-year partnership, but it must show communities and institutions working collaboratively to improve conditions for the community.

## Examples:

- Collaboration between a university and towns to create a local government leadership program
- Creation of an environmental research center that works with local officials and environmental groups to gather data on localized challenges
- A service-based nonprofit and advocacy-based nonprofit working together to better serve their communities of interest

# Service

**Work for the betterment of others; not a term exclusive to community-engaged scholarship**

Service could not be defined independently regarding community engagement practices or in the context of colleges and universities. Service is best defined as it is in the dictionary: “the work performed by one that serves; contribution to the welfare of others.” The use of the word “service” is not inherently tied to use within community-engaged scholarship.



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# Academic service-learning

- /// Incorporates curriculum with service opportunities; results in stronger learning outcomes; community partner receives a concrete benefit; includes post-service reflection from students**

Academic service-learning incorporates structured education with service to the community. All definitions and descriptions of this concept emphasize that academic service learning is a curriculum model, teaching method, or education strategy. This term is bound by its relationship to academia. Many definitions also reference a component of reflection and a deeper understanding of the academic content and how it relates to society. See Creighton University's definition: "Academic service-learning is an experiential education strategy that integrates community service into academic courses so learning is enhanced and community partners receive concrete benefits. Students study, serve and reflect on their experience in order to deepen their appropriation of knowledge" (n.d.). Florida Atlantic University emphasized a very similar sentiment: "Academic service-learning is more than a volunteer activity; it integrates community service with instruction and reflection... [it] requires students to apply what they learn in the classroom and reflect on their experiences by thinking, discussing, and writing about them. It teaches students how to apply academic knowledge to real-life civic issues, promotes teamwork and collaborative problem-solving, develops life skills, and makes learning more personally meaningful" (n.d.).

Consistent themes throughout these definitions and others included a reflection component after working with the community to "reinforce the link between service and their learning" (The American National Red Cross, n.d.). This aspect of reflection is what transforms the experience into one in which long-term learning can be accomplished. This pedagogy is designed to show students how their learning applies in real-world scenarios. Academic service-learning is purposeful and strategic in the way it helps communities and students alike (Bentley University, n.d.; Eastern Michigan University, n.d.).

To summarize all the definitions, academic service-learning is an education strategy combining classroom curriculum with meaningful work in the community, followed by purposeful academic reflection. There are no parameters as to what type of community the work should be performed in or what level of engagement the community work must reach.

## Examples:

- A class-wide project that involves meeting with community members and working alongside them to understand their specific needs and challenges better
- A capstone course in which students work with a community partner to solve a challenge presented by the community partner
- A specialty course in a study away program that works with community members to help a localized issue, featuring reflection and understanding of culture

# Service-learning

- ✓ Incorporates curriculum with service opportunities; results in stronger learning outcomes; community partner receives a concrete benefit; includes post-service reflection from students**

Service-learning has been defined by many institutions over the last two decades, including the United States Congress. Service-learning takes a slightly broader approach than academic service-learning, opening the door to service-learning that takes place in community organizations such as 4-H, which is not necessarily tied to a classroom space or school-mandated curriculum. In 1993, the U.S. National and Community Service Trust Act defined service-learning as a “method under which students or participants learn and develop through active participation in a thoughtfully organized service that is conducted in and meets the needs of a community; is coordinated with an elementary school, secondary school, institution of higher education, or community service program, and with the community; and helps foster civic responsibility; and that is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum of the students or the educational components of the community service program in which the participants are enrolled; and provides structured time for the students or participants to reflect on the service experience.”

The common theme in each definition included a relationship between learning and community service that is grounded in reflection. These three core elements were seen again and again: “service-learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection,” “service-learning programs tend to offer a model which integrates liberal teaching, experiential learning, critical reflection, community service, and citizen education,” and “service-learning is a curriculum-based form of community service that integrates classroom instruction and reflection with hands-on service experiences” are all examples of this (Brown, 2010, p. 78; Ayers et al., 1996, p. 10; Stagg, 2004, p.1).

