

## **New to the Neighborhood: Race, Civic Engagement and Challenges for Educators**

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## New to the Neighborhood: Race, Civic Engagement, and Challenges for Educators

Stephen Danley

Gayle Christiansen

Recent research shows the prevalence of implicit bias in policing,<sup>1</sup> classroom discipline,<sup>2</sup> teacher expectations,<sup>3</sup> and throughout our legal systems.<sup>4</sup> With race playing a critical role in our understanding of systems,<sup>5</sup> the issue of who stands in front of our students has received more attention.

There are increased calls for seeing teachers of color in front of students of color,<sup>6</sup> as well as arguments that a diverse teaching force benefits white students.<sup>7</sup> A parallel line of research

shows the best techniques for teachers trying to address race issues by teaching on social justice.<sup>8</sup> Less researched but critical concepts such as allyship,<sup>9</sup> savior-mentality,<sup>10</sup> and white racial justice activists,<sup>11</sup> touch on the strengths and weaknesses of those teachers (and people) who do not share culture or race with those around them.

Many of these conversations are limited to the K-12 space, and rarely do they extend beyond (much-needed) calls for more teachers of color, or address the benefits/harm that come not just within the classroom, but outside it.

A parallel conversation is ongoing at the university level, where institutions of public learning have historically been the location of protests to increase the diversity of faculty,<sup>12</sup> and recently students have made similar demands.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, universities are reexamining their historical relationships with their surrounding communities, often using civic engagement (of students, faculty, and the university) to attempt to bridge historically fraught relationships with communities of color.

While much of the literature on such civic engagement within higher education can be self-congratulatory, it also identifies critical

<sup>1</sup> Seguino, Stephanie, and Nancy Brooks. "Driving while Black and Brown in Vermont." (2017).

<sup>2</sup> Skiba, Russell J., Robert H. Horner, Choong-Geun Chung, M. Karega Rausch, Seth L. May, and Tary Tobin. "Race is not neutral: A national investigation of African American and Latino disproportionality in school discipline." *School Psychology Review* 40, no. 1 (2011): 85.

<sup>3</sup> Gershenson, Seth, Stephen B. Holt, and Nicholas W. Papageorge. "Who believes in me? The effect of student-teacher demographic match on teacher expectations." *Economics of Education Review* 52 (2016): 209-224.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander, Michelle. *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. The New Press, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Feagin, Joe. *Systemic racism: A theory of oppression*. Routledge, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Rizga, Kristina. "Black Teachers Matter" Mother Jones. 2016. <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/09/b-lack-teachers-public-schools-education-system-philadelphia>.

<sup>7</sup> Perry, Andre. "We Need More Black and Brown Teachers but Not for the Reasons You Think." Hechinger Report. 2017. <http://hechingerreport.org/need-black-brown-teachers-not-reasons-think/>.

<sup>8</sup> Picower, Bree. "Teacher activism: Enacting a vision for social justice." *Equity & Excellence in Education* 45, no. 4 (2012): 561-574.

<sup>9</sup> Peterson-Smith, Khury and Brian Bean. "Fighting Racism and the Limits of "Ally-Ship;" 2015. Accessed 1/31/17, <https://socialistworker.org/2015/05/14/fighting-racism-and-the-limits-of-allyship>.

<sup>10</sup> Flaherty, Jordan. *No More Heroes : Grassroots Challenges to the Savior Mentality*. La Vergne: AK Press, 2016. <http://replace-me/ebraryid=11270805>.

<sup>11</sup> Warren, Mark R. *Fire in the heart: How White activists embrace racial justice*. Oxford University Press, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> McCormick, Richard Patrick. *The black student protest movement at Rutgers*. Rutgers University Press, 1990.

<sup>13</sup> Libresco, Leah. "Here are the Demands from Students Protesting Racism at 51 Colleges." 538. 2015 <http://scholar.aci.info/view/14636574e1d084e0361/15169e94d5300010003>.

problems with the paradigm—including the ways universities overwhelm community voices even while seeking to partner with them.<sup>14</sup> Also missing from this civic engagement discussion is an understanding of how white educators who choose to live in communities of color where they teach negotiate their intersecting roles, both as members of a higher education institution and as community members.

This paper is a starting point for such a discussion. It aims to blend the literature focusing on race and culture at the K-12 level with popular conceptions of allyship and savior mentality, and with a discussion of civic engagement impediments in institutions of higher learning.

**Also missing from this civic engagement discussion is an understanding of how white educators who choose to live in communities of color where they teach negotiate their intersecting roles.**

We ask: what challenges are faced when educators choose to live where they teach? And what strategies can educators use to address these challenges?

For the two of us, civic engagement played a central role in where we chose to work and where we chose to live. Both of us moved to Camden, New Jersey, motivated in part by the ethos of civic engagement to be good citizens and attempt to contribute to our community. Doing so comes with many benefits: as residents, our understanding of urban challenges

and history has expanded, which informs and enhances our teaching.

But moving to the community in which we teach also comes with serious ethical, economic and political challenges. Our status as white educators and white residents in a community of color can place us at odds with the community, with the institutions where we work, and with the systemic ways racism<sup>15</sup> is rooted in urban communities.

In this article we use reflective practice<sup>16</sup> to better understand the responsibilities educators have to their communities, and to lay out strategies for white educators to navigate these challenges. In particular, we lay out the ways that playing multiple roles in a community can lead to conflicting responsibilities, how the political desire to attract middle-class residents can warp power relationships, and how the economic influence of newcomers to communities can contribute to gentrification and undermine local businesses. We also show how an intentional focus on relationship-building and investing locally are first principles for avoiding unintended consequences that damage local communities.

