

# Learning through Collaboration: Reflections on Cultivating Cross-Institutional Capacity for Place-Based Community Engagement

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## Abstract

This article highlights the nascent efforts between College Unbound, Brown University, and Providence College—three very different types of institutions in Providence, Rhode Island—to foster cross-institutional capacity for place-based community engagement. By collectively engaging our institutions, we experimented with what collaboration around community engagement might look like within our local context. In this article, we share our approach and reflections in working to cultivate a place-based collaboration that is community-centric and grounded in students' lived experiences, along with limitations, lessons learned, and next steps related to our collaborative work. Through our efforts, we situate cross-institutional collaborations as an opportunity for more sustained and transformative work within higher education community engagement.

**Keywords:** U.S. higher education, place-based community engagement, cross-institutional capacity building

## Introduction

Higher education in the United States (U.S.) has faced daunting challenges in response to the weaving of the global COVID-19 pandemic with the wicked problems of economic collapse, political polarization, white supremacy, catastrophic climate change, and, most recently, international conflicts. While college and university campuses are feeling the weight of these (and other) challenges, as institutions with historic public purposes (Hartley & Saltmarsh, 2016; Daniels, 2021), they are also uniquely situated to respond. Many campuses—especially those that are part of the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities—are anchored in neighborhoods and communities with an abundance of learning assets, which can be tapped, recognized, and unleashed to offer a rich set of resources for learning and public problem-solving. Efforts to create multiple and integrated pathways for how campuses and communities can learn and work together can offer a powerful way forward.

However, while reciprocal partnerships between campuses and communities have historically been assumed to be an inherent principle of higher education community engagement (see, for instance, Honnet & Poulsen, 1989), through our work as community-engaged scholar-practitioners and administrators across several different institutions, we have experienced colleges and universities as being slow to re-connect with the neighborhoods and communities that surround their campuses, most especially following several years of social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Though community does play a more prominent role through various anchor (Dubb et al., 2013; Garton, 2021) and place-based community engagement initiatives (Yamamura & Koth, 2018), centering community voices and valuing community members as co-producers of knowledge continues to be largely missing from higher education, even in the field of community engagement (Perrotti, 2024; Shah, 2020; Quan, 2023). Thus, calls for elevating community perspectives, knowledge, and expertise in higher education community engagement have all too often been met with lofty rhetoric without subsequent practical application (Stoecker et al., 2009). Accordingly, reflecting on the current state of higher education community engagement, it seems appropriate to pose the question: *Does place still matter?* (Longo, 2022).

Our contention is that place still matters and that higher education institutions have a responsibility to respond where they are located. Accordingly, this article highlights the nascent efforts between College Unbound (CU), Brown University (Brown), and Providence College (PC) to foster cross-institutional capacity for place-based community engagement; “a long-term university-wide commitment to partner with local residents, organizations, and other leaders to focus equally on campus and community impact within a clearly defined geographic area” (Yamamura & Koth, 2018, p. 18). With support from Bringing Theory to Practice (BT2P), we collectively engaged our three institutions in experimenting with what collaboration around community engagement might look like within our local context of Providence, Rhode Island (RI). A few core questions have animated our work together: *What are the assets for learning in*

*the local communities that surround our campuses? What individual and collective resources can we bring to campus-community partnerships? How might we collaboratively re-imagine learning partnerships in a way that centers community and redefines who is a student, an expert, and a community practitioner?*

We launched conversations and several pilot projects around these questions among our institutions. In this article, we share our approach and reflections in working to cultivate a place-based collaboration that is community-centric and grounded in students' lived experiences, along with limitations, lessons learned, and next steps related to our collaborative work. Ultimately, this effort offers a small-scale example of what a new, more collaborative paradigm in education might look like, where we co-recognize the potential for what Scobey (2023) has called for in the Paradigm Project: a larger effort supported by BT2P calling on higher education to think about how we might “reorganize how we work, aligning the everyday labor of education with the purposes of education” (p. 18). This paradigm shift involves seeing connections among the many configurations of education in the places where our campuses are located, so that we can access more resources within and across our institutions for community-engaged teaching, learning, and research to meet community-identified priorities.

## **Background**

It is noteworthy that some studies have engaged community voices and perspectives to better understand essential components of effective collaboration as well as community engagement's impact on community organizations (see, for instance, Leiderman et al., 2003; Sandy, 2007; Stoecker et al., 2009). More recent studies have also called for critical and justice-oriented approaches to campus-community relationships and partnerships (Shah, 2020; Quan, 2023). Yet, “community organizations”—the nonprofits, K–12 schools, and government agencies with whom community-engaged courses and programs most often partner—tend to be invoked in scholarship and practice as a proxy for “the community” (Perrotti, 2024). As such, higher education fails to partner with local community residents (so called, “ordinary people”) as we substitute professional leadership for genuine community connections—a limitation of our own institutional power, positionality, and comfort with traditional ways of knowing (Boyte, 2009; McKnight, 2017).

