

Sustaining Community Partnerships: The Role of Ethical Oversight

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Abstract

This paper develops an ethical framework to enhance community engagement and community-based learning, aiming for sustainable partnerships between institutions and communities. Social issues and weakened partnerships often result from inadequate ethical standards in institutional practices. Many institutions lack ethics boards to uphold respect and foster intercultural relationships. Establishing a relationship is only the first step; its long-term success requires ongoing commitment. Recent literature shows community engagement initiatives often neglect rigorous ethical frameworks. Thus, institutions need dedicated ethics committees for vetting community-based endeavors, such as service-learning and educational fieldwork. This need is akin to Institutional Review Boards overseeing research. This paper proposes the Ethical Community Engagement Learning (ECBEL) framework as a comprehensive tool for embedding ethical considerations into community engagement initiatives. By ensuring high ethical standards, the ECBEL framework fosters trust, respect, and mutual benefit among all stakeholders.

Key Words

ethics committees, community-based learning, sustainable partnerships, institutional frameworks, engagement standards

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The foundation of cooperative efforts between academic institutions and the larger society is community engagement, which aims to develop long-lasting relationships and tackle urgent social challenges. Ethical issues are fundamental to successful community participation and have a significant impact on the nature and results of these collaborations. In this paper, I look at the fundamentals of community involvement and stress the importance of ethics to its effectiveness and influence. Upon reviewing recent research on community engagement programs, I contend that ethical practices in field trip and community-based collaborations have received progressively less attention from academics. With

focus towards a conceptualized ethical community-based engagement learning (ECBEL) framework, I illustrate the importance of integrating ethics boards in K-20 education systems which is akin to the IRB (Institutional Review Board) established for research ethics standards.

Community engagement is based on collaborative activity aimed at tackling shared concerns and improving collective well-being (Evans, 2008, Hammersley, 2012, Ai, 2021). Institutions collaborate with communities on a variety of programs, including service-learning projects and community-based research (Eyler & Gyles, 1999, Wade, 2008, Rodríguez-Zurita, Jaya-Montalvo, Moreira-Arboled,

Raya-Diez, & Carrión-Mero, 2024). However, the ethical components of these engagements are sometimes disregarded or badly addressed, posing possible obstacles and risks such as social concerns and even the loss of long-term collaborations (Hartman et al., 2023, p. 105; Scheepers et al., 2023). To clarify the concepts of community-based learning and community engagement learning, the following sections define and distinguish the related terms: community-based learning, community engagement learning, community service, and community-based research.

Community-based learning describes educational experiences that integrate significant community engagement with academic coursework. Students apply their academic knowledge and skills to address real-world challenges in collaboration with community organizations or stakeholders. This approach emphasizes the reciprocal exchange of knowledge and resources between students and the community, fostering mutual benefit. Structured activities such as service-learning projects, internships, fieldwork, or practicums are typical components, designed to enhance both student learning and community development (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Furco, 1996, p.4).

Community engagement learning encompasses a broader spectrum of educational activities involving interaction and collaboration with communities beyond the classroom. It prioritizes active participation, relationship-building, and collaborative efforts to address shared goals or concerns. Initiatives under this approach include service-learning, civic engagement projects, community-based research, volunteer work, and outreach activities. The focus remains on fostering reciprocal partnerships, promoting social responsibility among students, and addressing community needs or issues (Jacoby, 2015, p. 167; Saltmarsh & Zlotkowski, 2011, p. 31).

Community service differs from community-based and engagement learning in its emphasis on volunteering or providing aid without necessarily incorporating academic curriculum or learning objectives. Examples include volunteering at a local

shelter, participating in charity events, or organizing neighborhood cleanups. Unlike the other approaches, community service is often unrelated to academic credit or structured learning outcomes. While it benefits both the community and the individual, it may not involve systematic reflection or integration with academic content (Lounsbury & Pollack, 2001).

Community-based research is a collaborative approach to inquiry that engages academic researchers and community members to address local concerns or priorities. It emphasizes equitable partnerships, collaborative decision-making, and the co-creation of knowledge to foster social transformation and policy development. This methodology combines academic research techniques with community insights to produce meaningful solutions or insights. Community-based research highlights community empowerment through participatory data collection, analysis, and dissemination of findings to inform decision-making and advocacy (Israel et al., 1998; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008).