This is not an indictment of civic engagement or an educator becoming a resident in the local community where one teaches. We believe that doing so can be a critical learning opportunity for such educators while also introducing them to wonderful communities and local institutions. But we recognize that white educators moving into communities of color creates challenging power dynamics stemming from decades of oppression and discrimination.

In laying out these challenges, we hope to both increase our theoretical understanding of the tensions inherent in living where we teach,

<sup>14</sup> Cruz, Nadinne I., and D. E. Giles. "Where's the community in service-learning research." *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 7, no. 1 (2000): 28-34.

<sup>15</sup> Feagin, 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Schon, Donald A. and Martin Rein. *Frame Reflection: Toward the Resolution of Intractable Policy Controversies* Basic Books. 1994.

and also to give practical guidance for those considering such a commitment.

## Diverse Teaching and Civic Engagement

First, a disclaimer: this paper is not meant to undermine the great research showing the value of hiring educators who share cultural and racial characteristics with their students. In fact, the challenges we lay out in the context of this article should reemphasize the value of so doing. And yet, as civic engagement becomes a growth area within higher education institutions, white educators find themselves moving to the communities surrounding their education institutions, in part in response to critiques of (largely white) educators who are neither living locally, nor invested beyond the classroom walls.

Urban universities have a history of building (metaphorical or literal) walls around their campuses. Calls to change this relationship harken back to Dewey.<sup>17</sup> Engaging directly with surrounding communities<sup>18</sup> through community partnerships or service-learning classes is a powerful pedagogical opportunity for students in these institutions<sup>19</sup> that can make academic learning more applicable and meaningful to real world problems.<sup>20</sup>

While often seen as beneficial,<sup>21</sup> scholars have identified drawbacks to civic engage-

ment:<sup>22</sup> community voices are often overwhelmed by university voices,<sup>23</sup> universities may be “serving ourselves” rather than community through the choice of projects,<sup>24</sup> and gentrification is caused by an influx of university-affiliated residents.

Much civic engagement literature is aimed at the institution, with little applying to decisions made by individuals. Ivan Illich,<sup>25</sup> in *To Hell with Good Intentions*, argues such attempts often create unintended consequences, are unwanted by surrounding communities, and serve more as evangelism for beliefs than genuine progress for local communities. These critiques are at the heart of our discussion of civic engagement by university educators.

Those seeking to engage with communities in which they teach face the potential for damaging those very same communities. In this paper, we examine some of these challenges and, because we disagree with Illich’s assertion that such civic engagement is ultimately counterproductive, we lay out strategies for minimizing the potential damage caused by these unintended consequences.

The K-12 conversation around teachers and race shows how having a teaching force that reflects the student body can increase achieve-

<sup>17</sup> Dewey, John and Albion W. Small. *My Pedagogic Creed*. EL Kellogg & Company. 1897.

<sup>18</sup> Ehrlich, Thomas. *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education* Greenwood Publishing Group. 2000

<sup>19</sup> Kenworthy-U'Ren, Amy, Edward Zlotkowski, and Andrew H. Van de Ven. "Toward a scholarship of engagement: A dialogue between Andy Van de Ven and Edward Zlotkowski." *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 4, no. 3 (2005): 355-362.

<sup>20</sup> Lynton, Ernest A. "Knowledge and Scholarship." *ERIC*. 1994. Schon, 1995.

<sup>21</sup> Colby, Anne, Elizabeth Beaumont, Thomas Ehrlich, and Josh Corngold. *Educating for democracy: Preparing under-*

*graduates for responsible political engagement*. Vol. 19. John Wiley & Sons, 2010. Colby, Anne. *Educating citizens: Preparing America's undergraduates for lives of moral and civic responsibility*. Vol. 6. John Wiley & Sons, 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Cruz and Giles, 2000. Stoecker, Randy, Elizabeth A. Tryon, and Amy Hilgendorf. *The Unheard Voices: Community Organizations and Service Learning* Temple University Press. 2009. Bortolin, Kathleen. "Serving ourselves: How the discourse on community engagement privileges the university over the community." *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 18, no. 1 (2011): 49-59.

<sup>23</sup> Cruz and Giles, 2000. Stoecker et al., 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Bortolin, 2011.

<sup>25</sup> Illich, Ivan. "To hell with good intentions." In *Conference on Inter-American Student Projects*. Cuernavaca, Mexico. Retrieved from [http://www.swaraj.org/illich\\_hell.html](http://www.swaraj.org/illich_hell.html).

ment<sup>26</sup> and is a critical issue for parents and activists.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, there exists helpful research to inform teaching social justice in the classroom<sup>28</sup> or teaching across cultural boundaries.<sup>29</sup>

There is less discussion of teachers' responsibilities directly to their communities. Such discussions address the use of critical pedagogy<sup>30</sup> and the disconnect between urban educators and their surrounding community.<sup>31</sup> Rarely do they address teachers who do not share backgrounds with their students but wish to invest in a school's community.

How should such educators navigate this space?

Recent discussions of allyship and the "savior mentality" address this question in part. Allyship addresses the question of how people who care and want to contribute to the effort of oppressed communities to better their lives can do so, despite their privilege. That effort,

often by white, middle-class individuals to contribute to movements by people of color, can be tortured.

Mia McKenzie suggests that true allyship is to "shut up and listen" to people of color.<sup>32</sup> Others argue that allyship involves leveraging privilege and power to help such groups.<sup>33</sup> Such allyship can be fraught, leading to what McKenzie<sup>34</sup> calls "ally theater" in which allyship is performed socially, not for the purpose of ending oppression, but rather for the social benefits of being labeled an ally.

