

## Case Study

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# Partnerships in Civic Engagement: Cultivating Transformational Campus-Community Relationships Built to Last

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### ABSTRACT

A critical feature of contemporary models of civic engagement is mutually-beneficial collaboration between campus and community partners, in which all members contribute knowledge, skills, and experience to co-create knowledge. To date, most research has focused on student outcomes, and we know much less about how to develop successful campus-community partnerships. This article reviews the challenges and opportunities in establishing and maintaining these partnerships to address issues in Trenton, NJ, USA. We first review best practices for developing partnerships between potential stakeholders on campus and in the community. We then describe the infrastructure at The College of New Jersey (TCNJ) that supports the development of these partnerships and present 3 case studies that highlight how they were maintained to offer a range of civic engagement activities that benefit all stakeholders involved in the collaboration. Finally, we present recommendations for developing and maintaining partnerships at other institutions.

**KEYWORDS:** Service-learning; Community engaged learning; Campus-community partnership; Civic engagement.

### INTRODUCTION

In the context of higher education, civic engagement refers to service, teaching, and/or research that is conducted both in and with the community.<sup>1,2</sup> It includes a range of activities—service learning, community-engaged learning, community-based research, participatory action research—and provides important experiential learning opportunities in higher education.<sup>3,4</sup> To date, most research has focused on student outcomes associated with service learning.<sup>5</sup> Although it has been defined in different ways, a broad consensus exists that service learning should integrate academic material, relevant service activities, and critical reflection, as well as be based on reciprocal partnerships that engage students, faculty, or staff and community members to achieve academic outcomes, promote civic learning, and advance public purposes.<sup>6</sup> Service learning has gained prominence in higher education as a high-impact practice that enables active learning and can encourage innovative pedagogical strategies that achieve positive learning outcomes for students.<sup>7-9</sup>

Today, developing collaborative campus-community partnerships to co-create knowledge is both the norm and an aspiration within higher education civic engagement practice.<sup>10</sup> In the Carnegie Foundation's Community Engagement Classification, partnership is considered a defining attribute of the publicly engaged institution. These collaborations, however, are difficult to achieve, as they are based on relationships between individuals and institutions from (sometimes dramatically) different contexts.<sup>11</sup>

This article describes how staff and faculty at The College of New Jersey and community organizations in Trenton, New Jersey, USA developed campus-community partnerships to address social issues affecting local populations. Trenton's history of poverty, juvenile crime, gun violence, unemployment, and other community-level problems provides civic engagement opportunities for local students in a landscape of community organizations eager for collaboration. We present three case studies that highlight how the partnerships developed and were maintained to offer a range of civic engagement activities that mutually benefit all partners in the collaboration and to illustrate a series of best practices in partnership stewardship. We also present recommendations for developing and maintaining partnerships at other institutions.

### Civic Engagement in Higher Education

A growing number of universities and colleges across the United States have committed to civic engagement initiatives that go beyond individual classrooms and move toward a fully engaged university. For instance, since it was founded in 1985, Campus Compact's membership has grown to over 1,000 colleges and universities that have made an institutional commitment to civic engagement and service-learning.<sup>12</sup> This development reflects an evolution of thinking about higher education's role in communities, recognizing that colleges and universities must play a more substantive role in addressing the problems facing communities locally, nationally, and globally.<sup>13</sup> The publication of *A Crucible Moment: Civic Learning and Democracy's Future* marks a milestone in this transition. The report calls for investing on a massive scale in higher education's capacity to renew this nation's civic, social, and intellectual capital.<sup>4</sup> The call to action is for every college and university to promote a civic ethos that governs campus life, make civic literacy a goal for every graduate, integrate civic inquiry within general education and majors, and advance civic action as a lifelong practice.

One of the defining features of contemporary models of civic engagement is mutually-beneficial collaboration, in which all members contribute knowledge, skills, and experience to determine issues to address, questions to ask, problems to resolve, strategies to use, outcomes that are considered desirable, and indicators of success.<sup>14,15</sup> While institutional commitments to civic engagement have increased, colleges and universities have struggled to narrow the distance between universities and com-

munities, as well as document the impact of campus-community partnerships.<sup>16-19</sup> One major shortcoming of existing research is the lack of convincing evidence about the authentic nature of campus-community reciprocity.<sup>18,20-24</sup> Research indicates that students gain academic, psychological, and social benefits from participating in high-quality civic engagement experiences,<sup>25</sup> but because most research has focused on student outcomes, we know much less about how community organizations perceive these experiences and what benefits they gain.

### Campus-Community Partnerships

At the foundation of all forms of civic engagement are the partnerships that develop to create and support collaborative efforts. In 2000, Cruz and Giles suggested that the "university-community partnership itself be the unit of analysis" (p.31) in service learning research. Soon after, Enos and Morton provided a framework for examining the quality of relationships in civic engagement and distinguished between transactional and transformational relationships.<sup>26</sup> *Transactional* relationships are instrumental and often designed to complete short-term tasks. All parties benefit from the exchange, and no long-term change is expected. In contrast, *transformational* relationships occur when all parties grow and change because of deeper and more sustainable commitments. In a transformational relationship, individuals come together in more open-ended processes that take place over longer periods of time. All parties bring an intention—or, at least, an interest—to explore emergent possibilities, revisit their own goals, and develop products and systems that are mutually beneficial.