It is crucial to keep in mind that the purpose of this study is to counter the current trend of community-based learning and community engagement programs not giving enough consideration to ethical practices. This is not to be confused with community-based research ethics protocols, which have been given fair consideration by the IRB (Institutional Review Boards) over the years. For the sake of this research, I therefore combine the two ideas under the heading of Community-Based Engagement Learning (CBEL). Ethics in CBEL encompass a spectrum of principles and practices that guide interactions, decision-making processes, and outcomes. Scholars have emphasized the importance of ethical frameworks in fostering equitable partnerships, respecting diverse perspectives, and promoting social justice within community contexts (Wendler, 2012; Doran et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2019). Without robust ethical guidelines, community-based engagements run the risk of perpetuating power imbalances, tokenism, and cultural insensitivity, thereby undermining their intended goals (Hartman & Kiely, 2014). Recent trends

in community-based frameworks and study abroad programs have revealed a concerning tendency to prioritize outcomes over ethical considerations. For example, we can see higher institutions and K-12 schools plan community-based programs and field trips within and outside America. Often, these students visit these low economic communities and third-world nations with savior mentalities. They come in with the idea of what they want to do for these communities without taking time to study, research, and ask what those communities want. Afterwards, they take their pictures, show them off on social media without their consent and display them as trophies. While these initiatives aim to provide immersive learning experiences and foster cross-cultural understanding, the ethical dimensions of engagement often receive insufficient attention (Hartman et al., 2023, p. 36). Here lies the problem where oversight can have profound consequences, ranging from unintended harm to strained community relations and diminished trust (Danley & Christiansen, 2019).

In 2024, the United States is witnessing more diversity than ever, which poses new challenges with emerging social issues among communities and institutions. The neglect of ethics in community-based engagement learning may pose significant challenges for addressing social issues and advancing community development initiatives. Without a robust ethical framework in place, well-intentioned efforts may inadvertently compound existing inequalities, perpetuate stereotypes, and fail to empower marginalized communities (Raji et al., 2020). Moreover, the absence of ethical oversight mechanisms leaves institutions vulnerable to criticism and undermines their credibility as responsible partners in community endeavors. However, by giving in-depth attention to the ethical dimensions of CBEL and partnerships, institutions can enhance the quality and impact of their engagements. Ethical frameworks provide a foundation for building trust, fostering meaningful dialogue, and co-creating solutions that reflect the needs and aspirations of communities (Hartman et al., 2023, p. 85). Moreover, a commitment to ethics strengthens institutions' capacity for social responsibility,

enhances accountability, and contributes to the development of sustainable partnerships grounded in mutual respect and reciprocity.

In light of these considerations, this paper proposes an Ethical Community-Based Engagement Learning (ECBEL) framework designed to integrate ethical principles into community engagement and partnership frameworks. By institutionalizing ethical review processes akin to Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) for research, institutions can ensure that their community-based engagement programs are guided by principles of justice, equity, and integrity, thus maximizing their positive impact on society.

Development of ECBEL Components

This section provides an overview of the Ethical Community-Based Engagement and Learning (ECBEL) framework, including its components and a review of the literature that supports its conceptual foundation. The introduction of this paper emphasized the importance of integrating ethical frameworks into Community-Based Engagement and Learning (CBEL) initiatives to foster meaningful collaborations between institutions and communities. Building on this foundation, the ECBEL framework draws upon existing theoretical models and insights gained from diverse global experiences. It identifies key elements of ethical partnerships that contribute to the establishment of sustainable and impactful relationships in an increasingly interconnected and diverse world.

The table below presents the foundational elements of the ECBEL framework, structured into three essential dimensions: Leadership, Operation, and Partnership. These dimensions encompass key principles and practices that promote ethical and impactful community engagement, such as fairness, transparency, reciprocal practices, and collaborative decision-making. Together, they provide actionable guidelines for fostering equitable, sustainable, and mutually beneficial relationships between institutions and communities.

Community engagement lies at the heart of collaborative efforts between academic institutions and society, addressing shared concerns and

enhancing collective well-being (Evans, 2008; Hammersley, 2012; Rodríguez-Zurita et al., 2024). By embedding ethical principles into these collaborations, institutions can mitigate risks such as power imbalances and cultural insensitivity while building trust and respect with community partners (Hartman et al., 2023; Scheepers et al., 2023).

The ECBEL framework organizes its components into three critical categories:

1. **Leadership**, which ensures fairness, transparency, and the analysis of power dynamics to guide ethical decision-making.
2. **Operation**, focusing on cross-cultural comparisons, social justice, and community consent to create inclusive and effective engagement strategies.
3. **Partnership**, emphasizing reciprocal practices, collaborative decision-making, and prioritizing community well-being and agency for sustainable outcomes.

These dimensions reflect the foundational requirements for successful community-based engagement initiatives, providing a roadmap for ethical practice and long-term impact (Wade, 2008).