A related concept is that of "savior mentality"<sup>35</sup> in which people come to teach in schools with students of color to "save" students. As put by Dr. Christopher Edmin,<sup>36</sup> the savior mentality is expressed by the fact that "there's a teacher right now in urban America who's going to teach for exactly two years and he's going to leave believing that these young people can't be saved." Similarly, in a stunning poem titled *Hallelujah the Saviors are Here*, Rachel Smith<sup>37</sup> relates her own experience as a student, and the biases of a constant string of self-proclaimed "saviors" who both took pride in their short experience in urban America, and looked down upon their students while so doing.

Such discussions of privilege, savior mentality, and allyship can be criticized as insular, and according to Smith,<sup>38</sup> for being esoteric

<sup>26</sup> Milner IV, H. Richard. "The promise of Black teachers' success with Black students." *The Journal of Educational Foundations* 20, no. 3/4 (2006): 89.

<sup>27</sup> Pratt, Timothy. "Many Hispanic Students Never have a Teacher Who Looks Like Them." Hechinger Report. 2016. Accessed from <http://hechingerreport.org/many-hispanic-students-never-teacher-looks-like/>.

<sup>28</sup> Picower, 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Emdin, Christopher. *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood... and the Rest of Y'all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education*. Beacon Press, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> Barton, Angela Calabrese. "Capitalism, critical pedagogy, and urban science education: An interview with Peter McLaren." *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* 38, no. 8 (2001): 847-859. Burbank, Mary, Alisa Bates, and Laurie Ramirez. "Critically reflective thinking in urban teacher education: A comparative case study of two participants' experiences as content area teachers." *The Professional Educator* 36, no. 1 (2012): 1.

<sup>31</sup> Duncan, Greg J., Ariel Kalil, Katherine Magnuson, and Richard Murnane. "Two policies to boost school readiness." (2014). Flory, Sara B., and Nate McCaughtry. "Culturally relevant physical education in urban schools: Reflecting cultural knowledge." *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 82, no. 1 (2011): 49-60. Monkman, Karen, Margaret Ronald, and Florence Délimon Thérémène. "Social and cultural capital in an urban Latino school community." *Urban Education* 40, no. 1 (2005): 4-33.

<sup>32</sup> Peterson-Smith and Bean, 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> McKenzie, Mia. "How to Tell the Difference between Real Solidarity and 'Ally Theater'." 2015. Accessed 1/31/17, <http://www.blackgirldangerous.com/2015/11/ally-theater/>.

<sup>35</sup> Flaherty, 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Downs, Kenya. "What 'white Folks Who Teach in the Hood' Get Wrong about Education." 2016. Accessed 1/31/17, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/what-white-folks-who-teach-in-the-hood-get-wrong-about-education/>.

<sup>37</sup> Smith, Rachel. *Hallelujah the Saviors are Here*. Smith, Rachel. 2012. *Louder than a Bomb*. (Spoken Word).

<sup>38</sup> Smith, 2012.

and ritualistic. But for educators attempting to engage civically, these nuanced discussions belie the real, everyday challenges of being a newcomer and an educator in a community.

## Who We Are

The stories examined below are the experiences we have lived through. They are our civic engagement with Camden, New Jersey. They are the ways we have struggled. They draw deeply from our own experiences as two leaders of civic engagement activities at Rutgers-Camden University. Before moving to these stories, we will briefly examine our biographies, what brought us to Camden, and two partnerships that grew out of our involvement with the city.

### Stephen Danley

As an academic, my eyes turned to Camden when I applied for an Assistant Professorship at Rutgers-Camden University. Coming off a study in post-Katrina New Orleans, I saw firsthand the distrust communities have of researchers, and the need for genuine civic engagement work by local universities. Rutgers-Camden put civic engagement at the center of its strategic plan. When I received the position, I moved to the city, believing as a young, white, male professor intending to focus my research and teaching agenda locally, I had a responsibility to invest personally in the city as well.

I began teaching a class entitled *Camden, Philadelphia and the Region* and launched the *Local Knowledge Blog*, which focused on amplifying local issues, local ideas, and local voices. The blog became what one local activist called a “credible alternative voice” in a city with overwhelming political control. Through it, I met many of the city’s activists.

Of all of the issues I became involved in, my favorite was the Camden “foodie” scene. The focus on local culture and food reminded

me of New Orleans, and local organizations were doing excellent work. My *Camden* class worked with the Latin American Economic Development Authority (hereafter LAEDA) to promote Dine Around Friday, a program that linked downtown institutions to locally-owned ethnic restaurants, and my students produced online restaurant reviews for a variety of local Camden restaurants as called for by the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission’s (hereafter DVRPC) food plan. Students wrote over 85 restaurant reviews.

### Gayle Christiansen

I first came to Camden to teach 7th and 8th grade science in a public middle school and, after a brief stint away for graduate school, I returned to lead the Rutgers-Camden Office of Civic Engagement’s University-Assisted Community School initiative, the North Camden Schools Partnership. This partnership was funded with a five-year, *21st Century Community Learning Centers* grant, providing a half million dollars a year to support a partnership with three schools in the neighborhood closest to campus.

In taking the position with the Office of Civic Engagement, I chose to move to Camden and to the same neighborhood that contained the schools where I worked. From my previous experience in the city, I knew living in the neighborhood would help provide me with better insight into what students and families experienced while also lending me some credibility for doing this work. My own race was not a good starting point for gaining trust.

During my time with the North Camden Schools Partnership, the Governor called for state control of the school district, installing an appointed superintendent and making the recommendations of the School Board advisory. The Superintendent brought a portfolio management approach to the Camden schools, which meant different things for the three

North Camden schools I worked with: phasing one out while co-locating a charter run school in the same building; flipping one school from being run by the district to being run by a charter organization; and keeping the final school open to compete with the new neighborhood options. A for-profit organization built and opened a fourth school in the neighborhood during this time.