Building on this distinction, Bringle, Clayton, and colleagues differentiate between *relationships* and *partnerships*.<sup>11,14,15</sup> Relationships refer (generally) to any type of relationship or interaction between people, while partnerships refer (specifically) to relationships with certain qualities (e.g., frequent interactions, trust, common interests, respect, good communication). Thus, not all relationships are partnerships. To identify potential partners relevant to and involved in service learning, the researchers introduced the SOFAR Model. They note that it is important to delineate different campus and community groups because, at a minimum, there are 5 key types of stakeholders or constituents who bring different perspectives to the table: students, staff of community organizations, faculty, administrators on campus, and community residents. At any given time, multiple relationships may require attention—for example, dyadic relationships between faculty (F) and staff of community organizations (O) or triadic relationships between students (S) faculty (F), and community residents (R). Co-creating knowledge and outcomes within this context is an ambitious goal, as there are complex and often unpredictable differences to navigate within as well as across groups of stakeholders.<sup>11,14,15</sup>

Although transactional relationships may be appropriate in some situations, the development of partnerships-based

on transformational relationships between stakeholders—is now considered best practice for campus-community engagement. These partnerships, however, are rarely or only partially achieved.<sup>10</sup> This is not surprising given that partnership within the context of civic engagement is fundamentally relational, and relationships are difficult to build and maintain. Campus-community partnerships are particularly challenging because they bring together individuals and groups that span (sometimes dramatic) differences with the expectation that they will work together toward a shared vision. Improving our understanding of what it means to be in and nurture transformational relationships is important for developing the practice of civic engagement and institutionalizing the cultural norms that help partnerships thrive.<sup>11</sup>

### Current Paper

The current article describes the development of partnerships between The College of New Jersey (TCNJ) and 3 organizations in the City of Trenton designed to address social issues affecting local communities. What began as a campus-wide requirement for all freshmen to document 8 hours of community service has blossomed into a multi-faceted effort that touches every academic department on campus and, in the process, has transformed the relationship that this public college has with its immediate and neighboring community. TCNJ's experiences in attempting to adopt and implement the definition of *partnership* described by Bringle, Clayton, and colleagues suggest that the process requires 2 related, but distinct, attitudes. The first is a stubborn commitment to the well-being of all parties involved.<sup>10,25</sup> When we connect ourselves to the fate and experiences of others, we are more likely to establish authentic relationships where we work together to develop and carry out ideas and activities. The second is a commitment to strength-based problem solving.<sup>27</sup> This approach, originally developed in the field of social work, is essential for civic engagement as it emphasizes the principle that all people bring resources to the table. As such, all people and organizations in a campus-community partnership are viewed as potential resources for solving problems. The approach emphasizes the value of identifying strengths at different levels (e.g., individual, school, neighborhood) and using these strengths as levers of change.

In particular, we discuss how the partnerships have developed layers of connection between campus and community—what health services professionals consider a continuum of care or what engineers might call redundancy structures.<sup>10</sup> These layers of connection provide programmatic structures and resources for partners to get the sustained and reliable relationships they want and need throughout the year, and for multiple years. For community partners, the connections can help to reduce gaps in services or products that can negatively impact an organization and its clients.<sup>25</sup> For campus partners, the connections can help faculty maintain important community-based scholarly or pedagogical projects that might otherwise lose momentum dur-

ing an academic break, sabbatical, etc. or can provide a range of additional community organizations with which to partner in the case of additional partnership opportunities. In the following sections, we first describe the context of TCNJ's civic and community engagement work. We then present the infrastructure that supports the development of campus-community partnerships. Finally, we present case studies that illustrate how partnerships between TCNJ and three community-based organizations (CBOs) were developed and maintained with three to identify and achieve mutually reinforcing goals.

