



A U C E A

**Australian Universities Community
Engagement Alliance**

**National Conference Proceedings 2008
(Online)**

**Section 1 Refereed Proceedings
Section 2 Non Refereed Proceedings**

ENGAGING FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

**University of The Sunshine Coast
Sippy Downs**

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Section 2 papers were presented at the conference but were not refereed.

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Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance REFEREED CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS 2008

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Hope as a Basis for Understanding the Benefits and Possibilities of Community Engagement

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Abstract

Community engagement is crucial to Australian Catholic University's mission. The university's Institute for Advancing Community Engagement is dedicated to forging partnerships with communities in Australia and overseas, with a strong focus on working with disadvantaged people to build capacity and create new opportunities. The Institute's activities include providing education programs for homeless and marginalised adults in Australia, and teacher training courses and health clinics for people in East Timor. The present paper discusses the documented outcomes of these and other initiatives, and analyses them in terms of Hope Theory. A substantial body of research has demonstrated that those with higher levels of hope are more able to effectively make decisions and pursue their goals, and enjoy better physical health, psychological adjustment, and academic performance, among other positive outcomes. It is argued that increases in hope underlie the observed benefits of the Institute's community engagement work, and a strong array of empirical evidence and theoretical reasoning is provided in support of this view. The hope-focused perspective is presented as a key framework for understanding how community engagement projects, such as those of the Institute for Advancing Community Engagement, lead to positive outcomes for communities, and how the quality and sustainability of this work can be enhanced.

Community engagement initiatives take many distinct forms, and are evaluated in many different ways. Some initiatives aim to provide education, others welfare, still others healthcare, and so on. In assessing such efforts, researchers often find that the benefits of community engagement go beyond the discrete effects of the specific forms of assistance offered in these initiatives. Take, for example, a hypothetical program that offers education courses to disadvantaged community members. As expected, the students who participate in these courses become more educated, and thus more able to access employment or further education. The results of the program evaluation confirm this. But the participants also seem to have benefited from the program in other ways. The researchers suspect that a deeper, more encompassing impact has been made in the lives of the community members; one that goes beyond the stated aims of the program. What is this impact? In the present paper, it is argued that a key benefit of community engagement, common to all successful community engagement initiatives, is the increase of hope. We propose that hope theory offers a distinctive and useful framework within which community engagement can be understood, evaluated, and expanded.

Keywords: hope, community, engagement, pathways, agency

What is Community Engagement?

In order to explore community engagement in this context, it is necessary to outline our understanding of what engagement is, at the fundamental level. Cohen (1989) offered a definition of engagement with regard to the delivery of human services for homeless people: "*Engagement* is defined as the process of establishing mutual respect and trust in the helping relationship" (p. 505). Egan et al. (2005) expanded this definition to apply it to the community as a whole, conceptualising *community engagement* as the process of "establishing trust in the broader community" (p. 5). Mirroring this, ACU National has stated that it values community engagements as "affirming relationships that depend on trust and genuine partnerships with community organisations, institutions, and corporations". An engaged person is one who feels connected to their community or neighbourhood, belongs to positive and rewarding social networks, and maintains meaningful links to their society and its institutions. Disengagement occurs when people lose trust in their communities, and disconnect from those around them. Community engagement initiatives aim to increase levels of engagement in communities where there is disadvantage, marginalisation, or social exclusion.

Expanding upon this definition, ACU National's Institute for Advancing Community Engagement describes community engagement as:

...the process through which ACU National brings the capabilities of its staff and students to work collaboratively with community groups and organisations to achieve mutually agreed goals that build

capacity, improve wellbeing, and produce just and sustainable outcomes in the interests of people, communities, and the University (ACU National, 2007).

This description, while written specifically with ACU National in mind, captures the nature of community engagement work as it is practiced by all manner of universities, community organisations, and other institutes and agencies. The key features of community engagement efforts are collaboration, mutual benefit, capacity-building and sustainability.

Related to engagement is the concept of 'empowerment'. Levels of engagement are heightened when community members are *empowered* to reconnect with society (Stewart & Bhagwanjee, 1999). Many community engagement initiatives focus on empowering communities through the provision of education, health, or welfare services, and by forging new relationships between community members and social institutions, such as universities. Cohen (1989) captures the nature of empowerment when she describes it as meeting "the critical human need of being an effective and creative participant in one's environment" (p. 507). This description highlights the inherent link between engagement and empowerment: unless a person is empowered – that is, able to participate effectively in their environment – they will not be engaged with the social environment that surrounds them.

