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INTRODUCTION

Our Sankofa Moment: Stewarding Legacy

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Abstract

The 20th anniversary of the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement offers an important moment to honour a remarkable legacy and to ask what faithful stewardship of that legacy requires now. First awarded in the United States in 2006, the Community Engagement Elective Classification is a framework through which colleges and universities examine whether their commitments to partnership, reciprocity, knowledge democracy and the public good are reflected not only in individual programs, but also in institutional culture, structures, policies, practices and relationships. At a time of complex and interconnected crises, this themed volume of *Gateways: International Journal of Community Research and Engagement* marks this moment by looking backward and forward at the same time. This volume seeks to honour the elective classification's foundations, while also inviting renewed reflections on how its commitments to reciprocity, equity and the public purposes of higher education must continue to evolve and respond to changing circumstances.

Keywords

Carnegie Elective Classifications; Community Engagement; Stewardship; Legacy; Higher Education Public Purpose

Introduction

The 20th anniversary of the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement offers an important moment to honour a remarkable legacy and to ask what faithful stewardship of that legacy requires now. First awarded in the United States in 2006, the

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Community Engagement Elective Classification has become far more than a national designation. It is a framework through which colleges and universities examine whether their commitments to partnership, reciprocity, democratic purpose and the public good are reflected not only in individual programs, but also in institutional culture, structures, policies, practices and relationships. At its best, the elective classifications invite institutions to look honestly at themselves – to recognise meaningful progress, identify persistent gaps and deepen their accountability to the communities with whom they work.

This themed volume of *Gateways: International Journal of Community Research and Engagement* marks that anniversary by looking backward and forward at the same time. This is our *Sankofa* moment – an intentional return to the wisdom, histories and relationships that made the elective classifications possible so that we might carry their lessons forward into the future. The Ghanaian Akan word/concept of *Sankofa* reminds us that moving forward does not require us to leave the past behind; rather it asks us to retrieve what remains valuable, examine it with honesty and use it to guide what comes next. This volume embraces that responsibility by honouring the elective classifications foundations, while inviting renewed reflections on how their commitments to reciprocity, equity and the public purposes of higher education must continue to evolve, reflect and respond.

The contributions in this themed volume trace the intellectual and institutional development of the Community Engagement Elective Classification; examine how its concepts have taken root across diverse institutional and national contexts; raise necessary questions about access, evidence, equity and recognition; and consider the ongoing evolution of the larger group of Carnegie Elective Classifications. Together, the articles demonstrate that the enduring value of the elective classifications lies not solely in the prestige of a designation, but in their capacity to support institutional learning and change. Recognition matters. Yet the deeper purpose has always been to help higher education become more responsive, reciprocal and accountable in how it fulfils its public mission.

I write this introduction through the lens of having served as Executive Director of the Carnegie Elective Classifications at the American Council on Education from 2022 to 2026. That role gave me the privilege of working closely with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, institutional leaders, faculty, staff, students, community partners, reviewers, advisory committees, researchers and colleagues in the United States and around the world. It also gave me a profound appreciation for the responsibility attached to the Carnegie name and to the trust the field places in these frameworks. During my tenure, my colleagues and I understood that the elective classifications were never ours to possess. They were ours to steward.

For us, stewardship meant protecting the integrity and rigour of the elective classifications while remaining open to what the field was teaching us. It meant listening carefully, being transparent about decisions, attending to data and evidence and recognising that a framework created to advance the public good must itself be examined through the lenses of equity, accessibility and accountability. It meant honouring the accumulated wisdom of those who built the elective classifications while ensuring that they could respond to changing institutional realities, emerging areas of public purpose and increasingly international contexts. Above all, it meant remembering that the elective classifications are relational work. No application framework, review process or designation can substitute for authentic partnerships grounded in mutual benefit, shared authority, respect and reciprocity.

That orientation shaped our efforts to strengthen the Community Engagement Elective Classification, expand the research and knowledge infrastructure surrounding the electives, support institutions through communities of practice and technical assistance, and develop new elective classifications in Leadership for Public Purpose and Sustainability. It also informed the transition to a networked model of leadership. In this model, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the American Council on Education retain the essential role of safeguarding the integrity of the elective classifications, while host institutions bring deep subject-matter expertise, field relationships and operational capacity to the respective

electives: the University of San Diego for Community Engagement, Rice University for Leadership for Public Purpose and the University of Colorado Boulder for Sustainability. The model distributes leadership, but it does not dilute responsibility. Its promise depends on strong coordination, shared values, clear governance, responsible data stewardship and sustained accountability to the fields and communities each elective classification serves.

The networked model is both an evolution of and a return to a foundational truth: the Elective Classifications have always been created with and through a broader community. They are of and by the field. Their strength has come from the interplay of intellectual leadership, institutional practice, peer review, field-based learning and the willingness of practitioners to contribute their expertise for the benefit of others. Hosting an elective is therefore not simply an administrative assignment. It is an act of stewardship. Each host inherits a living body of work and assumes responsibility for cultivating it with rigor, humility and care, while remaining connected to the wider network and to the public purposes that give the elective classifications meaning and value.

