

ESC ENGAGEMENT EXCHANGE FOR LEADERS

Community-Engaged Learning Course Attributes and Designations

Insights and frameworks from ESC member institutions at varying stages of CEL designation development

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This report synthesizes key insights from an ESC Engagement Exchange session on community-engaged learning (CEL) course designations, attributes, and notations. Participants represented institutions at varying stages of development — from those exploring a designation for the first time to those revisiting mature processes. The discussion surfaced recurring themes across three categories: core structural questions that must be addressed, dynamics to be aware of, and practical ideas for implementation.

PART 1

Areas that must be addressed — the core structural questions every institution must work through when establishing or revising a CEL designation.

PART 2

Things to be aware of — recurring tensions and dynamics that affect whether designation systems succeed or erode over time.

PART 3

Ideas for implementation — specific practices from institutions at different stages that proved effective or are worth testing.

1 Areas That Must Be Addressed

The following are core structural questions every institution needs to work through when establishing or revising a CEL designation process.

1 Defining the Criteria

Before anything else, an institution must reach consensus on what qualifies a course for a CEL designation. This is often the most time-consuming step and should not be rushed.

- › Establish clear, shared definitions covering: a community partner relationship, time or length of engagement required, mutual benefit and reciprocity, integration of the community experience with course content, a reflection component, and assessment of student learning outcomes tied to the engagement.
- › Decide whether scope includes only service learning, or also internships, teaching practicums, research-based engagement, and other field experiences.
- › At multi-campus institutions, negotiate a shared definition across campuses while allowing for local variation in implementation.
- › Consider anchoring the definition to established frameworks or your institution's strategic plan language, which can make the case more durable over time.

2 Designing the Submission Process

How faculty submit for designation significantly affects uptake. A process that is too burdensome will deter participation, even among faculty already doing the work.

- › Determine whether faculty submit through the course management or registration system directly (preferred where possible) or through a separate application process.
- › If using a form or application, keep it focused and field-tested. Early iterations at several institutions were described as too long or clunky; revisions based on faculty focus group feedback improved clarity and completion rates.
- › Coordinate with the Registrar's Office early — understand whether the designation can be embedded in the course proposal workflow or must be applied after the fact, and what data entry is required in your student information system.

3 Establishing the Review Process

A robust review process ensures that designated courses genuinely meet criteria, not simply that a box was checked.

- › Establish who reviews applications: a standing faculty senate subcommittee, a multi-stakeholder committee (faculty, community partners, students), a faculty fellow or coordinator, an administrator, or a combination.

- › Multi-stakeholder committees add legitimacy. One model includes two community partners, one undergraduate student, and one graduate student alongside faculty.
- › Build in a feedback or coaching pathway for courses that do not yet meet criteria but show potential.
- › Decide whether to designate at the course level (all sections must comply) or the section level (individual faculty per section). Larger institutions often find section-level designation more realistic, though it requires more administrative tracking.

4 Defining the Re-Designation Process

A designation without a renewal mechanism tends to drift. Several participants cited course drift as a primary motivation for reform.

- › Set a clear re-designation timeline (e.g., annual or every three years).
- › Decide what re-designation requires: full resubmission, a lighter-touch affirmation, a faculty reflection, or simply confirming that the course is still being taught with CEL components.
- › Proactively track which faculty are continuing to teach CEL courses each semester and reach out rather than waiting for re-application.
- › Plan for faculty who rotate out of courses, take on administrative roles, or choose not to continue. Build a process that accommodates graceful exits as well as renewals.

5 Managing Administrative Infrastructure

The operational side of maintaining a designation system is often underestimated and can become a significant burden without deliberate planning.

- › Clarify the partnership with the Registrar's Office: who enters designation data into the student information system, and at what level (course vs. section)?
- › Develop a system for tracking designated courses, instructors, enrollment data, and student demographics over time. These data are essential for reporting, Carnegie classification, strategic planning, and assessing equity in access.
- › Anticipate the data needs you will have for external reporting and design your tracking system accordingly from the start.

2 Things to Be Aware Of

Beyond the structural questions, a number of dynamics and tensions surfaced repeatedly. Being alert to these in advance can help institutions navigate them more effectively.

1 Faculty Burden and the Risk of Low Uptake

- › The designation process is often seen by faculty as one more thing to do with no direct professional benefit. Unlike research, community-engaged teaching is rarely rewarded explicitly in promotion and tenure processes.
- › Faculty who are already doing CEL work may not see the value in formalizing it, particularly if the designation does not count toward anything institutionally.
- › Resistance tends to increase in proportion to the complexity of the process. Even a streamlined form requires personal outreach for some faculty to complete.

2 Quality Drift Over Time

- › Several institutions discovered upon review that existing designated courses had drifted significantly from original criteria — reflecting changing community partner relationships, faculty turnover, or gradual dilution of reflective components.
- › A designation without re-designation is not a designation system — it is a historical list. Renewal and review must be built in from the beginning.
- › Consider whether current faculty awareness of CEL criteria is sufficient, or whether ongoing professional development is needed alongside renewal.