White (2012) noted that colleges and universities “fall short of sharing full responsibility, accountability and authority for civic work with our community partners, especially marginalized citizens and residents of economically distressed communities” (p. 5). White continued, “the reason residents don't find us relevant is not because we aren't doing anything to help them. It's because they have no stake in what we're doing” (p. 10). When this is the case, community residents tend to be viewed using social service or marketplace values, with a framing of serving “clients” or “consumers,” as opposed to democratic values which frame engagement as a co-

creative process in which residents are “producers” doing common work (Boyte, 2009; Perrotti, 2024; Stoecker, 2016; White, 2012).

Even when one higher education institution tries to center the local community in its mission, campuses in close proximity tend to develop separate community engagement strategies and partnerships—often with some of the same members of the local community, but with no mechanisms in place to foster cross-institutional connections and collaboration to serve a larger purpose. And when senior campus leaders come together, it tends to be around advocacy for the interests of their institutions (e.g., to lobby for tax and other policies favorable to higher education) (see, for instance, Cheche, 2022; Ebertz, 2023). The longer-standing institutions in our collaborations—Brown and PC—are no exception, while CU as a newer, more nimble institution has been able to challenge some of the traditional ways of operating. However, we have found it promising that when individuals within institutions seek to genuinely collaborate on engagement—as in the work described in this article—while these relationships may not quickly transform institutional policies or practices, they generate new insights, connections, and experimental activities that can potentially influence and inform broader, longer-term change.

## **Institutional Contexts**

CU, and its innovative curricular model, served as the project lead for our collaborative work. Created to address the needs of first generation, low-income students, CU, the newest degree-granting post-secondary institution in the state of RI (authorized in 2015), is an independent college structured around “a student-driven model of rigorous and engaged scholarship” (CU, n.d.). With an average student age of 37, most CU students have had some college experience but never completed a degree. Thus, adult students are returning to college to earn their first degree (CU, 2023).

CU is focused on existing in the space of a “higher education as it could be” (Bush, 2024, p. 64). On a student-level, the CU curriculum holds that flexibility. CU tries to do so within a relationality inside three curricular structures that enrolled students pursue concurrently towards a Bachelor of Arts in Organizational Leadership & Change (the only major offered through the college):

1. A semester-long World and Workplace Lab 3-credit course where a cohort of students meet weekly in a seminar that feels like a cross between a dissertation committee, high school homeroom, a town hall meeting, and your kitchen table. Students share dinner and workshop learning projects that ground their degree.
2. A series of 8-week intensive online 3-credit courses that introduce content and methodologies to students grounded in the praxis of Organizational Leadership & Change.

3. A robust “Learning in Public” program to help students tell the story of their learning in a way that is not bounded by the classroom. Unlike other colleges’ credit for prior learning programs where only about 10% of a student body engages in learning documentation (Lane & Leibrandt, 2021), at CU every student submits a minimum of 10 credits worth of portfolios as a required part of a student’s degree.

These are not disconnected curricular modules but deeply engaged in a sense of place and purpose. CU does not have a campus, but builds cohorts where students are already connected through public spaces of learning (e.g., community health centers, public housing developments, public libraries and schools) and grows its faculty and its curriculum in partnership with its student body and alumni to support professional pathways within its one major. Students drive the innovation of the college by pushing for new cohorts in different places and with new curricular foci. This year, CU had its 50th cohort with students across RI, as well as now in other locations, including Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Illinois.

Brown and PC offer very different types of institutions, with long histories of community engagement work taking place in Providence. Founded in 1764, Brown is an Ivy League research university with a mission of “serv[ing] the community, the nation and the world” through collaborations that aim “to address the defining challenges of a complex and changing world” (Brown, n.d.a). Since 1986, the Swearer Center for Public Service at Brown, who acted as a liaison on this project, have connected students, community partners, staff, and faculty through curricular and co-curricular community engagement programs, fellowships, and other opportunities. One of its longest running programs, the engaged research-focused Royce Fellowship, now has alumni working as local community partners or engaged faculty. When Brown established an undergraduate certificate structure (essentially a minor with an experiential learning requirement), the Swearer Center and the Department of Sociology launched an Engaged Scholarship Certificate that is accessible to students in any concentration (Brown’s version of a major), building on its previous Engaged Scholars Program, a partnership with 16 academic concentrations.