### The Context: Trenton, NJ, USA

Despite being the state capital, Trenton is an economically distressed small city. According to the 2014 American Community Survey,<sup>28</sup> Trenton is home to nearly 85,000 residents, with more than one quarter of its residents (28.4%) having incomes below the poverty level. The unemployment rate of 11.4% is widely held by community-based organizations to grossly underestimate long-term joblessness among subpopulations, especially young, African American men and young mothers. Poverty is particularly concentrated in female-headed family households with dependent children: 45.7% of these households with children under 5 report incomes below the poverty line. Median household income is less than half of both the Mercer County and New Jersey state medians at \$35,647, and 27.4% of households received food stamps and/or SNAP benefits. Only 71.3% of residents have at least a high school degree (or equivalent), compared with 87.1% in the county and 87.6% statewide. Only about 1 in 10 (10.7%) have at least a bachelor's degree, compared with 39.8% in the county and 36.4% statewide. In 2012, Trenton reported the lowest high school graduation rate in the state: 48.4%.<sup>29</sup> In 2015, the Trenton school districts four-year graduation rate was 68.6%, ranging from 29.1% at the public alternative high school to 79.7% at Trenton Central High School.<sup>30</sup> Trenton has seen significant racial and ethnic turnover in the past four decades. In 1970, Trenton was 61.4% white, 37.9% black, and only 5.7% “Spanish language” speakers.<sup>31</sup> The foreign born population of the city amounted to just 7.7%, although “foreign stock” (immigrants and their children) constituted nearly one quarter of the population.<sup>31</sup> By 2014, only 32.2% of the City population was white, with more than half (50.9%) identifying as black or African American and 34.0% Latino. Nearly one quarter (23.6%) of the city was born outside of the United States, with a vast majority of these non-citizens (78.0%) who identify as Hispanic/Latino (65.7%). More than one third of all households (36.9%) speak a language other than English at home, and more than one-fifth (20.1%) speak English less than “very well”.<sup>28</sup>

### Infrastructure for Campus-Community Partnership

TCNJ is a highly-selective, residential public college located in an inner-ring suburb, about 5 miles from downtown Trenton. Formerly called Trenton State College (among other names over

the past 150 years) and located in Trenton until the 1930's, TCNJ changed its name in the mid-1990's as part of a dramatic transformation of the College's academic mission and image. Over the past 15 years, TCNJ has developed a robust infrastructure to support and develop rigorous community engaged learning activities. Since its early-adopted community engagement requirement (established in 1995), all TCNJ students have been required to complete a Community Engaged Learning (CEL) experience through an organized community-based experience, either through a first-year seminar or a co-curricular one-day experience. In 2014, community engaged learning was recognized as one of five Signature Experiences of the college. As a consequence of these and TCNJ's additional community engagement-focused programs, TCNJ received the Community Engagement Classification from the Carnegie Foundation in 2015.

In 2006, under the direction of Patrick Donohue, the then-recently established Bonner Center for Civic and Community Engagement took on the coordination of the First-Year CEL requirement (FYCEL) and began integrating its nascent Bonner Community Scholars program with FYCEL management. Bonner Scholars now organize and lead FYCEL activities and work with staff and first-year seminar faculty to design curricular FYCEL components. If students do not complete their CEL graduation requirement through a curricular project, Bonner Scholars organize the students into co-curricular CEL days with existing partners. These students learn, serve, and reflect together at a relevant Bonner community partner site. They too are led, educated, supported and guided by Scholars who work at the site throughout the academic year. Since 2010, Bonner Scholars and staff have also supported upper-level CEL course components (Advanced CEL, or ACEL) in 15-20 courses each semester.

TCNJ's Bonner Community Scholars Program now includes more than 100 students, more than half of whom are minorities, and each of whom receives a 50-100% tuition scholarship to complete service with community partners. The Bonner Community Scholars work at designated sites for 300 or more hours during the academic year providing direct service and support as needed. The scholars are organized into 12-16 partner-based teams, which are then organized into four issue-based divisions: Education, Juvenile Justice and Re-Entry, Self Sufficiency, and Environment and Food Security. Each division is led by a full-time CEL Coordinator, three of whom are funded by grants or self-generated revenue streams. These staff members anchor the College's relationship with community based organizations (CBOs) and serve as the main liaison between the community organization and TCNJ staff, faculty, and students.

In 2012, the Center for Community Engagement Learning and Research (CELR Center) was created to house the Bonner Institute, consisting of the Bonner Community Scholars and FYCEL programs, and other community engaged-related programs and initiatives. The CELR Center's partnerships are built on a multifaceted approach to developing and maintain-

ing transformational relationships. Between 12 and 16 "deep" partnerships are established each year between the CELR Center and community organizations that serve as the main sites for Bonner Community Scholars to serve and for TCNJ's students to undertake their CEL experiences. Each deep partner works with a team of 3-6 Bonner Community Scholars over the course of the academic year, and the Scholars provide direct service and strive to enhance the partner's capacity. These "deep" partners are the bedrock upon which the CELR Center's efforts are built and represent TCNJ's effort to model the partnerships that Bringle and colleagues describe.<sup>11,14,15</sup>

The first step in establishing partnerships between TCNJ and community organizations is through the CELR Center's partnership application process, whereby staff communicate the opportunities and resources available to potential partners and establish the norms of a potential partnership. This document is shared throughout the community and is revised annually based on partner feedback and TCNJ's, the CELR Center's, and the community's changing needs. The needs of partners across a range of categories—such as direct service, research, planning, training, communications, policy-analysis and resource development—are documented through this application, and CELR Center staff perform an internal assessment of the CELR Center's capacity to support requested projects. Following a review of the proposed projects, and a period of communication between CELR Center staff members and community organization staff members about potential projects and activities, accepted partnerships are communicated with the organization and communication about the coming year begins.

