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## Creating a Learning Community for Community Engagement for Detroit Practitioners

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## Creating a Learning Community for Community Engagement for Detroit Practitioners

### Cover Page Footnote

A Report from the CDS Fellows Initiative. Contributing authors: Daniel Kahl, PhD, Kristina Hains, PhD, University of Kentucky

## Introduction

Through the support of the Community Development Society (CDS) Innovation in Community Engagement Fellowship, the Detroit cohort of fellows<sup>1</sup> convened with the goal of building individual and community capacity through a yearlong, hands-on educational initiative that addressed innovative engagement within a community context. Connected by the Master of Community Development program at the University of Detroit Mercy as faculty, students, alumni, or community partners, the fellows embarked on a project entitled “Creating a Learning Community for Community Engagement for Detroit Practitioners (Detroit Learning Community).” The objective of the project was to explore the intersection between community engagement, democratic decision-making, and community development in Detroit. Specifically, the fellows organized an intentional learning community of Detroit engagement practitioners to gain insight into what engagement practitioners identify as standards and values for community engagement work and about what tools they need to improve their practice. The work was presented at both the 2018 International CDS Conference and Community Development Advocates of Detroit (CDAD) Community Development Week, and continues today.

## Background

Community engagement is rightly considered to be the cornerstone of Community Development work. However, all too often our efforts fail to give residents and stakeholders the opportunity to truly participate and have an impact on the decisions that shape their communities. In recent decades, Detroit has suffered from a splintered community engagement culture limiting its potential for community development. As Detroit neighborhoods face increased development pressures, the need for thoughtful and collaborative approaches to community engagement and development as well as more defined practices, competencies, and expectations for engagement, are critical for practitioners seeking to promote equitable community change. In response to this need, the Detroit Fellows led the development of a community engagement framework for practitioners aimed at empowering residents and stakeholders to continue their own process of community development towards the creation of lasting and meaningful places.

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<sup>1</sup> The Detroit Fellows cohort included the following members: Aaron Goodman, Community Development Advocates of Detroit; Ashley Flintoff, Association for Community Design; Lauren Hood, Community Development Consultant; Madhavi Reddy, Community Development Advocates of Detroit; and Virginia Stanard, University of Detroit Mercy

The community engagement approach of this project supported the set of core values in the “Community Development Society Principles of Good Practice” both in the activities of the learning community and in the outcomes that inform community engagement citywide. The project promoted active and representative participation through its learning community toward the goal of creating processes and guidelines that support all Detroiters to meaningfully influence the decisions that affect their lives. Further, the project engaged community engagement leaders in learning about and understanding community issues towards the goal of creating best practices for engaging community members around economic, social, environmental, and political issues. The project also incorporated diverse interests and cultures in its learning community towards the goal of scaling this to other, perhaps larger, engagement processes in Detroit. Another outcome of the project included tools to enhance the leadership capacity of community members, leaders, and groups within the community in the form of community engagement guidelines and recommendations. In addition to utilizing these tools, the fellows and learning community members remain open to using a full range of action strategies to work toward the long-term sustainability and wellbeing of the community.

#### The Project: A Learning Community for Community Engagement Practitioners in Detroit

The Detroit Fellows championed a new co-learning community of practitioners as its innovative community engagement initiative. The outcomes were both the establishment of an ongoing learning community and a set of tools for community-based practitioners to use in assisting resident partners to more effectively exercise their power and drive decision-making in collaboration with developers, government agencies, and community partners. These activities and outcomes are described below.

#### **Project Activities**

Once the project goals were established, the fellows recruited local community development practitioners to join in shared learning and visioning as part of the “Detroit Learning Community for Community Engagement for Detroit Practitioners.” The practitioners were invited based on their work to raise awareness of and advocate for a higher standard of community engagement practice throughout Detroit, particularly in regards to neighborhood-based development, as well as for the diverse voices they represent in the community development field. The practitioners who participated did so not necessarily as representatives of their professional organizations—which included community

development corporations and advocacy organizations, community development financial institutions, nonprofits, and the City of Detroit—but as leaders and change agents practicing civic engagement in the City. As part of this group, approximately ten experienced community engagement practitioners met three times between February and May 2018 (Fig. 1). Each participant was paid a stipend from the grant for attending each meeting.



