

# Interview with Cassandra Simon

University of Alabama and Founding  
Editor of *Journal of Community  
Engagement and Learning*

Cristina Kirklighter,  
*Editor*

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As the Editor of this journal, I am delighted to have interviewed Dr. Cassandra Simon, founding editor of the *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*. Some of you who were at the Conference of Community Writing may have heard me enthusiastically talk about this journal as I showed you a copy of an issue. Some of you know our journal is about “Getting on the Bus” as we pay homage to the young civil rights student activists did many years ago. We strive to walk the talk as a social justice and racial justice activist journal. The *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship* also walks the talk through a founding editor who had this vision guided through her life experiences and made it into a reality with one of the most successful journals in our area. We know our journals are different from the mainstream. We encourage our authors to take risks with their research and writing, work against an ivory tower mentality, and strive for inclusivity by embracing the voices of academics, students, community partners,

and others. I am pleased to interview a sister editor and share her inspiring insights on what it means to be a journal editor who celebrates community engagement and scholarship.

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**Cristina Kirklighter (C.K.):** Dr. Simon, first I'd like to say how pleased I am to interview you for our journal. What you have done with the Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship (JCES), since its inception in 2008, is impressive. JCES is now one of the leading journals in the area of community engagement. We have presented together at the Engaged Scholarship Consortium Conference for the past three years, and I must say how I have admired the vision of JCES in linking the community, students, and faculty. Would you provide us some history on how the title of your journal came about and what this title means to you?

**Cassandra Simon (C.S.):** First, I'd like to say how appreciative I am for the opportunity to do this interview, especially for Reflections, which I view as a needed medium for engagement scholarship. We need to hear the engagement scholarship narrative in many ways from those involved at all levels in the process. The Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship (JCES), as well as Reflections, each in their own way, provides space for that to happen. Thank you for the kind remarks regarding JCES. We've worked really hard to move this different model of engagement scholarship forward and have it recognized as valid, valuable, and at minimum equally important as more traditional forms of research and scholarship. The co-sponsorship of JCES by the Engaged Scholarship Consortium provides a form of sanction to this approach to engagement scholarship, and that's a good thing. When we were still in the planning stages of the journal, we had a wonderful group of people, working together to develop what would eventually become known as JCES. Most important was to develop our vision and mission for the journal and have the name reflect these. Once we decided that we would approach the journal from what we refer to as "authentic community engagement" (explained below), the name soon followed. What I mean by that is we came up with every possible combination

of words like “engagement, community, higher education, service learning, student, etc.,” but none of them captured the focus on community that we wanted to convey. Then, when we read the combination, *The Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*, it resonated with most of the working group. The name emphasized the added focus of community inclusion (defined in different ways), which we wanted the journal to have but also highlighted its scholarly and academic value.

**C.K.:** What makes JCES stand out from other community engagement journals is the way it does not follow the traditional academic journal made up of traditional academic articles and book reviews. JCES has sections entitled “From the Field,” “Community Voices,” and “Student Voices.” We, at *Reflections*, are moving in a similar direction and departing from traditional journal content of just articles and book reviews. Would you tell us why and how these sections were developed in JCES?

**C.S.:** Earlier I mentioned what we call “authentic community engagement.” It serves at the core of the journal and speaks to promoting the three components of the community engagement triad at all levels of engagement scholarship, including planning, resource distribution, and dissemination of results. All too often, we hear about the students, community, and university representatives (mostly faculty) being partners in engagement scholarship work. More often than not, you see the roles of community partners and students delegated to “subjects” who are reported on by those of us in higher education. Less often are they partners in the true sense of the word. There continues to be a divide here, especially in the dissemination of engagement scholarship work. It brings to question why this is. How much do we value community partners and students in the telling of their own stories? Believing that it was important to provide avenues for community partners and students to tell their stories in their own voices, we all agreed that providing “Research from the Field,” “Community Perspective,” and “Student Voices” in the journal would provide a valuable space and, in part, show our commitment to authentic community engagement. I was fortunate to have the support of a publisher and board who