Table

Components of the ECBEL Framework

Leadership of ECBEL	Operations of ECBEL	Partnership of ECBEL
Fairness	Cross-Cultural Comparison	Reciprocal Practices
Transparency	Social Justice	Inter- & Trans-Disciplinary Approaches
Analysis of Power Dynamics	Autonomy	Collaborative Decision-Making
Shared Value Proposition	Consent-Valuing	Solidarity & Prioritizing
Goals & Social Responsibility	Environmental Ethics	Wellbeing, Safety, & Agency
Reflection on Responses	Reflection on Findings	Reflection on Results

Literature Review

Community engagement has become increasingly recognized as a vital component of educational initiatives, social research, and civic participation. Within and outside the classroom, the American population is changing as a result of increased inter racial marriages, immigration, and other forms of diversity. For CBEL initiatives to be successful and sustainable, giving adequate attention to the ethical side is crucial. CBEL initiatives play a crucial role in fostering collaborative partnerships between educational institutions and diverse communities. These initiatives aim to address social issues, promote civic participation, and facilitate reciprocal learning experiences. An important part of community engagement efforts are ethical frameworks that guide the interactions, decision-making processes, and outcomes of these initiatives. Drawing from recent literature, this review examines the diverse ethical frameworks employed in community engagement learning initiatives and explores their implications for practice.

Ethical Principles in Community Engagement

A variety of ethical principles inform community engagement learning initiatives, reflecting the values of respect, reciprocity, social justice, and cultural humility. Mayer (2016) emphasizes the significance of autonomy in community engagement learning initiatives. Their study delves into the concept of autonomy within the context of decision-making processes in community projects. By recognizing and respecting the autonomy of community members, educational institutions can empower individuals to have agency over their own lives and contribute meaningfully to the development and implementation of initiatives that affect them directly. Mayer's research underscores the importance of inclusive and participatory approaches that prioritize the voices and choices of community stakeholders. Tervalon & Murray-García (1998) introduce the concept of cultural humility as a framework for fostering respectful and equitable cross-cultural interactions. Their seminal work explores the importance of self-reflection,

openness, and lifelong learning in navigating cultural differences and power dynamics. By practicing cultural humility, educators and community partners can engage in meaningful dialogue, challenge stereotypes, and build trust and rapport with diverse communities. Tervalon and Murray-García's research highlights the role of humility in promoting mutual understanding and collaboration across cultural boundaries.

Memon et al. (2021) shed light on the value of cross-cultural comparisons in community engagement learning initiatives. Their study examines how comparative analysis of diverse cultural perspectives can enrich the learning experience and inform collaborative decision-making processes. By exploring the similarities and differences in beliefs, values, and practices across different communities, educators and students can gain deeper insights into the complexities of social issues and develop more inclusive and culturally responsive approaches to addressing them. The researchers underscored the transformative potential of cross-cultural learning experiences in fostering mutual understanding and collaboration among diverse stakeholders. These studies collectively emphasize the importance of ethical principles such as autonomy, cultural humility, and cross-cultural understanding in community engagement learning initiatives. By integrating these principles into educational practices, stakeholders can promote respect, reciprocity, and social justice in their interactions with diverse communities, ultimately contributing to more equitable and sustainable partnerships and positive social change.

Despite the emphasis on ethical principles, community engagement initiatives continue to face challenges related to power dynamics, cultural differences, and systemic inequities. For example, studies by Andres et al., (2020) and Hartman et al. (2023) have documented instances where power imbalances and institutional biases have undermined the ethical integrity of community engagement projects. Moreover, the lack of clear guidelines and oversight mechanisms, as noted by Mikesell et al., (2013), can pose risks to the ethical conduct of such initiatives. A comparative analysis of CBEL initiatives

reveals both similarities and differences in the ethical frameworks employed. While some initiatives prioritize collaborative decision-making and reciprocal practices, others may focus more on top-down approaches or tokenistic forms of participation. Studies by Perez Jolles et al. (2022) and Boston et al. (2023) highlight the importance of co-creation and co-learning processes that empower community members as equal partners in the engagement process. In contrast, research by McCowan (2018) raises concerns about the instrumentalization of community engagement for institutional agendas, calling for greater attention to ethical considerations and power dynamics.