Founded in 1917, PC is a Catholic, liberal arts college “committed to academic excellence in pursuit of the truth, growth in virtue, and service of God and neighbor” (PC, n.d.). Since 1994, PC has developed extensive curricular partnerships with local community organizations through the Feinstein Institute for Public Service and community-engaged academic departments, most especially Public and Community Service Studies (the first community-engaged academic program of its kind in the country) and since 2005, Global Studies (an interdisciplinary academic program focused engaged learning locally and internationally). Like the Swearer Center, several alumni from these departments now work as local community partners or engaged faculty. At PC, the Dialogue, Inclusion, and Democracy Lab, which uses deliberative, community-based pedagogies to promote equity and democracy, acted as a liaison for this project.

Census population estimates from 2023 reported a population of 189,563 in Providence, RI, with a median household income of \$61,365 between 2018-2022 (in 2022 dollars) and 21.3% persons living in poverty. Census population estimates also showed that Providence is a majority-minority city (with “Hispanic or Latino” people comprising 42.6% of the total population), whereas Brown and PC demographic data indicates students from historically underrepresented groups comprised, on average, 22% of the undergraduate population at Brown (Brown, n.d.b) and 16% at PC (PC, 2024). CU, however, specifically in RI, is more representative of the City of Providence’s demographics with, on average, “Latinx” comprising 33% of the student population and, overall, historically underrepresented groups comprising 73% of the student population (CU, 2023).

## **Bringing Theory to Practice the Way Forward Grant**

CU, Brown, and PC were one of fifteen multi-institutional collaborations to be awarded a The Way Forward (TWF) grant by B2TP, a national project headquartered at Elon University in North Carolina “dedicated to both the core purposes of higher education and the need to transform higher education” (BT2P, n.d.). BT2P received funding from the Endeavor and Henry Luce Foundations to run this grant program. Our initial plan was to utilize the innovative capacity of CU, which serves adult learners who are community leaders (and who very well could be, and sometimes are, the community partners or neighborhood residents working with community-engaged students from Brown or PC), in an effort to re-imagine and better facilitate community partnerships at Brown and PC, along with CU. In doing so, we aimed to build new relationships among students, community partners, staff and faculty across our three very different Providence-based institutions. We also hoped to create credit-bearing pathways for community partnerships so that nonprofit professionals and residents working with Brown and PC would be able to get college credit from CU for their efforts as community partners and co-educators—an effort to “credit community.”

The idea for our collaborative work and impetus in applying for the BT2P grant was designed, in part, by a series of credit-bearing courses that had previously taken place, entitled, “The City And...” between CU and PC students as well as local community members (most often local high school students) (see Morton & Bergabauer, 2015). Versions of the course, which attempted to blur the lines between campus and community, included, “The City And Its Youth,” “The City And Its Storytellers,” and “The City And Its Generations.” We applied for a BT2P grant to collaborate across our institutions more intentionally and connect our local efforts with the broader BT2P network.

The BT2P grant was for \$10,000 (an original grant in the amount of \$8,000 with a \$2,000 extension grant). While these funds covered instructional costs for two summer seminars; tuition

waivers for participating students in the seminar, specifically community partners; and stipends for guest speakers, most of the work related to the project came from in-kind contributions from our three institutions. The various aspects of our collaborative work are further detailed later in this article.

## Broader Trends

TWF launched in the fall of 2020 with a goal of catalyzing campuses to respond to the intersecting crises of the global COVID-19 pandemic with wicked problems, such as economic collapse and systemic racism. Fifteen multi-institutional grants were selected nationwide to offer collaborative problem solving to such crises. The fifteen projects represented partnerships between more than fifty higher education institutions, consortia, and community-based organizations. TWF project was a precursor to the more ambitious Paradigm Project, a multiyear initiative that aims to develop new models of holistic, inclusive, engaged learning and to activate systemic change across higher education.

It seems clear that this type of change can only happen if we think across networks of institutions within higher education—a stated strategy for the Paradigm Project. However, little scholarship has examined the benefit of multi- or cross-institutional collaborations within higher education community engagement. For example, despite the close proximity of many colleges and universities within urban and metropolitan areas, much scholarship on higher education community engagement has revolved around a single postsecondary institution (Marullo et al., 2009). Still, scholars and practitioners have encouraged cross-institutional collaborations between geographically similar campuses and community-based organizations to further develop and sustain mutually beneficial relationships and partnerships between postsecondary institutions and the neighborhoods and communities where they are located—both within the U.S. (Marullo et al., 2009; Mileva et al., 2016) and internationally (Medved & Ursic, 2021; Ngai et al., 2019).