Still, there are some who limit service-learning to “course-based, credit-bearing, educational experience[s]” (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995, p. 112). However, most descriptions instead referenced educational experiences and students, which are not limited to purely academic, school-based settings. To understand the definition of service-learning, one must understand that

curriculum-based learning can take place outside the four walls of a school building.

Yet, service-learning and its definitions fail to define what level of involvement with the community is required. Some scholars suggest that a range of projects fall under this category, with some heavily focused on the academic aspect and others more focused on community work (Butin, 2003, p. 1676; Furco, 1996, Sigmon, 1994). This invites using more specific terms, depending on the service-learning focus. However, there is a risk in delving into ultra-specific terms for a scale of engagement, as they are inherently difficult to quantify. That said, some in the field assert that service learning should be hyphenated as service-learning to represent better the connection that must exist between the two components. And there are further delineations between traditional and critical service learning (Mitchell, 2008). Others still argue that the term should not be readily used, and maybe better replaced with Community-engaged learning, as it is unclear how many service learning efforts result in meaningful or impactful service (Gendle, M.H., Tapler, A., 2022).

Despite the controversy, we define service-learning as a teaching method in which students enhance their learning of the curriculum (which may not be classroom-based) by working directly with a community, followed by meaningful reflection. Often the focus is on the students learning.

#### Examples:

- A class-wide project that involves meeting with community members and working alongside them to understand their specific needs and challenges better
- A capstone course in which students work with a community partner to solve a challenge presented by the community partner
- A specialty course in a study away program that works with community members to help a localized issue, featuring reflection and understanding of culture

# Community-engaged teaching and learning

**/// Incorporates curriculum with service opportunities; results in stronger learning outcomes; community partner receives a concrete benefit; includes post-service reflection from students**

Community-engaged teaching and learning, a term with connections to service-learning and academic service-learning, has an unclear definition. Campus Compact, the “largest and oldest higher education association dedicated to higher education civic and community engagement,” defines community-engaged teaching and learning as synonymous with service-learning (About, n.d.; Key Competencies, 2021). Campus Compact outlines key competencies of community-engaged learning and teaching, providing elements necessary for a definition. They state that in this form of engagement, students must be able to understand power, privilege, identity, and differences as they relate to community engagement; explain potential outcomes or impacts of the experience; emphasize that foundations of partnership are utilized throughout the process; and think critically, support one another, and strategize public dissemination of project outcomes to benefit all stakeholders (Key Competencies, 2021). Additionally, teachers should provide students with clear information regarding the experience and expectation of serving while reflecting and critiquing their ability to create change (Key Competencies, 2021).

Still, there are other definitions available. Cornell University defines four criteria that are essential to all community-engaged teaching and learning experiences: they address a specific community issue, involve working with and learning from community partners, integrate community experiences into learning, and include documented, critical reflection by students (n.d.). The Gephardt Institute at Washington University in St. Louis identifies community-engaged teaching and learning as “learning activities in a community context” with “course content and assignments committed to activity in the community [with] faculty oversight” (2022). They also recognized that this form of engagement has “historically been referred to as service learning.”

Like service-learning, most resources did not identify the balance of collaboration necessary between the academic institution and community partners. Only Colorado College made this distinction, stating that “community-engaged learning is experiential education that simultaneously - and in roughly equal balance - promotes student learning and meets community needs” (n.d.). Even this statement does not provide a concrete definition of what the balance should be or examples of a good balance.

At its core, community-engaged teaching and learning have the same values and components as service-learning and academic service-learning. It is a form of learning in which students work with community partners in a way that is conducive to deeper learning and reflection.