After partnerships are approved, and before the start of each semester, key representatives from each CBO meet with their team of staff and Bonner Community Scholars to clarify and refine the proposed projects. In mid-August, CBO staff and Bonner Community Scholars and CELR staff meet for a half-day Site Planning Process. During this process, Bonner Scholars, CELR staff and CBO staff develop an action plan to complete the proposed projects and, most importantly, address the CBO-identified need. At the end of the Site Planning Process, the team develops a document that details the projects to be implemented and roles and responsibilities of different partners. CELR Center staff then work to connect the agreed-upon projects with curricular and co-curricular options at TCNJ that best match the project's goals. There are two main curricular tie-ins for partner-based projects: the first-year community engaged learning requirement through a first-year seminar, and upper-level discipline-specific courses that include CEL projects.

In addition to the direct and higher-level service provided by TCNJ students, CELR staff help meet CBOs' requests when students are unable to. For example, they help write or co-write grants (increasingly with student involvement) to support partners. This includes obtaining full-time AmeriCorps and VISTA members who are placed at the CBO to provide direct service

or address other organizational needs. In these ways, there is an intentional and deliberate attempt to share resources and build the capacity of CBOs over the long-term, particularly when the needs go beyond what TCNJ students are able to provide.

This infrastructure also allows the community partner to dialogue with a regularly available professional at the College through the calendar year. Each CBO has a consistent point of contact in the form of one CELR staff member throughout the year. Through their established connections and experiences with TCNJ students, faculty, and staff, community partners can also interact with other TCNJ representatives as needed (e.g., Bonner Community Scholars during weekly visits, professors involved with curricular CEL projects during a given semester). The model recognizes that one class or any one semester- or year-long project is not likely to have a substantial impact. Instead, this model integrates full-time staff members into its design, so that partnerships are able to meet the needs and build the capacity of all partners at TCNJ and in the community through a menu of co-created and mutually beneficial projects and experiences. By developing these layers of connection between campus and community partners,<sup>10</sup> partnership constituents are able to use collective resources to develop and implement comprehensive projects that can have a significant impact. This infrastructure also helps to reduce the gaps in service, activities, and personnel that can make it difficult to achieve project goals and address community-identified needs in a meaningful way.

## METHODS

This study used case studies to illustrate the way in which long-standing, multifaceted partnerships meet the needs of both the CBO and the institution of higher learning. The research protocol was approved by The College of New Jersey's Institutional Review Board (IRB protocol #860 1138-19). The following section profiles three examples of how campus-community partnerships developed at TCNJ—not to evaluate the partnerships but to demonstrate TCNJ's instantiation of the partnership model presented by Bringle and colleagues.<sup>11,14,15</sup> When considering which partnerships to present in detail, we purposely selected three different types of exemplars: one in which the CBO depended heavily on the higher education partner, one in which the CBO did not, and one involving a public school.

To develop each case study, we reviewed the annual reports generated by CELR teams from the beginning of the partnership to the 2013-2014 academic year, interviewed the CELR staff members responsible for overseeing all three partnerships, and conducted semi-structured interviews with individuals in leadership positions at two sites. In addition, all of the authors have worked with the case study organizations in a variety of roles across more than a decade. To highlight how these three partnerships developed over time, we summarize each partnership in terms of student-partner engagement (in the form of Bonner Community Scholars and community-engaged learning) and

organizational capacity building for the partners involved. These profiles are followed with an examination of how challenges within these partnerships have been addressed.

### Academic Sports Academy (ASA)

The Academic Sports Academy (ASA) is an after-school program developed by the non-profit GGrant 94Ft Foundation. Greg Grant, a former professional basketball player and Trenton native, previously ran afterschool programs for middle-school-aged boys, designed to help develop the basketball skills of young players in a local league. However, Grant realized that the players had greater needs for academic support, and he began to require players to attend an afterschool program to get assistance with schoolwork. During this time, about 25 boys were involved in the program. Bonner Community Scholars began their relationship with Grant by tutoring in this program in 2005. The program eventually became permanently established as the GGrant 94Ft Academic Sports Academy in a public K-8 school, where it enrolled about 100 students, divided into six classes of 15-20 students based on grade. Parents pay for the afterschool program on a sliding scale, although students deemed at risk or in great need are often given whole or partial scholarships. In addition, ASA manages a summer day camp in a different K-8 school. At the time of this study, ASA's staff included one full-time Assistant Director, a former Bonner Community Scholar, and one full-time AmeriCorps member (another former Bonner Community Scholar and former student of Grant's). The Assistant Director estimated that five or six Bonner Community Scholars and other TCNJ volunteers can be found working with ASA on an average day, managing classrooms, tutoring, mentoring, and providing or coordinating enrichment activities.

**Student-partner engagement:** After ASA lost state funding, the CELR stepped in to fill roles previous filled by paid staff. A CELR staff member with appropriate credentials and experience in the Trenton public schools was named as the education coordinator for ASA, and another Bonner staff member directed and organized classroom teams. Bonner Community Scholars in their junior and senior years, usually pursuing education majors, became the classroom leaders in the afterschool program, supported by a team of first- and second-year Bonner Community Scholars and a legion of other volunteers drawn from TCNJ's student population. Each year, a team of roughly 14 Bonner Community Scholars have been the principal classroom staff for the afterschool program, and each spends up to four days per week at the program from roughly 4-6 pm.

