

## | ARTICLE

# A N.I.I.C.E WAY TO ASSESS BEST PRACTICE FOR CRITICALLY ENGAGED UNIVERSITIES IN AUSTRALIA

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**ABSTRACT**

This article describes the evolution and development of the National Inventory of Institutional Infrastructure on Community

Engagement (NIIICE) used in the United States as a strategic planning tool to advance community engagement in higher education. The authors also describe how the tool has been utilized during two-day institutes to promote dialogue and networking for community engagement professionals. This article also serves as an invitation for collaborative efforts to adapt the NIIICE for use in Australia.

A comprehensive study of infrastructure and common practice for campus centers of community engagement was conducted in the United States in 2013 (Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013a - <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1018631.pdf>). Following the publication of that study, directors of campus centers frequently sought permission from the authors to utilize the results of that study as either a tool for strategic planning or “leverage” in requesting additional resources. As a result, the original survey was adapted to create the National Inventory of Institutional Infrastructure of Community Engagement (NIIICE – pronounced as “nice”) as an on-line inventory that could be used as a tool that campus centers and their institution could utilize for strategic planning.

Five years after the publication of the original research article, nearly 170 institutions have completed the inventory, creating a rich database. The growing database that emerged allows comparisons with comparable institutions and a “best

practice” metric based on the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement and the professional literature.

The framework and context of the inventory, however, is for American institutions of higher education. As such certain terminology and constructs of the existing tool would not necessarily apply in Australia. The growing interest and effort to advance community engagement in Australia provides an opportunity to consider possible partnerships to explore ways the NIIICE might be modified and utilized in this country. This article continues with a brief review and background of the original study followed by a description of the inventory development and use over the past five years.

Next, we describe institutes that have been conducted for campuses that have completed the NIIICE to “unpack” their profile results in a retreat setting to identify priorities for strategic planning. We conclude with an invitation to Australian colleagues to consider ways they might participate in reviewing and revising the inventory for use in Australia.

## BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

By the mid 1990s, as American campuses were integrating community service with academic study, campus infrastructure emerged to support the institutionalization of service-learning. If campuses were going to institutionalize service-learning, they would need what Walshok called “new kinds of institutional mechanisms” (1995, p. 275) to do so. By the end of the decade, models of the structure, staffing, functions and funding of service-learning on campuses of every

institution type had been compiled in a widely read book, *Successful Service Learning Programs* (Zlotkowski, 1998). As the infrastructure evolved into the first decade of the next century, the purposes, roles and complexity of the centers changed, often with a civic engagement agenda broader than service-learning, and often with a mission that was aimed at wider institutional transformation. What was missing, beyond case studies, was an empirical understanding of how centers had evolved, where they fit in the organizational reporting charts, and how they were structured, staffed, and budgeted. Our original study used a survey to investigate the following questions:

**What are the defining features of the organizational structures created by campuses for the purpose of facilitating connections to communities at the local, regional, national, and global levels?**

**To what extent are the activities undertaken through these institutional structures connected to institutional or community change initiatives?**

The survey was designed to provide an overview of critical components and essential infrastructure to guide campus administrators and center directors as they establish and continue to advance community engagement as part of the college experience. The survey was comprised of items derived from a

comprehensive review of the literature cited in the article. Additionally, the authors incorporated reciprocal validity (Welch, Miller, & Davies, 2005) by inviting respondents to provide additional information and insight from their own contexts and experience. This information gleaned from this process provided a significant contribution to the extant knowledge of current and best practice from the perspective of center directors.

The results from 147 respondents were initially reported in a chapter (Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013b) in an edited volume, *Deepening Community Engagement in Higher Education: Forging New Pathways* (Hoy & Johnson, 2013). However, due to limited space, the findings reported in the chapter were expanded in an article (Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013a). The findings were organized into six broad categories: 1) institutional architecture and policy, 2) center infrastructure, 3) center operations, 4) center programming for students, faculty, and community partners, 5) center director, and 6) institutional information consisting of descriptive and demographic data. The results of the study concluded that campus centers have evolved through what might be called the first generation of this field, expanding from primarily coordinating co-curricular volunteer service to a comprehensive and professional administrative role funded by institutional dollars within academic affairs to coordinate campus-wide community engagement initiatives. Roles and responsibilities now encompassed logistical coordination of tracking and assessing programs coupled with management of transportation, implementation of risk management

policy and procedures, and additional development and fund-raising. The findings also suggested that the creation of an infrastructure to support community engagement is an evolutionary process. As the operation of a center develops, the work becomes more complex and expansive. The study suggested the evolutionary direction of centers included: 1) a need for more staff, more space, larger budgets, and more intentional fundraising; 2) deeper affiliation with academic affairs and faculty roles and responsibilities; 3) better data gathering and reporting/communicating the work of the center and its outcomes; and 4) greater community partner voice and student voice in center planning and operations.

