BECOMING ENTREPRENEURS OF CONNECTION: HOW COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS SHAPE ENGAGEMENT ACROSS DIFFERENCE AND ANTI-POVERTY COMMITMENTS

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Abstract

This article contributes to the civic identity development literature by exploring how a scholarship program emphasizing entrepreneurship and economic revitalization can facilitate engagement across difference in pursuit of shared anti-poverty commitments. Drawing on theories of entrepreneurial action, civic identity development literature, and a mixed methods approach, we propose a framework for how students conceptualize identity, race, and poverty as entrepreneurs of connection.

The role of uncertainty is central to entrepreneurial action and a hallmark of community engagement. Combining an inquiry into their own sense of identity in relationship to their peers and community partners, students contribute to the development of the entrepreneurial ecosystem by making connections at the interpersonal, organizational, and systems levels. Students merge an understanding of their personal identities and situational context to build trust with diverse peers and community partners. Entrepreneurs of connection take action with community partners to pursue innovative solutions with a focus on social change.

This study contributes to the civic identity development literature by exploring how a co-curricular scholarship program emphasizing entrepreneurship and economic revitalization can facilitate engagement across difference in pursuit of shared anti-poverty commitments. The Catalyzing Entrepreneurship and Economic Development initiative, known as CEED, develops actionable partnerships that increase entrepreneurship and promote economic revitalization in rural communities. The goal of this article is to show how participation in the CEED initiative impacts student identity development and learning about diversity, and to draw conceptual connections between those findings and the civic identity framework put forth by Schnaubelt et al. (2022).

The CEED is an interdisciplinary, cohort-based program that provides undergraduate scholarships and graduate assistantships, as well as funding for summer internships with community partners. Students can participate in CEED for multiple years, which creates opportunities for mentorship within the cohort. The CEED initiative sits at the nexus of entrepreneurship, civic identity development, and community development. It is a signature initiative of the Grisham-McLean Institute for Public Service and Community Engagement, which partners with Mississippi communities to fight poverty through education, innovation, and entrepreneurship.

Both the founding and current directors of the Grisham-McLean Institute are sociologists specializing in community development. The CEED is led by a project manager with a background in student affairs and leadership studies, and is supported by an associate director with experience in public policy and the nonprofit sectors prior to specializing in higher education. The team of Community Engagement Professionals (Dostilio, 2017) leading this work, blend their academic traditions with the current research and movements in community engagement to frame the program objectives in civic engagement and social change.

The community engagement literature explores the power asymmetries between dominant economic entities, like universities, and the marginalized groups and communities that they collaborate with through community engagement initiatives (Dempsey, 2010; Kindred & Petrescu, 2015; Soria et al., 2015). This tension sits alongside the transformative potential of universities channeling their economic activity to create mobility and opportunity as anchor institutions (Guarasci, 2022). With these tensions in mind, the CEED initiative cultivates a diverse cohort of students, and then creates teams of students from different backgrounds. These student teams then collaborate with a range of community partners, from traditional state economic actors to leaders in historically marginalized communities. Students meet regularly as a cohort and one-on-one with the Community Engagement Professionals (CEPs) to reflect on the perspectives, obstacles, and opportunities they encounter.

Through CEED, students explore the connection between entrepreneurship and social justice. They consider how partnerships with unlikely allies are critical for the success of community engagement work, and that traditional approaches to addressing poverty run the risk of reinforcing the status quo (Cook & Nation, 2016; Liew, 2016). Students also consider the political dimensions of undertaking equity-centered work while holding an affiliation with a public university. The program is funded by a statewide foundation to advance economic development for all communities.

Student collaboration with community partners has led to business development workshops, business and nonprofit formation, and youth entrepreneurship education programs. A total of 96 students (24 graduate/professional students and 72 undergraduates) have gone through the program since 2014, and many have used the program as the basis for undergraduate and graduate theses. The CEED program model blends several high impact practices, including collaborative projects, undergraduate research, internships, and community-based learning (Chittum, et al., 2022). This study is positioned to make unique contributions to the literature on civic identity development for its intentional cohort development, entrepreneurial framing, incorporation of multiple high-impact practices, and data collection from current and former program participants (Chittum et al.,

2022). Using a case study approach, this research project addresses the following question: *How does community engagement impact student identity development and learning about diversity*?

Literature Review

The purpose of this special issue is to contribute to an understanding of the building blocks and core commitments of civic identity (Schnaubelt et al., 2022). The building block that is central to this study is the *Capacity to Engage Constructively Across Difference*. In the context of Mississippi, race is of critical importance due to the pervasive effects of systemic racism. Writing about the Mississippi Delta, Harvey (2013) notes that institutional racism is embedded in "every room in which leaders meet to discuss community issues" (p. 271). These considerations require students to develop an awareness of their own identity and how they are perceived by others, as well as an understanding of local politics, institutions, and power structures, and to navigate effectively within those dynamics.

The CEED program uses intersectionality as a theoretical framing (Hill Collins, 2019), and challenges students to critically reflect on how their views of themselves and others are socially constructed. Catalyzing Entrepreneurship and Economic Development centers the perspectives of community partners – many of whom are Black women, echoing Hill Collins's (2019) argument that "African American women have long advanced alternative explanations about the complex nature of oppression in the United States as well as American democracy's potential in fostering freedom" (p. 159). The CEPs leading the program challenge students to examine white supremacy and anti-blackness and develop an alternative narrative of their own consciousness that draws on the innovative, imaginative ethos of entrepreneurship.