Hope, and Hope Theory

C. R. Snyder's pioneering theory of hope has allowed psychological science to build a substantial body of knowledge on what has come to be acknowledged as a crucial aspect of human cognition. According to hope theory, the construct of hope is understood in terms of three key components: goals, pathways, and agency. These dimensions of hope are outlined as follows:

Goals

All purposeful human behaviour, by its very nature, is goal-driven (Snyder, 1995). As such, the goals for which people strive are central to their lives, and their sense of wellbeing often hinges on whether or not their goals are reached. Hope is defined as *goal-directed thought*. Of course, hope is not relevant in the case of trivial or minor goals, such as the goal to brush one's teeth in the morning. Nor is it relevant when the goal in question is either certain to be attained or impossible to attain, because there is little use in hoping for that which is guaranteed, or for that which will never eventuate. In short, hope theory "is concerned with goals that are at least of moderate importance and intermediate in their probability of attainment" (Snyder et al., 2000, p. 748). Those high in hope approach their goals with positive emotions, a focus on success, and a sense of challenge, while those low in hope approach their goals with negative emotions, a focus on failure, and a sense of ambivalence or intimidation. High hope persons are more likely to set realistic, well-defined goals for themselves, and are more likely to divide their goals into more manageable sub-goals, to facilitate progress towards the grander goal. In contrast, low hope persons are more likely to set goals that are too large or too difficult to attain, and are more likely to have poorly defined goals that are not divided into sub-goals (Snyder, 1995; Snyder, 2002).

Pathways

A person's sense of hope is determined in part by their perception of the available routes by which they might reach a given goal. When a person perceives that there are few such routes, or when the available routes are ineffective or become obstructed, then their hope is diminished. 'Pathways thinking' refers to a person's cognitive appraisal of the available pathways leading to goal attainment. It also refers to the process by which a person generates plausible pathways by which they could achieve their goals (Snyder, 2002). In other words, those higher in pathways thinking are better able to perceive or construct effective routes to their goals. They can also think of a greater number of workable routes, and are more able to generate alternative routes when the original ones become unexpectedly obstructed.

Agency

In order to reach a goal, a person must not only have access to workable pathways leading to the goal; they must also believe in their own capacity to actually follow these pathways. They must possess a sense of agency sufficient to motivate them along the path to goal attainment; they must perceive themselves to be effective, capable agents (Snyder, 2002). 'Agentic thinking' refers to the self-referential beliefs and thoughts held by a person regarding their own ability to pursue their goals. Those higher in agentic thinking make more positive appraisals of their own abilities, and are more motivated to attain the goals they have set for themselves.

Bringing the three dimensions of hope together, the overall construct of hope is defined by Snyder (1995) as “the process of thinking about one’s goals, along with the motivation to move toward (agency) and the ways to achieve (pathways) those goals” (p. 355). Pathways and agentic thinking are reciprocally derived and mutually reinforcing (Snyder et al., 1991). In other words, when a person’s pathways thinking is enhanced, and they become more able to generate effective pathways to their goals, it is likely that they will then become more motivated to follow these routes. Conversely, when a person becomes more motivated to pursue their goals, it is likely that they will thus be more energised to think of workable routes to their goals.

In all, those who are more hopeful are more likely to pursue their goals effectively, and thus are more likely to reach their goals. Further, when the pursuit of a given goal is hampered or made impossible, high-hope people are better able to refocus their energies on new goals, not letting past failures unduly disrupt subsequent efforts (Snyder, 1995). Indeed, high-hope individuals are more likely to view their failures as lessons, from which they can learn how to more successfully pursue future goals (Snyder et al., 2000).