While cross-institutional collaborations are still too rare within higher education community engagement, those that do exist have often focused on community-engaged research collaborations to enhance both “the service provided to the community and democratizes the production and dissemination of knowledge and commitment to social changes” (Marullo et al., 2009, p. 74). Today, several such collaborations exist across the U.S. For example, the Philadelphia Higher Education Network for Neighborhood Development (PHEND) is a network of over 30 higher education institutions with a mission of strengthening service-learning, civic engagement, and community partnerships in Philadelphia by connecting academics with community involvement. Likewise, in Chicago, the Chicago Consortium for Community Engagement (C3) serves a consortium of several higher education and healthcare institutions with a mission of maximizing the impact of community-engaged research to improve health equity and population health in Chicago. In Washington, a regional collaboration between five

universities in the Spokane area, Partners in Campus and Community Engagement, aims to identify and address critical issues impacting communities through community partnerships and community-based research. These collaborations, as well as BT2P's efforts to build a larger movement around civic and community engagement in higher education through TWF and the Paradigm Project, including through funding place-based collaboratories (Griffin, 2024) and other multi- and cross-institutional partnerships, served as an important foundation for our project.

## **Our Approach: Methods of Engagement**

Building upon BT2P's theory of change and call for multi- or cross-institutional collaborations within higher education community engagement, our original impetus for this project was to collaborate across our diverse set of institutions to build capacity for community engagement. A key dimension of this was recognizing the need to rethink the role of expertise and credentialing in campus-community partnerships. Utilizing CU's innovative teaching and learning model, which works to redefine the credit-bearing accumulation process for first generation, low-income students returning to college to earn their first degree, this involves offering college credit to learners for "learning in public:" prior work and leadership experiences, expertise, and the application of knowledge. Instead of simply crediting face-time with faculty members, "learning in public" attempts to recognize the outcomes of learning and leadership in students' family, community, and professional lives. At its most basic level, our collaboration aimed to offer college credit for community partners engaged in work with our three institutions. To that end, we piloted a joint summer seminar and professional development workshops to experiment with offering college credit for the labor, leadership, and learning of nonprofit professionals and residents involved in higher education community engagement. After all, the credentials offered by higher education have been institutionalized to symbolize knowledge-creation beyond the academy. While this has had mixed results, it did initiate a conversation about the role of our campuses and how to best contribute to the collective impact of communities in Providence. The following outlines the experimental programs, which emerged from this effort.

### **Summer Seminar**

CU students are adult learners and community leaders grounded in local communities (e.g., neighborhood, political, issue-based communities) throughout Providence and RI. As a core aspect of the CU curriculum in the Organization Leadership & Change major, each student leads a change-making project on an issue of public significance. This intensive curriculum grounded by project-based learning enables students to center their education around a learning dream and integrate this effort with their family, community, and professional work and leadership experiences. Likewise, at both Brown (through the Engaged Scholarship Certificate) and PC (through the Public and Community Service Studies and Global Studies academic departments),



undergraduate students investigate public, civic, and/or social justice issues that they are passionate about through the integration of academic study with community-based learning, research, and action.

We began our collaboration by piloting a joint summer seminar that placed students who are engaged in local community-based work in conversation with one another. The summer course aimed to reimagine the role of community engagement for civic learning, knowledge creation, and public problem-solving. The idea for the seminar, and our larger collaborative work, was designed, in part, by the series of courses previously mentioned, entitled, “The City And...” between CU and PC students as well as local community members. We utilized CU’s 8-week summer semester for the class and advertised the seminar to Brown and PC students likely to participate in community-engaged research summer projects, where students are often engaged in community-based work without a community of learners. Both Brown and PC disseminated this opportunity to engaged faculty as well as community-based organizations with which they collaborate. We also partnered with CU’s Community Scholars Program and larger efforts by CU to provide access to higher education among adults in RI. The Community Scholars Program enables adult learners to “test the waters” of returning to study, while being introduced to CU’s experiential learning curricular model. Thus, those community partners without a college degree who enrolled in the seminar had the option to earn course credit through CU, which they could later apply to a degree at CU or transfer elsewhere. The BT2P grant covered institutional costs for the seminar and allowed us to offer tuition waivers to participants enrolled in the summer seminar, specifically community partners.

Led by artist, educator, and anti-racist organizer Anjel Newman (who also is an alumna of CU, along with PC’s Master of Education in Urban Teaching), the seminar, entitled, “Liberatory Design: Engaging with Community,” brought together students, community partners, staff, and faculty from across our three institutions for a course focused on design thinking and community practice. Drawing on liberatory design as a framework to help address equity challenges and change efforts within everchanging complex systems (brown, 2017), the seminar guided participants to collaboratively identify a process towards addressing solutions to real-life problems impacting local communities throughout Providence (e.g., affordable housing, environmental justice, access to affordable healthy foods, youth mentorship and development, mental health awareness in schools and community centers, financial literacy resources at local libraries, vaccination awareness). The pilot seminar in 2021 included 14 participants, including 11 undergraduate students from CU (who were all also local residents), Brown, and PC; one faculty member from PC who also was a resident of Providence; and two nonprofit professionals. Yet, the class sought to challenge the distinctions between these formal roles—redefining who was a student, an expert, and a community practitioner.