Catalyzing Entrepreneurship and Economic Development students become immersed in the history of social movements in Mississippi, where a legacy of white supremacist repression coexists alongside the movement for Black liberation (Asch, 2011; Duncan, 2014; Laymon, 2020). The practice of community engagement work at the state's flagship university – with its own history of forced integration (Cohodas, 1997; Eagles, 2009) – provides an additional avenue to strengthen the full participation model (Strum et al., 2011) and the attendant linkages between partnerships and programming in marginalized communities with efforts to promote the success of underrepresented students. The CEED students also explore realities facing rural communities, including population loss, hospital closures, and workforce development.

Civic Identity and Engagement Across Difference

Soria et al. (2015) found that community engagement fosters attitudes that appreciate diversity, practice shared power and accountability, and build relationships across difference. Service-learning (SL) and community engagement are frequently touted for raising awareness of diversity among white or majority students (Hurtado & Deangelo, 2012; Holsapple, 2012; Yoon et al., 2012). So as not to burden students of color with the responsibility to educate their white peers, Mitchell et al. (2012) argued for a critical approach that examines white

supremacy. Other studies have found support for the notion that community engagement leads to greater cultural awareness, more nuanced thinking and attitudes toward diversity, confrontation of stereotypes through relationship development, and recognition of universality (Finley, 2011; Yoon et al., 2012; Holsapple, 2012; Hurtado & Deangelo, 2012).

These qualities may exist as a progression, as Hurtado and Deangelo (2012) found evidence from longitudinal surveys to support the notion that volunteerism and SL contribute to greater civic awareness and complex thinking strategies to participate in a diverse democracy. This reinforces the notion that longitudinal programs can foster a deeper civic learning progression over time, which is consistent with findings by Musil (2009) and Johnson (2017) that civic identity development unfolds in a sequential pattern.

Hart, Richardson, and Wilkenfeld (2011) imagined the co-existence of multiple civic identities, which resonates with the multiple identities that students can hold simultaneously on campus, as residents of the community where their campus is located and residents of their hometowns. Hart et al. (2011) indicated that scholars have not yet identified how civic identity can be fostered, while Johnson (2017) noted that there is limited research on how civic identity develops for college students.

Asset-based Commitment to Place

The field of community development has evolved from a deficiency analysis of "struggling communities" (Walzer et al., 2016) to embrace asset-based approaches. Taking inspiration from that shift, CEED offers a strength-based approach to developing student mindsets and challenging dominant narratives about Mississippi. This embodies a commitment to the flourishing of human potential in alignment with the vision of *What Universities Owe Democracy* as argued by Daniels, Shreve, and Spector (2021). The CEED curriculum includes a text by Clifton Taulbert, titled *Who Owns the Ice House* (Taulbert & Schoeniger, 2011). Taulbert and Schoeinger (2011) studies the example of his Uncle Cleve, a Black entrepreneur in the Mississippi Delta during the Jim Crow era and argues that, "the entrepreneur possessed a mindset that moved him or her beyond challenging circumstances, setting him or her apart" (p. xxvii). Taulbert and Schoeinger (2011) present eight mindset lessons, including choice, opportunity, action, knowledge, wealth, brand, community, and persistence. These lessons are rooted in a sense of pride, empowerment, and possibility in the face of adversity. Students of CEED have taught *Who Owns the Ice House* in correctional facilities and at youth summer enrichment programs.

The CEED program provides data to contextualize the historical inequities that are embedded through the social and physical environments in the Mississippi Delta and offers theoretical framing to counter the oppression of dominant groups through a resilient mindset and by harnessing the power of partnership. Liew (2016) argues for state intervention to offset the historical inequities built into the system and that "priorities should be given to ensuring equal access to employment opportunities and improving the employability skills of its population" (Liew, 2016, p. 630). Due to the rural nature of the state and the levels of persistent poverty in the region, CEED has expanded the University of Mississippi's (UM) commitment to place beyond the immediate community by operating within a two-hour radius of campus.

Building the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

Entrepreneurial framing is central to the design of the CEED initiative, and our use of the term "entrepreneurial mindset" is rooted in Taulbert and Schoenginer's (2011) empowerment framework. It should be noted here that the purpose of this article is not to reconcile or settle ongoing debates in the field about the definitions and boundaries of community engagement, entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship, and social innovation. Rather, the goal is to consider how students define and embrace an entrepreneurial mindset to address community and social challenges, and to situate that shared definition within the context of civic identity development – specifically, an understanding of one's own identity and how that shapes engagement across difference.

Catalyzing Entrepreneurship and Economic Development students consider the entrepreneurial mindset as defined by the Entrepreneurial Learning Initiative (2020), which is a humanistic outlook characterized by curiosity, creativity, and critical thinking; a desire to create value by solving problems for others and seeking out positive influence and critical guidance (para. 3). This definition, however, is at odds with the community-oriented ethos of solving problems with, rather than for, others. In their definition of social entrepreneurship, Perry, Lahm, Schauer, and Rumble (2016) offer language that resonates with aspects of civic identity that are responsible to the greater good: "a framework that demands a mission to create and sustain social value, pursue new opportunities to serve the mission, engage in a process of learning and adaptation, think and solve beyond available resources, and exhibit high accountability to the outcomes created and the constituencies served" (p. 3). This definition of social entrepreneurship, however, does not acknowledge the role of market forces that make entrepreneurship a promising lever for social change. CEED students are invited to critique and debate these frameworks, and to consider persistent poverty as a market failure that calls for solutions that have yet to be developed or scaled.