Examples:

- A class focused entirely on a social issue, with guest speakers and engagement from involved local leaders
- A capstone course in which students work with a community partner to solve a challenge presented by the community partner
- A specialty course in a study away program that works with community members to help a localized issue, featuring reflection and understanding of culture



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# Community-based research

- Research takes place in a specified community; design development and dissemination stages completed with community involvement; research leads to direct benefit of the community**

Community-based research (CBR) involves participation from community partners at each stage of the process. Michigan State University, a leader in the movement, described CBR as research that “takes place in community settings and involves community members in the design and implementation of research projects” while demonstrating “respect for the contribution of success which are made by community partners as well as respect for the principle of “doing no harm” to the communities involved” (Brown, 2010, p. 78). CBR is not just research that occurs in a specific community; the participants, as non-academic researchers, must have a significant impact and influence in the development stages (Israel et al., 1998). It is the difference between conducting research in a community instead of in collaboration with a community. At the end of such research, findings, and knowledge should be shared among partners, so the community can see and receive direct benefits (Israel et al., 1998).

Definitions of community-based research were found to have the same values as those referencing community-engaged research, focusing on collaboration at all steps of the process and a result that will help the community in an area of need.

## Examples:

- Community members interested in a perceived perception of water quality and health in their region
- Research related to education outcomes from a specified school district
- Dental professionals collect information from other professionals for research and publication on best practices



# Community-engaged services and practices

- ▮ **The community identifies an issue or need; university or other academic/technical experts fulfill identified need; community involvement throughout the process is not required**

As a single term, community-engaged services and practices were only found once in the research process. Community-engaged services, as defined within *From Rhetoric to Reality: A Typology of Publicly Engaged Scholarship*, are “associated with the use of university expertise to address specific issues (ad hoc or long-term) identified by individuals, organizations, or communities” (Doberneck, 2010, p. 24). Michigan State University then took this definition and applied it to both community-engaged services and practices, listing examples such as “technical assistance, consulting, policy analysis, expert testimony, legal advice, clinical practice, diagnostic services, [and] human and animal patient care” (2018). This term, as is, was not mentioned again during the research process. With this, it is best to take the definition as described in *From Rhetoric to Reality* and understand that this term is specific to types of community work completed by practitioners.

## Examples:

- University-provided conflict resolution services to state employees
- Bordetella vaccine clinic for dogs at a time of heightened risk
- Legal consulting done by law students for indigent defendants

# Community-engaged research and creative activities

**Draws on community knowledge and experiences; community-defined goal; community is involved in the final stage of the activity**

The phrase, in its whole, was found twice in the research process; it was defined by Michigan State University as being “associated with the discovery of new knowledge, the development of new insights, and the creation of new artistic or literary performances and expressions - in collaboration with community partners” (Common Types, n.d.). Michigan State then listed examples of each type of service; community-engaged research included applied research, contractual research, demonstration projects, program evaluations, and needs/assets assessments, whereas community-engaged creative activity was described as “collaboratively created, produced, or performed” film, music, theater, writing, exhibitions, and other performances and works of media (Common Types, n.d.). These two activities, while related, refer to different types of work. They can be referenced as a whole because they imply similar levels of community engagement.

The University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) defined community-engaged research and creative activities as separate terms. They state that community-engaged research, encompassing applied research and policy research, includes “community involvement at the beginning and end” (2014). They also require that the community “defines or shapes the question/issue to be studied” and that the “community receives products designed specifically for their benefit and use” (2014). UAA defines community-engaged creative activity as projects “designed to direct attention to community/social issues” while publicly acknowledging that activities were “prompted by community concerns” (2014). In addition, other activities are to be included that “directly link [the creative activity] to community concerns,” such as a facilitated discussion after a performance or viewing (2014). This additional component differs from the Michigan State definition, which has a broader definition and does not expand on how creative activities can engage with a community.

