

Advancing Impact, Partnership, & Purpose: Reflections from Compact26

This spring Michigan State University was well represented at Campus Compact's national conference, Compact26, where colleagues from the Center for Community Engaged Learning (CCEL), Center for Community and Economic Development (CCED), the Detroit Center, and University Outreach and Engagement (UOE) contributed to, and learned from, a wide range of sessions, presentations, and national conversations.

Spanning topics from student impact and assessment to community partnerships and economic innovation, MSU's presence reflected both the depth and breadth of its commitment to community engaged learning. Across sessions, a clear throughline emerged: meaningful impact is achieved when institutions listen intentionally, measure thoughtfully, and partner authentically.

Showcasing Student Impact and Learning

Several MSU-led sessions focused on understanding and communicating the impact of community engagement on students. In a featured session, K.C. Keyton, CCEL

Assistant Director, shared insights from MSU's Spartan Days of Service, highlighting how intentional design through reflection and assessment can transform even a single day of service into a meaningful learning experience.

Student survey data revealed consistent outcomes: increased awareness of community issues, stronger connection to community, and a deeper sense of purpose. These findings reinforce that short term engagement, when structured thoughtfully, can lead to lasting personal and civic growth.

Building on this work, a roundtable led by Michelle Snitgen, Stephanie Brewer, and Tina Houghton, Assistant Directors in CCEL, expanded the conversation to include career readiness. The presenters explored how community engaged learning helps students develop transferable skills such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, and problem solving. This evolving



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assessment approach positions community engagement not only as civic learning, but also as a critical pathway to professional development.

Strengthening and Studying Partnerships

A strong emphasis throughout the conference was placed on the importance of authentic, reciprocal partnerships. In sessions led by CCEL staff, presenters shared strategies for building and sustaining these relationships, including intentional onboarding processes, clear communication, and ongoing feedback mechanisms.

Tools such as the SpartansVolunteer platform and engagement aligned with global frameworks like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals are helping to create more coordinated and inclusive opportunities for collaboration.

At the same time, national conversations, particularly through CCEL Executive Director, Renee Miller Zientek's involvement with the TRUCEN network, focused on improving how institutions assess community partner experiences. Participants explored emerging frameworks to better capture partner perspectives and ensure that engagement efforts are not only effective, but also ethical, reciprocal, and sustainable.

Expanding Innovation and Community Impact

MSU's contributions also extended beyond student learning into broader community and economic development. In a session led by Geoffrey Gracia, CCED AmeriCorps Member in the Center for Community and Economic Development, participants explored the concept of circular economies and the shift from traditional "take-make-waste" systems toward regenerative models.

This work highlights how universities can partner with communities to create sustainable economic opportunities while reducing environmental impact, demonstrating the broader potential of community engagement to drive systems level change.

Deepening Practice Through Mindfulness

Another emerging area of focus shared at the conference was the integration of mindfulness into community engaged learning. Renee Miller Zientek and Stephanie Brewer presented on practices being incorporated into MSU's Community Engagement Scholars Program, including reflection, intentional listening, and presence.

These approaches support more ethical and empathetic engagement by helping students better understand their own perspectives and responsibilities within community-based work. Looking ahead, they are exploring how mindfulness practices can also be extended to community partners to strengthen relationships and support more sustainable collaboration.

National Recognition of Leadership and Impact

Compact26 also provided an opportunity to celebrate national recognition of MSU’s leadership community engagement.

Renee Miller Zientek, Executive Director of CCEL, received the Nadinne Cruz Community Engagement Professional Award from Campus Compact. This national honor recognizes sustained leadership and a deep commitment to advancing equitable, reciprocal community engaged work.

In addition, MSU student Roberto Garcia was recognized with a national Student Leadership Award, reflecting the powerful role students play in advancing community impact through service, partnership, and civic engagement.

Together, these recognitions highlight the collective efforts of students, community partners, faculty, and staff who contribute to this work every day.

Moving Forward

As MSU colleagues return from Compact26, they do so with renewed clarity and momentum. Key priorities moving forward include:

- Strengthening assessment practices to better capture meaningful impact
- Centering community partner’s voices in all aspects of engagement
- Connecting civic learning with career readiness and life outcomes
- Deepening partnerships grounded in trust, reciprocity, and shared purpose

At its core, community engaged learning is about relationships—*relationships* that support student growth, strengthen communities, and advance the public mission of higher education.