Reflecting on the course, Newman explained that liberatory design is an ideal framework for doing community-based work because it teaches organizers to recognize their power and positionality, while gaining skills to lead participatory processes. The seminar taught participants not to simply move forward with their own individual go-it-alone ideas, but rather to design with the people most impacted by a problem. “If you are the only one saying what you think the problem is and what the answer should be,” Newman further reflected in a conversation about the framework for the course, “you can bet yourself it is probably not going to be what people need.” Newman continued that to bring about justice, you must have a “just process.” Thus, the seminar introduced participants to these kinds of participatory, deliberative community processes.

In reflecting on the experience (through interviews following the completion of the seminar), participants discussed the “unique dynamic” of this “collaborative learning environment.” For some participants, particularly those from Brown and PC, this was their first time engaging in a class not only with people from different institutions, but also with people from such a diverse range of backgrounds—from diversity in age to socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds to participants with various levels of family, community, and work and leadership experiences. In this way, participants noted how the seminar highlighted and celebrated students’ lived experiences, knowledge, and expertise as part of the course experience.

Participants also noted the significance of the three institutions coming together to discuss and learn to collaboratively problem-solve similar issues affecting some of the same communities in which they engage through their local community-based work. One participant described those enrolled in the seminar as a group of “thinkers,” “organizers,” and “advocates” all aiming to learn from each other’s experiences, better understand, and collaboratively identify and take actions towards addressing important social issues. In other words, another participant noted how they witnessed the merging of the theory and practice—the “learning” and “doing”—of community-engaged scholarship coming to fruition through this summer seminar.

Recognizing that our institutions had several overlapping community partners that focused on youth development, when we offered the class for a second time in the summer of 2022, it had a focus on youth development. The 2022 seminar included 21 participants, including 15 undergraduate students from CU, Brown, and PC; one staff member and one faculty member from Brown; and two youth development focused nonprofit professionals. To expand our collaboration to include other local postsecondary institutions, the second year of the seminar also included two graduate students from Rhode Island College’s Youth Development Master of Arts program.

## Mapping Project

Recognizing that our three institutions had several overlapping community partners that focused on youth development led us to hire a graduate student, financially supported by Brown's Swearer Center, to work on conducting a mapping project of project-based work, community partnerships, and community relationships across our institutions. Like traditional community asset mapping (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993), this mapping project allowed us to better understand where our institutions' community engagement strategies and partnerships did (and did not) already overlap to further consider what a more robust cross-institutional collaboration could look like within our local context. It also revealed where community engagement might have been operating in silos at our individual institutions, allowing for more intentional conversations and coordination across campus units at our institutions, specifically at Brown and PC.

Through collecting data from various sources across our institutions (e.g., community engagement center partner lists, course descriptions, faculty activity reports, student project data, etc.), we identified 296 community-based organizations that our institutions had worked with in some capacity through community engagement initiatives. Of these community-based organizations, we found minimal overlap among two ( $n=33$  organizations; 11%) or all three ( $n=4$  organizations; 1%) of our institutions. However, more importantly than the specific overlap of the same community partners across our institutions, this work further revealed themes of the types of community partners our institutions tend to collaborate with across a variety of thematic areas, including not only youth development, but also arts-based, community health, economic development, environmental justice, and public service (local and state government) organizations. This work at our individual institutions ultimately aided our cross-institutional efforts to identify themes across our various institution's community engagement initiatives and we expect will continue to do so through sustained engagement.

## Professional Development Workshops

We simultaneously offered a series of joint professional development workshops across our institutions, a practice that has continued beyond the life of the grant. Too often institutions of higher education in close proximity offer separate professional development opportunities on an array of topics with relevance to their neighboring institutions but, again, with no mechanisms in place to foster cross-institutional connections and collaboration. To that end, during the 2021-2022 academic year, we offered a series of multi-institutional remote workshops, themed "Learning in Community," to begin to understand and collectively develop strategies for "what works" for sustained, collaborative change.

By bringing together people affiliated with each partner institution, the workshop series not only aimed to foster cross-institutional connections and collaboration among students, community partners, staff and faculty, but also collaborative skill building. With local community leaders who have navigated CU, Brown, and/or PC (as undergraduate and graduate students, staff, instructors, and/or community partners) serving as panelists, the workshops aimed to build on the success of the summer course by further offering insights into students' lived experiences and how local community knowledge and expertise can be central to community-engaged teaching and learning in higher education and, in turn, to public problem solving. While higher education stakeholders must certainly do their own work, these workshops demonstrated that there is value in learning collaboratively (i.e., among various campus and community stakeholders).