Community-engaged research is a more broadly used term than community-engaged creative activities. Community-engaged research, as a term, is defined by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (a division of the National Institutes of Health) as projects “driven by academic concerns [in which] a scientist or research team engages the community to help develop research questions, design a study, and collect data” (2022). This definition fails to identify how engagement occurs, to what extent partners collaborate, or how the results will impact the community, as do other definitions. The Environmental Protection Agency also attempts to define community-engaged research, calling it “a framework or orientation for conducting research that supports the premise that people ought to be involved in the decisions, as well as the cultivation of information those decisions are guided by, that affect their lives,” while recognizing that communities are the greatest asset when it comes to information about their own experiences and perspectives

(2015). Duquesne University’s definition requires a “reciprocal partnership for the common good” and “equitable partnerships in all phases of research”; they recognize the importance of co-learning, co-ownership, and finding results that benefit all stakeholders (n.d.) Collaboration and the mobilization of resources within groups is emphasized in the definition provided by Florida International University; unlike other institutions, their definition was located with information regarding their Institutional Review Board (2019).

Across all definitions, a continuation of the collaboration between the institution and its community partners is identified via research or creative activities. In particular, the community should define the project’s goal and be involved in the execution of the creative activity or in the dissemination of the results of the research.

#### Examples:

- A nonprofit enlisting the assistance of an institution in performance evaluation of their programming, which includes recommendations crafted in collaboration with the nonprofit
- A theater performance that tells the story of a community, with community members performing or assisting in the production
- A research project initiated by those who were formerly incarcerated, analyzing the challenges of life after being released



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# Community-engaged commercialized activities

**Final product benefits communities via a commercial application; form of social entrepreneurship; community involvement in design is important but not required**

In 2010, the Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement identified community-engaged commercialized activities. These include licenses, patents, copyrights, inventions, and other forms of social entrepreneurship that benefit the public. It is specifically defined as being “associated with a variety of projects in which university-generated knowledge is translated into practical or commercial applications for the benefit of individuals, organizations, or communities” (Doberneck et al., 2010, p.26). These entrepreneurial opportunities should work for the benefit of others, such as socially-focused businesses or inventions that will address community issues. For example, the invention of a new water filtration device would significantly benefit a community with difficulties accessing clean water. In researching, this exact phrase only appeared when referencing this specific research and is not widely used. However, community-engaged commercialized activities can be utilized in future publications as a way to categorize community engagement.

Examples:

- A “pay-what-you-can” restaurant that not only provides food to those who are unable to pay, but also employs those who struggle to maintain stable income due to job-related challenges
- A medical testing device that needs little training to use and understand, helping those in communities with little access to healthcare
- A novel that expresses the pain of a marginalized community provided it was created with input from various community members

# Civic engagement

- Addresses a concern of the general public, such as large-scale issues; may not have a clear, single partnership; groups can have many or few partners who are engaged at a variety of levels; engaged through repeated work in increasing awareness and advocacy for a goal that improves the quality of life; not limited to political activities/actions**

The use of the term “civic engagement” had great variation among its definitions and the practices used to exemplify this form of engagement. For reference, “civic” is defined as “of or relating to a citizen, city, citizenship, or community affairs” (Merriam Webster, 2022). Some sources viewed civic engagement as rooted in political activities, whereas others observed it as a general term for communities. For example, Project Pericles, a higher education consortium focused on the promotion of civic engagement within those institutions, identified civic engagement as the practice of “working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities.... It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes” (Liazos & Liss, 2009). The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) also referenced political and non-political processes in their definition: “There are many ways to be civically engaged. That includes political participation... many other activities can also be acts of civic engagement: volunteering, working with neighbors, serving in community organizations, participating in social movements, discussing issues, reading the news, etc.” (Tufts University, n.d.). Definitions like this wear away at the traditional notion that civic activities are directly and only tied to political engagement.

Another aspect of civic engagement definitions is a reference to public issues and concerns. These definitions mention engagement “with pressing issues of any public concern of the local, city, or state governments” or as “individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern” (Gordon West College, n.d.; American Psychological Association, 2009). The University of Illinois-Chicago narrows this issue to “any activity that contributes to a more effective democracy” in which there are improvements to “government-constituent relations, better access to information, and an invitation to high-quality public discourse” (n.d.). If the modern definition of civic engagement is no longer directly tied to political activities, it may be that it has shifted to a more general view of engagement with issues and activities that affect society as a whole. These issues may include civil rights, protecting democracy, and a responsive government. This negates the need for defined partners or continued involvement with a single entity over time. A group working to increase awareness of gun control laws or other broad societal needs may work with many communities of varied sizes to achieve their mission.