On Friday afternoons, ASA's curriculum offers enrichment activities that supplement the programs run during the rest of the week. Several times per semester, these involve content developed by TCNJ students who are enrolled in CEL-designated courses (principally first-year seminars). In one example, TCNJ students administered a social and emotional learning curriculum for K-3 students every Friday for six weeks. Another

class led a theatre improvisation workshop. Other classes have provided tutors and mentors. TCNJ first-year seminar students often serve as facilitators and chaperones for ASA students on field-trips to places like Ellis Island, the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, the Amish Country of Pennsylvania, Asbury Park, NJ, and a local organic farm. These trips are primarily designed to enhance the content of the TCNJ course. For example, the Asbury Park trip is part of a course on “Bruce Springsteen’s New Jersey,” and the Ellis Island trip is integrated into a course on “Multicultural New York”. However, these trips provide ASA’s inner-city students with a variety of opportunities that would be otherwise unavailable because of financial constraints. In addition to serving as chaperones, TCNJ students are asked to adapt the content of their course material to be appropriate for younger students and, in doing so, gain a better grasp of what they are studying.

Advanced, disciplinary course-based projects also provide additional support for the afterschool program. For example, after ASA lost its state funding, an accounting course was recruited to calculate the true costs for the services provided. The Assistant Director notes that these estimates have been useful when she has written grant proposals to support ASA. The website used by ASA and the GGrant 94 Ft Foundation was developed in conjunction with a TCNJ website development course. In 2013, a sociology course evaluated the program, and found that students who attended ASA performed better than their peers on some academic criteria.<sup>32</sup>

**Building organizational capacity:** ASA has relied on its partnership with the TCNJ’s CELR since its inception. Founder Greg Grant and then-TCNJ CELR Director, Pat Donohue, were the coauthors of the \$100,000 grant from NJ After 3, which initially provided paid staff for the afterschool program. Donohue and Grant, along with teachers from the Trenton public school system and two advanced Bonner Community Scholars with education majors, wrote the curriculum that refocused the afterschool activities towards academic support and enrichment and no longer required that student participants were involved in athletics. Since this time, the leadership of CELR has also maintained a consistent relationship with ASA and the GGrant 94 Ft Foundation in terms of grant writing and support. CELR has issued letters of support for grants and customarily reviews grant proposals submitted by the foundation for ASA and other initiatives.

CELR involvement has allowed ASA to build its capacity as an organization by providing both personnel and enrichment services. As noted above, curriculum development and implementation were assigned to a member of the CELR staff after the state reduced funding for afterschool programs like ASA. In 2010, the CELR helped ASA secure funding for an AmeriCorps member to spend 1,300 hours managing the afterschool program each year. The Assistant Director interviewed for this project was the first AmeriCorps member assigned to ASA; as a former Bonner Community Scholar, she was able to draw on her

knowledge of the TCNJ CELR models to improve the afterschool program activities, develop additional enrichment opportunities (at no cost to ASA or to parents), and to leverage resources dedicated to TCNJ’s CELR classes and financial commitments to provide mutually beneficial experiences for the afterschool students.

When she had completed her AmeriCorps service, the former Bonner Community Scholar joined the GGrant 94 Ft Foundation staff full-time as the Assistant Director for ASA, and the CELR found funds to cover one-third of her salary because it was mutually beneficial to both organizations. In this role, she assisted with the institutionalization of the after school program and also worked with the Director to widen its participants from predominantly African American boys interested in basketball to a diverse group of both boys and girls, including non-athletes. The Assistant Director also writes reports on the afterschool program and on students, as requested by the school and teachers at the school. She builds on the common interests of TCNJ students and faculty and of her organization’s needs. The partnership became so popular that ASA has had to restrict CEL projects to those whose students demonstrated a strong commitment to ASA over time (and thus, excluding one-day service projects). This popularity is mirrored by CEL projects from TCNJ; the ASA Assistant Director indicated that there are enough CEL classes interested in working with ASA that it has been able to choose among them based on what works best for ASA’s curricular and/or enrichment needs.

The Assistant Director cites other advantages of the partnership for ASA in terms of building organizational capacity. She credits policy reports written by Bonner Community Scholars in their junior and senior years for her deeper appreciation of the complexity of urban public education and the limitations of direct service. ASA has also benefited from publicity because of its association with TCNJ, which has a dedicated staff to call attention to its community outreach. The CELR Center has directed high-level state visitors (including the former Attorney General for the State and the Secretary of Higher Education) and media requests to the ASA program, which has now been featured in a variety of regional media. The partnership also benefits from a pre-college program developed at TCNJ that brings roughly 30 high school juniors and seniors each year from across the region to complete community-engaged learning at the summer camp operated by ASA as part of their pre-college coursework.