The findings of this literature review offer critical insights for the design, implementation, and evaluation of community engagement learning initiatives. To uphold the ethical integrity of such initiatives, stakeholders must prioritize principles of respect, reciprocity, and social justice in their practices. Achieving this requires ongoing dialogue, reflection, and collaboration among educational institutions, community partners, and other stakeholders. Furthermore, the establishment of ethics boards or oversight committees, as recommended by Smith and Brown (2019), can provide essential guidance and accountability, ensuring that community engagement efforts adhere to ethical standards. Building on these insights, it is essential to examine how these ethical principles are applied in real-world contexts through case studies. Case studies, as illustrative narratives, are powerful tools for knowledge transfer because they transform abstract concepts into concrete, relatable examples. They contextualize theoretical ideas, making them accessible to a broader audience and fostering a deeper understanding (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

For this paper, I have selected case studies that represent two contrasting perspectives: initiatives widely regarded as successful, and others criticized for their ethical shortcomings. By juxtaposing these examples, I aim to illustrate how the integration of respect, reciprocity, and social justice can lead to sustainable and impactful community engagement initiatives. These examples underscore the importance

of the ECBEL framework in education, highlighting its relevance in fostering ethical and meaningful collaboration. I hope this comparison will illuminate the need for ECBEL and its application in education.

Case Studies of Community Engagement Initiatives

Successful Initiative: The Harlem Children's Zone

The Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) exemplifies successful community engagement and intervention in the United States. Founded in 1997 by Geoffrey Canada, HCZ aims to break the cycle of generational poverty in Central Harlem, New York, through a holistic, community-centered approach. Its network of programs spans early childhood education, health, social services, and college preparation, all designed to create a supportive environment for children and families to thrive (Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Tough, 2009).

A cornerstone of HCZ's approach is *The Baby College*, a nine-week workshop series for parents and caregivers of children up to three years old. This program focuses on child development, health, and effective parenting strategies, illustrating HCZ's commitment to collaborative decision-making and community involvement. By actively engaging stakeholders through surveys, focus groups, and open dialogues, HCZ tailored the program to meet the cultural and practical needs of the community (Dobbie & Fryer, 2011). The Baby College fosters a reciprocal exchange of knowledge, empowering parents to share their experiences and insights, thereby strengthening community bonds and validating their voices (Hartman et al., 2023). HCZ's programs exemplify the principles of reciprocal engagement and collaborative decision-making central to the ECBEL framework. By adopting a "cradle-to-college" approach, HCZ ensures continuity in support, emphasizing equity, empowerment, and sustainability. For instance, programs like The Baby College® are co-designed with community input, ensuring they remain relevant and culturally attuned (Wade, 2008; Eyer & Giles, 1999).

The success of HCZ is evident in measurable outcomes, such as improved academic performance, higher high school graduation rates, and increased

college enrollment among participating children (Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Tough, 2009). This example highlights the transformative potential of ethically grounded, community-centered practices in driving sustainable social change.

Successful Initiative: The Mondragon Corporation

The Mondragon Corporation, based in the Basque region of Spain, is a globally recognized example of community engagement through cooperative business practices. Established in 1956, Mondragon has grown into one of the world's largest cooperative enterprises, encompassing industries from manufacturing to retail. Its ethical approach is rooted in worker ownership, democratic governance, and community reinvestment, aligning closely with the ECBEL framework (Whyte & Whyte, 1991; Cheney, 1999).

Central to Mondragon's success is its democratic decision-making structure, where workers actively participate in shaping organizational policies. This inclusive governance ensures the interests of both employees, and the broader community are prioritized. Continuous education and professional development are integral to Mondragon's culture, fostering respect, competence, and mutual growth (Whyte & Whyte, 1991). Mondragon's reinvestment strategy extends beyond financial contributions, with profits allocated to local infrastructure projects, small business development, and renewable energy initiatives. These efforts enhance economic resilience, support sustainability, and build a collective sense of ownership within the community (Cheney, 1999; Hartman et al., 2023).

The success of HCZ and Mondragon Corporation demonstrates the principles that align with the ECBEL framework rather than direct application of the framework itself. These cases illustrate how adopting ECBEL principles—such as democratic participation, reciprocal practices, and long-term sustainability—can guide similar collaborations to achieve ethical and impactful outcomes. By drawing on these examples, the ECBEL framework provides a theoretical foundation for structuring successful community engagement initiatives. However, while

these successful community partnerships may demonstrate the transformative potential of ethically grounded engagement, volunteerism remains a prominent approach for educational institutions initiating community-based work (Mitchell, 2008; Stukas et al., 2015; Sanberg et al., 2024). Volunteerism is often confused with service-learning—a curriculum-based strategy that incorporates structured reflection and mutual learning objectives. This confusion has limited opportunities for deeper, more sustainable collaboration between institutions and communities. Unlike service-learning, which integrates academic content with meaningful community impact to foster mutual growth (Eyler & Giles, 1999), traditional volunteerism frequently lacks mechanisms for reciprocal benefit and reflection. While well-intentioned, it often overlooks these aspects, leading to ethical oversights, such as power imbalances, cultural insensitivity, and unsustainable practices. Examining volunteerism in this context aims not to discredit its value but to raise awareness of its recurring challenges and align it with the principles of the ECBEL framework.