gave me carte blanche in taking JCES in this new and different direction. Actually, I probably would not have accepted the offer to be editor of the journal if that wasn't the case. So, JCES developed what some people have called a hybrid model. JCES publishes the more traditional manuscripts but also commits to making efforts to have the other manuscripts in each issue. Research from the Field is primarily a lessons learned kind of manuscript, Community Perspective is reserved for community partners to share their ideas, thoughts, reflections, critiques, etc., while the Student Voices serves the same purposes for students. Some academicians are happy to help students and community partners, who often feel intimidated with the thought of publishing with experienced writers, with their manuscripts. Others, surprisingly, want to be co-authors on these manuscripts, especially if they've provided support in development of the manuscript. I think this speaks to the extreme pressure put on faculty to publish. The journal's policy is to NOT allow faculty co-authorship on the student and community specific pieces. Of course, we encourage co-authorships with students, community partners, and faculty (or other university representatives) on the Research from the Field and regular manuscripts. Actually, these types of co-authored pieces are given publication preference.

**C.K.:** In our conversations and presentations over the years, we have both emphasized how important it is for the academic writing in our respective journals to be accessible. As you've said in presentations, we want our community partners to be able to understand what we've written in journals, so our authors can walk the talk of community engagement. However, we still face in academia the tendency to write for specific academic audiences. Oftentimes, emerging scholars may hesitate to experiment beyond traditional academic writing. I'd like to share with you a quote from Josh Rothman's essay in *The New Yorker* entitled "Why Is Academic Writing So Academic?" <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/why-is-academic-writing-so-academic> . How would you respond to Josh Rothman as a community engagement journal editor?

Academics may write for large audiences on their blogs or as journalists. But when it comes to their academic writing and to

the research that underpins it—to the main activities, in other words, of academic life—they have no choice but to aim for very small targets. Writing a first book, you may have in mind particular professors on a tenure committee; miss that mark and you may not have a job. Academics know which audiences—and, sometimes, which audience members—matter.

**C.S.:** Well, I would say that in the traditional academic trajectory, those without tenure or who desire to be promoted should pay heed to his words. That doesn't mean that I agree with the philosophy, but the reality is that for far too many this is still true for most of higher education. That's not to say that this approach does not have its place, it does. You may remember me saying at our last panel discussion, that I don't see JCES as "competing" with other journals. I say that because I see JCES as moving beyond the traditional research model. A critical part of our approach is making sure that not only can the academic community be a consumer of our research, but also can those about whom this research is often written be a consumer of our research. In general, most research is done in an effort to contribute to the "common good." It is difficult for me to say research is best for the common good, when the common good isn't included in the work. In order to facilitate readership of the journal, JCES makes sure that after acceptance, each manuscript goes through a readability review so that it can be read and understood by the general public.

It is somewhat ironic that somehow a case is made for having knowledge accessible to only a few being appropriate or ok. How does knowledge being written so that it is accessible and understood by more people become a negative thing? Mmmm, Could it be the part of the "ivory tower" syndrome? I think part of what is missing here is the acknowledgement that engagement scholarship has centrality to the academy. Service, research, and teaching are at the base of most colleges and universities. Each of these in their own way is connected to engagement scholarship. Recognition of this has resulted in a growing number of units on college campuses that focus on engagement scholarship in some way. Falling under a variety of names (e.g., Outreach,

Community Affairs, and Service Learning), these programs are developing more than any other time in the academy. Recently, more and more effort is being given to how to best capture the aspects of engagement scholarship in the tenure and promotion processes; thus indicating that engagement scholarship is being valued and mainstreamed into higher education.

**C.K.:** In my presentations and discussions with you, I have mentioned how *Reflections* emphasizes racial and social justice. Our logo is the photo of civil rights students about to embark on a bus to Mississippi after they learned of their missing friends, Chaney, Schewerner, and Goodman who they later found out were murdered in this state. Oftentimes, as editors, our vision of the journal is shaped by our experiences. Would you share a couple of pivotal experiences that you know had a significant impact on your vision of JCES?

**C.S.:** Well, there is no doubt that my life experiences and the things I value influenced my vision of JCES. I've made it clear that I think the primary purpose of the work that we do is to contribute in positive ways to society and the world in which we live. Although, I didn't consciously choose to do so, when I reflect on the manuscripts with which I was most impressed, it was the articles that dealt with addressing issues of social justice, inclusion, vulnerable and at risk populations, and culture in some form. I do remember thinking at some point that manuscripts that dealt with these issues probably got more visibility in JCES than most journals without a specific emphasis on these issues.