## White Resident in a Black and Brown City

At the crux of this investigation is the intersectionality between identity as an educator and identity as a new, white resident in a black and brown city. Through reflection, we brought together key themes and struggles that occurred at this intersection.

***Wessells asks of university-community partnerships, “ethical obligations to whom?”***

We argue that educators who take seriously a responsibility to engage civically beyond the classroom in the communities within which they teach face struggles that roughly fall under three categories. The first is ethical challenges that put the responsibilities of the job at odds with responsibilities to community partners. The second is the challenge of engaging politically when the political context may empower and privilege new, white residents out of a desire to attract middle-class residents to the city, putting educators at a further power imbalance with existing residents. The third is grappling with the economic impact of our presence in the city upon gentrification and local businesses influenced by our spending patterns.

## Ethics

Wessells<sup>39</sup> asks of university-community partnerships, “ethical obligations to whom?” We have often asked ourselves the same question, as we found our responsibilities as educators and newfound responsibilities as residents coming into conflict.

For example, in working with LAEDA, Stephen faced conflicts between his responsibility to his students and his responsibility to the LAEDA partnership. LAEDA came to the partnership hoping to expand its Dine Around program, which helped bring downtown students and employees to local restaurants. Stephen saw the partnership as an opportunity for students to expand their limited knowledge of the city by exploring restaurants in neighborhoods not adjacent to campus.

The partnership was a poor fit because many students worked and were unable to attend the program’s monthly Friday lunches, a frustrating result that undermined the educational objective. Stephen wanted to change the nature of the collaboration to ensure a better experience for students, but also knew that in doing so, the collaboration would stray further from LAEDA’s objectives.

The next semester, Stephen added a third partner and changed the civic requirement to focus more on a Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission’s call to build online infrastructure through having students conduct restaurant reviews. LAEDA was frustrated with the changes. Over time, students had even less of a presence at Dine Around, yet students responded well to conducting restaurant reviews on their own time. This is an ethical challenge

<sup>39</sup> Wessells, Anne. “Dear Prudence: power, campus-community collaborations, and the elusive space between constructive disruption and neoliberal subcontract.” Paper presented at the Urban Affairs Association Conference, Miami FL (April). 2015.

of the type described by Bortolin.<sup>40</sup> It is an example where educational and local ethical responsibilities come into tension and must be negotiated.

Gayle also faced ethical challenges of “to whom.” As the state-appointed superintendent made changes in the North Camden schools, Gayle found the new school operator a poor partner, unwilling to provide classroom space and access to staff members to assist in running programming. This failure to engage with and commit to the partnership made it difficult to run a quality after-school program that benefited students and families. On a personal level, Gayle saw this school operating with militaristic practices that she believed disrespected students. If it had been her choice, she would have ended the relationship with this school operator. But there was an obligation to the University to make it work and contribute to the success of the school system.

Gayle also felt an obligation to the University students she employed as assistant teachers in the after-school program. From an academic perspective, the changes taking place within the school district were a ripe opportunity for debate on the purpose of education, what excellent education looks like, and the role of education in alleviating poverty. Yet, this debate was stifled because there was a mandate from the University to work with the new school operator. Finally, the North Camden families faced disruptions and uncertainty as they saw one school close, another change ownership, and a new school open.

Gayle and her Rutgers students knew each of the schools as the North Camden Schools Partnership covered the entire neighborhood. They were often put in the place of answering parent questions about which school their child should attend. Here, Gayle allowed the student staff to share their own opinions, and she shared hers as well, giving her personal beliefs

regarding what makes for a great school. With families who entrusted their students to your care daily, it proved difficult to always toe the party line.

These examples show how intersectionality naturally leads to conflicting ethical responsibilities. Educators, in particular, face multi-dimensional ethical responsibilities to students, community, partners, and their own conscience. We often found ourselves in no-win situations, where every choice felt as if it we were betraying someone or something we cared about.

## Politics

There is a similar danger in what we define as the political space. In this space, new, white, residents often receive preferential treatment by politicians, and must wrestle with the implications of such treatment. A couple of small examples from Camden show how this works. In a recent tour given to Rutgers students by the local Cooper-Norcross Foundation, a foundation employee began to recruit the students to live in the city. We wrote in our fieldnotes that:

The tour guide seemed to make his presentation a direct pitch to the students to move into the neighborhood. He talked about nurses and doctors moving to new homes there, and mentioned that now there was a school for “your” kids to go to if you moved to the neighborhood. He talked up a forthcoming CNN piece about a family, with six kids, that moved into the neighborhood specifically to go to a new KIPP charter school.

Similarly, at a meeting of the Camden Social Club, run by a group of young African-Americans who recently had purchased homes in the neighborhood surrounding Cooper Hospital, Mayor Dana Redd described new housing in the neighborhood as “housing for those of

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<sup>40</sup> Bortolin, 2011.



our peer group.” These examples show the ways in which the needs of middle class, white newcomers to a neighborhood can be the first concern of local public officials, in part because a city with overwhelming amounts of poverty perceives a need for residents with expendable income. New residents occupy a powerful political position because of the political effort to bring them to the city.

Take, for example, a local, white artist who moved to Camden. We wrote in our fieldnotes that:

We talked a bit about how art is in some ways apolitical and provided this communal space. But he continued, arguing about how welcoming Camden had been to him. He frequently served alcohol illegally in his gallery without once having a problem, even though police and even the Mayor had come to visit on such occasions. He remarked how easy it was to come buy a property, not end up with problems, paperwork or licensing.

This is in sharp contrast to the experiences of small business leaders taking LAEDA’s small business training classes.