#### Isles Youth(Build) Institute (IYI)

YouthBuild is a national program that began in Harlem with the goal of improving the social skills, education, and job skills of young men and women who had dropped out or had been expelled from high school. Isles, Inc., a well-established non-profit organization dedicated to independent and sustainable development in Trenton, founded the Isles YouthBuild Institute (IYI) as

an alternative school for youth who wanted to learn construction skills while completing their GED (General Educational Development) test or high school diploma. IYI also features extensive soft skills development and cultural enrichment programs, including museum visits and live performances of theatre and music. IYI initially obtained substantial funding through the national YouthBuild program. When this funding was reduced, it was unable to continue providing stipends to enrolled students and came to rely more on community partnerships, including with TCNJ. It is now known as the Isles Youth Institute.

**Student-partner engagement:** At the time of this study, a team of five Bonner Community Scholars worked at IYI, spending an average of four afternoons each week filling a variety of roles. First, Bonner Community Scholars serve as tutors for IYI students in both the GED and high school diploma tracks. Bonner Community Scholars took the lead on the college preparation components of the YouthBuild program, including helping prepare for the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test), helping to complete the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid), organizing campus visits, coordinating workshops with college program officers (such as the Educational Opportunity Fund, or EOF), and providing guidance in the actual college application process. Bonner Community Scholars also served as formal and informal mentors to IYI students, who are often similar in age but have had dramatically different life trajectories. The Director of IYI explained that one of the greatest contributions of the Bonner Community Scholars to the program was that they provided a group of near-age peer mentors that value educational achievement, career advancement, and healthy social relationships. Many IYI students in Trenton are the first in their families to graduate high school, so they often lack the social networks that would provide mentors who have attended college and pursued professional careers. In addition, the Director indicates that the soft skills fostered by the personal relationships between TCNJ and IYI students are equally or more important than the construction skills for obtaining employment. Bonner Community Scholars often attend or facilitate cultural enrichment programs for IYI students, including organizing those that take advantage of performing arts and athletic events on TCNJ's campus. In 2013, Bonner Community Scholars began hosting IYI students at the college campus for tutoring once per week so that the IYI students can begin to feel like they "belong" on a college campus. IYI students have also joined Bonner Community Scholars on the annual CELR service trip to New Orleans, where they employ their construction skills in the long-term reconstruction efforts of the Crescent City.

In addition to the collaboration with Bonner Community Scholars, IYI has collaborated with TCNJ CEL courses to enhance their workshops on professional development. The Director cites an example of a course on the topic of networking. First-year students worked with IYI students to develop networking skills in both personal and professional contexts. This partnership culminated with a Networking Fair, where members

of the local community came to IYI, and students practiced their networking skills with a "coach" from TCNJ. More advanced, CEL courses have also worked with IYI. One Business class, for example, helped IYI students develop business plans that could be implemented upon graduation.

**Building organizational capacity:** As part of Isles, Inc. and the national YouthBuild network, IYI already had sophisticated organizational capacity, which included relationships with many other higher education partners that are better resourced than TCNJ. Even so, the Director cites a variety of ways in which the partnership with TCNJ CELR has enhanced their organizational capacity. Most directly, the person in charge of the mentoring programs and coordinating volunteers at IYI had been a former Bonner Community Scholar. In this sense, the partnership has increased the ability of IYI to find and recruit talented staff. This TCNJ alumnus coordinated with a variety of local schools and institutions that provide mentors and tutors for IYI students, but her networks with TCNJ's CELR Center have been a real asset, particularly when she is looking for high quality mentors. In addition, this individual's knowledge of the CELR Center's capacities and internal goals allows her to take advantage of campus resources (such as cultural events) that might be otherwise beyond IYI's budget.

Similarly, IYI benefited from the CELR Center's use of a VISTA member to form a city-wide mentoring coalition that shares best practices information on a regular basis. CELR staff members have also written grants to secure more stipends for IYI participants, and a TCNJ Marketing class developed a multimedia presentation that the organization could use to solicit sponsors for individual IYI participants. IYI has also worked with a political science faculty member to engage students in a policy project that would argue for amending an existing state law that could once again fund this program's scholarships.

#### Trenton Central High School (TCHS)

Trenton Central High School (TCHS) is the main campus and largest of three public high schools in the city, with 1,554 students in four grades in AY 2014-15.<sup>33</sup> At TCHS, 52.6% of students are Black or African American and another 44.9% are Latino, and 85.9% of TCHS students are eligible for free or reduced lunches. As noted above, TCHS students perform well below averages on the state's graduation exam, as well as national standardized tests like the SAT. For example, mean SAT math, reading, and writing scores for students were 392, 376, and 378 respectively, compared to statewide means of 518, 496, and 494.<sup>34</sup> Only 28.8 of TCHS's graduating seniors go on to a 4-year institution of higher learning, compared with 64.7% of their peers statewide.<sup>34</sup>