Within hope theory, hope is cognitive; it is goal-directed *thinking*, and emotions are affected by the success or failure of goal-pursuit (Snyder, 2002). Those who are making good progress towards their goals, or who reach their goals, experience positive emotions. Those who are not making progress, have encountered setbacks, or have failed to reach their goals, experience negative emotions (Snyder, 1995). Of course, the consequences of goal-pursuit go beyond these effects on affectivity. The very direction of a person’s life is determined by whether or not they reach their goals, such as being admitted to a certain university, being hired for a certain job, being able to start a family, being able to advance their career, and so on. As such, hope is a crucial factor in determining the quality and direction of a person’s life, and the promotion of hope should therefore be viewed as a key aim in efforts to improve the lives of people and their communities. While hope is commonly treated as a trait, with a person’s hopefulness remaining relatively stable across time and situations, this does not mean that hope cannot be altered. Even at the dispositional level, hope can be enhanced over time by counselling, therapy, and other life experiences (Snyder, 1995), such as involvement in community engagement initiatives.

Benefits of Hope

The positive outcomes of hope have been documented in numerous empirical studies. Those with higher levels of hope are not only more likely to reach their goals, but they also have a greater number of goals, have more difficult goals, and view their goals as challenges (Snyder, 1995). Other benefits enjoyed by high-hope people include superior coping skills, better recovery from injuries, less burnout at work, greater levels of happiness, and lower levels of distress (see Snyder, 1995, for an overview of the research on these benefits). Hope has also been associated with better physical health, psychological adjustment, academic achievement, and athletic performance (see Snyder, 2002). In all, there is a substantial body of evidence attesting to the positive impact of hope in many areas of life, and it is clear that hope deserves attention as a central factor in determining whether people enjoy wellbeing, success, and happiness in their lives.

Linking Community Engagement with Hope Theory

Community engagement initiatives can be understood as fundamentally hope-enhancing, exemplifying as well as promoting hope in communities. In support of this perspective, the ways in which community engagement leads to heightened pathways and agentic thinking will be examined, and specific examples of recent community engagement initiatives will be discussed in terms of hope theory.

Community Engagement as Enhancing Pathways Thinking

Community engagement initiatives can be characterised as providing community members with new, effective pathways, by which they may reach previously inaccessible goals. For example, education programs offer pathways to further learning, healthcare programs offer pathways to greater physical and mental wellbeing, and welfare programs offer pathways to better standards of living. For community members, to be involved in community engagement is to be exposed to new pathways for pursuing previously unreachable goals, and to experience what it means to follow these pathways successfully. The experience of identifying and following specific pathways within a particular community engagement initiative can teach general lessons to community members about how to perceive and

generate pathways in other areas of life. So, for example, a community member involved in an education program will follow a pathway towards the goal of furthering their education, and in doing so their overall pathways thinking will be heightened, allowing them to pursue non-education-related goals more successfully. In other words, by pursuing the specific goals of the initiative in which they are participating, a person will learn general lessons about how to follow pathways, and this learning experience will enhance their pathways thinking and thereby increase their sense of hope. Equipped with greater levels of pathways thinking and hope, this person will be better able to formulate and pursue goals in other areas of their life. The literature on hope theory supports the proposition that learning to generate and follow pathways in a specific domain of life can generalise to other domains.

Community Engagement as Enhancing Agentic Thinking

In addition to providing workable routes towards specific goals, community engagement initiatives enhance the sense of agency of participating community members. Indeed, merely by delivering community engagement initiatives, community workers send the message that they believe in the capacity of community members to make positive changes in their lives, and connect more fully with society. This message is empowering, and as such has the potential to be internalised by community members, who could thereby come to believe more strongly in their own abilities as effective agents. By participating in community engagement programs, community members should realise that such initiatives would not exist were it not for the belief that the participants, even those who are most disadvantaged, have the ability to successfully follow the pathways offered by the initiatives. Recall that empowerment is a crucial way in which to heighten levels of engagement, and that empowerment involves meeting the human need to feel like an effective agent in one's environment. Clearly then, empowerment can be equated with the enhancement of agency: those who more strongly perceive themselves to be effective agents are those with higher levels of agentic thinking. By promoting agentic thinking, community engagement initiatives empower participating community members, who will thus be more likely to engage more completely with society.