The overarching theme of civic engagement definitions focused on “promoting the quality of life in a community through political and non-political processes” (Elrich, 2000). This definition is adopted by the American Association of Colleges and Universities and best represents the varied descriptions found in the research process.

Examples:

- Advocating for the passage of a new legislative bill
- Working with an organization to provide transportation to those who need it on election day
- Volunteering at a clean-up day at a local park



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# Outreach

**Benefits an audience; does not require engagement with the audience; one-directional**

Outreach was not easily defined; it was rarely identified and described in the resources used for this analysis. Michigan State University provided a description of outreach as “a form of scholarship that cuts across teaching, research, and service [that] involves generating, transmitting, applying, and preserving knowledge for the direct benefit of external audiences in ways that are consistent with university and unit missions” (Brown & Doberneck, 2010, p. 77). Another definition from 14 years prior, was also published by Michigan State University and identified that “outreach is conducted for the direct benefit of external constituents in ways consistent with the mission of the university” (Sandmann, 1996, p. 9). It can be assumed, based on the context of both sources, that “outreach” refers to reaching out to a community by a higher education institution. This assumption limits the ability to define outreach as a term independent of community outreach.

Examples:

- Flyers advertising a legal services clinic
- Highlighting recent research publications in a community newspaper
- Providing direct services to constituents

# Community outreach

- Provides services or expertise to a community; conducted by an institution or organization; it is not collaborative in nature; communities can and should be consulted so their needs are better addressed via outreach initiatives

A description of community outreach did not surface when examining definitions provided by higher education institutions and their subsequent research. However, professional organizations use this term to describe their work with communities. The American Student Dental Association described community outreach as a practice that “involves providing professional services, or services of a specific expertise, to a group of people who may not otherwise have access to these services” (n.d.). It does not implicate the two-directional or collaborative aspect that other terms incorporate. This is repeated again in a statement by the Community-Centered Libraries Initiative, which defines community outreach as “building awareness and sharing information about programs, resources, and services with people in a community” (2018). Outreach is confined to instances in which an organization provides their expertise to a community; it lacks reciprocation from the community that is being served. However, that does not mean that there is no interaction between the community and the organization. Both partners should work together to determine how needs can best be met to “achieve mutually valued goals for targeted populations” while “building culturally responsive and community-responsive bridges to these populations” (de Tablan & Sanders, 2017, p. 2).

Community outreach considers the relationship between a community and a service-providing organization but clearly notes that the relationship is one of service and awareness, not collaboration.

## Examples:

- Offering general dental cleanings to low-income communities
- Tutoring services provided to college students, free of charge
- An “Intro to Gardening” clinic provided by experts at the Cooperative Extension



# Volunteerism

**/// An individual, not an organization provide service; uncompensated for service; it does not require continued involvement or reflection**

Volunteerism, or volunteering, is a method by which an individual provides service to a community. This term was not found to be used by any higher education institutions, though the United Nations General Assembly recognizes it as “a wide range of activities, including traditional forms of mutual aid and self-help, formal service delivery and other forms of civic participation, undertaken of free will, for the general public good and where a monetary reward is not the principal motivating factor” (2002, p. 3). Many other publications and dictionaries are similar, defining volunteerism as “the act of doing prosocial work in a community without being compensated” (American Heritage Dictionary, n.d.; Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.; Merriam-Webster, n.d.; Random House Inc., 2022). This work can be for individual people or for organizations that serve other people (O’Neill, 2018).

The only variation in volunteerism definitions involves the commitment level of the individual giving their time. For example, the International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences defines volunteerism as “a form of helping in which people actively seek out opportunities to assist others in need, make considerable and continuing commitments to provide assistance, and sustain these commitments over extended periods of time, often at considerable personal cost” (Snyder, 2001). Previous definitions made no reference to these “considerable and continuing commitments” to the community. This inclusion of a commitment to “a sustained amount of time and effort” is referenced again in a 2015 essay written in part by the same author (Stukas, et al.).