Fig. 1 Detroit Learning Community session

During the three sessions the Detroit Learning Community reviewed research and engaged in activities and in-depth discussions that helped to illuminate and refine values, best practices, and competencies for community engagement in the City of Detroit and sector as a whole. In the first learning community meeting, members discussed their values for community engagement. They responded to the question “Community Engagement is...” through a wall activity (Fig. 2) and then participated in a Spectrum Exercise<sup>2</sup>. In the Spectrum Exercise learning community participants placed along a spectrum engagement activities or strategies in which they have been a part. The spectrum ranged from Inform > Consult > Involve > Collaborate > Empower/Activate. This exercise

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<sup>2</sup> The Spectrum Exercise was modified from the Training for Change “Vision Gallery” exercise: [https://www.trainingforchange.org/training\\_tools/vision-gallery/](https://www.trainingforchange.org/training_tools/vision-gallery/)

framed the important discussion that followed in regards to community engagement and shared values: “Why is community engagement important? Is it important for community engagement to be informed by a set of values? Is it important for the values to be shared amongst practitioners? What would some important values look like for community engagement in Detroit community development?” A discussion of these questions continued in the second meeting after which the learning community members determined that a set of shared standards, values, and competencies for community engagement as well as resources and toolkits for practitioners would be a beneficial outcome of this project. As a result, a draft of shared values and principles for community engagement as well as best practices and resources for community engagement/practitioners was discussed at the third and most recent learning community meeting. Finally, a working set of strategies, guiding principles, and recommendations was developed based on the input at these three meetings to serve as a foundation for community engagement practice in Detroit.



Fig. 2 “Community Engagement is...” activity at Detroit Learning Community session

Additionally, the Detroit Fellows met virtually once a month as part of the full CDS Fellows group to discuss different aspects of innovative community engagement including the following topics: Innovation in Community, Measuring

Community Change, Community Learning and Development, The Importance of Engagement in Community, and Challenges to Engagement. These sessions were helpful in shaping the Detroit Learning Community project in having a group of peers to test ideas with and troubleshoot challenges. The CDS Fellows group was a supportive sounding board and also provided the encouragement and impetus for the Detroit Fellows to present their work both in the form of workshops and through writing.



Fig. 3 Think Tank Spectrum Exercise at 2018 CDS Conference

The progress of the Detroit Learning Community and Detroit Fellows group was then shared at the 2018 International Community Development Society Conference in a CDS Fellows Plenary and Think Tank. While the Fellows Plenary primarily prompted questions about opportunities for future CDS Fellows cohorts and projects, the Think Tank session titled “Equitable Community Engagement - Tools and Strategies for Community Development” was geared toward discussing issues and questions and soliciting feedback related to the community engagement learning community project. In the Think Tank attendees first participated in an Icebreaker where they were asked to quickly think of one word that came to mind when they thought of community engagement. Responses included “step back,” “intentional,” “cursed,” “sustained,” “foundation,” “undervalued,” and “painful but worth it.” Similar to an activity that may occur in

a community meeting, this exercise served to introduce participants to each other while building trust and comradery among the group. The Think Tank continued with a Spectrum Exercise to help participants identify the types of engagement in which they are involved in their work (Fig. 3) followed by a discussion of the fellows' draft guiding principles and recommendations for community engagement in Detroit. Participants offered suggestions to clarify and improve the proposed framework before unpacking one to two principles through the following questions: "How does the principle resonate with you in your context?" "Are there things that are missing in the principle?" and "What are the tools and guiding ideas that you use in community engagement?" Attendees were then asked to draft a community engagement recommendation based on their particular context (Fig. 4). All of these activities served to inform the work of the Detroit Learning Community.



Fig 4 Think Tank session at 2018 CDS Conference

In order to gain additional feedback on the community engagement framework tools, the fellows later presented the working ideas in a workshop at "Community Development Week" hosted by the Community Development Advocates of Detroit. This workshop focused on presenting the key community engagement principles from the Detroit Learning Community and again asked for participant feedback about their relevance and if anything was missing. This input



served to fine-tune and enrich the framework. While the refinement and dissemination of the final principles and recommendations is still underway, a summary of the findings is described below.

### Project Outcomes

There were two significant outcomes of the project. The first was the formation and ongoing collaboration of the Detroit Learning Community, a new and innovative model to provide support for community engagement practice in Detroit. The second was a set of tools created by the learning community for community-based practitioners to use to assist their resident partners to drive decision-making in collaboration with developers, government agencies, and community partners. These tools included Guiding Principles and Recommendations for Community Engagement in Detroit. The following working guiding principles and recommendations reflect the input from participants of the 2018 CDS Conference Fellows Plenary and Think Tank and CDAD Community Development Week.

