



Spring 2022 Newsletter

Learning in Community: Re-Imagining Partnership Reciprocity

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What are the assets for learning in the local neighborhoods and communities that surround our campuses? How can our campuses best center community as a space of learning? How might we re-imagine campus community partnerships to shape positive social change? These questions, among others, have animated our collaborative work together.

While reciprocal partnerships are often assumed as an inherent principle of civic and community engagement, centering community voices and valuing community members as co-producers of knowledge have been largely missing from engagement practices within higher education. Though there are areas where community is playing a more prominent role through various anchor and place-based initiatives (see Nicholas Longo's "[Does Place Still Matter?](#)", 2022), elevating community voices and perspectives has all too often been met with lofty rhetoric without subsequent practical application.

Even when one college or university makes an effort to center community in their work, campuses in close proximity tend to develop separate community engagement strategies and partnerships with some of the same members of the local community but with no mechanisms in place to foster cross-institutional connections and collaboration. College Unbound, Brown University, and Providence College—three institutions in Providence, Rhode Island with varying institutional contexts and approaches to community engagement—have been no exception.

[College Unbound](#) is an independent college structured around an innovative, personalized, interest/project-based curriculum for low-income working adults returning to college to earn their first degree. Brown University is an Ivy League research university that has connected students, staff, faculty, and community partners through curricular and co-curricular community engagement, engaged scholarship, and social innovation programs through the [Swearer Center for Public Service](#) among other efforts across campus. And Providence College is a Catholic, liberal arts college that has developed extensive curricular partnerships through the [Feinstein Institute for Public Service](#) and community engaged academic programs, such as [Global Studies](#).

In an effort to foster cross-institutional connections and collaboration, we piloted a series of experimental programs, including joint professional development workshops. For example, 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 aimed to foster cross-institutional connections and collaboration among

students, staff and faculty. With local community leaders who have navigated College Unbound, Brown University, and/or Providence College (as undergraduate and graduate students, staff, instructors, and/or community partners) serving as panelists, the workshops have offered insights into students' lived experiences and how local community expertise can be central to engaged teaching and learning.

Further, we piloted a joint seminar to re-imagine the role of community engagement for civic learning, knowledge creation, and public problem-solving in the summer of 2021. This collaboration is part of College Unbound's Community Scholars Program and larger efforts by College Unbound to provide access to higher education among adults in Rhode Island. The Community Scholars Program enables adult learners to test the waters of returning to study, while being introduced to College Unbound's experiential learning curricular model.

Led by artist, educator, and anti-racist organizer [Anjel Newman](#) (who also is an alumn of College Unbound and Providence College), 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, the course guided participants to collaboratively identify a process towards addressing solutions to real-life problems impacting the local neighborhoods and communities throughout Providence that surround our campuses (see adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy*, 2017). The pilot seminar included 14 participants, including eleven undergraduate students from College Unbound, Brown University, and Providence College; one faculty member from Providence College; and two community partners. Yet, the class sought to challenge the distinctions between these formal roles—redefining who is a student, an expert, and a community practitioner.

Anjel Newman reflected that liberatory design is an ideal framework for doing community-based project work because it teaches organizers to recognize their power and positionality, while gaining skills to lead participatory processes. The course 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 explained, "you can bet yourself it is probably not going to be what people need." Newman concluded that to bring about justice, you must have a "just process." Thus, the course introduced participants to these kinds of participatory, deliberative community processes.

Upon reflection, course participants discussed the "unique dynamic" of this "collaborative learning environment." Participants noted the significance of the three institutions coming together to discuss and learn to collaboratively problem-solve similar topics and social issues affecting some of the same communities in which they engage through their local community-based work. One participant described those enrolled in the course 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.

A fundamental aspect of our collaboration involved the need to re-think the role of expertise and the subsequent power of credentialing in campus community partnerships. Using College Unbound's practice of recognizing "learning in public," our partnership has aimed to "credit community" by providing community partners with college credits from College Unbound for engagement in collaborative work in the community, including with our institutions of higher education. However, this pilot seminar and other aspects of our project has revealed challenges for involving community partners in curricular offerings. COVID-19 presented a multitude of challenges that required a re-thinking of community partnerships. Scheduling, time commitments, and an awareness of the benefits of college credit also posed challenges to participation. Further, the ways in which learning is recognized at traditional institutions of higher education became a more chronic challenge.

Based on insights from College Unbound's educational approach, we have recognized the need for more traditional institutions of higher education to re-think community as a space for learning. This involves re-imagining what John Wallace has called "[the problem of time](#)" (2000) 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 course noted the absence of a stronger perspective of "the community" beyond the College Unbound, Brown University, and Providence College participants—even as the College Unbound 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 with an interest in college credit and ways we can best support this desire through college credit. Youth-development organizations serve as the primary core partnerships with Brown University and Providence College, while a majority of the projects developed by College Unbound students are focused on serving local youth. Thus, we have mapped out projects in the areas of youth development as a promising focus for this course moving forward, giving us the ability to support youth workers without a college degree as well as young people interested in access to higher education. When Liberatory Design is offered in the summer of 2022, youth development will be an increasing focus of the course based on lessons learned from the pilot seminar.

Ultimately, we see some initial promise, but also challenges for creating credit-bearing pathways for community members and new relationships among students, community partners, staff, and faculty across our three very different institutions of higher education. 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 moving forward.