Being a light complexioned, dialect speaking, Black American female from a divorced, single parent home who grew up in a low socioeconomic household in the South, provided many opportunities for me to feel disenfranchised and a recipient of a socially unjust society. One event is a faint memory to me but one that was discussed often when we were growing up. Before my mother and father divorced, and my father was later incarcerated, we lived in Houston, Texas and were the first Blacks to integrate an all White neighborhood. I could share stories of the harassment, but I'm sure you could imagine most of it, including the eventual

bombing of our home. When my parents finally separated (when I was 5 years old), my Mom, my five siblings, and I moved back to Louisiana to a housing development. Eventually, Mom purchased a home that had a great sense of community but many of the social issues that come with living in a poorer neighborhood. Thus, I've seen more than my share of minds and lives not living up to their potential, being destroyed by drugs, alcohol, and unequal opportunity. Couple that with three of my four brothers diagnosed with mental illnesses and one diagnosed with HIV in 1985, and I would say I have seen much injustice in my life. On the other side of that, I have seen resilience among individuals facing issues that would cause others to quit. I learned how to be resilient and have confidence in myself. The perfect example of that would be the decision I made to go to the high school from which I graduated. I was in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and the year was 1974. I had gone to predominately Black schools my entire academic career and had a 4.0 average. There was an initiative to bus those on "the Black side" of town to one of the predominately White schools on the other side of town. I went to talk with the counselor of the middle school I was attending to help me make my decision about what to do for high school. Basically, he told me that I was very smart, but if I wanted to continue to make straight As, I needed to go to the school in my neighborhood as I would not be able to make those grades at the White high school. Well, that didn't sit well with me, and I thanked him for helping me make my decision. I decided in that moment that I would go to the predominately white school, and I did, becoming the first Black valedictorian in the history of Lake Charles High School. As a side note, in 2013, I received a key from my home city for this accomplishment. Me, the little girl from the other side of the tracks, receiving a key to the city, it's a little funny to us. I often wonder if I had gone to the school in my neighborhood, if I would have gone through life wondering if I could be as smart as White people. I could continue with stories about uncles, aunts, cousins, family, and friends from humble beginnings who have made tremendous strides in the areas of civil rights and social justice. I could give explicit stories about my battle with breast cancer and health disparities and the obstacles I've faced in the academy related to race and gender. So, thanks to my mother who continues to counsel and support me, who made me proud of

each difficulty we overcame in our lives, and who showed me how to make a difference in the world. It is because of her that I dare not let my work be separate from me and my life experiences, no matter how far I might “improve” my circumstances.

**C.K.:** In your “Founding Editor Reflects on JCES Development” in Vol 8, No. 2 of JCES, you stated the following regarding what you’ll do after retiring from the journal: “It is time for me to return to working with other people and with students and doing the work I was doing before I became editor.” How do you think as founding editor of JCES this work as a journal editor will influence how you work “with other people and with students?”

**C.S.:** This is an easy one for me to answer. Being editor of JCES will influence me in a couple of ways. First, I am more aware than ever about how to elevate the role of community partners and students in engagement scholarship work. My work will focus more on recognizing the importance of their voices, whether characterized as intellectual or some other “less than” way of communicating. I will definitely be working to train community partners on how to become equal partners in a more honest way that will encourage their voices being fully heard.

**C.K.:** Is there anything else we have not covered that you would like to say?

**C.S.:** Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts, and please continue to do the GOOD WORK being done by *Reflections*. All too often the best way is not the easiest or most popular way. I think JCES and *Reflections* are evidence of this.

Cassandra E. “Cassie” Simon, Ph.D., MSW is an associate professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Alabama. Prior to her appointment there in 2000, she was on the faculty at the University of Texas at Arlington. She is the founding and past editor of the *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*. Her scholarly and personal interests include health care disparities, equity, and social justice, particularly as related to community engagement. She has a strong publication history in oncology and cancer survivorship and is the recipient of numerous academic, research, and social awards. She can be reached at [csimon@bama.ua.edu](mailto:csimon@bama.ua.edu).