Volunteerism operates at the intersection of privilege and vulnerability, offering a valuable lens to explore how community engagement initiatives can unintentionally cause harm. As Mitchell (2008) observes, volunteerism without a critical approach risks perpetuating "charity-oriented" engagement rather than fostering meaningful, reciprocal relationships. Educational institutions often position volunteerism as a gateway to civic engagement, yet it has faced scrutiny for its reliance on short-term interventions and lack of accountability (Hartman, Paris, & Blache-Cohen, 2014). For example, international volunteer programs may attract privileged participants who, though well-meaning, inadvertently foster dependency or a "savior complex" rather than empowering local stakeholders (Heron, 2007).

This section highlights these critiques to propose pathways for improvement, ensuring that volunteer efforts align with equity, sustainability, and mutual respect. By focusing on volunteerism, we can better bridge the gap between intention and impact, transitioning it from a charity-oriented practice to one

that fosters mutual growth and respect in line with the ECBEL framework.

Case Studies: Ethical Challenges in Practice

Orphanage Volunteering in Cambodia

A prominent example of ethical challenges in volunteerism is orphanage volunteering in Cambodia. Many Western volunteers, motivated by altruistic intentions, travel to work in orphanages, believing they are making a difference in vulnerable children's lives. However, investigations reveal that some orphanages exploit children to attract donations and volunteers, placing non-orphans in these institutions to generate income (Reas, 2015). This practice disrupts children's lives and attachment patterns, causing emotional harm.

Organizations like UNICEF and Save the Children advocate for community-based care and family reunification, prioritizing the long-term well-being and rights of children over short-term volunteer desires. This shift reflects the ECBEL framework's emphasis on sustainable, ethical engagement.

Medical Volunteering in Haiti

The influx of medical volunteers after Haiti's 2010 earthquake highlights another ethical challenge. While volunteers provided emergency care, some lacked training for disaster response, resulting in suboptimal care or harm. Moreover, short-term volunteers overshadowed the need for sustainable healthcare infrastructure and capacity building for local providers (Maki et al., 2008).

This case emphasizes the importance of aligning volunteer efforts with local community needs and capabilities. It also underscores the ECBEL framework's focus on long-term, reciprocal partnerships.

Construction Volunteering in Honduras

In Honduras, volunteer groups often engage in building infrastructure. However, insufficient involvement of local communities in project planning has led to structures that are unused or poorly

maintained because they fail to address community priorities (Palacios, 2010).

This critique highlights the need for community-based approaches where local voices are central to decision-making. The ECBEL framework stresses the importance of collaboration and respect for local expertise to ensure culturally appropriate and sustainable outcomes.

These critiques of volunteerism provide valuable lessons for ethical community engagement. They underscore the need for reciprocal practices, collaborative decision-making, and long-term sustainability—principles central to the ECBEL framework. By addressing these challenges, the framework offers a pathway to more effective and ethical engagement initiatives. The next section will explore case studies that exemplify these principles in action.

Operationalizing the (ECBEL) framework

Operationalizing a framework involves translating its principles into actionable strategies and practices aimed at fostering ethical partnerships between institutions and communities (Mayer, 2016). Within the ECBEL framework, leadership plays a pivotal role in cultivating fairness, transparency, and a critical analysis of power dynamics (Andres et al., 2020). This leadership entails prioritizing fairness through the facilitation of equitable participation and decision-making processes, alongside the promotion of inclusivity and justice (Scheepers et al., 2023). Transparency serves as a cornerstone within the ECBEL framework, upheld through clear communication and information-sharing channels, which foster trust and accountability among stakeholders (Firestone et al., 2018). Leadership also emphasizes a shared value proposition, ensuring that partnerships deliver mutual benefits by aligning institutional goals with community needs. For example, collaborative projects should reflect the priorities of all stakeholders, fostering trust and a sense of shared ownership. Additionally, effective leadership incorporates goals and social responsibility, setting objectives that advance societal

well-being, such as reducing inequalities or promoting sustainable development.

An essential aspect of this framework involves the analysis of power dynamics, crucial for identifying and addressing disparities in access, representation, and decision-making authority (Hartman et al., 2023, p. 84). Through such analysis, power imbalances can be mitigated, shared value can be cultivated, and partnerships can be guided by ethically aligned goals that promote inclusiveness, mutual growth, and equitable outcomes.