Based on the lack of references to sustained involvement in multiple resources, it can be generalized that volunteerism can refer to single service instances. With this, the definition of volunteerism is summarized as an activity done without monetary compensation for the good of others.

## Examples:

- Handing out water bottles at a 5k for charity
- Packing boxes at a food bank
- Collection donations for the homeless

# Discussion

Practitioners use terms related to community engagement in various ways, hence the need for this research. From the definitions found and created, connections between these varying terms can be found. While some terms differ distinctly in their intentions, many have similar ideals and values.

Community engagement is a broad term, as previously discussed. It encompasses any activity or project in which there is a reciprocal relationship between an organization and a community where the end result will benefit the community at hand. Because community engagement is possible in many different aspects, many of the terms identified can be recognized as subcategories of community engagement. These subcategories all end in work that benefits a community, but the types of work represented, and level of engagement vary. For example, civic engagement focuses on activities that affect broader society, often in the form of advocacy, awareness, and political activism. Reciprocity between partners is less of a focus in civic engagement, as energy is spent on benefiting the community via change. However, community-engaged commercialized activities, community-engaged services and practices, and community-engaged research and creative activities have very different tangible outcomes and activity areas but are designed to help communities through partnership.

Service-learning, academic service-learning, and community-engaged teaching and learning are extremely closely related, if not identical, to one another in practice. In many instances, definitions of one of these terms referred to one another as alternative names for the same practices. All three terms describe learning opportunities that incorporate the curriculum at hand with community service. These practices include students reflecting on the work done, resulting in more in-depth learning overall for students. Community members receive a definable benefit from the student's work; everyone involved in the activity from beginning to end is positively impacted.

Two of the eleven terms discussed have no relation to any other terms. Community outreach and volunteerism projects do not require community engagement to define problems, implement ideas, or analyze results. Outreach activities serve their community by providing resources, expertise, or services. However, community outreach is a one-way transfer of knowledge; it is not within the practice to take information from the community and use it to guide future missions of the program or organization providing the outreach.

Volunteerism is unrelated to any other terms because it primarily refers to individual work, not the work of an organization or institution. It also remains independent because it must be done without pay or compensation, whereas no other term mentioned such. The idea of volunteerism is that work is done entirely out of an individual's free will; other types of community work may not be entirely voluntary, such as a service-learning project within mandatory coursework.

This framework is designed to allow institutions to identify the type of work they are engaging in. No form of work is seen as more valuable than another; each type has its place

in creating better outcomes for society and helping surrounding communities. Once the type of work is identified, institutions can measure the level of engagement between the institution and its partners. These levels of engagement look different depending on the type of work occurring, but some aspects remain the same across all forms.

Community engagement and community-engaged activities occur on a spectrum related to how closely the respective community and institution worked together throughout the activity. Were there continual conversations during the creation, implementation, and dissemination of the project or activity? Or were community partners only involved during one phase of the process? Was there a clear amount of respect between partners, or did institutions fail to listen to the community's true needs instead of relying on perceived needs? The more reciprocal the relationship, the higher degree of engagement activity can be awarded.

When analyzing service-learning experiences, the level of engagement can be determined by how much impact was made on students. The impact can be improved by deeper, more thorough connections between curriculum and service activities and through the reflection process.

Community outreach and volunteerism are much more difficult to measure, as they are, by definition, not reciprocal in nature. However, community outreach activities can be improved by listening to the needs of a community. A student dental organization offering free cleanings cannot gain input from the community on how to conduct better cleanings, but the community can indicate that there is also a need for cavity screenings and surgery referrals. These conversations make outreach activities more productive for those in a community. Volunteerism activities can be improved by increasing volunteer understanding of the issue at hand. For example, someone volunteering at a food bank can add depth to their experience by learning why food insecurity exists, who is affected, and how it can be combated. Those participating in volunteerism can also become more involved by taking on leadership roles within their organizations, furthering the mission.

