



Toward Decolonizing Community Campus Partnerships

**A Working Paper for Community First: Impacts of Community
Engagement**

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Community First: Impacts of Community Engagement (CFICE), a major SSHRC-funded project, aims to strengthen Canadian communities through action research on best practices of community-campus engagement. We ask how community-campus partnerships can be done to maximize the value created for non-profit, community based organizations in four key areas: poverty, community food security, community environmental sustainability, and reducing violence against women.

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Toward Decolonizing Community Campus Partnerships: A Working Paper for Community First: Impacts of Community Engagement

Since its establishment in 2012, Community First: Impacts of Community Engagement (CFICE) has focused on strengthening the ability of Canadian non-profits, universities, colleges and funding agencies to build more resilient communities. This pan-Canadian action research project has drawn from a social and environmental justice framework, leading participants (academic/community researchers and practitioners) to focus on the power relationships that create conditions of inequity and oppression. These issues include the impacts of patriarchy, capitalism, and racialization on individuals and societies more broadly. While many Hub projects have sought to address these structural impacts in Phase I of CFICE, our collective research has highlighted the need to focus on colonialism as a distinct but foundational structure of oppression. In the context of a settler colony such as Canada it is particularly important to understand and challenge the ways that our worldviews and practices have been shaped by and often reinforce colonial processes. Lawrence and Dua (2005) explain that settler colonialism in North America has been “maintained through policies of direct extermination, displacement, or assimilation . . . to ensure that Indigenous peoples ultimately disappear as peoples, so that settler nations can seamlessly take their place” (123). Colonial structures and relationships are reproduced in everyday practices including through research, teaching and community work.

This historical insight requires not only that we better understand and engage with how community-campus engagement (CCE), but to focus on how we might move towards and adopt a *decolonizing* framework. We recognize that settler colonialism in Canada is deeply intertwined with struggles against poverty, racism, corporate-led industrial food systems, violence against women, and ecological degradation. Decolonization, however, “offers a different perspective to human and civil rights based approaches to justice, an unsettling one, rather than a complementary one” (Tuck and Yang 2012, 36). It demands Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty, underlining the ways that ‘no justice can happen on stolen land.’ Below, we briefly review the concept of CCE in relation to social/environmental justice and decolonization. We conclude with some key questions for consideration relating to how decolonization might be part of working with diverse communities, but also how it might change the ways we currently engage with CCE. Although this framework may not be adopted by CFICE as a whole at this point in the project, we recommend that it be enacted through the Phase II working group structure within particular parts of our projects and with interested partners. From there, the learnings can be shared more broadly and possibly set the groundwork towards decolonizing CCE in our future work.

Community Campus Engagement and Social and Environmental Justice

At the most basic level, CCE can be broadly described as a situation in which campus-based actors (including post-secondary students, postdoctoral fellows, instructors, professors and their institutions) work in partnership with practitioners in various sectors of the broader civil



society (including the private, public and non-profit sectors, social movements and Indigenous communities). Through our collective work within CFICE, we have identified that CCE can entail a wide range of motivations, objectives and goals. In particular, many CCE partnerships are not based in social and environmental justice frameworks and do not challenge systems of inequality or endeavour to change social and ecological systems (McBride et al. 2006; Butin 2010; Butcher et al. 2011). While we acknowledge that these types of CCE can still have value for research, teaching and the work of non-profit organizations, we also recognize that these types of CCE can reinforce the status quo and may risk reproducing social inequities and environmental challenges (Dempsey 2010; Mitchell et al. 2012).

CCE partnerships that adopt transformative approaches have the potential to function as a democratizing and counter-normative methodology that supports social and environmental change by addressing structural inequities in partnership with community-based practitioners (Howard 1998; Mitchell 2008; Swords and Kiely 2010). This type of transformational CCE has the potential to build trusting and respectful relationships, examines and aims to change “the histories, social relations, and conditions that structure groups unequally” (Verjee 2012, 66), and “create[s] new structures of engagement” (Sheridan and Jacobi 2014, 13). Despite the benefits of these critical approaches to community-campus partnerships, few CCE projects have addressed the ways that teaching and research is deeply implicated in forms of colonialism and the ways that universities have historically been institutions of power (or more accurately, misuse of power). When done well, CCE relationships that do address the ongoing colonial context can collaboratively enhance knowledge and enact change.