McMullen and Shepherd (2006) seek to reconcile several theories of the entrepreneur that address individual action while attending to systems-level impact. They propose a two-stage conceptual model that considers attention to and evaluation of potential entrepreneurial opportunities. Throughout their discussion, they address contextual factors around entrepreneurship, including a context of uncertainty, scarce resources, and the desire to respond to or create change (McMullen & Shepherd, 2006). These dynamics also apply to community engagement spaces, which are characterized by the evolving nature of community partnerships, competition for resources, and the desire to fulfill higher education's public purpose through social change.

Like other entrepreneurship initiatives on campus, CEED engages students and is connected to chambers of commerce and small business development organizations. As a community engagement initiative, CEED also nurtures partnerships with grassroots organizations across north Mississippi and the Delta region. Given the realities of operating in a politically conservative state, CEED has embraced a conversation about how to harness market forces for social good. This brokering role positions the CEED initiative to contribute to the entrepreneurial ecosystem, which encompasses institutions, culture, and networks, as well as resources such as physical infrastructure, demand, intermediaries, talent, knowledge, leadership, and finance (Stam & Van de Ven, 2021). Universities can play a connecting role in developing the entrepreneurial ecosystem by developing talent, building social capital, and making connections across networks (Malecki, 2018).

Convening diverse stakeholders has become a hallmark of the CEED initiative, and this work is undertaken annually through the Mississippi Entrepreneurship Forum. The Mississippi Entrepreneurship Forum has grown from a gathering of academics and community partners working in rural community development to a statewide conference that includes representation from all eight public universities in Mississippi, traditional statewide economic development agencies, elected officials, and community-based organizations. Student entrepreneurs are featured as panelists and participate in a pitch competition. These synergistic activities contribute to the development of the entrepreneurial ecosystem in the state, while centering the voices of student entrepreneurs.

The CEED initiative challenges students to apply the entrepreneurial mindset to disrupt the cycles of poverty and oppression in rural Mississippi. The entrepreneur is called on "not only to build their own business but to act in ways that purposely encourage entrepreneurship efforts of others" (Fortunato & McLaughlin, 2012, p. 4). This cascading model of cultivating entrepreneurship in others is enacted through informal mentorship within the CEED cohort, formal mentorship relationships with CEED alumni, and through youth entrepreneurship programming in partner communities.

Methods

Using a case study approach, this article addresses how community engagement impacts student identity development and learning about diversity. Case studies take a constructivist approach where subjectivity and individual perspectives generate meaning, reality is socially constructed, and the notion of truth is a relative concept (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Hart, Richardson, and Wilkenfeld (2011) understand civic identity to be "linked to particular social groups located in specific geographic areas" (p. 774), suggesting that case studies may be particularly well suited to explore civic identity development.

Case studies are well positioned for gaining insight into how bureaucratic institutions, such as universities, engage with marginalized groups (Sjoberg et al., 2020), and exploring power asymmetries while engaging across difference. We present data from 12 program participants, drawn from an exploratory focus group with nine CEED students and alumni, and eight key informant interviews with one CEED student and seven alumni (five of whom had also participated in the focus group). These findings are corroborated by data from a survey sent to 70 program participants and alumni, as well as artifact analysis, including 11 undergraduate and master's theses. The study was approved as exempt by the institutional review board, and data collection was part of an earlier dissertation project.

The exploratory focus group took place in 2018 and was followed by in-depth interviews and document review that occurred in 2020. The overlap in participants from the focus group and interviews permits an understanding of how student reflections have evolved since graduation and participation in the CEED initiative; this represents a contribution to the literature on how civic identity develops over time (Johnson, 2017). Due to the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted and recorded over Zoom. Interviews were then transcribed for review and analysis.

Participants

A questionnaire was emailed to all 70 active participants and alumni of the CEED program in late September 2020. After sending two additional reminders, the total response rate for the survey was 61.4% (N = 43). The survey respondents included a higher percentage of students who identify as African American than represented in the overall student body at the time of data collection. This reflects the intentional design of the CEED cohort to be more diverse than the student body. The survey respondents were also somewhat more likely to identify as female and Asian/Pacific Islander than the overall student body. Table 1 presents additional data about the CEED survey respondents alongside the characteristics of the UM student body in the 2020-2021 academic year.

A diverse cohort of students participate in the CEED initiative. The 12 student participants in the qualitative portion of this study included four white females, four African American females, two white males, and two African American males. Several were first-generation college students. Their areas of study included Counselor Education, Elementary Education, English, Health Promotion, Pharmacy, Philosophy, Public Policy Leadership, and Sociology. When the interviews were conducted, seven of the eight respondents had completed their time with the CEED initiative. Table 2 presents information about the interview and focus group participants.