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# Appendix

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT CHECKLIST

**Directions:** This resource is designed to help institutions think about community engaged activities and the terms that describe them. To use this form, review the following statements and check off those that reflect the work that you are currently doing. Then, using the key on the following pages, review the terms that most align with your activity. For more information about definitions and their sources, please refer to the University of Delaware publication, “Community Engagement Terms and Meanings: A Deeper Dive into Definitions.”

- Is or can the service be provided by an individual, not an organization?
- Will the results lead to the direct benefit of the community?
- Is there NO requirement for reflection or continued involvement over time?
- Does the activity incorporate curriculum with service opportunities for students?
- Could the activity be considered as social entrepreneurship?
- Do community partners receive a concrete benefit from student work?
- Is the community involved in multiple aspects of the work including during the final stage of the activity? (Planning, dissemination of results, performance, etc.) Is the community involved in the planning, implementation and final stages of the activity? (Dissemination of results, performance, etc.)
- Is post-service reflection from students required?
- Are services, expertise, or knowledge being provided to a community?
- Is the activity being conducted by an institution or organization?
- Is the goal to improve quality of life for all via awareness and advocacy of a particular issue?
- Is the work reflective of a reciprocal relationship between two or more organizations?  
Note that the level of these relationships may vary; stronger reciprocity is reflective of stronger levels of engagement. Any form of reciprocity can be considered to answer this question as “yes”.
- Do communities receive a direct benefit from the activity?
- Is the goal to create stronger learning outcomes?

- Does community expertise guide decision making?
- Is research being conducted in a specified community?
- Is service uncompensated, both in terms of physical money and academic credits?
- Does the activity address a concern of the general public (large-scale issues)?
- Are community members involved in the design, development, and dissemination stages of the research process?
- Did the community identify the issue or need?
- Are university or academic/technical experts fulfilling the identified need?
- Did the community define the goal of the activity?
- Is the community partner engaged throughout the process, including the creation of the project, design, implementation, and results?
- Does the activity draw on community knowledge and experiences?
- Does the activity result in a final product with a commercial application?
- Does the work benefit a targeted community?

## CHECKLIST KEY

**Directions:** Each item is color coded to the corresponding definition on the next pages. Find which color you most often checked and that definition will match what type of work you are currently engaged in. Please note, that you may be doing several different types of work.

- Is or can the service be provided by an individual, not an organization?
- Will the results lead to the direct benefit of the community?
- Is there NO requirement for reflection or continued involvement over time?
- Does the activity incorporate curriculum with service opportunities for students?
- Could the activity be considered as social entrepreneurship?
- Do community partners receive a concrete benefit from student work?
- Is the community involved in multiple aspects of the work including during the final stage of the activity? (Planning, dissemination of results, performance, etc.)  
Is the community involved in the planning, implementation and final stages of the activity? (Dissemination of results, performance, etc.)
- Is post-service reflection from students required?
- Are services, expertise, or knowledge being provided to a community?
- Is the activity being conducted by an institution or organization?
- Is the goal to improve quality of life for all via awareness and advocacy of a particular issue?
- Is the work reflective of a reciprocal relationship between two or more organizations?  
Note that the level of these relationships may vary; stronger reciprocity is reflective of stronger levels of engagement. Any form of reciprocity can be considered to answer this question as “yes”.
- Do communities receive a direct benefit from the activity?
- Is the goal to create stronger learning outcomes?

- Does community expertise guide decision-making?
- Is research being conducted in a specified community?
- Is service uncompensated, both in terms of physical money and academic credits?
- Does the activity address a concern of the general public (large-scale issues)?
- Are community members involved in the design, development, and dissemination stages of the research process?
- Did the community identify the issue or need?
- Are university or academic/technical experts fulfilling the identified need?
- Did the community define the goal of the activity?
- Is the community partner engaged throughout the process, including the creation of the project, design, implementation, and results?
- Does the activity draw on community knowledge and experiences?
- Does the activity result in a final product with a commercial application?
- Does the work benefit a targeted community?