According to LAEDA CEO Ray Lamboy, those entrepreneurs face serious challenges getting appropriate and timely inspections and certification from Camden City Hall, often crippling resident entrepreneurs with relatively small backup funds who need to open their business quickly in order to stay solvent. Similarly, entrepreneurs complain about the way that small businesses were excluded from the tax credits in the 2013 Economic Opportunity Act, which resulted in \$1.4 billion<sup>41</sup> in tax subsidies to new corporations moving to Camden.

That exclusion plays out in the city’s politics. In the 2016 Democratic Congressional Primary, Alex Law, a 25-year-old white suburban male, left his job at Microsoft to run for Congress. Camden was part of his district. He came to the city and told its activists that he was their best chance for change, leveraging his privilege into an immediate leadership position among local activists. In a similar situation, a local artist bought a home in the city and briefly considered a run for office, in part because she had the resources to run a professional campaign, unlike many of the long-time Camden residents who made periodic runs for office.

Such examples show how resources, being an outsider, and even whiteness can be political assets and lead to inequitable results. Long-time city residents are often skeptical of new residents for exactly this reason, seeing how this advantage had been leveraged into preferable treatment.

***There are constant political decisions about when to defer to long-time residents and when to move forward with our own ideas.***

We struggled with the proper response to these political situations in day-to-day life. There are constant political decisions about when to defer to long-time residents and when to move forward with our own ideas. In many ways, these are political decisions—they are decisions about who should have final say over what is happening in the city. New, middle class, white residents face the decision of how often to defer to existing residents. The knowledge, compassion and wisdom of existing residents is a great benefit for new residents, but disagreements often lead to power struggles.

<sup>41</sup> Sheridan, M., “Camden Comeback”. Urban Land Institute. 2016. Available from:

<http://urbanland.uli.org/development-business/camdens-comeback/>.

For example, while promoting Dine Around, Stephen had friends from outside the city who wanted to try Camden restaurants. These friends called themselves the “Camden Supper Club” and their monthly dinners were covered by the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.<sup>42</sup> The coverage led to quick growth and ballooned to a monthly gathering of up to 37 people and a list serve with over two hundred members. This success also brought political challenges. LAEDA’s Ray Lamboy was nervous that Camden Supper Club was now competing with Dine Around, which saw its numbers shrink over the same period. As Camden Supper Club leveraged its largely white, suburban group into a second newspaper article,<sup>43</sup> Ray Lamboy complained that the group often went to similar restaurants as Dine Around and might be causing its decline.

For Stephen, this was a political choice. As a new resident to the city, he often deferred to Lamboy, who had long been involved in Camden and whose father had run a furniture store in Camden. But Stephen chose not to stop the Camden Supper Club because it drew from a different group of people, was specifically started for those who could not make Dine Around, and was a personal social group.

Such challenges speak to the small ways that new residents struggle with finding the appropriate role in a new city. These are political challenges and personal ones. They reflect the “allyship” discussion which asks whether allies should always defer, or should use their privi-

lege in attempts to further causes which are handicapped by oppression and discrimination.

While our experiences do not offer a definitive answer for such debates, we argue that being aware of the advantages and power dynamics of being a new, middle class, white resident in a community is a first step towards morally addressing these challenges.

## Economics

Just as these challenges manifest themselves through multiple ethical responsibilities and political challenges, there is an economic challenge for new, middle class, white resident educators. Hertz<sup>44</sup> questions whether it is possible to avoid being a gentrifier. As cities increasingly face “Disneyfication,”<sup>45</sup> in which downtown cores become playgrounds for the rich, there are corresponding fears about rising prices and displacement.

Displacement is a distinct fear in Camden, where investment is often criticized as being for newcomers and not existing residents. Benson<sup>46</sup> sees displacement as a risk in the rise of charter schools in Camden and the rebuilding of Camden High School.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, residents in Camden’s Whitman Park neighborhood opposed a federal Promise Neighborhood application—a program which would come with significant investment—because the initial application included the power to use eminent domain to displace residents.

There is an economic risk beyond displacement posed by such newcomers: that of

<sup>42</sup> Riordan, Kevin. "Sampling Fine Food and Fellowship." *Philadelphia Inquirer*. 2015. [http://articles.philly.com/2015-03-27/news/60520897\\_1\\_camden-store-assistant-professor-east-camden](http://articles.philly.com/2015-03-27/news/60520897_1_camden-store-assistant-professor-east-camden).

<sup>43</sup> Paolino, Tammy. "Discover Camden's Many Restaurants with Supper Club." *Courier-Post*. 2015. <http://www.courierpostonline.com/story/life/2015/09/22/discover-camdens-many-restaurants-supper-club/72615626/>.

<sup>44</sup> Hertz, Daniel. "There's Basically no Way Not to be a Gentrifier." *City Labs*, 2014. <http://www.citylab.com/housing/2014/04/theres-basically-no-way-not-be-gentrifier/8877/>.

<sup>45</sup> Harvey, David., *Rebel Cities: From the right to the city to the urban revolution*. Verso Books. 2012.

<sup>46</sup> Benson, Keith. "COMMENTARY: School fight about gentrification." *Courier-Post*. 2015.

<sup>47</sup> Benson, Keith. "Residents must fight Camden High plan." *Courier Post*. 2016.

cultural appropriation in which newcomers monetize existing culture in a city. Stephen struggled with this when his *Local Knowledge Blog* received positive press<sup>48</sup> and he began to be interviewed by the media on Camden-related policy issues. Realizing that his own professional development might be coming at the expense of residents with encyclopedic knowledge of Camden's history and politics, he instituted a policy where if he is on a panel, is asked for a quote, or makes a radio appearance, he pushes to have a long-term Camden resident included as well.