Analytic Process

Incorporating the perspectives of multiple researchers contributes to reliability in a case study. Similarly, triangulating data can establish validity when themes are reinforced through multiple sources such as interviews, media articles, documents, and photographs (Denzin, 1989, as cited in Orum et al., 2020), while encompassing the complexity of social reality (Snow & Anderson, 2020). The analytical process relied on the embeddedness of the research team. Our closeness to the research participants facilitated an understanding of how they

Table 1
Survey Respondents and UM Student Body

Student Characteristic	Percent	Count	UM Student Body (2020–2021)
Gender			
Male	37.2%	16	43.0%
Female	62.8%	27	57.0%
Race			
African American	23.3%	10	12.9%
White	65.1%	28	75.6%
Asian/Pacific Islander	7.0%	3	4.4%
Other	4.7%	2	2.9%
Ethnicity			
Hispanic/Latinx	4.7%	2	4.2%
Non-Hispanic/Latinx	95.3%	41	Not reported

Table 2
Research Participants

Student Pseudonym	Race	Gender	Degree(s)	Years in CEED	Focus Group	Interview*
Myesha	African American	Female	Health Promotion	1	X	
Grace	White	Female	Integrated Marketing Communications	2	X	
Emily	White	Female	Pharmacy	2	X	X
Kandace	African American	Female	Counselor Education	2	X	X*
Lillian	White	Female	Public Policy Leadership	2	X	X*
Ethan	White	Male	Public Policy Leadership	2	X	X*
Briana	African American	Female	Elementary Education	2	X	
Ashley	White	Female	Philosophy	2	X	
Kendrick	African American	Male	Health Promotion	2	X	X*
Lauryn	African American	Female	Public Policy Leadership	2		X*
James	White	Male	Public Policy Leadership, Sociology	4		X*
Demarcus	African American	Male	English	2		X*

*Denotes that the interview was conducted after the respondent had completed the CEED initiative. At the time of the interview, Ethan was enrolled at UM as a graduate student.

interpreted interactions in partner communities and how meaning is made within the CEED cohort (Prasad, 2005). For the exploratory focus group, members of the research team took detailed notes which we circulated among one another to validate our interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Feedback on the preliminary framework was elicited from colleagues at conferences on community engagement, sociology, and entrepreneurship.

In analyzing the interview data, the lead author identified codes, categories, and major themes (Lichtman, 2023) and then engaged in peer review to validate those interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2017). After the interviews were transcribed, participants were given the opportunity to review the text, offer clarifications, and further elaborate upon the transcript. The process of member checking adds rigor and credibility and builds trust between the researcher and study participants (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Qualitative Findings

The preliminary themes identified in the focus group took on a fuller articulation in the in-depth interviews with CEED students and alumni, which yielded 533 codes. These excerpts, or units of meaning, were distilled while retaining fidelity to the language used by respondents (Hycner, 1985; Thomas, 2006). These codes clustered into 15 categories that coalesced into themes of Sense of Identity, Interpersonal and Organizational Approaches, and Strategic Action. These themes are corroborated by data from student and alumni surveys, theses, and other program artifacts, suggesting sufficient data saturation to address the research question (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Table 3 presents the themes, nested categories, and associated numbers of codes.

Table 3
Categories and Themes from CEED Student Interviews

Themes and Categories	Number of Codes
Theme: Sense of Identity	*178*
Categories	
Evolving Beliefs, Interests and Ideas	51
Aspects of Shared Identity with Community	24
Being an Outsider in the Community	22
Relational and Developmental Leadership	47
Internal Conflict and Personal Growth	34
Theme: Interpersonal and Organizational Approaches	*191*
Categories	
Networking and Relationship Building	39
Making Room for the Best Idea to Emerge	42
Being Part of the CEED Cohort	37
Guidance from CEPs	24
Building Trust and Understanding Context	49
Theme: Strategic Action	*164*
Categories	
Understanding of Entrepreneurship	27
Taking Entrepreneurial Action	43
Negotiation with Empathy	13
Serving as a Conduit and Resource Broker	36
Systemic and Sustainable Change	45

Sense of Identity

The Sense of Identity theme contains categories that pertain to self-discovery, as well as the accompanying conflict and growth. Categories include evolving beliefs, interests, and ideas; aspects of shared identity with the community; being an outsider in the community; relational and developmental leadership; and internal conflict and personal growth. Respondents shared how their beliefs, interests, and ideas evolved through their participation in the CEED initiative. These changes were both conceptual and behavioral, such as a more nuanced understanding of entrepreneurship and an increased risk tolerance for starting a business or nonprofit venture.

James shared that his understanding of how to define a problem had shifted from abstract concepts to localized solutions. He explained, "I saw problems as things like high school graduation rates, incarceration rates, or literacy rates. But often interacting with students, they saw problems as something very specific, very local" (James Interview, 2020). Focusing on local manifestations of larger and systemic phenomena – such as finding jobs for high school students in a particular community rather than solving unemployment in Mississippi – can

make the solutions more accessible and locally-tailored. The focus on local solutions resonates with the framing of civic identity espoused by Hart, Richardson and Wilkenfeld (2011), where it differs from moral identities in that civic identity is "linked to particular social groups located in specific geographic areas" (p. 774).