## INVENTORY

Due to the response to and use of the 2013 article, the authors adapted the research survey as an inventory or checklist that centers and institutions could use to assess their current programming and infrastructure for program review and strategic planning. The original survey of 66 items within the six categories was expanded by including salient information derived from the reciprocal validity results reported by respondents, resulting in nearly 120 items to comprise an inventory known as the National Inventory of Institutional Infrastructure for Community Engagement (NIIICE). The inventory was also intended to be both a “measuring stick” by which campus centers could compare their inventory results with the full database of campuses and with comparable institutions. That said, the inventory was never intended for or used to rate or rank centers and institutions. A

simple response metric was developed consisting of three response options that could be used to calculate and derive a score for each of the six categories on the inventory. Each inventory item asked respondents to report to what extent a particular practice or program was being implemented ranging from “Yes,” it is operational, to “Hope To” (it was planned but not implemented), and “No,” it does not currently exist.

Each of these were given a weighted score ranging from 2 for a “YES” response to a 1 for a “Hope To” response to a 0 for a “No” response rendering a cumulative “maximum” score for each of the six categories. This allowed for calculating both a raw and mean score that could be used for comparison with results from institutions with the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement and comparable types of institutions. Results were presented in table (see Table 1) and bar-graph chart (see Figure 1) formats for easy review and analysis. Thus, it was relatively easy for an institution to literally “eyeball” where they stood in each category to determine specific areas of strengths and areas for continued development.

Other demographic and descriptive information pertaining to staff size, budgets, number of faculty teaching service-learning courses, number of departments implementing service-learning, and number of service-learning courses taught on campus was collected. These data were presented in table and pie-chart formats so respondents could compare their results with the overall database.

It is important to remember that, in its

current form, the NIIICE is not a validated survey instrument but an assessment inventory and planning tool. As such, response validity is not a significant methodological issue. It is, however, important to have as accurate data as possible. A center director is most likely the most knowledgeable respondent to independently complete the inventory. However, a collective team response by a center staff not only increases response validity, but serves as an effective exercise to promote reflective dialogue in the process of responding. If an institution has more than one center coordinating community engagement, it is recommended to convene knowledgeable representatives from each center to collectively complete their own individual inventory responses as a way to promote a conversation to compare operations and programming.

## INSTITUTES (A MEETING OR ENCOUNTER OR ‘RETREAT’ TO DISCUSS AND REFLECT)

While the authors knew the value of an empirical and comparative inventory of community engagement infrastructure, we also recognized the potential benefit of providing the “gift of time” in a retreat setting in which the results of the inventory could be reviewed and discussed in a meaningful and strategic way. A half-day pre-conference workshop at the annual conference of the International Association for Research on Service-learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE) in 2015 served as a pilot. A total of 10 participants comprised of campus center directors completed the inventory in advance and received their