## CHECKLIST DEFINITIONS

The definitions below correspond to the publication, “Community Engagement Terms and Meanings: A Deeper Dive into Definitions,” which provides more detailed explanations regarding how each term is defined and the context in which it is used. In order to alter your programming to achieve more or less degrees of engagement, please consult the aforementioned publication in its entirety.

### ■ Volunteerism

Generally, refers to single instance of service, where an activity is done without monetary compensation for the good of others.

- Is or can the service be provided by an individual, not an organization?
- Is service uncompensated, both in terms of physical money and academic credits?
- Is there no requirement for reflection or continued involvement over time?

### ■ Service Learning (includes academic service learning and community-engaged teaching and learning)

A form of learning in which students work with community partners in a way that is conducive to deeper learning and reflection.

- Does the activity incorporate curriculum with service opportunities for students?
- Is the goal to create stronger learning outcomes?
- Do community partners receive a concrete benefit from student work?
- Is post-service reflection from students required?

### ■ PINK Community Outreach

Takes into account the relationship between a community and service-providing organization, but clearly notes that the relationship is one of service and awareness and not of collaboration.

- Are services, expertise, or knowledge being provided to a community?
- Is the activity being conducted by an institution or organization?

*Note: the term community outreach does not indicate a collaborative nature between partners. If the designated activity is developed from an issue or need identified by the community in question, please see community engaged services and practices.*

## ■ Civic Engagement

Promoting the quality of life in a community through political and non-political processes.

- Does the activity address a concern of the general public (large-scale issues)?
- Is the goal to improve quality of life for all via awareness and advocacy of a particular issue?

*Note: this term does not require a clear partnership with a specified community; groups may have many or few partners who are engaged at a variety of levels. In addition, it is important to note that this is not limited to political activities.*

## ■ Community Engagement

Continuum of engagement. At its heart, it is always rooted in equitable partnerships that account for unequal balances of power and resources, and in ensuring that the community partner at hand has ample opportunities to be a part of the process and share their wisdom and expertise.

- Is the work reflective of a reciprocal relationship between two or more organizations? Note that the level of these relationships may vary; stronger reciprocity is reflective of stronger levels of engagement. Any form of reciprocity can be considered to answer this question as “yes”.
- Does the work benefit a targeted community?
- Is the community partner engaged throughout the process, including the creation of the project, design, implementation, and results?
- Does community expertise guide decision-making?

*Note: these terms are further specifications of community engagement.*

## ■ Community-based research

Involves participation and collaboration with community partners at all steps of the process and a result that will help the community in an area of need.

- Is research being conducted in a specified community?
- Will the results lead to the direct benefit of the community?
- Are community members involved in the design, development, and dissemination stages of the research process?

### ■ Community-engaged services and practices

Associated with the use of university expertise to address specific issues (ad hoc or long-term) identified by individuals, organizations, or communities.

- Did the community identify the issue or need?
- Are university or academic/technical experts fulfilling the identified need?

### ■ Community-engaged research and creative activities

A continuation of collaboration between the institution and their community partners is identified, via research or creative activities. In particular, the community should be defining the goal of the project and be involved in the execution of the creative activity or in the dissemination of results of research.

- Did the community define the goal of the activity?
- Is the community involved in multiple aspects of the work including during the final stage of the activity? (Planning, dissemination of results, performance, etc.)
- Does the activity draw on community knowledge and experiences?

### ■ Community-engaged commercialized activities

Include licenses, patents, copyrights, inventions, and other forms of social entrepreneurship that benefits the public.

- Does the activity result in a final product with a commercial application?
- Could the activity be considered as social entrepreneurship?
- Do communities receive a direct benefit from the activity?
- Note: minimal levels of community involvement are required for this designation.







# Community Engagement Terms and Meanings

A DEEPER DIVE INTO DEFINITIONS



Center for Research in  
Education & Social Policy