In many ways, the partnership with LAEDA and the creation of Dine Around (and Camden Supper Club) are designed to explicitly address the ways that dollars are captured during development. Take, for example, the case of Little Slice of New York in downtown Camden. Its owner, Pete Toso, chose a Camden location in part because of the promise of development downtown. But when that development happened, the two projects nearest his restaurant included direct competitors. The Victor Luxury Lofts included Market Street Pizzeria as a tenant, only blocks from Toso's pizza shop. The L3 office buildings across the street included an internal cafeteria. With employees leaving at 5pm, and an internal cafeteria for lunch, Toso says little business trickles to *Little Slice*.

Without networks in the city, it can be difficult to even know what local establishments exist. When the mayor spoke at an event run by new homeowners in the city, Stephen took a moment to ask why the club regularly met at Hank's—a new bar opened downtown on the waterfront—instead of at a long-established Camden restaurant. One of the organizers, who recently had bought a home in Camden's Cooper Plaza neighborhood, shrugged and mentioned there was nowhere else to go.

For educators new to the neighborhood, this is the risk. Cultural distance can be a barrier that keeps new residents from assimilating in a way that supports pre-existing local businesses. At the same time, as new residents with more income increase, it puts additional rental pressure on old establishments without sharing the benefits of new customers.

## Strategies for Educator Residents

Illich<sup>49</sup> argues that, given similar challenges, the effort to “help” through civic engagement is a counterproductive one.

We make no such argument. We see the effort of both higher education institutions and educators to engage their surrounding communities as much needed progress. But this does not make the path toward progress any less treacherous. White educators who become residents in communities of color, out of good intentions, can still have negative impacts. These challenges are real, and we lay out both a macro strategy for addressing them, as well as micro-approaches that address day-to-day situations.

Our starting point is that these challenges are deeply embedded in society. Ladson-Billings and Tate<sup>50</sup> argue that systematic racism is at the root of our education system, as well as our segregated housing system. The challenges of structural racism<sup>51</sup> and systemic racism<sup>52</sup> are at the heart of the challenges white educators face. The vulnerability of housing in communities of color, influenced by a racist policy of red-lining, leaves communities more vulnerable to gentrification. The use of zoning to avoid affordable housing leaves poverty segregated and leaves politicians desperate for investment from both

<sup>48</sup> Riordan, Kevin. “A blog with many voices.” *Philadelphia Inquirer*. 2014. Terruso, Julia. “A young professor in Camden to help—and learn.” *Philadelphia Inquirer*. 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Illich, 1968.

<sup>50</sup> Ladson-Billings, Gloria, and William F. Tate. “Toward a critical race theory of education.” *Teachers college record* 97, no. 1 (1995): 47.

<sup>51</sup> Friedman, 1969.

<sup>52</sup> Feagin, 2006.

middle class residents and businesses that can leverage the city for tax breaks.

In some ways, moving into an under-resourced community that has been the site of discrimination is an act of solidarity and an attempt to mitigate segregation of races and resources in a small way. But those who do also walk into a society shaped by those forces. Because of this, we argue for a macro-strategy that combines intentional relationship-building with intentional spending. Racism can be structural. Thus, educators in communities of color will be working in a situation in which structural racism (and other factors) may restrict their choices. There may not always be a “right” choice, making building local relationships strong enough to withstand conflicts a necessity.

***There may not always be a “right” choice, making building local relationships strong enough to withstand conflicts a necessity.***

We assume that part of being in a community is realizing that, it is a “harmful fiction” to assume community has a universal voice that can always be agreed with.<sup>53</sup> Instead of guiding other educators towards the “right” decision, our own experiences show that building relationships that can withstand critical arguments and disagreements is a key component to joining a community—it is almost inevitable that new residents will both make mistakes and find themselves in no-win situations. Local relationships have helped us as educators avoid ill-suited partnerships while widening our pool of engagement projects for students, but have also supported our residential life by helping us to find places to live, introducing us to local busi-

nesses, and connecting us to other valuable people in the community.

These relationships are a sounding board for feedback to avoid damaging community. For example, a local foundation requires that grassroots groups partner with one of a select few nonprofits in the city in their grant application process, giving those nonprofits influence over the budget and shape of grant proposals. The foundation reached out to Stephen during the process of evaluating the Cooper Grant Neighborhood Association grant application to implement its neighborhood plan.

The foundation’s representatives were surprised to hear that the neighborhood association was frustrated with the process and in a power struggle with its partner nonprofit. When Stephen challenged the foundation representatives on the consequences of their policy requiring these partnerships in the city, the foundation representatives insisted that they were the “good guys” trying to work in communities, an example of savior-mentality.<sup>54</sup> Both can be true. But not being able to hear the damage being done—in this case, setting up a nonprofit with few employees from the city as a kingpin over a neighborhood association conducting a neighborhood plan—can happen alongside much-needed investment. At a later meeting, the foundation was surprised to see that only \$130,000 of a \$750,000 implementation grant was designated for the neighborhood association to spend. The required partners had claimed the rest of the grant for their on-going projects.

The success of the North Camden Schools Partnership depended on Gayle’s ability to build relationships with members of the school and greater communities. To use classroom space, for instance, required a relationship with building leadership and classroom teachers that would be tested when students left rooms messier than they found them. Gayle also need-

<sup>53</sup> Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995.

<sup>54</sup> Flaherty, 2016.

ed to build relationships with families and students to have them sign-up and attend after-school programming, an especially difficult endeavor for middle school students facing stigma from peers for spending their free time learning after school.

Stephen and Gayle found building relationships rooted in generative listening<sup>55</sup> that went beyond downloading information from community members and considered how past histories and divides underlie their words, tone, and body language.<sup>56</sup>

Gayle, for instance, received many phone calls from school staff regarding the state of classrooms and building the morning after program took place, often from teachers with notoriously messy and disorganized classrooms as their normal state. Gayle made a point of getting to know these teachers by taking time while in the building to stop by and say hello and ask how their day was. In so doing, she eventually heard how these teachers felt unsupported by their school administrations or overwhelmed by another new policy being put into place. It seemed Gayle and her staff were easy outside targets for projecting existing frustration.