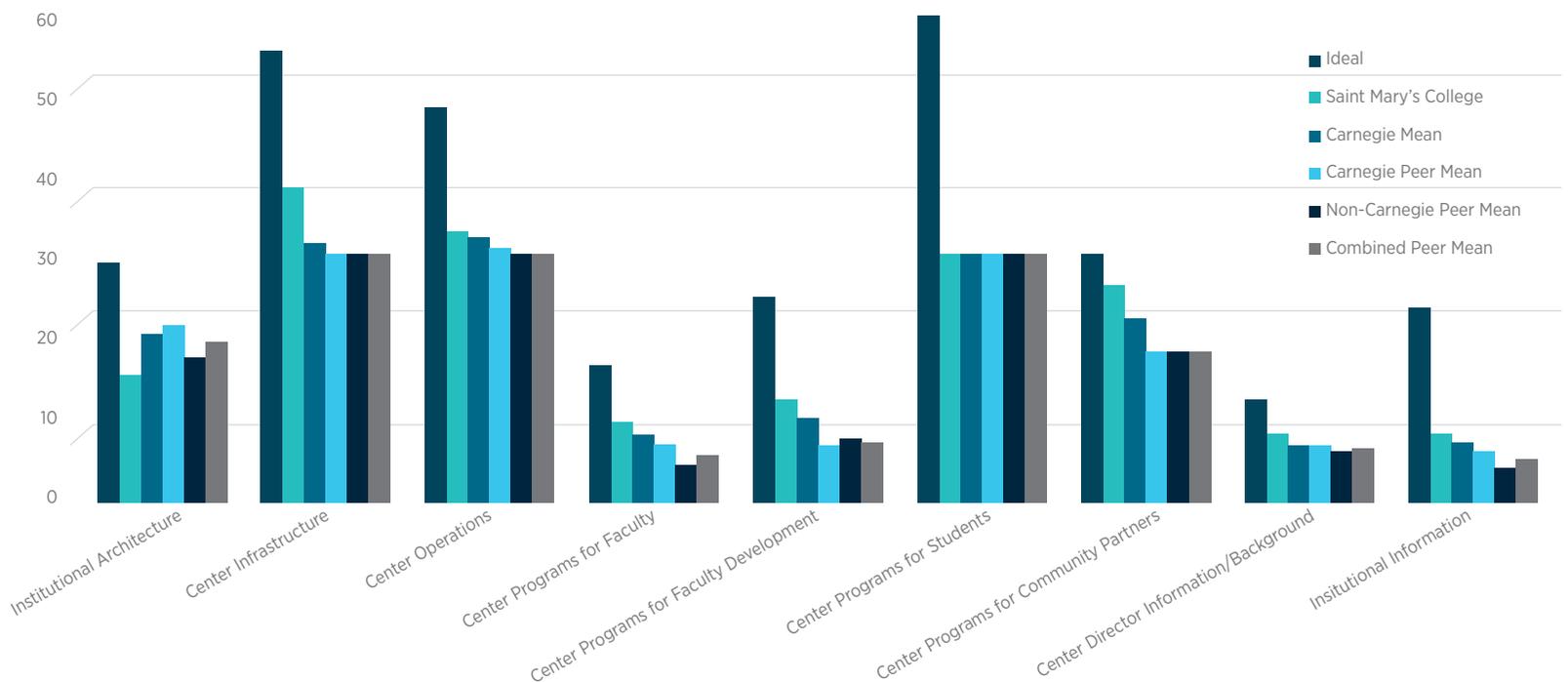
TABLE 1.

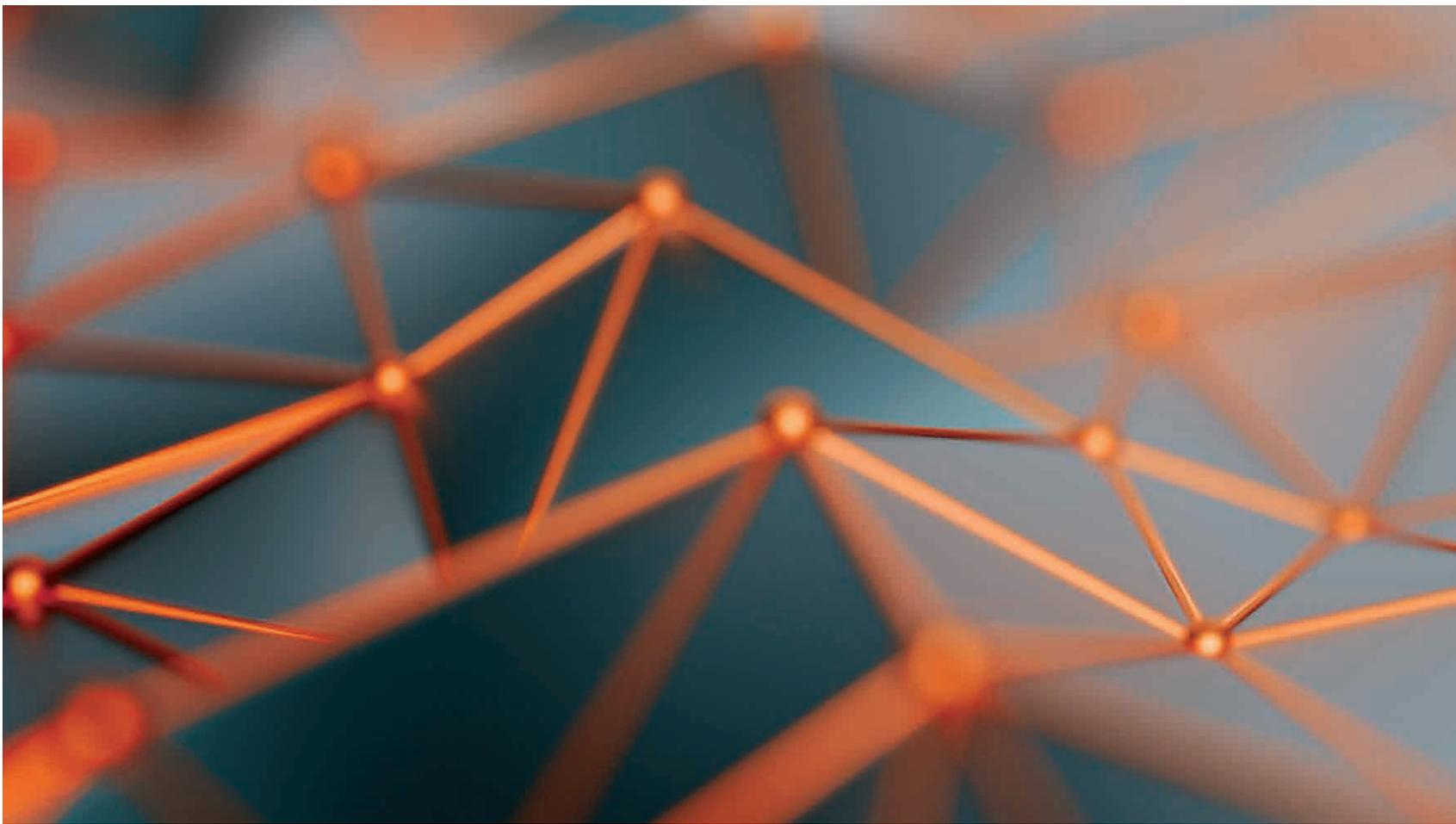
## INDIVIDUAL SURVEY RESULTS + COMPARISON MEAN SCORES