Depending on their racial identities and backgrounds, CEED students identified aspects of shared identity with the community, as well as being outsiders. These identifications hinged on a shared sense of racial identity with the community partners. The community partner organizations that worked with students on youth entrepreneurship and enrichment programming included three organizations in the Mississippi Delta led by African American female educators and one in north Mississippi led by a Hispanic immigrant female. When working in majority Black communities, Grisham-McLean staff intentionally created cross-racial teams of students. Lauryn, as a Black female student, shared how she took on a familiar role of translation when meeting with African American community partners and a white CEP: "I felt relatable… There's just a little bit of translation that goes on between what you're talking about and what they're trying to get to. And where's our midpoint? And so I think for me, my identity has always kind of been in that midpoint of – I feel like a translator" (Lauryn Interview, 2020). Lauryn used the term "code switching" to describe the process of translating nuanced communication between African American community partners and white university representatives. The sense among African American respondents was that a shared racial identity with community partners can open doors and accelerate the trust-building process, and even extend credibility with majority peers.

Students who did not share the racial identity of their community partners were also able to build trust over time. Lillian, a white female who led a summer enrichment program for Hispanic youth, shared that her Catholic faith allowed her to establish a rapport with the community partner at the local Catholic Charities affiliate. Identity in general and race in particular were influential in how students approached building trust and meeting community needs when working across racial lines. Lillian emphasized the importance of building relationships with community partners: "Identity and just race alone played a huge role in how we had to approach building trust in the community and creating a relationship with the partner to ensure success of the program and actually meet the needs of the students in the community" (Lillian Interview, 2020).

James built upon that analysis by considering the importance of being in diverse spaces and how his identity as a white male would be perceived by others: "Just being in places that were different, taking a step back, and thinking about my position in those places all were essential to thinking about my identity and then how my identity interacts with others" (James Interview, 2020). This growing awareness of identity and representation builds the capacity to engage across difference. Students draw on self-awareness and cultural humility to attend to power asymmetries inherent in their community partnerships (Schnaubelt et al., 2022), ultimately building relationships grounded in trust.

Respondents described how trust was built not only with community partners but also within the CEED cohort. The leadership qualities espoused by the respondents were decidedly relational, with an emphasis on guiding others into leadership roles and creating an environment that values listening and a robust exchange of ideas. Demarcus had an extensive background in community organizing prior to joining CEED, and embraced opportunities to learn about other approaches:

> I think working with people that were so different than me has helped me grow – helped me actually start listening to people, and knowing that I don't have to be the driver of the car all the time. That other folks can lead the way, even if they haven't had as many experiences as I've had, or have had the experiences that I've had. (Demarcus Interview, 2020)

Like Demarcus, many respondents reported experiencing growth by stepping out of their comfort zone – an analogue to taking on entrepreneurial risk. For different students, this meant interrogating unexamined beliefs, sitting with the ambiguous timeframes of evolving community partnerships, or accepting public speaking opportunities on behalf of the university. In each of these instances, students reflected on the opportunity to create growth out of conflict.

Interpersonal and Organizational Approaches

The Interpersonal and Organizational Approaches theme consists of the following categories: networking and relationship building, making room for the best idea to emerge, the experience of being part of the CEED cohort, guidance from CEPs, and a focus on building trust and understanding local context. Each of these aspects describes how CEED students approach working with one another and navigating community partnership.

Community engagement work is anchored in personal relationships and organizational partnerships. Lauryn considered the relationships that she built through CEED to be her proudest achievement. She connected the notion of relationship building to collective action in her home state of Mississippi: "And I think that what's important in Mississippi is people being able to synergize and work together. So that we can accomplish these common goals, rather than everybody trying to put one little coal on the one thousand different fires" (Lauryn Interview, 2020). The CEED cohort served as an incubator to apply this concept.

In the CEED cohort, students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, ages, life experiences, and academic disciplines created a marketplace of ideas where robust exchanges took place. The overarching focus, poverty alleviation, is a societal challenge that has no easy answers, so all ideas were up for consideration. As Kandace described it, "I was able to bring some of my culture and my background and my ideas – where my culture shaped my ideas – and talk about it with other CEED people who are not of the same demographic background as I am" (Kandace Interview, 2020). Both Lauryn and Emily emphasized the volume and thoughtfulness of questions asked: "CEED was the first place I learned that you need to have more questions than answers. So that I appreciated" (Lauryn Interview, 2020). This insight also speaks to how the CEED experience educates participants to contribute to the robust exchange of ideas that characterizes democratic pluralism (Daniels et al., 2021).

Being part of a diverse group of peers and coming prepared with more questions than answers are hallmarks of the CEED experience. Respondents also characterized other aspects of being part of the CEED cohort, such as stepping out of one's comfort zone but doing so with support from CEPs and the structure of the Grisham-McLean Institute. Both Kendrick and Demarcus reflected on the experience of taking UM students out of their

comfort zone in visiting communities around the state to experience firsthand the generational poverty, resilience, and creativity that coexist in those places. This is another juncture where CEPs play a critical role in facilitating reflection so students can translate their personal and disciplinary growth into justice-oriented action.

Kendrick (2020) characterized those community visits as a "wake-up call, almost a call to action" for students, while Demarcus (2020) recalled those trips as a chance to learn from his peers: "It gave me a chance to sit back and see how outsiders view the Mississippi Delta and view the people in the Delta and how that may or may not connect to their lives." The experience of being in the CEED cohort appears to be a combination of physical presence in communities and having peers with whom to process and contextualize those experiences – particularly peers from different backgrounds.

