

Leading change in education through a community engaged approach to teaching and learning

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Highlights

Question: How do educators develop, bring to scale and lead community-based teaching and learning initiatives?

Goal: Develop insights about leadership qualities and practices needed to drive community-engaged teaching and learning initiatives to support students in orienting their learning towards making positive changes in the world.

Context: Community-engaged teaching and learning represents a departure from conventional practice in higher education. Leadership is required to break with tradition and influence changes such as this.

Findings: Leadership begins with a small group of committed administrators and professors but quickly becomes a collaborative effort that includes determined students, community actors, and organizations. Leaders must confront numerous institutional barriers and build support through pragmatic action and strong management skills. Leaders' success is dependent on their level of perseverance and resilience.

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Introduction

Creating an educational institution that fosters authentic learning for students through community-engaged learning opportunities requires leadership that breaks with tradition and promotes collaboration across organizational boundaries. Currently, there is limited empirically-informed guidance available to help drive such initiatives forward. This study sought to describe how educators in one Canadian university have been working to develop, bring to scale, and lead community-based teaching and learning initiatives.

By using community-engaged teaching, this university aims to improve social conditions through experiential learning, community action, and the formation of future leaders. The findings provide formative insights for those planning future community-engaged initiatives in higher education.

Methodology

Case study of a hub for community-engaged teaching and learning in a Canadian university.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with leaders and key actors.

Institutional documents were also collected and field notes were recorded.

Analysis was conducted and five key themes emerged to address the main research question.

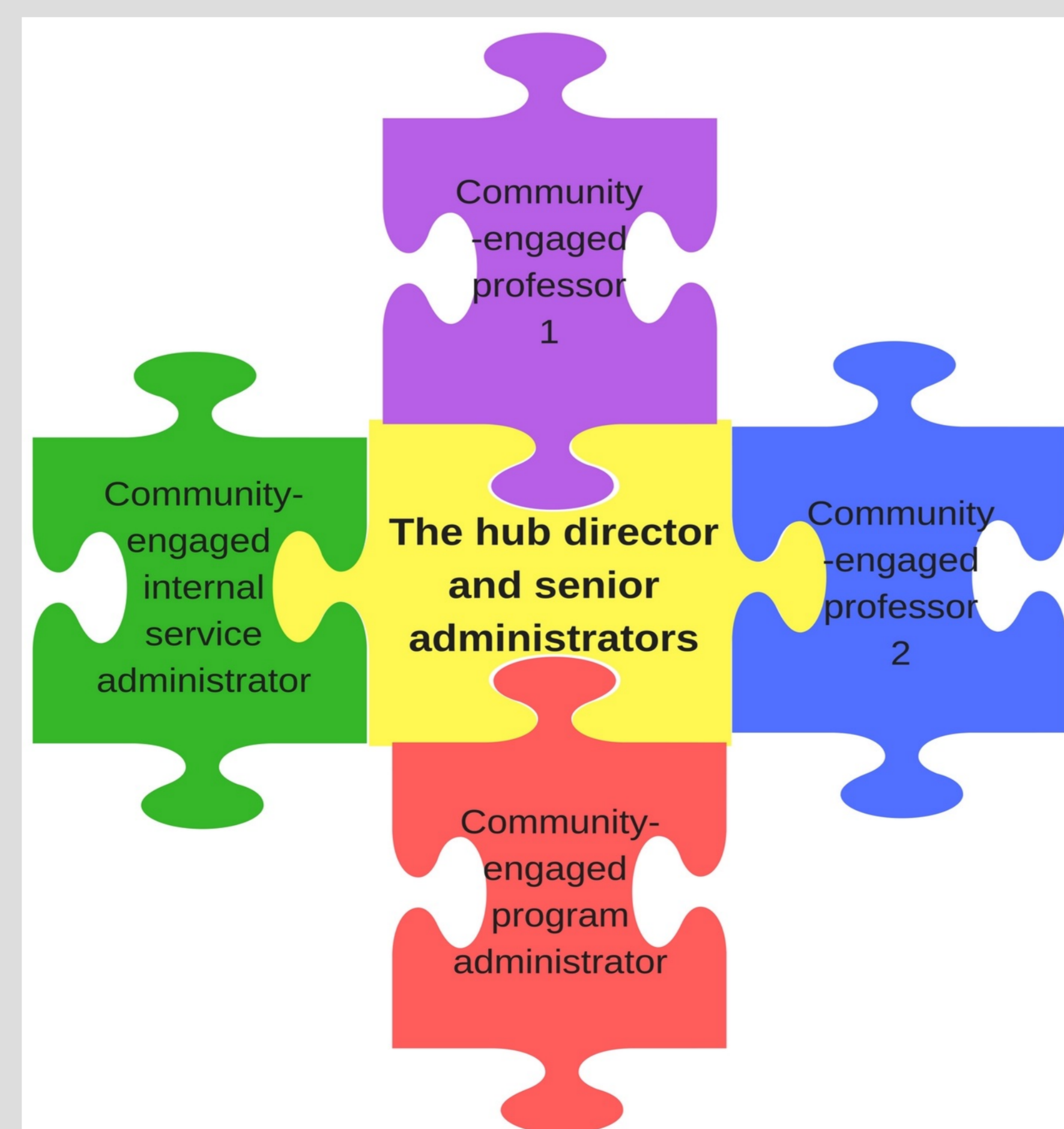


Figure 1: Leaders and key actors interviewed in the case study.

Results

There are five important themes that were found to be at the center of the process of creating community-engaged teaching and learning opportunities.

Commitment:

- to all parties involved, causes, community, and society
- stems from life experiences that generated passion for community-engagement
- reinforced through serial efforts as an innovator in education

Leadership process:

- started by a small group of devoted leaders in administration and professoriate
- quickly moved to a collaborative leadership effort involving students and community partners
- this collaboration was required for successful development and scaling

Change and constancy:

- some efforts required constant processes (eg. focusing on building and sustaining relationships) while others required change (eg. initial use of charisma as a leader, then moving to pragmatic action and management of processes)

Institutional support and tensions:

- efforts produce support (i.e. belief in the approach follows from taking action and producing initial results)
- lack of time and resources, as well as institutional structures and systems designed around conventional teaching create barriers or tensions

Pragmatism and management capacity:

- commitment is idealistic, but implementation requires pragmatic actions
- management skills (in addition to leadership) needed to succeed



Figure 2. The five themes that emerged for creating community-engaged teaching and learning opportunities.

Conclusion

The creation and organization of a community-engaged teaching and learning hub starts with a vision and is carried forward through determination, perseverance and resilience.

Leadership is a key aspect of creating such a hub.

Leaders will experience resistance and must push forward to overcome obstacles.

Much of the time and work put into creating and expanding these hubs is a result of someone taking a leadership role to work on building relationships on their own time.

Building relationships allows for these hubs to be effective to teachers and students alike. These hubs allow for students to gain practical experience in their field of interest by forming connections with the appropriate people and/or organizations.



Figure 3: A quote highlighting the importance of persistence and resilience in leadership.

Next Steps

Extending the boundaries of the current case to explore more about university-community relationships and leadership among community-based actors.

Analysis of other hubs and their affiliates. Conducting a cross-analysis of data collected from several institutions.

Gathering a more diverse set of data from a variety of sources will help gather more examples of how these hubs can be created, how they can grow, and how they drive tangible learning experiences that allow for creating positive change in the world.

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