SCORES FOR ALL SURVEY CATEGORIES	IDEAL	SAINT MARY'S COLLEGE	CARNEGIE MEAN	CARNEGIE PEER MEAN	NON-CARNEGIE PEER MEAN	COMBINED PEER MEAN
Institutional Architecture	25	15	18.77	19.42	16.66	18.04
Center Infrastructure	53	41	36.01	32.71	34.82	33.77
Center Operations	48	37	36.59	35.57	33.83	34.7
Center Programs for Faculty	16	11	9.81	9	7.16	8.08
Center Programs for Faculty Development	22	13	11.31	8.85	9.5	9.17
Center Programs for Students	56	33	34.83	28.14	33	30.57
Center Programs for Community Partners	28	23	20.11	17.14	17.16	17.15
Center Director Information/Background	13	10	8.94	9	8.33	8.66
Institutional Information	21	10	9.29	8.42	7	7.71
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>282</b>	<b>193</b>	<b>185.66</b>	<b>168.25</b>	<b>167.46</b>	<b>167.85</b>

FIGURE 1.

## INDIVIDUAL INVENTORY RESULTS + COMPARISON MEAN SCORES





results at the pre-conference workshop. The pre-conference workshop began with an overview of the original study and how the survey was adapted to create the inventory. The results were then “unpacked” with the participants and discussed collectively as a group. A rich discussion ensued, revealing not only an interest in the topic, but a need and desire for networking and exchanging information among participants. A closing debriefing discussion was conducted to identify effective aspects of both inventory and the workshop as well as what might be changed. Participants indicated that a half-day was not adequate and recommended at least another half day be allocated for strategic planning. Finally, those participants suggested that future institutes include a team of two consisting of center director and their immediate

administrative supervisor.

Based on this pilot, another institute was developed and hosted on a college campus during the summer of 2016 in partnership with Campus Compact, where teams of center directors and their immediate supervisor could devote a day and a half in dialogue with each other and colleagues from other participating institutions. Interested participants were invited to apply for participation by submitting a brief written statement articulating their current infrastructure and programming coupled with their goals and aspirations for participating. The authors reviewed the applications. After reviewing a total of 19 applications, 9 teams committed to participating in the day and a half institute. The institute began with introductions of participants

and an overview of the agenda. The afternoon was devoted to reviewing the inventory results. As was the case in the IARSLCE pilot institute, the presentation of the data and reports resulted in a robust conversation about specific items on the inventory, often introducing new practices and strategies to participants. A key activity throughout the afternoon reporting was pausing to allow each individual team an opportunity to identify one specific inventory item in each of the six categories that was noteworthy. These six identified items distilled from the 122 inventory items served as an initial starting point for targeting strategic planning priorities and goals.