It appears that some aspects of entrepreneurial start-up culture seeped their way into the culture of the CEED cohort. Multiple respondents referenced a comfort with failure, and characterized failure as an opportunity to learn, grow, and find their way to a better solution – crucially, for failed ideas to unfold in the classroom context, rather than using the community as a laboratory. James provided the example of reading a *New York Times* article about student achievement gaps and wanting to address the issue by fostering closer collaboration among community partners working in the education space. After gathering feedback on the idea, considering time and resource constraints, as well as his role as a student, James realized that a better solution would be to create an immersive summer learning program for youth.

Respondents reported that Grisham-McLean staff were instrumental in facilitating this creative, iterative culture. It must be mentioned again here that CEPs facilitated the focus group and interviews, so this category must be interpreted accordingly. From being sounding boards for conflict management to sharing their professional networks to insisting on high standards from students, CEPs developed a relationship with each member of the cohort. CEPs also, in the words of Demarcus, served as a bridge to connect students and community members: "Although [the students] may have had great ideas, you guys were that bridge to get us over" (Demarcus Interview, 2020). Emily, a white female, recalled taking a cue from the project manager when first visiting African American community partners to step back from task orientation and focus on building trust.

The culmination of these relationships, exchanges of ideas, and supportive structures was a concerted focus on building trust in the community. Students were prepared by their study of civil rights figures such as Fannie Lou Hamer (Asch, 2011) and ethnographic studies of rural poverty (Duncan, 2014). The community itself was viewed as a space where needs were framed as opportunities, and collaboration was guided by community voices. As Kandace explained, "instead of going in saying, 'okay, this is what you need to do for your community to be better,' I approach it as, 'your community is already great. How can we make it greater?'" (Kandace Interview, 2020). In approaching the community partners with appreciation for their ideas and a desire to align student strengths with community interests, students moved away from a charity-oriented model to a community development approach.

The trust-building process was also heavily dependent on local context and individual personalities. Demarcus reflected on how the legacy of oppression can present obstacles for building trust, especially in the context of the Mississippi Delta and the University of Mississippi:

> "There's [exploitation] that has happened so many times to people of color that I think it's beneficial to have someone that looks like me, looks like anyone else in the cohort who is Black, and has a southern dialect or just spoke just like people in those communities speak" (Demarcus Interview, 2020).

While a shared racial identity and modes of speech can build rapport, the process of building trust is a longer-term endeavor. As James put it, "we have to do it with a degree of empathy and understanding and that takes time" (James Interview, 2020).

Ultimately, this trust, empathy, and understanding in one partner community can help students to realize parallels across Mississippi. As Lauryn explained, "That historical context was something that was sorely lacking from my knowledge; I had a broader understanding of history, but not necessarily of how it affects people's day-to-day lives" (Lauryn Interview, 2020). Understanding how historical, political, and economic forces shape the state then filters down to an appreciation for how those forces manifest in the local context, as well as with individual community partners who open doors to collaboration.

Strategic Action

The theme of strategic action describes how students mobilize their evolving sense of identity alongside interpersonal and organizational approaches to consider social change at scale. Categories within the theme of Strategic Action include developing a shared sense of entrepreneurship, taking entrepreneurial action, negotiation with empathy, serving as a conduit and resource broker, and seeking systemic and sustainable change.

Across the theses and interviews, CEED students provided their own definitions of entrepreneurship. While these definitions contained elements common to traditional conceptualizations of entrepreneurship – assumption of risk, passion, and dedication – they also described problem solving for the public good. Lauryn defined entrepreneurship very succinctly: "I view entrepreneurs as problem solvers... I think the best entrepreneurs are the people who are solving problems for other people" (Lauryn Interview, 2020). Lauryn is now Assistant Director of Entrepreneurship within a community engagement office at a research university in Texas. She has also founded a nonprofit organization dedicated to youth entrepreneurship education, runs her own apparel company, and has published a book about how purpose-driven work creates both community impact and meaning for individuals.

Several students addressed a collaborative approach to practicing entrepreneurship. CEED students mapped a progression of steps for entrepreneurial action, including: (1) identify team strengths and unmet needs in the community, (2) take a risk to step out of one's comfort zone, and (3) create something that didn't exist before. CEED students were also transformed in the process. As Kandace shared: "And the thing I'm most proud of is that I started a nonprofit. And that was, I feel – *I know* – I started that because of CEED. Because CEED developed an entrepreneurial spirit within me" (Kandace Interview, 2020). Kandace now holds a doctorate and runs her own counseling business; has published a book on self-care, personal growth, and healing; and serves as a community partner for CEED summer interns.

Two respondents, Lauryn and Kendrick, went into detail about the process of negotiation with community partners. Both reflected on their racial identity as Black Mississippians but also as university representatives from outside the community. Kendrick recalled the extensive networking he undertook to build trust in the community and ensure the success of the summer learning program. As he received input from students, parents, and community leaders, Kendrick's strategy was to invert the traditional paradigm of university experts who impose programming on a community. He explained how he approached skeptics in the community:

> "I want to make sure that what you're seeing is what you wanted. So instead of me asking 'how are you going to work with me?' It's 'let me just see what can I do to work with you? Where can we go?'" (Kendrick Interview, 2020).