The theme of the workshops, "Learning in Community," not only built off the success of the summer course, but also CU's "Learning in Public" program. With Learning in Public (LIP), CU has developed a method of learning that recognizes that the classroom is only one of many sites of learning, and understands the need for higher education institutions to value the ecology of education that occurs in family, community, work, and other settings. Opening the process by which credit can be granted, LIPs honor life-wide learning and encourage autonomy and curiosity in students. Thus, our hope was that if such a workshop series was sustained over time, it could be "counted" towards credit through CU's LIP program.

Across these professional development workshops, panelists and participants discussed how campuses need to become "student ready"—to center students, celebrate their lived experiences in the classroom, and eliminate barriers that might hinder their success, especially for Black, Indigenous, People of Color. In higher education we often talk about students needing to be college ready (which can have a focus on perceived student deficits) but we do not necessarily talk about what institutions can do to be student ready—to foster student-driven educational environments that meet students where they are. It is noteworthy that topics from the workshops centered around institutions needing to foster an "ecosystem of support" for students—such as creating a sense of belonging and representation on campuses for all students, decolonizing curricula, and centering student voices in curriculum revisions, hiring, and institutional policy decisions.

Likewise, panelists and participants discussed how campuses need to be community-centric for similar reasons (see White, 2021)—to not only center community voice and perspectives, but also knowledge and expertise in higher education decision making around community-engaged teaching, learning, and research, as well as broader institutional policy decisions, and transform research practices (see, for instance, Community Power and Policy Partnerships Program, 2023). Panelists and participants also described how communities are important sites of learning, further expanding CU's call to broaden the scope of learning to include whole families and communities.

With calls for campuses to be “student ready” and community-centric, panelists and participants noted several initiatives that are currently ongoing across our institutions. For example, at CU, to support working adult learners, many who are parents or have child caregiving responsibilities, meals and child-care are provided for students’ weekly World and Workplace Lab course. And, at Brown, to increase understanding of Indigenous peoples’ lived experiences, the institution has invested in building relationships with the Narragansett Indian Tribe and other Indigenous peoples in RI by, for instance, hiring a Tribal Community Member in Residence to support the institution’s “Land Acknowledge Commitments,” including on-campus trainings among other commitments (Brown, 2022).

To continue this collaborative skill building and knowledge co-creation among our institutions, during the 2022-2023 academic year, we hosted two recognized community-engaged scholar-practitioners, Tania D. Mitchell, Professor of Higher Education at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, and Byron P. White, Associate Provost for Urban Research and Community Engagement at the University of North Carolina Charlotte, for visits on our individual campuses and for joint conversations and workshops. Then, in the 2023-2024 academic year, we hosted Emily M. Janke, Director of the Institute for Community & Economic Engagement and Professor of Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of North Carolina Greensboro, along with a regional symposium on bridging divides in higher education. These visits included discussions with various campus and community stakeholders on topics related to community-engaged teaching and learning. More specifically, workshops explored themes of social justice education, restorative practices in community engagement, and collective impact work to frame how higher education institutions can and should collaborate—across units on campus and across multiple campuses—with local communities to share knowledge and resources for the purposes of collectively solving complex problems.

## **Limitations**

A fundamental aspect of our collaboration involved rethinking the role of expertise and the subsequent power of credentialing in campus-community partnerships. As mentioned above, using CU’s practice of recognizing “Learning in Public,” our partnership initially aimed to “credit community” in more formal ways by providing community partners with college credits from CU for engagement in collaborative work in the community, including with our institutions. While we still think this has promise, it was difficult to administer in practice. It also seems likely that while the project emerged from our ongoing engagement with local community engagement initiatives, and especially the inspiration for seeing community as embedded in learning as done with the CU model, there was a need for a greater community voice in the design of the project. The pilot seminar and other aspects of our project revealed challenges for involving community partners in curricular offerings; offering CU credit, for instance, tends to

be more valuable for existing CU students but not as helpful for nonprofit professionals and residents not already enrolled in an institution. It requires more resources to create pathways so that college credit could lead to a degree at CU or be transferred elsewhere.

As with other collaborations, the COVID-19 pandemic presented a multitude of challenges that required a rethinking of community engagement and partnerships (Ohmer et al., 2022). Our collaborations took place as our institutions grappled with how to stay connected and often re-think partnerships during social distancing (Klinenberg, 2024). This certainly impacted our collaborative work. While it allowed us to offer joint programming online more easily, scheduling, time commitments, and an awareness of the benefits of college credit posed challenges to participation in the context of the pandemic. Further, planning across multiple institutions' academic calendars and internal processes and procedures, including how learning is (and is not) recognized at traditional institutions of higher education and criteria for earning credit, became more chronic challenges.