**Student-partner engagement:** TCNJ began its partnership with TCHS in 2005, when the school was divided into smaller learning communities, with many of the most academically successful students in the Medical Arts program, located at the high

school's West Campus. The CELR was asked to create a community service program for high school students that mirrored the Bonner Community Scholarship emphasis on academic achievement, direct service, and leadership development. This was later formalized in a three-year, privately-funded Bridge to Employment (BTE) grant, which CELR staff helped to write. The CELR supported a full-time AmeriCorps member to run the BTE program, assisted by a team of upper level campus and corporate staff as well as Bonner Community Scholars, who provided direct service as tutors to students as well as contributed to enrichment and college preparatory programs. After seeing the success of the BTE, the TCHS Principal asked about forming an on-going partnership. To do so, the Principal built the CELR into a federal grant; when this funding ended, the CELR wrote and received a private grant to keep the new effort alive. During the same period, a team of eight Bonner Community Scholars began tutoring afterschool for TCHS's basketball team (under Coach Greg Grant, who had been begun working with CELR through ASA). The program then expanded to include the lunch hour and to other athletics programs and eventually to the general student body. By academic year 2011-12, CELR estimated that roughly 100 high school students *per day* received tutoring from Bonner Community Scholars and TCNJ volunteers coordinated by them.

During this time, the TCHS Principal had grown increasingly concerned about the small proportion of students who met statewide graduation standards on the New Jersey High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA). He contacted the CELR staff liaison, who had previously served as a tutor in the BTE program and a student-teacher elsewhere in the Trenton public school system. Upon earning her Bachelor's in Education, she took a full-time staff position with the CELR. In 2011, the Principal tasked this staff liaison with organizing tutoring for "cusp" students who had near-passing scores on their 8<sup>th</sup> grade proficiency exams. She created a master grid that connected Bonner Community Scholars, other student volunteers from TCNJ, and TCHS students based on subject area needs and availability throughout the school day. The staff member estimates that in addition to two dedicated TCHS teaching faculty and the eight Bonner Community Scholars, roughly 50 additional TCNJ students tutored about 200 cusp students in preparation for the state exam. While the percentage of TCHS students passing the language section of the exam remained about the same from 2011 to 2012 (60.2% to 59.7%), the number of students passing the math section nearly doubled from 22.9% to 40.0%.<sup>35</sup> Internal evaluation of the students involved in the tutoring program, conducted by CELR staff, demonstrated significant gains among those students who had regularly participated in tutoring. The TCNJ Principal expanded the program in preparation for the 2013 HSPA exam to include an extra month of tutoring and students outside of the marginal score range on the HSPA.

Although no CEL courses have contributed to the programs noted above, course-based projects have been part of the relationship between TCNJ and TCHS. For example, in Fall

2012, a First-Year Seminar course worked with the high school librarian to reinvigorate the book club. CEL projects have also included the creation and retouching of five murals that decorated TCHS's halls and have contributed to the repainting of three teachers' lounges, the stairs in the gym, and the front entry arches. Notably, CEL projects attached to summer courses at TCNJ have been critical in these building restoration projects, as they generally must be completed when few or no students were using the high school's facilities. Likewise, when TCHS piloted an 8<sup>th</sup> grade transition summer program for at-risk students (see below), the program integrated tutors and mentors from students enrolled in summer college courses.

**Building organizational capacity:** The partnership has grown from one that simply provides tutors for high school students to one where CELR staff take part in the planning and policy development of the high school itself, as well as the evaluation of programs implemented through this partnership. Following on the success of the program, the TCHS Principal, in collaboration with a CELR staff member, and a coalition of community-based organizations, proposed and piloted a district-wide 8<sup>th</sup> grade transition program, whereby students transitioning to TCHS received information and support towards successfully navigating the high school and its curriculum during the summer between 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades. CELR staff, especially the TCHS liaison, and Bonner Community Scholars were continuous participants in discussions about shaping the content of the summer program, and Bonner staff and TCNJ students played a central role in its operation. CELR staff even arranged for the program to take place on the TCNJ campus, and integrated mentors from the residential summer Pre-College high school program. In addition, CELR staff have helped the high school coordinate a partnership with a local mental health organization to identify and provide counseling for at-risk boys. The CELR Education team leader has also collaborated with the TCHS Principal on other community initiatives, including a program that places candidates for TCNJ's Master's of Educational Counseling in TCHS's counseling office and an effort to obtain approval for a university-based team to digitize TCHS's data as means to identify students at risk for dropping out.

## DISCUSSION

The case studies above demonstrate how the partnerships between TCNJ and CBOs reflect transformational partnerships, rather than transactional ones. Transformational partnerships are maintained over time by having staff at the College and at the non-profit with a working familiarity of both sides of the partnership, collaborative planning, resource sharing, and a track record of successful programs. These relationships can better weather changes in personnel, CEL projects that do not work, and changes to institutional resources. For instance, the ASA partnership continues to thrive and has begun its second decade working with TCNJ. The support provided to ASA throughout the calendar year and the additional funding that has been se-



cured to support ASA, has dramatically increased ASA's capacity and impact in the community.