3 Sustainability as a System Grows

- › Re-designation processes that require individual annual contact with every faculty member become burdensome at scale. Plan for how the process will function when the number of designated courses doubles or triples.
- › Where manual workarounds are currently in place, invest in automation or process improvements before they become bottlenecks.

4 The Student Perspective

- › When a CEL attribute appears in course registration, students may interpret it as signaling additional work, which can deter enrollment — particularly where many courses carry the designation and students feel they have already fulfilled a perceived quota.
- › The designation is most effective as a student-facing signal when it carries meaning through transcript notation, advising conversations, or integration into degree program identity.
- › Working with academic advisors to understand and actively promote CEL-designated courses can significantly improve the designation's impact on student access and enrollment.

5 Institutional and Political Positioning

- › Tying the designation to a strategic plan, general education revision, accreditation process, or high-impact practices framework provides institutional protection and a clearer faculty incentive.
- › Language matters. Framing CEL within concepts that resonate with current institutional priorities — career readiness, civic health, immersive learning —

can help secure visibility and resources, though care is needed to preserve the integrity of the CEL concept.

- › At institutions with strong faculty-staff divides, a process led primarily by staff may face structural credibility challenges. Centering faculty governance is often essential.
- › Accreditation cycles represent a high-leverage moment to launch or strengthen a designation system, because they provide motivation, resources, and institutional attention that may not be available at other times.

3 Ideas for Implementation

Across institutions at different stages, a number of specific practices emerged as effective or worth testing.

A Application and Review

- › Offer faculty an oral interview option as an alternative — or complement — to a written application. Several institutions found this led to more faculty seeking designation and a richer understanding of how courses actually work. It reduces burden and creates a developmental conversation rather than a gatekeeping transaction.
- › Conduct focus groups with faculty before revising the application to reveal whether questions are too vague or not specific enough.
- › Build in a coaching or iterative feedback pathway for courses that do not yet fully meet criteria. Frame designation as a developmental process, not a pass/fail judgment.
- › For large institutions, designate at the section level rather than the course level — unless the course itself is an element of the unit's community engagement plan.

B Faculty Development and Support

- › Require faculty to complete professional development workshops before applying. Texas Tech requires at least three sequential workshops before a faculty member submits a syllabus for review, ensuring a common baseline and reducing applications that do not meet criteria.
- › Develop a faculty fellows program in which participants are expected to revise an existing course or develop a new CEL course. A small course development stipend (in the range of \$1,000) tied to an expectation of a resulting designation has worked at some institutions.
- › Create small grant programs for community-engaged teaching and research, with an expectation that grant recipients will seek designation.
- › Plan for cyclical and ongoing workshop offerings to reach faculty on different schedules. No single cohort model will capture everyone.

C Sustainability and Re-Designation

- › Adopt a three-year re-designation cycle with a lighter-touch renewal process. Rather than requiring full resubmission, consider a faculty reflection on the course's outcomes and community relationships, or a brief reaffirmation that the course is continuing to meet criteria.
- › Track CEL-designated faculty proactively each semester. Reach out personally rather than relying on mass emails, which tend to generate lower response rates.
- › Maintain a live record of which CRN numbers are designated each term and develop a clear protocol with the Registrar's Office to keep that data current.

D Strategic Positioning

- › Start with a pilot in a single college or department where there is genuine dean or faculty champion support. Build excitement and a track record before scaling institution-wide. One institution's experience launching in the College of Liberal Arts created organic demand for expansion among other colleges.
- › Identify and cultivate at least one faculty champion already doing strong CEL work who is willing to encourage peers, participate in review committees, and help spread the word informally.
- › Seek integration of the CEL designation into the course addition or proposal workflow wherever the course management system permits. When built into the standard course development process, designation becomes a routine consideration rather than an afterthought.
- › Actively engage academic advisors as partners in promoting CEL-designated courses to students. Advisors represent one of the most direct pathways to increased enrollment.

E Evaluation and Data

- › Use enrollment and demographic data to assess whether CEL-designated courses are accessible to a representative cross-section of students. If certain populations are over- or under-represented, use that finding to inform course placement, advising outreach, and scheduling.
- › Conduct periodic landscape analyses to identify faculty who are doing CEL work but have not sought formal designation. This data can inform outreach strategies and give a more accurate picture of the institution's CEL activity than the designation list alone.

A NOTE ON STARTING POINTS

Institutions in this conversation were at very different stages. Some had been running designation systems for nearly a decade; others were in their first year. A few had no designation at all and were weighing whether to pursue one. The consistent message from those with mature systems: the process can be worth doing, but it requires

ongoing attention. A designation that is launched and left alone will erode. The investment is not just in building the system — it is in maintaining it, refining it, and making it mean something to the faculty and students who encounter it.

The strongest systems share a few characteristics: they are anchored to something the institution already cares about; they are simple enough for faculty to engage with willingly; they include regular review and renewal; they are supported by at least one dedicated person who maintains relationships with faculty; and they are evaluated over time to demonstrate impact.

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