Mutual Reinforcement in Community Engagement

It should also be remembered that pathways and agentic thinking are mutually reinforcing. Thus, whenever a community engagement initiative leads to increases in pathways thinking, a corresponding increase in agentic thinking can be expected, and vice versa. If, as argued, community engagement programs promote both pathways and agentic thinking, then this mutual reinforcement should produce greater total increases in hopefulness than would be expected if the two forms of thinking were considered separately. As such, community engagement should be viewed as a highly potent means by which to increase hope, and to thereby facilitate the attainment of important goals held by community members.

Realisations of Hope: ACU National's Community Engagement Work

Having shown, in principle, how community engagement initiatives can promote increases in hope to the benefit of community members, this paper will now provide three examples of how this has occurred in practice. ACU National has long been involved in community engagement work, and in 2006 it created the Institute for Advancing Community Engagement (IACE). IACE is responsible for maintaining, advancing, and creating community engagement programs, in partnership with community members, community organisations, and other universities and agencies. Three of its initiatives demonstrate the impact of community engagement upon levels of hope: primary teacher education programs for students in East Timor, teacher education programs for Indigenous Australian students, and tertiary-level humanities courses for homeless and marginalised Australian adults.

It is no coincidence that the three aforementioned initiatives all aim to deliver *education* to community members. IACE views education as a transformative process (Howard, Cooke, & Butcher, 2007), so often necessary as the foundation upon which other achievements and advances are built. A well-educated person typically has access to innumerable opportunities, careers, occupations, and advantages that are not available to those whose education has been minimal or non-existent. For this reason, education, like community engagement, can be seen as fundamentally hope-enhancing (Snyder, 2005). With more education come more opportunities and thus more pathways by which to reach important goals, and with more pathways comes greater agentic thinking. The transformative nature of education, and the sense of achievement and success that comes with completing an educational program, are also likely to lead to improvements in agentic thinking, which in turn facilitates the identification of new and more effective pathways. Of course, as the following examples will show, the community engagement initiatives developed by IACE and its community partners are hope-

promoting not only by virtue of their being educational: the ways in which they are structured and delivered also lead to increases in hope within the participating communities.

Teacher Education for East Timorese Students

In 1999, the people of East Timor (officially the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste) declared independence from Indonesia in a popular referendum, supervised by the United Nations. In the years since, armed conflicts with anti-independence militias and civil unrest in East Timor have added to the difficulties inherent in building a new nation. As part of the reconstruction and development efforts within the nascent republic, the Instituto Católico para Formação de Professores (ICFP; formerly the Catholic Teachers College) was established at Baucau in 1999 (see Beck, 2006, for a discussion of the college, its establishment, and its subsequent development). The college's Bachelor of Teaching program, which provided primary teacher education to students throughout East Timor, was officially validated by ACU National, before ACU National began offering its own Bachelor of Teaching degree through ICFP. ACU National has been an active supporter of ICFP in various other ways, and one of the key foci of the university's community engagement work has been on assisting with the enhancement of East Timor's teacher education capacities.

Presently, IACE is collaborating with ICFP on a project titled 'East Timor Capacity Building: Sustained International Collaboration'. The project aims to assist ICFP in developing the skills and capacities of its staff and students, along with the college's resources, infrastructure, and sustainability. It is hoped that this will lead to the international recognition of ICFP and its academic programs. Indeed, ICFP 'Vision Statement' asserts that the Institute is "committed to being a lighthouse for advancing East Timorese curriculum and education" (see Beck, 2006, p. 148). This commitment is mirrored by the IACE agenda for its collaboration with ICFP, which states that the college is to be "a sign of hope for the people of East Timor during the period of nation building" (IACE, On-line).

Reports on the teacher education courses provided by ACU National through ICFP indicate high levels of student satisfaction and a high retention rate (over 96%) (IACE, On-line). Between November 2006 and October 2007, 97 East Timorese students graduated from the college; they are now qualified as primary school teachers with a degree from ACU National. An additional 150 students were enrolled in the Bachelor of Teaching course as at October 2007 (IACE, On-line). The graduates and students of ACU National/ICFP are in an ideal position to be the future leaders of East Timor (Beck, 2006), and to communicate the college's message of hope to school students and community members throughout the nation.