In those conversations, Gayle had a chance to share parts of her story and to work with the teachers to see how her program could try to make their day easier. She was able to identify students who rarely turned in homework and have afterschool staff work more intently with them on assignment completion. And after learning that spelling tests took place every Friday, her staff started reviewing spelling with students on Thursdays. Listening first helped to build relationship that reduced complaints—it was hard to be upset with someone you knew

was genuinely trying to help your students—and led to working for common goals.

The thriving discussion about allyship starts to capture the intricacies of building these relationships. A key component of this type of listening is recognizing that other perspectives are valuable—and then deferring to them. We do not go as far as some<sup>57</sup> in arguing that in communities of color, white educators need *always* defer. There are areas of expertise in which educators need insist upon using their training, but educators' first instinct needs to be that the views of local residents, students and parents are valuable, bring new and needed information forward, and deserve to be deferred to in most situations.

In this sense, we agree more with Warren<sup>58</sup> in that issue championing requires a conversation about race, no matter who ends up leading.

Listening and deferring is not charity. It is recognition that if there are negative consequences of honest civic engagement efforts, local residents will be the first to feel them. It is prudent to value such knowledge. The same can be said of economic support of local institutions. We argue that buying and hiring locally is a necessary first principle for educators new to the neighborhood. Doing so is not a compromise or gift. Local residents ensure stability in local educational programs and connect these programs to existing resources of which newcomers are often unaware.

Gayle found in the afterschool program that the Rutgers students, who were both serving as assistant teachers and were from the city, connected better and more easily with students than those from the suburbs. She also intentionally sought out school teachers to hire for the afterschool program instead of bringing in outside staff. These individuals knew the students, families, school day procedures, and challenges from the school day that could easily

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<sup>55</sup> Scharmer, Otto and Katrin Kaufer. *Leading from the Emerging Future: From Ego-System to Eco-System Economics* Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. 2013.

<sup>56</sup> Forester, John. *Planning in the Face of Power* University of California Press. 1998.

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<sup>57</sup> McKenzie, 2015.

<sup>58</sup> Warren, 2010.

flow into the afterschool hours. Hiring staff from the school and city allowed the program to flourish.

Support of local businesses has the same effect. East Camden, with a host of homegrown businesses, has become a tourist destination for local Latino immigrant communities.<sup>59</sup> Donkey's, a local cheesesteak joint, was featured on Anthony Bourdain's TV show<sup>60</sup> and named one of the East Coast's best sandwiches.<sup>61</sup> Yet the danger is "Disneyfication," when genuine establishments with local character are replaced with generic businesses along prime waterfront property. The result is a sterilization of local culture that creates a generalized (and fictional) culture in its place. Walk into the Victor Pub or the newly-opened Hank's on Camden's waterfront and this feeling is tangible.

**Yet the danger is "Disneyfication," when genuine establishments with local character are replaced with generic businesses along prime waterfront property**

When new residents fail to support local and homegrown institutions, they risk undermining local gems that could distinguish urban businesses from surrounding suburban developments filled with chains. Take, for example, the case of Camden Printworks. The longtime Camden business prints a variety of t-shirts,

hoodies, bags and more. At a recent start-up conference,<sup>62</sup> the company was a big hit, bringing its press and giving away "City Invincible" t-shirts—a reference to Walt Whitman's poem about Camden.

Stephen reached out to Adam Woods, the business owner and a member of Camden Supper Club, and bought shirts to hand out to guest speakers and students. Woods shared his frustration that he was unable to work with Rutgers-Camden University on an official basis. Unlike the other universities with which Camden Printworks collaborates, Rutgers requires all shirts to go through its vendor and trademark process. For the other schools, Camden Printworks does not do official work for bookstores or athletics. Instead, it works with student groups, and small programs and schools within the university able to afford the lower-cost Camden Printworks products but unable to pay the cost of the firm which does the Universities' more traditional paraphernalia.

At first glance, it appears that Rutgers policy is a loss for Camden Printworks. And it is. But it is also a loss for Rutgers-Camden University. The smaller campus in Camden is less able than the New Brunswick campus to produce a variety of official university clothing. In the Rutgers-Camden bookstore, there are university sanctioned items and Rutgers Law School items, but little in terms of the boutique, hip shirts that are popular on campuses.

A lack of local knowledge subtly undermines existing local businesses. This process does not need to be intentional. It can occur because of a lack of existing social ties. If housing and geography are an ingrained component of racism, it follows that development contains the same foibles. New residents may not have access points or the social capital to connect to the broader set of local businesses, instead stay-

<sup>59</sup> Steele, Allison. "A "Main Street" Thriving in Camden." *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 2015. [http://www.philly.com/philly/news/new\\_jersey/A\\_Main\\_Street\\_makeover.html](http://www.philly.com/philly/news/new_jersey/A_Main_Street_makeover.html).

<sup>60</sup> Young, A. "New Jersey: Anthony Bourdain's visit to Donkey's Place in Camden brings in extra large lunch crowd." *NJ.com*. 2015.

<sup>61</sup> Rothman, L. "The Best Sandwiches in America." *NY Post*. 2017.

<sup>62</sup> Riordan, Kevin. "Why these tech start-up founders are moving to Camden." *Philadelphia Inquirer*. 2017.

ing in what some Camden residents refer to as the “downtown bubble.” In doing so, new residents both miss out on the rich existing culture in a city and simultaneously undermine that culture economically.