In the operation of ECBEL initiatives, various key components synergistically contribute to their effectiveness. Cross-cultural comparisons play a pivotal role in facilitating mutual understanding and collaboration across diverse communities, thereby fostering dialogue and the exchange of experiences (Memon et al., 2021). As these initiatives unfold, social justice emerges as a central focus, with concerted efforts aimed at addressing systemic inequalities and advocating for equitable access to resources and opportunities. This commitment to social justice underscores the importance of standing in solidarity with partnering communities, aligning with their just causes to foster trust and mutual respect. Additionally, autonomy represents a fundamental principle upheld throughout the engagement process, recognizing and honoring the right of community members to self-determination and decision-making. Concurrently, consent-valuing as described by Ai (2021) as the idea of valuing the consent of community partners before taking engagement steps ensures that participants are afforded the opportunity to provide informed consent and voluntarily engage in activities, thereby promoting ethical engagement practices. Furthermore, environmental ethics are seamlessly integrated into ECBEL initiatives to promote sustainability and stewardship of natural resources. These initiatives are characterized by addressing environmental challenges and advancing ecological sustainability, contributing to the broader goals of responsible community engagement (Reynolds & Sariola, 2018).

Partnerships within the ECBEL framework epitomize collaborative efforts characterized by reciprocal practices, interdisciplinary approaches, collaborative decision-making, solidarity, and prioritization of community wellbeing, safety, and agency. These partnerships, as elucidated by Hammersley (2012), are rooted in reciprocal practices that foster mutual respect, trust, and collaboration between institutions and communities, thereby facilitating shared learning and growth. Additionally, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches, drawing on diverse perspectives and expertise, are employed to effectively address complex social challenges, promoting holistic solutions. Collaborative decision-making, another cornerstone of ECBEL partnerships, ensures the active involvement of all stakeholders in shaping the direction and implementation of initiatives, thereby reflecting the

genuine needs and priorities of the community. Furthermore, solidarity and prioritization underscore a commitment to marginalized and vulnerable communities, advocating for their rights, wellbeing, and empowerment to contribute positively to societal change, as noted by Shaw and Howard (2020). Finally, the prioritization of community wellbeing, safety, and agency underscores a fundamental principle within ECBEL partnerships, ensuring that participants' voices are not only heard but also respected throughout the engagement process. This empowerment enables individuals to take ownership of their experiences and actively contribute to positive change within their communities (Firestone et al., 2018).

While putting this framework into usage, it is important to note the importance of reflection in the process. Reflection plays a crucial role in each category of the ECBEL framework, contributing to ongoing