Kendrick describes a negotiation strategy that is rooted in empathy and a deep contextual awareness. This negotiation practices scaffolds on a sense of personal identity and their role within the CEED cohort to center community priorities and establish new programs. When brokering interactions in the community, CEED students were attuned to the importance of communication and serving as a conduit to connect community and campus resources. While the interpersonal theme addressed individual connection, the systemic-level iteration of that practice involved connecting the university with individuals and organizations that could most strategically deploy resources. One example that grew out of the youth summer program in a Hispanic farmworker community was a "Know Your Rights" workshop for migrant parents with questions about their immigration status amid escalating rhetoric from the Trump administration. This is an example of a CEED student brokering connections to share resources in support of immigrant rights.

Reflections on sustainable partnerships, and how higher education can connect disparate programs to a larger movement for social change, were threaded throughout the interviews. This is a call for higher education to fulfill its democratic purpose. Students addressed the importance of sustainability and a recognition that poverty alleviation is a long-term prospect. Kendrick acknowledged the frequently internalized mentality of Mississippi "being last" in many indicators of wellbeing: "It's a slow and definitely grueling process because we're last and we have to be willing to accept that we're not first and everything, and it's a challenge" (Kendrick Interview, 2020). At the same time, a sense of optimism also pervaded the student reflections, alongside a sense that colleges and universities can play a role in positive social change by partnering with communities.

While CEED students felt like ambassadors in linking university resources to community partner organizations, they were simultaneously mindful of the power dynamics implicit in those negotiations:

> "Other insights I gained are about how our universities and communities interact together, and the power that universities have and how that power can be used for good, and for bad, and for all things in between. And the resources that universities have to work in partnership with communities" (Lillian Interview, 2020).

As much as universities can be a powerful partner, James also acknowledged that the project of poverty alleviation is much larger than any one intervention or field, and that the key is to implement local solutions that can be scaled to have a broader impact: "I still believe community and economic development has to be from a local perspective. But then on the same hand, as you scaffold the solutions, you do get more systemic change." (James Interview, 2020). The CEED students shared a theory of social change that centered the entrepreneurial mindset within community-campus partnerships that could be scaled to have a systemic impact.

Discussion

To understand how community engagement impacts student identity development and learning about diversity, the data suggest that students in the CEED program become what we refer to as *entrepreneurs of connection.* These entrepreneurs of connection explore their identities to make authentic connections and build trust across difference – with peers in the cohort and community partners. These relationships create the space for the best ideas to emerge, and these innovative solutions frequently align university resources to meet community needs. Entrepreneurs of connection understand that poverty alleviation requires broad-based solutions from many sectors, and that higher education has a critical role to play in this collaborative venture. Therefore, entrepreneurs of connection look to sustainable, scalable solutions that can have a systemic impact.

As discussed in the literature review, entrepreneurs balance an uncertain environment with scarce resources and a desire to make change (McMullen & Shepherd, 2006). Table 4 maps each locus of action alongside the role of uncertainty, relevant research finding, and student response.

Table 4
Becoming Entrepreneurs of Connection

Locus of Action	Role of Uncertainty	Relevant Finding	Student Response
System	Long-term outcomes of community engagement effort.	Shared understanding of entrepreneurship that takes a risk and creates a solution to align with community needs.	Students practice entrepreneurial leadership by taking action with community partners to create something that didn't exist before, with a focus on sustainable social change.
Interpersonal/ Organizational	Unknown environment outside of university setting.	Practice of a developmental and relational leadership style where students serve as a conduit to connect resources where they are needed.	Being attuned to local context and cultivating empathy allows students to build relationships that establish trust and make space for the best ideas to emerge.
Individual	One's own ability to plan and lead a community engagement program.	Student roles in the cohort and in the community are influenced by a developing awareness of their own race and privilege.	Students calibrate interactions to connect authentically with peers and community members.

The findings suggest that CEED serves as an incubator not only for community engagement projects, but also for civic identity development. Entrepreneurs of connection practice

> "the arts of democracy: development of active listening and active voice, establishment of empathy and reciprocity, acquisition of intercultural competency, use of mediation and negotiation skills, understanding of ambiguity and nuance, and learning the necessity of building coalitions as pathways to solutions and action" (Guarasci, 2022, p. 36).

These abilities and sensibilities prepare entrepreneurs of connection to engage constructively across difference with individuals, and to consider how those interactions can be scaled through coalition building at the organizational and systems levels.

At the individual level, students reflected on their identity and how their own race and privilege influence their worldview and how they are perceived by others. The CEED cohort is intentionally diverse with respect to academic discipline, life experience, age, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability, religion, native language, and national origin. The ability to calibrate interactions with peers and community members is born out of self-awareness; this facilitates constructive engagement across difference (Schnaubelt et al., 2022). While CEED students noted how a shared racial identity and vernacular can serve as an accelerant to building relationships with community partners, perceived differences narrow with time. The ability to engage constructively across difference is key in program design and the fulcrum upon which the framework rests.

At the interpersonal and organizational levels, entrepreneurs of connection practice networking, building relationships, and developing the leadership potential of others. Among peers and community partners, engaging a variety of voices ensures that the best ideas can emerge. As entrepreneurs of connection formalize community partnerships, building trust ensures that their efforts to facilitate asset-based community development and equity-oriented entrepreneurship have maximum impact.

Students devote much energy to making connections to serve as a conduit connecting university resources where they can be deployed effectively in the community, which is how the CEED students understand their impact to reach the systems level. The CEED students use imaginative applications of the entrepreneurial mindset to address poverty in Mississippi. These entrepreneurs of connection are mindful of the power asymmetries that exist in community-campus partnerships and seek to broker resources to benefit underserved groups. Through their experiences with CEED, students develop a nuanced awareness of themselves as change agents, of community partners, as collaborators in creating a more just society, and call on the university to fulfill its democratic imperative.