The engagement between East Timorese students and ACU National is a prime example of how levels of hope can be raised within communities. Through the training of East Timorese citizens to become the educators of the next generation of East Timorese school children, communities throughout the country have become empowered (Beck, 2006). Not only is education necessary for continued human development in East Timor, but the successful completion of the Bachelor of Teaching program provides a model of successful goal pursuit to those citizens who might be ambivalent about their own goals and aspirations. The graduates of the program are living examples of the attainment of significant goals. They are a source of hope before they have even entered a classroom to teach primary school students. And in fulfilling their roles as the educators of East Timor's children, they will continue to demonstrate to their students the process of pursuing goals with hope and success.

Teacher Education for Indigenous Australians

Historically, the Indigenous peoples of Australia have suffered oppression, discrimination, disadvantage, and dispossession, often at the hands of the state and its representatives. At present, the effects of these injustices are still being experienced by Indigenous Australians, who on average are less advantaged compared to non-Indigenous Australians in many areas of society, including participation in higher education (Howard et al., 2007). Recognising this inequity, and the potentially empowering effects of participating in education, ACU National created a teacher education program specifically for Indigenous students. The first participants in this program began their studies in 1989, and the program has been evolving ever since, becoming increasingly sensitive and responsive to the particular needs and circumstances of students from Indigenous Australian communities. Evaluations of this program have indicated that it has been an effective pathway by which Indigenous Australians can access higher education and receive the training necessary for them to return to their communities as qualified teachers (Howard et al., 2007).

The structure of the program presents a clear example of how to successfully pursue goals. Rather than

entering immediately into a Bachelor of Teaching course, the Indigenous students who enrol in the program are first required to complete an Associate Diploma in Aboriginal Education. By beginning with a less demanding course, the students are able to grow accustomed to university-level studies in a less stressful context. Upon completing the Associate Diploma, the students are then able to progress to the Bachelor of Teaching program, by which time they have become sufficiently experienced and familiarised with ACU National and the demands of its units of study (Howard et al., 2007). This structure is reminiscent of the process by which high-hope individuals approach and pursue their goals: large goals are divided into more manageable sub-goals, and so the large goal is pursued one step at a time. In the case of ACU National's teacher education program for Indigenous students, the larger goal of earning a Bachelor of Teaching degree and becoming qualified to teach in classrooms is preceded by the more manageable goal of completing an Associate Diploma in Aboriginal Education. Thus, the very structure of the program is such as to promote hope and to model the high-hope way of pursuing goals. Indeed, a recent assessment of the effects of the Indigenous teacher education program delivered the following conclusion:

Having the teacher education program in phases enabled Aboriginal people to succeed at an Associate Diploma level thus providing the impetus and aspiration to continue (Howard et al., 2007, p. 197).

Not only does the structure of the program foster hope within individual students, but the students' successes inspire and motivate others within their communities. Hope is thus promoted at the community level as well as at the individual level. The Indigenous students model success to other Indigenous Australians, and demonstrate the importance and value of receiving an education and of educating others in turn. One example of this process of modelling and inspiration was provided by Howard et al.'s (2007) case study of Sharon, an Indigenous Australian who completed the teacher education program. In one of a series of interviews, Sharon pointed out that she was initially motivated to enter the program after observing that an elder Aboriginal lady had successfully completed the Associate Diploma component. Thus, the educational success of one Indigenous student revealed an effective pathway by which another Indigenous person could reach an educational goal. Pathways thinking is improved by observations of the viable pathways travelled by others, and agentic thinking is enhanced by observations of the success enjoyed by those who follow these pathways.

Another key feature of the structure of the Indigenous teacher education program is that it does not require its students to be on campus throughout the entire semester. Rather, it requires each student to stay on campus for a one-week residential stay twice per semester. This allows the students to stay within their communities for the majority of the duration of each semester. Allowing the students to maintain a high level of contact with their communities is not only expressive of the responsiveness of the program to the needs of Indigenous peoples, but it enables the students' influence as role models for the rest of their communities to be all the more strongly felt. A message is sent to the students' communities that Indigenous people do not need to abandon their communities in order to participate in university-level education: there exists an effective pathway by which community roles and educational goals can be simultaneously fulfilled.