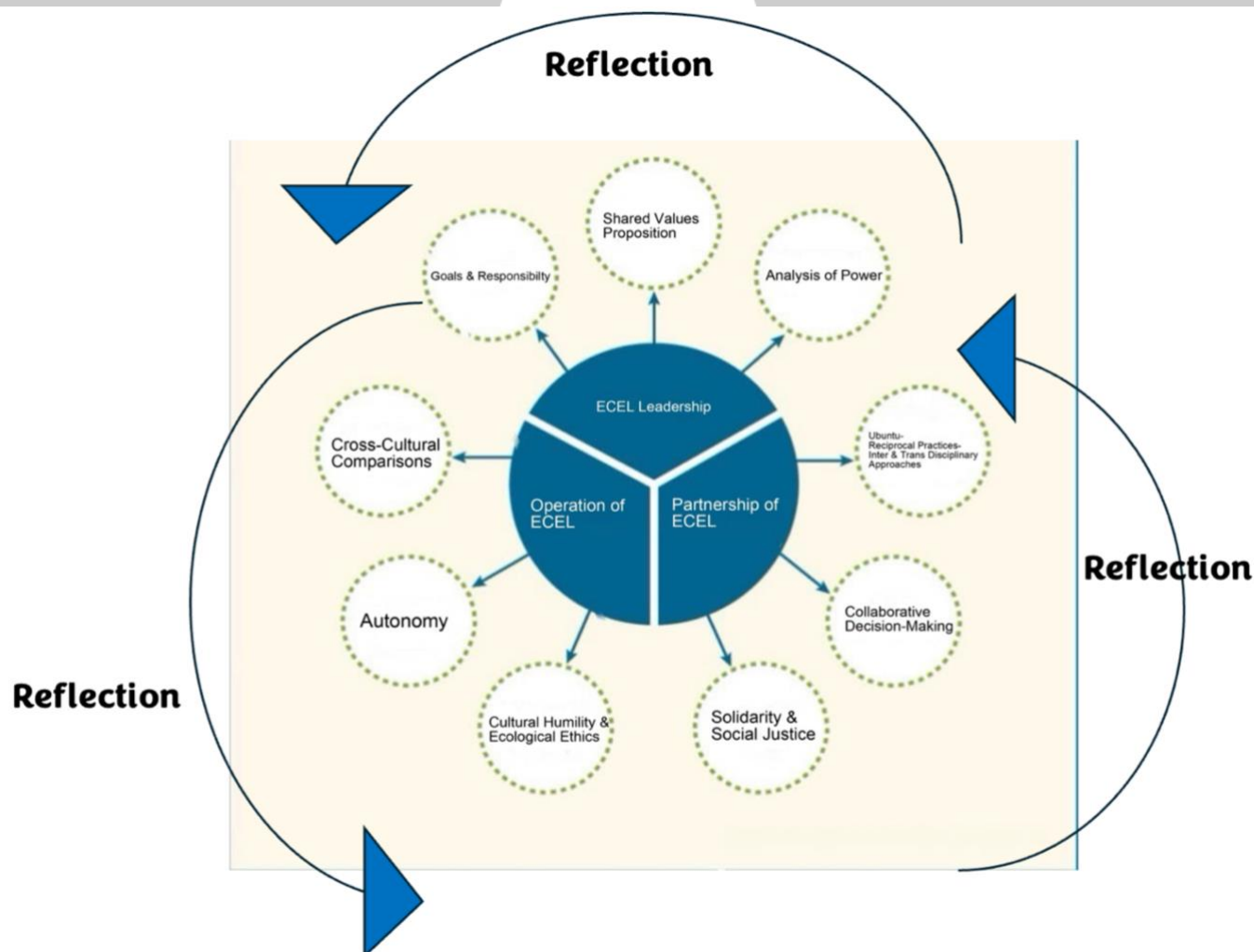


Figure: The ECBEL Framework

learning, improvement, and ethical practice. In the leadership aspect of ECBEL, reflection enables institutional leaders (teachers or boards) to critically assess their own biases, assumptions, and behaviors, fostering self-awareness and humility (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998). By reflecting on their leadership practices, leaders can identify areas for growth and development, as well as potential areas of ethical concern. This self-reflection fosters a culture of continuous improvement and accountability, where leaders actively engage in dialogue and feedback processes to enhance their ethical leadership capacity (Scheepers et al., 2023). Within the operational dimension of ECBEL, reflection plays a central role in facilitating learning and growth among participants. Through reflective exercises and discussions, participants can critically examine their own beliefs, values, and experiences, as well as their interactions with others (Memon et al., 2021). This process of self-reflection fosters empathy, cultural competence, and humility, enabling participants to develop a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives and experiences. Additionally, reflection allows participants to identify ethical dilemmas or challenges that may arise during community engagement activities, empowering them to make informed decisions and navigate complex ethical issues (Hartman et al., 2023).

In the partnership component of ECBEL, reflection serves as a catalyst for collaboration, communication, and collective action. By engaging in reflective dialogue with community members and stakeholders, institutions can build trust, foster mutual understanding, and co-create solutions to shared challenges (Wendler, 2012). Reflection enables partners to critically evaluate the impact of their actions and decisions on the community, identify areas for improvement, and adapt their approaches accordingly (Hartman & Kiely, 2014). Furthermore, reflection promotes transparency, accountability, and shared responsibility, ensuring that partnerships are grounded in ethical principles and aligned with the needs and priorities of the community.

Overall, reflection is integral to the ECBEL framework, providing a mechanism for individuals and institutions to engage in critical self-assessment, dialogue, and learning. By incorporating reflection into each dimension of the framework, institutions can cultivate ethical community-based partnerships that promote mutual respect, collaboration, and positive social change.

In conclusion, operationalizing the ECBEL framework requires a cohesive and concerted effort to align leadership practices, operational strategies, and partnership principles with ethical values and principles. By embodying these principles in their actions and decisions, institutions and communities can cultivate ethical community-based partnerships that promote mutual respect, collaboration, and social change. To operationalize this framework effectively, institutions must adopt actionable strategies that translate these principles into practice.

Strategies for Implementing the ECBEL Framework

To ensure ethical and impactful community engagement, the following strategies should guide the implementation of the ECBEL framework:

1. **Establish Ethical Review Boards:** Similar to Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) for research, institutions should create ethics boards specifically for community engagement initiatives. These boards would oversee the planning, execution, and evaluation of Community-Based Engagement Learning (CBEL) activities to ensure ethical standards are met.
2. **Stakeholder Training and Development:** Institutions should invest in training programs for students, faculty, and community partners. Training should focus on cultural humility, ethical decision-making, and fostering reciprocal relationships.
3. **Inclusive Decision-Making Processes:** Participatory methods should be encouraged to actively involve community members in decision-making. Regular meetings, focus groups, and collaborative planning sessions

can foster trust and shared ownership of initiatives.