Later, the authors provided an overview of the action planning process and template that would be used by each team on the

following day to begin strategic planning. Participants were instructed to review their six identified priorities and select one to two items to become strategic planning goals. The overview included a discussion and example of how to develop observable and measurable goals as well as how to conduct a task analysis of the necessary steps to achieve those goals. A basic template of an action plan was provided and explained. The next morning, participants dispersed to various areas across the hosting campus to spend the entire morning developing their action plan. Teams reconvened during the day to report on their goal and action plan, soliciting a friendly critique and input from colleagues in the room.

The institute concluded by devoting another hour debriefing on the inventory

as well as the event and generating suggestions for future gatherings. Through the course of the discussion, participants, especially the supervising administrators, reported the information was very valuable. They also indicated the retreat format and setting allowed them to devote significant time and attention to strategic action planning in ways that would not be possible back on their campus due to daily affairs and interruptions. Likewise, participating administrators reported how much they had learned about the field of community engagement, coupled with the necessary infrastructure to effectively implement it on campus. Finally, participating center directors commented on how much they appreciated the time and energy they had with their supervising administrator. The following are two examples of

written feedback by two of the institute participants:

The NIIICE is a valuable tool and we appreciated the opportunity to reflect on our strengths and challenges. The retreat offers information and expertise, while also ample time to reflect and plan for the future. Two days well spent.

What was perhaps most valuable about this institute was the opportunity to get away from the daily hustle on our own campus to spend time with one another doing

purposeful, intentional, research-driven planning for our campus. In addition, the chance to share our ideas with a small group of colleagues and receive feedback, as well as offer our own suggestions with their plans, was essential to our walking away feeling like we have a good idea of where we are, and what we want to accomplish moving forward.

Since then, three other institutes with similar formats and components have been conducted in various parts of the United States. Participant evaluations consistently validate the importance and value of an institute that provides adequate time and space for meaningful and strategic planning. As such, the participants acknowledge the value of the NIIICE and indicated that the institute was the “bow on the package”.

## REVISED INVENTORY AND RESEARCH AGENDA

As reported above, a portion of each institute was devoted to debriefing, which included an opportunity for participants to provide suggestions and comments regarding both the inventory instrument and the institute. In partnership with the Swearer Center at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, where the inventory is now housed, the NIIICE has been revised (Welch, Saltmarsh, Johnson, & Manok, 2018). Based on feedback and input gleaned from institutes described

above, the number of inventory items has grown from 122 items to nearly 200 items. The response metrics have also been revised from the original format of three response options to provide a more discrete and accurate levels of program and center implementation. The response options range from “Yes – Currently Fully Implemented” to “Partially In Place,” to “Plan to Implement,” to “No Plan to Implement,” to “Not Applicable.” Each response is weighted for calculating a program implementation profile score as previously reported and displayed in table and bar graph format (see examples above) in seven categories: 1) Institutional Architecture and Policy, 2) Center Infrastructure, 3) Center Personnel 4) Programming for Students, 5) Programming for Faculty, 6) Programming for Community Partners, and 7) Assessment. This format allows respondents to compare their responses with comparable institutions.

The accumulative information gathered through the NIIICE will provide a rich database for a research agenda. It is mutually beneficial for centers and their institutions to complete and submit the NIIICE as not only does each center receive a report and profile, but their information contributes to a growing data base that can be used for robust comparisons and research. Tentative research questions include determining if there is a significant difference in various infrastructures and programming between types of institutions. Other questions will focus on a comparative analysis of faculty profiles, as well as determining if there is a correlation between center budget and/or staff size and types of programming. Consult

the Swearer Center website for more information, including a 9-minute video: <https://www.brown.edu/swearer/niiice>

## CONCLUSION AND INVITATION

In addition to describing the evolution of the NIIICE, this article is an invitation to our Australian colleagues and practitioner-scholars to consider exploring a partnership to adapt the NIIICE for use in your country. The process would entail reviewing the existing content and terminology of the inventory created for American institutions and revising it for an Australian context. The proposed partnership will include additional conversations regarding logistical coordination, housing of the inventory and database, developing a research agenda, hosting institutes, and other matters that will likely arise.

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