Based on insights from CU's educational approach, we have recognized the need for more traditional institutions of higher education to re-think community as a space for learning to ensure that community wisdom and expertise are central to higher education community engagement. This involves re-imagining what Wallace (2000) called "the problem of time" in campus-community partnerships with new methods of financing and scheduling of higher learning, along with more creative ways to validate and recognize community knowledge, time, and expertise.

One participant in the abovementioned summer seminar noted the absence of a stronger perspective of "the community" beyond the CU, Brown, and PC participants—even as many of the CU students themselves were long-time Providence residents and community leaders. This same participant posed the critical question we continue to grapple with: "Who wasn't able to be here and why?" As a result, we have recognized the need to better identify community partners interested in college credit and ways we can best support this desire through college credit.

## **Lessons Learned**

Our joint projects, along with follow-up conversations with seminar participants, helped illuminate important lessons. Our baseline assumption in entering this project was that colleges and universities are relevant actors in public problem-solving; as such, our campuses are important actors in community engagement and can and should be doing more. However, we also acknowledge that higher education community engagement can perpetuate harm in communities (Perrotti, 2021) and, thus, a re-orienting towards community-centric engagement grounded in students' lived experiences requires a significant shift in practice and mindset. At times, we even felt so bold as to tackle a question posed by Gaztambide-Fernandez (2022) when

they asked university researchers if they could “imagine a future when the phrase ‘community-engaged research’ or ‘community-engaged learning’ is a redundancy?” (1:15:47). Gaztambide-Fernandez continued that this would require a future where “the very definition of being a university hinged on being community-engaged.” This would entail a set of values, Gaztambide-Fernandez added, that would “dismantle the hierarchies that define the boundaries between the university and the community.”

But having these values is not enough. We also need to intentionally re-think our community engagement efforts to be most effective in creating transformative change—creating more equitable and sustainable communities and systems. Learning across our institutions with campus stakeholders and community members helped us gain insights and lessons for moving forward, including recognizing the importance of thinking comprehensively, bridging divides, and building trustworthiness.

## **Thinking Comprehensively**

Change efforts in higher education tend to be “regime[s] of segregation” (Scobey, 2023, p. 16). Scobey (2023) explained that they are “largely boxed in institutions that silo academic learning from student well-being, faculty from staff, campus from community, discipline from discipline, semester from semester” (p. 16). In shifting the center of learning towards communities and students’ lived experiences in community, our project attempted to recognize the many configurations, interconnections, and potential learning webs that exist. CU’s experiential learning curricular model recognizes learning that takes place beyond the walls of traditional classroom setting—in family, community, work, and other settings; something that both our summer seminar and professional development workshops aimed to foster. Then, even the initial mapping of project-based work, community partnerships, and community relationships among our institutions demonstrated how the most effective community engagement work must be multidirectional, networked, and transdisciplinary.

## **Bridging Divides**

Increasing levels of polarization, along with the loss of trust among the public, make efforts to bring together diverse students and institutions to engage in community work essential not only for community-engaged learning and problem-solving but also for engaging in the kind of bridging work so needed in our fragmented society. As noted in the Interfaith America (2024) report, “Bridgebuilding in Higher Education,” our project helped us recognize the “bridging work is inherently local” (p. 9). In recognizing the potential for anchoring bridgebuilding efforts in engagement beyond the campus, Interfaith America (2024) noted that while local communities around the nation “are experiencing the fissure, roadblocks, and pain of deep divisions,” this is also an opportunity for higher education (p. 9). The report continued that “local communities are

often more ideologically diverse than campus communities” and “community partnerships provide opportunities for applying bridgebuilding skills and understanding their ‘real-world’ impact” (p. 9).

Our work brought together three diverse institutions that helped us see the potential for bridging divides. This was most especially pronounced in the summer seminar, where participants discussed the “unique dynamic” of this collaborative learning environment with students from the three very different institutions being asked to bridge divides. For some participants, particularly those from Brown and PC, this was their first time engaging in a class not only with people from different institutions but also with people from such a diverse range of backgrounds. In this way, participants noted how the seminar highlighted and celebrated students’ lived experiences as well as community knowledge and expertise as part of the course experience.

## **Building Trustworthiness**

Our collaboration also taught us that ongoing collaborative efforts are imperative for higher education to build trust between campuses and the many other settings where learning takes place by acting in *trustworthy* ways (see Association of American Medical College, n.d.; Chinekezi et al., 2023). During his visit to Providence as part of our joint professional development workshops, Byron White spoke about how institutions need to foster “trustworthiness” with communities, which White identified as different from communities “trusting” higher education. Trustworthiness, according to White, includes movement towards trust, being transparent with communities about self-interests (e.g., sharing campus expansion and building plans), and what campuses can and cannot do and offer in terms of resources (e.g., sharing annual budgets). This requires campuses to be in relationship with the communities that surround their campus; to listen to and be in dialogue with communities through, for instance, listening sessions and community conversations, and planning and acting with communities around community-identified priorities. Campuses need to recognize and value communities as spaces for learning as well as value community knowledge and expertise. In many ways, taking a more comprehensive approach to community engagement and aiming to bridge divides can help to manage power dynamics and foster trustworthiness between and among campuses and communities because it requires that campus stakeholders consistently show up *in* and *with* the community over time, being accountable and coordinated across the usual boundaries.