This volume reflects that living and expanding ecosystem. The articles examining institutional definitions of community engagement show how the classification has helped shape a shared vocabulary while still allowing institutions to express their commitments in ways grounded in mission and context. The analysis of community college participation offers a critical reminder that recognition systems must be able to see the work of institutions whose engagement is deeply embedded in their mission and local communities, even when their structures and resources differ from those of research-intensive universities. The studies from Australia and Thailand demonstrate that international adaptation cannot be a matter of simple transfer; it requires dialogue, contextual interpretation and respect for distinct histories, cultures, policy environments and ways of knowing. The exploration of the Sustainability Elective illustrates how the Carnegie approach can support institutional reflection and systems-level change in response to one of the most urgent challenges of our time. Read together, these contributions do not offer a single, settled account. They invite continuing inquiry into what gets recognised, whose evidence counts, how reciprocity is demonstrated and how the elective classifications can remain rigorous while becoming more inclusive and responsive.

At the heart of the volume is the founders' oral history project. The oral history preserves the voices of Amy Driscoll, Tom Ehrlich, Matthew Hartley, Eugene Rice, John Saltmarsh and Lorilee Sandmann, whose recollections illuminate the intellectual lineages, relationships, experiments and acts of courage that made the Community Engagement Elective Classification possible. Their testimony reminds us that the elective classification did not emerge fully formed from a single institution or moment. It grew from decades of work to broaden the meaning of scholarship, establish academic legitimacy for engagement, strengthen democratic education, recognise community knowledge and align higher education more fully with the public good.

The oral history remains strikingly relevant because the questions the founders wrestled with are still before us. How do we distinguish authentic engagement from activity conducted in or for communities without shared power? How do we assess impact without reducing relationships to counts and outputs? How do we honour the different assets, missions and contexts of institutions while maintaining meaningful standards? How do we ensure that community partners are not merely subjects of inquiry or beneficiaries of institutional action, but co-creators of knowledge and change? And how do colleges and universities act as essential partners in democracy without imagining themselves as the primary authors of community transformation? These are not questions that an anniversary resolves. They are the continuing work of the field.

A formal recognition of Dr Judith A. Ramaley is especially important in this commemorative volume. Dr Ramaley's leadership helped establish the institutional conditions from which the Community Engagement Elective Classification could emerge. As president of Portland State University, she advanced a vision of the university as an engaged, place-responsive institution and helped make the university's commitment

to 'let knowledge serve the city' visible in curriculum, partnerships, faculty work, student learning and organisational culture. The oral history highlights not only the reach of her vision but the character of her leadership: present in the community, deeply connected to the people of the institution and tireless in opening doors between the campus and its partners. Her example demonstrated that institutionalisation is not achieved through rhetoric alone. It requires executive leadership that understands engagement as central to the identity and responsibilities of the university.

Dr Ramaley's influence extends well beyond any single institution or initiative. Her intellectual and practical leadership helped shape the national movement towards an engaged academy and created space for community engagement to be understood as serious institutional work: work connected to learning, scholarship, organisational change and democratic life. The field owes her a significant debt of gratitude. On this 20th anniversary, we honour her not only for what she helped build, but also for the standard of leadership she represented: visionary and grounded, intellectually rigorous and relational, ambitious for higher education and accountable to the communities it serves. Rest in power, Judith.

The same spirit of gratitude extends to the many people and organisations that have carried the elective classification across its different eras. The Community Engagement Elective Classification has been strengthened through transitions in administrative leadership, through thousands of hours of peer review and advisory service, and through the willingness of institutions to share their practices and submit their work to rigorous reflection. Its history is one of continuity through change. Each generation has inherited a framework shaped by those who came before and has had to decide what must be preserved, what must be questioned and what must be renewed.

During my time leading the Carnegie Elective Classifications, my colleagues and I sought to approach those decisions with depth, integrity and care. We worked to build processes worthy of the trust placed in them and to situate the elective classifications within a broader ecosystem of research, capacity-building, international learning and field leadership. We did not always have easy answers, nor should a framework concerned with institutional transformation offer them. Our responsibility was to ask better questions, bring diverse voices into the work, make decisions transparently, learn from evidence and experience and leave the elective classifications stronger and more prepared for their next chapter.

That next chapter is now underway. The 20th anniversary is therefore not only a celebration of endurance; it is a call to renewed stewardship. The networked model creates new possibilities for specialised leadership, innovation and deeper connection to the respective fields. It also requires vigilance so that distributed leadership remains coherent, equitable and anchored in a shared commitment to the public good. The articles in this volume offer both encouragement and challenge for that work. They show the reach of the Carnegie Elective Classifications frameworks, the creativity of institutions and national partners adapting them, and the persistent need to examine who participates, who benefits and whose knowledge shapes our judgements of quality and impact.

We honour the founders most fully by treating their work not as a finished monument, but as a living inheritance. The Community Engagement Elective Classification remains relevant because its central commitments remain urgent: reciprocity over extraction, partnership over paternalism, institutional responsibility over isolated activity, democratic purpose over prestige and continuous learning over complacency. As the Carnegie Elective Classifications enter their next era, may we carry those commitments forward with the same imagination, courage, integrity and generosity that brought the work into being.

Author statement on the use of AI

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used a generative artificial intelligence (AI) language tool to assist with copy editing, language refinement and improving the clarity of written expression. The author reviewed, verified and edited all AI-assisted text and takes full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity and content of the final manuscript.