The overarching strategies of building relationships and investing locally point to several other more specific strategies of value to white educators new to the neighborhood. The first of these is the “multiple hats” strategy in which educators delineate between personal and work roles. Intersecting roles can lead to tense moments in partnerships, as responsibilities to neighborhoods and selves occasionally conflicted with responsibilities to other actors. At these times, we recommend educators be explicit about the role they are playing.

For example, when the school district overhaul was first announced, the new superintendent led meetings across the city to talk about upcoming changes. Gayle attended one of these meetings, outside of work hours, but in the North Camden neighborhood, her catchment area based on address as well as where she worked. While at the meeting, she spoke to several activists, who she would also consider friends. Gayle left the meeting a bit early to attend another commitment and was surprised that a more senior work colleague followed her outside, stopping her to provide the advice that she should be careful with whom she was seen during meetings. Gayle was too surprised to respond, but had she, she could have explained that in this meeting, she was wearing her “resident hat,” which is different from her “Rutgers hat.”

A second specific strategy is to show up and engage. In spending time in the North Camden schools, Gayle heard about the North Camden Little League. Attending games on Saturday afternoons signaled to families she was willing to be a part of the community and was interested in getting to know it and them better. Instead of creating one’s own community, seeing themselves as “urban pioneers” in a

city that is a blank slate, white educators can build relationships and discover ways to invest locally by seeing what the city has to offer through the eyes of more long-term residents.

A third strategy is to use one’s white privilege as a bridge to better connect disparate individuals and power imbalances. Being white comes with the political challenge of being catered to or valued above minority residents. White educators can contribute to their new communities by using the preference that comes with their race to advocate for greater inclusion of others.

Gayle, for instance, was invited as a part of her neighborhood association to a meeting with developers receiving tax incentives for development of waterfront property. The leadership of the association is all white and, while this neighborhood is not the only one affected by the development, it was the only one invited to meet with the outside developers. During the meeting, the developers, who also happened to be white, shared designs connoting a fear of Camden residents—a shuttle will take employees a few blocks to the front door, there will be private security preventing people who aren’t supposed to be there from entering buildings, etc. Gayle, angry over how those she worked with on a daily basis were portrayed, advocated for the developers to share their plans with other community groups, offering to put the developers in touch with North Camden residents.

The challenges and zig-zag path through them lead to a final recommendation: reflection. White educators living in communities of color face tensions and loneliness. Along with their new neighbors they live with the weight of a difficult racial history. The above strategies are a start to navigating this space, but self-reflection can assist in further understanding dynamics and next steps. In this strategy of re-

lection, we echo the call by Otto Scharmer<sup>63</sup> to create an open mind, open heart, and open will.

To take time to become present instead of remaining on autopilot by continuing one's normal routines and approaches.

## Conclusion

In this article we have attempted to lay out a theoretical argument for the responsibilities of individual educators outside their classrooms. Doing so improves our understanding of civic engagement in higher education institutions and of educators in urban communities. While there are necessary calls for more teachers of color,<sup>64</sup> guidance for white educators in classrooms with students of color,<sup>65</sup> and critiques of institutions seeking to engage civically with their surrounding communities,<sup>66</sup> there is less information for those of us seeking to both move to and teach in urban communities.

Using reflective practice, we lay out a theoretical structure that examines ethical, political and economic challenges to educators new to the neighborhood. In doing so, we show how the well-intentioned can find ourselves in difficult situations, undermine the community we care about, and influence the economy around us in ways that damage long-local businesses.

But we also lay out a series of macro and micro strategies for addressing these challenges that serve as guidance for individuals seeking to live where they teach. We focus on relationship-building and investing locally in both business and people. These approaches are grounded in our belief that living and educating in the same urban community is not a series of binary choices between right and wrong, but a complex system of responsibilities which lead to inevitable miscommunications, conflicts, or un-

intended consequences that can damage the very community we hoped and worked to contribute to.

Our micro-strategies help fill in the blanks of such broad-brush strategies, focusing on building relationships through clear communication (“multiple hats”), showing up and engaging, leveraging privilege to better connect isolated groups, and, finally, reflection.

Hopefully, these strategies are both practical for educators seeking to invest more deeply in their community and help set the stage for future systematic research that more fully investigates the challenges of educators new to the neighborhood.

***We focus on relationship-building and investing locally in both business and people.***

The strategies also embody both our reflection on our own experiences, and our beliefs about the ways such experiences intersect with, but are not entirely explained by, the focus in the literature on allyship,<sup>67</sup> savior mentality,<sup>68</sup> civic engagement,<sup>69</sup> or social justice activism.<sup>70</sup>

Yes, our motivations for this work and this life were grounded in these concepts. But we believe that investing locally as an educator is a worthwhile pursuit. With the decision to live and teach in the same urban community comes the challenges of being a good neighbor—despite historical oppression and power balances that manifest in surprising and unpredictable ways.

Our challenges in living here, and our biggest failures in doing so, extend from the challenges of being a good neighbor. It is that expe-

<sup>63</sup> Scharmer and Kaufer, 2013.

<sup>64</sup> Rizga, 2016.

<sup>65</sup> Emdin, 2016.

<sup>66</sup> Bortolin, 2011.

<sup>67</sup> McKenzie, 2015.

<sup>68</sup> Flaherty, 2016.

<sup>69</sup> Cruz and Giles, 2000.

<sup>70</sup> Picower, 2012.



rience which led us to suggest responding to miscommunications, unintended consequences, and power imbalances by relationship-building, rather than setting up a moral code to guide action. Becoming part of a community is a process.

We believe that process can be beautiful, despite the mistakes we make. We believe so because we have lived through these mistakes and leaned on our relationships to remedy them. We hope our reflections help academics to capture that experience and relate it to existing conversations about educators and civic engagement.

But more importantly, we hope that it provides actionable support for those who, like us, want to engage with their community but do not always know how.

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