## **Next Steps**

Traditional ways of knowing often assume you must have a “perfect” program before you act. However, our collaborative work has taught us that to develop strategies for sustained, collaborative change collectively, we must continue to “test” pilot programs to see “what works”—to be responsive to students’ lived experiences and community-identified priorities, and



to re-think the role of community knowledge and expertise in higher education community engagement. This project largely developed out of interpersonal relationships. Continuing to move forward with an aim at thinking comprehensively about education, bridging divides, and building trustworthiness invites us to move beyond our interpersonal relationships to foster sustainability through shared goals. We are now exploring potential avenues to drive our collaborative work forward. While we aim to continue to share resources, best practices, and funding for professional development workshops and guest speakers across our institutions, we are also considering how to deepen our cross-institutional capacity for community-engaged work—and bring the lessons from this work into our institutions. It is our belief that collaboration adds value—so that  $1+1+1 > 3$ .

We feel this could have the most impact if we can go beyond our small-scale collaboration and infuse the lessons learned into the core aspects of our work at PC, CU, and Brown, respectively. For example, we hope to use our collaborative work to re-imagine how we can more effectively implement civic and community engagement courses at our individual institutions. CU has a “civic engagement” general education requirement for all students. Likewise, PC has a core curriculum “civic engagement proficiency” requirement for all students. While Brown’s Open Curriculum emphasizes student agency rather than curricular requirements, it does designate Community-Based Learning and Research courses, and many academic and co-curricular programs support substantial engagement opportunities. To this end, we are in the initial phase of planning to extend our collaboration with a focus around civic learning to advance civil discourse and a more robust practice of civic education into each of our institutions with an aim of cultivating a longer-term shift through our collaborative work. This would likely include more joint professional development workshops, a summer course(s) with a mix of students from our diverse institutions, and a planning process to embed civil discourse and democratic practice into the three institutions and community partnerships in Providence.

In addition, we are also considering other longer-term shifts that might be required in our thinking and practices to re-consider community knowledge and expertise among a wider range of stakeholders. For example, how can we (continue to) connect CU, Brown, and PC students through community-engaged courses and other opportunities? We noted earlier how our summer seminar aimed to place students engaged in local community-based work in conversation with one another. CU’s flexibility around credit-bearing courses can continue to support cross-institutional learning opportunities; and this work is already continuing to take place on a small scale. In addition to the abovementioned collaboration with a focus around civic learning, we hope to further pilot ways that CU students, who are themselves long-time Providence residents and community leaders, can serve as community mentors to students pursuing community-engaged work in Providence at Brown and PC, and receive credit for it, tapping into their local knowledge and expertise as well as fostering their leadership skills through CU’s Organizational Leadership & Change major. Finally, though we experienced challenges with creating credit-

bearing pathways for community members, we hope to think creatively about how to utilize CU's innovative curricular model to recruit new students to be part of CU learning cohorts—from neighborhood residents and community partner staff to contract workers at our institutions.

## **Conclusion**

The partnership between our three institutions helped us build stronger relationships and some practical joint projects—a summer seminar, professional development workshops, and sharing best practices. Yet, it also offered something larger—what a more collaborative paradigm might look like in practice. This effort is a type of education Scobey (2023) has called for with the Paradigm Project, which “requires new practices and policies that transcend the siloed, fragmented logic of current institutions” (p. 19).

Our collaborations helped us see the potential in shifting away from our own individual silos toward the creation of a more collaborative culture that can create abundance. This entails mundane tasks like finding economies of scale by sharing resources and funding for professional development workshops and guest speakers, to more long-term shifts that involve finding expertise among a wider range of stakeholders.

Ultimately, we see some initial promise in collaborating across institutions, even as we found some specific challenges for things like creating credit-bearing pathways for community members. However, new relationships among students, community partners, staff, and faculty across our three very different institutions proved to be important in creating cross-institutional capacity for community engagement. In addition to enhancing educational opportunities, we see value in identifying ways to work more effectively with common partners on community-identified priorities. Especially in a small city and state, we need to go beyond mapping collaborators, bringing together people with diverse perspectives and strengths to act for change as well as to continue learning. We continue to be hopeful that our nascent efforts can help to shift assumptions about expertise in campus-community partnerships and lead to more sustained, collaborative, and transformative work within higher education community engagement, specifically in Providence, having a greater impact on the neighborhoods and communities that our campuses are anchored within.

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