4. **Clear Communication Channels:** Transparent communication strategies are essential to keep all stakeholders informed and engaged. This includes regular updates, feedback mechanisms, and open dialogue forums to ensure mutual understanding and alignment.
5. **Evaluation and Feedback Loops:** Continuous evaluation processes should monitor the impact of engagement activities. Feedback from community members and other stakeholders should guide iterative improvements and address ethical concerns.

Metrics for Evaluating the ECBEL Framework

To assess the success and ethical alignment of community engagement initiatives under the ECBEL framework, the following metrics should be considered:

- **Stakeholder Satisfaction:** Surveys and interviews with community members, students, and faculty can provide insights into perceived benefits and areas for improvement.
- **Impact Assessment:** Measurable outcomes such as improvements in community wellbeing, educational progress, and social change indicators should be evaluated.
- **Participation Rates:** The level of community involvement across planning, decision-making, and implementation phases reflects inclusivity and collaboration.
- **Ethical Compliance:** Regular audits by an ethics board should ensure adherence to established standards, safeguarding the integrity of the initiatives.
- **Sustainability Indicators:** Evaluating the longevity of engagement efforts and the establishment of enduring partnerships ensures long-term mutual benefits.

Transitioning to Broader Policy Implications

The successful implementation and evaluation of the ECBEL framework require supportive policies at

institutional and broader levels. These policies ensure the sustainability and scalability of community engagement initiatives, embedding ethical standards into institutional practices.

Broader Policy Implications of the ECBEL Framework

- **Institutional Policy Changes:** Adoption of ECBEL principles may necessitate revisions in institutional policies, including mandatory ethics training for staff and students involved in CBEL activities.
- **Funding and Resource Allocation:** Dedicated funding should support the establishment and maintenance of ethics boards, as well as the training and development of stakeholders.
- **Accreditation and Accountability:** Accrediting bodies might incorporate ethical community engagement standards into their criteria, ensuring institutions are held accountable for their CBEL practices.

Potential Long-term Impact of the ECBEL Framework

The long-term impact of the ECBEL framework extends beyond immediate community engagement outcomes, promising a significant evolution in engagement practices and institutional culture. Over time, the framework is expected to lead to more refined and culturally sensitive engagement practices, as communities and institutions continuously learn from ongoing reflection and feedback. This iterative learning process will enhance the sophistication and effectiveness of engagement strategies, ensuring they are better tailored to the specific needs and contexts of each community. Furthermore, the adoption of ECBEL principles can catalyze a broader cultural shift within institutions, encouraging them to prioritize ethical considerations in all aspects of their operations. This shift not only improves the ethical landscape of the institution but also fosters a deeper commitment to responsible and sustainable practices. Consistently demonstrating ethical engagement will help institutions build and maintain long-term trust with their community partners, leading to more meaningful and impactful collaborations. Enhanced trust and strong relationships between institutions and

communities are vital for achieving sustained social and economic benefits, highlighting the transformative potential of the ECBEL framework.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Ethical Community-Based Engagement Learning (ECBEL) framework offers a comprehensive approach to fostering ethical partnerships between institutions and communities. Through its emphasis on leadership, operation, and partnership, ECBEL provides a roadmap for promoting fairness, transparency, and social responsibility in community engagement initiatives. By prioritizing values such as cultural humility, social justice, and reciprocity, ECBEL seeks to address the complex ethical challenges inherent in community-based learning and collaboration. Central to the ECBEL framework is the recognition of the importance of reflection in guiding ethical practice. Reflection enables individuals and institutions to critically assess their assumptions, biases, and behaviors, fostering self-awareness and continuous improvement. By engaging in reflective dialogue with community members and stakeholders, institutions can build trust, promote mutual understanding, and co-create solutions to shared challenges.

As we advocate for the adoption of the ECBEL framework, the establishment of institutionalized ethics boards dedicated to community-based engagement learning is critical. Unlike Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), which focus primarily on research ethics, these ethics boards would oversee community engagement initiatives, ensuring they are rooted in ethical principles and aligned with community needs. Such boards would provide essential oversight, offering guidance, support, and accountability for all stakeholders. They would also serve as platforms for ongoing dialogue and reflection on ethical issues, cultivating a culture of transparency, accountability, and continuous improvement within institutions and their partner communities.

The creation of ethics boards for community-based engagement learning would demonstrate a tangible commitment to ethical practice and social

responsibility. By institutionalizing ethical oversight, organizations can strengthen their relationships with communities, safeguard the integrity of their initiatives, and enhance the long-term sustainability of their collaborations. Ultimately, the ECBEL framework provides a powerful tool for ensuring that community engagement is conducted with respect, equity, and mutual benefit, fostering transformative social change for all stakeholders involved.

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