### ***Guiding Principles and Recommendations for Community Engagement in Detroit: Tools for Detroit Practitioners***

#### ***Guiding Principles for Community Engagement in Detroit***

1. Understand limitations.  
Know, understand, and share both your and the project's limitations.
  - Understand the purpose, expectations, and budget of the project/process and communicate these clearly to the community.
  - Understand who the project/process needs to influence to be successful.
  - Know what the project/process has the power to change.
  - Understand costs and trade-offs associated with a project/process in order to help community make more informed decisions.
  - Plan the engagement with specific goals and benchmarks.
  - Understand how to be nimble and change course if the engagement results are not favorable to what is being planned.
  - Understand what personal perspectives, biases, or privilege you bring to the project. Be humble.
  
2. Work through the lens of racial and social justice.  
Organize engagement work through the lens of racial justice.

When planning and implementing processes, work hard to understand the ways the issues discussed will impact racialized and indigenous communities. Work with these communities to decrease barriers to their participation and ensure that their experiences are valued by the process at all stages. Issues to consider:

- Racialization of poverty
- Impacts of policies on racialized people and communities
- Impacts of plans related to public safety on racialized people and communities
- Coded language that may trigger some people: creative class, placemaking, increasing the tax based, etc.

3. Allot ample time and resources.

Allot an appropriate amount of time and financial resources for the community engagement process to unfold in order to build trust and relationships.

- Build in the necessary time and financial resources to form trusting relationships with the community.
- Enlist the community's guidance in developing an appropriate engagement strategy. In this case, the "community" refers to both formal and informal place-based organizations as well as individuals who are able to connect the process with residents. It is important to work with all of these people because it cannot be assumed that formal organizations (such as nonprofits and CDO's) are authentic representatives of the people.

4. Respect context.

Respect and strive to understand the context in which the engagement is happening before it begins, both at the neighborhood level and the city/region.

- Do pre-work before starting the engagement process including research on political and economic history, previous planning and engagement efforts, others doing similar work in the community, and the relationship to government/departments.
- Understand of how the community views you or your organization.

5. Have authentic and inclusive representation.

Work to have authentic and inclusive representation of the community at all stages.

- Ask yourself who is not participating.
- Work to include those who are not in the room.

- Host separate sessions for vulnerable populations.
  - Have multiple entry points – meetings, walks, interviews, block parties, art exhibits, etc.
  - Work to make each space a welcoming space.
  - Set aside resources to support active participation from community members who face multiple barriers to participation.
6. Recognize and uplift existing knowledge.  
Recognize and uplift the fact that residents and other stakeholders in the community have valuable knowledge.
- Treat this knowledge as the expertise that it is.
  - Respect this knowledge as much as academic knowledge
  - Know and share with the community how you will be using their knowledge in the work.

***Recommendations for Community Engagement in Detroit***

1. The philanthropic community should have more specific requirements for community engagement in grant applications and grant reporting. In its current format, it is easy to claim authentic engagement when only a few people attended engagement efforts. It is easy to claim inclusive engagement when the people who participated do not represent the full spectrum of community stakeholders. Funders should require the participation of residents in the stage of applying for funding to ensure the project is something the community wants.
2. Nonprofit organizations such as community development organizations should be provided the opportunity to build their community engagement knowledge and capacity through trainings, workshops, time to plan, and meetings with the community to discuss their organization's community engagement efforts.
3. City-wide intermediaries should offer workshops in community engagement to City employees involved in community engagement and nonprofit organizations. These trainings should be in-depth and result in a plan that highlights how the organization will engage the community in the long-term. These trainings should be open to residents as well so they can understand how the engagement process should work.

4. Outside entities entering a community to facilitate engagement should be required to meet with long-term residents to learn about the history of the community.
5. Community engagement work should be a respected and funded part of place-based work. The foundation community and organizations doing place-based work should develop a strategy to fund long-term community engagement work and community engagement workers.
6. Funding timelines should be flexible enough to accommodate a responsible community engagement process. If disagreements arise during the engagement process, there should be time to work with the community to come up with a mutually beneficial compromise.