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge several limitations to this study. The first is that case study research can be less generalizable due to the unique contextual factors of each program. Mississippi is fertile ground to connect the

legacy of the civil rights movement to ongoing struggles for social justice, both on and off campus. Our campus is not alone in holding these critical dialogues. A survey of higher education administrators found that diversity, equity, and inclusion activities were high priorities heading into the 2020–2021 academic year (Bass et al., 2021). As campuses reckon with the legacies of structural racism and inequities at their own institutions, community engagement with an emphasis on building relationships across difference may be an avenue to facilitate the development of civic skills.

Given the qualitative dimensions of this study, it is also important to reflect on the positionalities of the research team. All identify as white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, and hold terminal degrees. One member of the research team grew up in poverty in the Mississippi Delta; another is female. We hold privileged positions while also working to facilitate a diverse CEED cohort and, as a result, are interpreting data from students of color through our respective lenses. There is also a power differential between the researchers as CEPs and students and alumni who received scholarships from the program. While there is potential for those considerations to influence responses, the numerous alumni voices included in the survey were more removed from those dynamics. As discussed earlier, we have conducted member checking to enhance our interpretation of the findings. While we were satisfied that we had reached saturation from data analysis from the focus group, survey, document analysis, and interviews, the research design could be strengthened by increasing the number of interview respondents.

Implications for Inclusive Design

Guarasci (2022) argues that "diversity and democracy are inextricably linked in the American narrative, but campuses divide them into separate commitments that have distinct administrative homes and often are divided into separate academic disciplines" (p. 30). The design of the CEED initiative upends that paradigm. The CEED cohort is purposefully drawn from across academic disciplines and aspects of individual identity – particularly race, class, and gender. The *Capacity to Engage Constructively Across Difference* (Schnaubelt et al., 2022) sits at the foundation of how the CEED cohort is developed and how students interact with communities. The interdisciplinary nature of the CEED initiative also reinforces the notion that all career pathways can contribute to the public good; and emphasizes reflective practice to ensure that these efforts are delivered with intention and integrity (Guarasci, 2022).

Community engagement at UM operates at a flagship public research university in a rural state. However, many aspects of the CEED program can be easily replicated, such as funding for scholarships and assistantships, collaborative project planning with community partners, framing poverty alleviation as an entrepreneurial challenge, and fostering diverse teams of students and community partners. Key considerations for program replication include the following: (1) intentionally cultivate a diverse cohort and pair students from different backgrounds; (2) take an asset-based approach to building interpersonal relationships and community partnerships; (3) engage with community partners from the grassroots to the statewide level, including traditional state economic development actors; and (4) challenge students to envision how entrepreneurial solutions can disrupt the inequitable status quo through community-driven problem solving.

Nearly a decade into program implementation, CEED alumni are now returning as guest speakers, mentoring current scholars, fundraising for community projects, and supervising internships. Since 2014, 14 CEED students have started 17 business and nonprofit ventures, many of which promote personal empowerment or community wellness. Of these, 16 are woman- and/or minority-owned and nine operate in Mississippi. In addition to the businesses mentioned previously, these include a film and video production company with an emphasis on education and social change, portrait and event photography, a "selfie museum" with rotating backgrounds, eyebrow threading, a transportation and logistics company, and an apparel company that amplifies mental health awareness. By becoming entrepreneurs, these students are reclaiming agency and doing so through economic activity that generates employment for others and a greater social benefit. By opening businesses and exploring the extent to which their market solution can address social issues, these young entrepreneurs are reconceptualizing the role that business entities can play in creating a more just society.

Conclusions

We argue that through constructive engagement across difference, the CEED initiative creates a larger scaffolding to uphold the values, practices, and institutions of a liberal democracy. The development of the CEED cohort and its shared sense of identity tracks closely with Knefelkamp's (2008) description of how an individual locates the self in community: engaging with members of the cohort and community partners, intellectualizing the process of ethical community engagement with significant power asymmetries, critically analyzing the history and narratives of Mississippi, leading with empathy, and pushing for the alignment of university resources with underserved communities. If the CEED initiative is an incubator of a particular type of civic identity – entrepreneurs of connection – we argue that it can also fulfill the university's obligation to democracy by promoting social mobility (of students and in partner communities), connecting current inequities to histories and legacies of oppression, and inviting the robust exchange of ideas from diverse contributors (Daniels et al., 2021). Indeed, this dynamic set of skills, including "communication skills, problem-solving ability, critical thinking capacity, creativity, and collaborative habits" (Guarasci, 2022, p. 9) is what the emerging economy and a thriving democracy require to flourish.

These entrepreneurs of connection describe how their evolving sense of personal identity – in relationship to diverse peers and community partners – gives way to a highly relational way of building trust and making space for the most innovative ideas to emerge. Building on these interpersonal and relational dynamics, entrepreneurs of connection apply innovative thinking to persistent community challenges such as generational poverty, negotiate with empathy, and marshal resources with systemic and sustainable change in mind. This co-curricular program model and resulting framework offer insight into civic identity development and promising practices for partnership with rural and historically marginalized communities as one pathway for higher education to promote social justice, racial equity, and uphold our democratic ideals.

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