Humanities Education Courses for Homeless and Marginalised Adults

Since 2003, ACU National has collaborated with a number of community agencies, principally Mission Australia and the St. Vincent de Paul Society, to deliver tertiary-level, community-based humanities education courses for homeless and socio-economically marginalised Australian adults (see Egan et al., 2006, for an overview). These courses are based on the original 'Clemente Course' devised by Earl Shorris and described in his book 'Riches for the Poor' (Shorris, 2000). Some of the Australian iterations have retained the 'Clemente' label, while the others are called 'Catalyst' programs. Collectively, they are known as the 'Clemente-Catalyst' program. The Clemente-Catalyst program is now offered at nine sites across Australia, located in the cities of Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth, Canberra, and Ballarat (Howard & Marchant, 2008). The program is offered to those who typically have great difficulty accessing higher education, or who are too disengaged from society to enter directly into mainstream tertiary courses.

At each Clemente-Catalyst site, one unit of study is offered per semester. Once an individual has completed four units (i.e., two years of participation in the program), they are eligible to graduate from ACU National with a Certificate in Liberal Arts, a non-award, accredited university qualification. Earning the certificate often leads to opportunities for further university study at the Bachelor, Masters, and even Doctoral levels. Each unit of study provides education in a particular area of the humanities, such as ethics, history, drama, politics, literature, and art theory. The units are taught in community settings,

such as the community centres operated by organisations such as Mission Australia. This ensures that the disadvantaged adults who participate in Clemente-Catalyst can undertake their studies in an environment in which they are most likely to feel comfortable and secure (Howard & Marchant, 2008).

Evaluations of Clemente-Catalyst have provided compelling evidence for the increases in hope experienced by those who participate in the program. The findings derived from structured interviews carried out in 2006 with the participants from the inner-city Sydney and Brisbane sites, reported by Howard and Marchant (2008), suggest that Clemente-Catalyst can lead to increased levels of hope amongst its participants. The participants reported improved self-perceptions, a greater regard for their own capacities, increased confidence and motivation, enhanced self-esteem, more positive appraisals of the future, and a heightened sense of agency and control. These positive outcomes suggest that the hopefulness of the participants was promoted through their involvement in Clemente-Catalyst, and that by the end of the year they were thinking more positively about their life opportunities (i.e., they perceived a greater number of workable pathways to their goals) and about their capacity to harness these opportunities (i.e., they perceived themselves to be more motivated and capable, with regard to pursuing their goals). In addition to these 'internal' (i.e., intrapsychic) benefits, those who participated in Clemente-Catalyst now enjoy the external benefits of having access to the numerous opportunities that come with having a tertiary-level education. These opportunities often serve as pathways to the various goals held by the participants, such as the goal to engage in further university education, or to undertake employment within a desired career path. The newfound accessibility of these pathways, provided by the education received through Clemente-Catalyst, in turn fosters hopeful thinking via the enhancement of pathways thinking. Overall, the Clemente-Catalyst program promotes hope at numerous levels. It not only allows its participants to experience the successful pursuit of educational goals, but it opens up new, previously unavailable pathways.

Conclusion: Ways Forward

From the theoretical reasoning and practical examples presented in this paper, the case has now been made that hope theory offers an excellent framework for understanding the nature and benefits of community engagement. This paper represents the beginning of what is expected to be a promising program of inquiry into how this framework can be employed in future research and initiatives. Indeed, it is recommended that future community engagement programs be conducted with an explicit emphasis on hope, and that reliable measures of hope (such as the Trait Hope Scale, see Snyder, 1989; Snyder et al., 1991) be utilised in assessing how the programs affect levels of hope in participants and community members. By making hope central to an initiative, and using measures of hope in evaluating the outcomes of the initiative, the thesis that increased hope is a crucial element of community engagement could be definitively tested. Future studies should seek to carry out such an investigation.

Hope, being goal-oriented, is inherently focused on the future; on ways forward. If reach, influence, and sustainability of the community engagement movement are to be increased, it must be continually informed by new explanatory frameworks, and the new insights they offer. Hope theory presents itself as a key pathway leading to new knowledge of community engagement, and to new and more effective methods of working and engaging with communities. Enhancing community engagement in this way is surely a goal for which all can strive. Indeed, in the words of Snyder himself, we need to build "environments in which people living and working together can interact in a supportive atmosphere so that both individual and collective goals can be met" (Snyder, 1995, p. 359). For the sake of a sustainable future, we must continue to create communities of hope.

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