Decolonization

Decolonization is an unsettling process that aims to bring about “the repatriation of Indigenous land and life” (Tuck and Yang 2012, 1) centering everyday acts of Indigenous resistance and resurgence (Corntassel 2012; see also Simpson 2011). It is a process through which Indigenous peoples are self-determining, removing themselves from the control of the Canadian nation-state (Alfred 1999; Manuel and Derrickson 2015). At the heart of decolonization are the relationship(s) between people and land and that everything flows from that (Lowman and Barker, 2015). Reimagining relationships with land through a decolonial lens demands that we change how we think about and engage with land and how we structure our laws, policies and politics in relation to land (see Smith 2012; Tuck and Yang 2012; Walia 2012; Lowman and Barker 2015). Furthermore, this changing relationship must go beyond symbolic engagement, as land must be repatriated, settler property rights challenged, and the dominant property regime fundamentally changed. How we begin to engage in these processes will take different forms depending on our subject position within the colonial state. For example, as academics and community-based settler practitioners, we might begin by asking the question “whose traditional land are [we] on?” (Haig-Brown 2009, 4; see also Lowman and Barker 2015, 114), recognizing that settler colonialism is an ongoing structure (Wolfe 2006) and a distinct, but intersecting system of oppression (Lawrence and Dua, 2005; Byrd 2011; Smith 2012).



For settlers, the importance of self-education around the Canadian colonial project and understanding how our everyday practices (e.g. research, teaching, activism) are inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism is a necessary step towards decolonization. However, decolonization cannot be realized unless this self-education results in action that forwards Indigenous resurgence and nationhood. Even when this type of understanding is combined with action, settlers and academics must still “call into question the (im)possibility of non-Indigenous people and people in a university doing this work in light of the histories of research and universities’ ongoing contributions to colonization” (Haig-Brown 2006, cited in Reinsborough and Barndt 2010). For settlers, decolonization means learning to live with the discomfort that results from the uncertainty of not knowing what the end result of a genuine shift to decolonization and justice might be. Further, it involves discouraging a false solidarity that is founded in guilt (yet another way of distancing people from one another) rather than real respect. Importantly, decolonization “is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools” and it is “not an approximation of other experiences of oppression” (Tuck and Yang 2012, 3) – e.g., a generic term for struggle against oppressive conditions and outcomes in the university or broader community. In summary, decolonization is a process that is based on, and works to realize Indigenous resurgence, self-determination, sovereignty, and nationhood, the repatriation of Indigenous land, and the reimagining of all our relationships to land.

Next Steps

Addressing these issues is not only a process between the Canadian state, settler identity and Indigenous peoples. According to Wallace (2013), the conflict is “a broken relationship that is also inherently embedded in local context – in communities and between people” (8). Desire to transform these conflicts and mend relationships is what drives *decolonizing community-campus engagement*.

Some questions for consideration:

1. How does decolonization as a framework strengthen CCE?
2. How might CCE forward a decolonial agenda (e.g. support Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination, identify and challenge ongoing processes of settler colonialism)?
3. Why are we, as CCE practitioners, adopting a decolonizing framework? What are our intentions in doing so? What cautions do we need to be aware of? How can we ensure we are not appropriating or co-opting the language of decolonization without enacting it?
4. How will CCE practitioners begin (or continue) to self-educate and educate others in relation to colonialism, decolonization, and Indigenous resurgence?
5. How can academics participate in CCE in light of the histories of research and universities’ ongoing contributions to colonization?
6. How can projects (like CFICE) deal with the ‘unsettling’ and discomfort that is necessary for this type of work?



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