### Lessons Learned

There were a number of key takeaways from the project. First, similar to findings of the overall CDS Fellows Program, bringing together a mixed and committed group of community developers around the topic of community engagement led to diverse perspectives and created synergy. This coming together allowed for participants with similar values to share their successes, frustrations, hopes, best practices, and knowledge for the practice of community engagement, both locally and nationally. Practitioners in the Detroit Learning Community noted that coming together to discuss community engagement successes and challenges felt like “therapy.” This demonstrated the great value in creating a space where engagement practitioners from across the City can come together in a supportive space to talk about their successes as well as challenges. A regular, informal gathering of engagement organizers, practitioners, and funders that is focused on uplifting best practices in community engagement could have a real impact on the way this work takes place in Detroit.

The variety of ways for coming together in this project—from the Detroit Fellows and Detroit Learning Community to the CDS Fellows and CDS Conference to the CDAD Community Development Week—created synergistic “community” at multiple scales. It also resulted in valuable input through multiple drafts and rounds of wordsmithing that informed the project’s principles and recommendations. Concepts such as “racial justice” and the “context” for doing this work were considered closely, for example, for clarity and intent. Also, it was inspiring to observe the commitment that practitioners have for improving engagement practices in Detroit as well as their strong conviction that engagement should center resident voices in both its process and outcomes.

Finally, though there were many valuable conclusions that came out of the project in the form of principles and recommendations for community engagement practice in Detroit, there were as many if not more unanswered questions raised that still need addressing, reinforcing that this work is not complete. For example, CDS Think Tank participants noted that the profession needs guidelines about how many financial resources should go into a community engagement process to make it truly effective. We also need more information and tools for measuring the impacts of community engagement work and evaluating racial equity (racial equity scoring). Going forward, these issues and initiatives could be addressed by the Detroit Learning Community.

### Challenges

As with any collaborative project, there were challenges faced throughout the process. The project was difficult in that it was working in the realm of both academia and practice, with both real-world application goals and organizational goals sought by the Community Development Society. Thus, the fellows sometimes struggled with how to describe and represent the project. It was also difficult to understand and explain who the audience or “client” was and which goals should be prioritized—those of CDS? Detroit community development organizations or funders? Detroit residents? Additionally, participants had different motivations for being involved in the work, and both the fellows and the Detroit Learning Community practitioners questioned, “Would the project be meaningful, worthwhile, and impactful? Would it be a good use of my time? Would this project be any different than others in which I have participated? Who would use the work? Would anything come of it?” Given the planning and engagement “fatigue” experienced by many in Detroit, these were fair reservations. Similarly, the CDS Conference Think Tank participants wondered if their input would be used and if the guiding principles and recommendations would gain traction and be implemented. These questions and doubts underscored the duration of the project.

Related, both the fellows and the learning community participants were busy, and participation was discontinuous. It was at times difficult to coordinate and plan for the project as a full Detroit Fellows cohort. On the other hand, because the fellows had worked together previously and shared similar values, a level of trust existed that allowed for productivity and forward movement despite not everyone being available to participate in monthly virtual meetings or planning sessions. Similarly, it was difficult to gain consistent commitment from the practitioners in the Detroit Learning Community. Though a number of participants attended all three convenings, many attended just one or two. Consistent, full attendance in all sessions could have enriched the principles and

recommendations, as missing a meeting could misalign a practitioner with the progress and cause the project to lose focus. Given participants' limited and valuable time, it was important for each gathering to be meaningful and useful. The fellows group worked through these issues by being flexible and communicating well with each other and the practitioners.

### Conclusions and Future Directions

The project of the Detroit Fellows, the formation and ongoing collaboration of the Detroit Learning Community, resulted in a new and innovative model for supporting community engagement practice in Detroit. There was great value in bringing together engagement practitioners from various organizations and disciplines and creating a space to discuss successes, challenges, and opportunities in their work. These kinds of informal but productive gatherings for co-learning hold much potential for application in other community development contexts.

While the goals of the project were largely met, there is still much work to do. The principles and recommendations developed by the Detroit Learning Community need finalizing so that they can be actionable by community engagement practitioners. There is also a need to create a platform for sharing these tools with the goal of influencing the broader community development sector in Detroit. In addition, the project findings should be presented to those who may be in a position to implement them (executive directors of community development organizations, funders, the City of Detroit leadership, etc.). The Detroit Learning Community intends to further this work by continuing to collaborate on ways to improve community engagement practices towards the larger goals of assisting residents in facilitating their own process of community development, strengthening of the field of community development through engagement, and creating lasting and meaningful places in Detroit and beyond.