### Addressing Challenges in Partnerships

At the same time, even transformational relationships are subject to external disruptions that can derail the partnership and limit opportunities. For example, the TCHS Principal noted above was replaced in 2013, and the following year, the physical building housing TCHS was closed and demolished, sending students to four temporary sites around the city. With the changes in the high school, the 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Transition program was discontinued and tutoring programs were scaled back and physically relocated. In addition, over the past two years, the IYI site has lost funding and the program no longer has a need for Bonner Scholars support. This was not due to a poor partnership design, rather a change in the community context of the organization's needs, TCNJ's capacities, and external funding constraints that lie beyond the limits of even the strongest partnerships.

Partnership within the context of civic engagement is fundamentally relational, and much like deep friendships, partnerships need ongoing care and cultivation. Each of the community organizations interviewed acknowledged that there are consistent challenges to making these partnerships work. These challenges are generally similar to ones previously identified in the literature: significant investment of time, incompatibility of short-term service with the long-term needs of clients, and the incompatibility of campus (9-month) and community (12-month) calendars.<sup>25</sup> On any given day, addressing these challenges has required, from all parties involved, a combination of consistent attention, stubborn commitment, patience, flexibility, acceptance, empathy, humility, creativity, and a generous sense of humor.<sup>10</sup> Most important to this collective work has been the reminder that there are multiple constituencies who are relevant to and involved in civic engagement (e.g., students, staff of community organizations, faculty, campus administrators, community residents), and the interactions between these different constituencies are dynamic and distinct.<sup>11,14,15</sup>

### Developing Layers of Connection

Although civic engagement is usually described in activist terms, partnership requires a willingness to be receptive—being attentive to the distinct experience of another and being open to being moved and even changed by the other.<sup>10</sup> According to McDaniel, an essential ingredient of authentic relationships is “deep listening”, a process that occurs when we listen to other people without trying to change them for any reason.<sup>36</sup> This type of listening is vital for developing and maintaining layers of connection that help partners achieve their goals in the short- and long-term. Through this process, staff from community organizations have expressed the value of having a heightened level of support from institutional staff members who would have the responsibility to see the project through.

Having a full-time CELR staff member who is dedicated to building and maintaining a particular partnership can address challenges linked to project management and the mismatch between the academic calendar and the year-round needs of CBOs. Staff members are available all year round for planning and facilitating projects and have the professional skills necessary to intervene when problems arise with student-led teams. Staff members are also instrumental in finding unique ways for organizations to meet the year-round needs of community partners, including securing full-time AmeriCorps members to supplement the CBOs' staff. Staff can also help identify and organize local TCNJ students interested in volunteering at sites and/or Bonner Community Scholars in need of additional service hours during camps break periods. CELR staff members have also made important contributions to the actual personnel of its community partners. At IYI, the CELR staff member recommended a former Bonner Community Scholar to the position that she now holds with IYI knowing that she had a desire to return to the non-profit sector after a time in a public school system. Another Scholar transitioned directly from being a CELR staff member to the AmeriCorps member assigned to ASA and then to a paid staff position there. Detailed above, the CELR staff members relationship with the administration of TCHS best exemplifies the advantages of having a dedicated staff member working with a community partner, allowing for a variety of positive outcomes for the high school.

In addition, all 3 community partners expressed support for the long-term relationships encouraged by having Bonner Community Scholars serve at the site for up to 4 years. This layer reduces the need for the community partner to “waste” time explaining the purpose of the organization and training new college students each semester. TCNJ Bonner Community Scholars form a critical link directing first-year students into appropriate projects identified during the collaborative partnership planning process, as well as helping to supervise their work. At times, these are simple direct-service projects, such as painting teachers' lounges at TCHS, but they are increasingly course-based projects that enhance the programming at the organization itself, such as providing mentoring coaches at IYI or knowledgeable chaperones for ASA's field trips. In this way, the four-year commitment of Bonner Community Scholars addresses challenges typically associated with short-term service projects.

On-going and long-term relationships with CELR staff and Bonner Community Scholars are also the primary means through which quality is maintained in the partnerships. Faced with uneven quality, ASA worked with its TCNJ team to establish a set of criteria for campus partners to target those who will provide the most consistent support. For example, one criterion was to require a substantial minimum number of on-site contact hours. There are enough faculty members interested in partnering with ASA that it no longer has to accept all requests and can choose partners that best align with its goals and needs. It is also true that the deeper and more sustained the partnership, the more

likely faculty partners will find community partners who are receptive to developing more complex, sometimes interdisciplinary, projects that can result in publishing opportunities. Finally, the deeper and more valuable the partnership becomes to community partners, the more they may want to invest in building the capacity of TCNJ's CELR Center and its affiliated faculty (e.g., assuming the role of co-educators of TCNJ staff and students, helping campus staff find resources). Ray notes that it is important to create institutional structures and practices where we can listen deeply to community partners.<sup>10</sup> Mechanisms for such listening might take the form of focus groups, community advisory groups or boards, community partner surveys, and community representation on the college or Institutional Review Board (IRB). We agree and add that it is critical to create structures and practices where we can listen deeply to all relevant constituents.

#### FINAL CONCLUSIONS

This article presents civic engagement in higher education as a process that should consider more than just student learning outcomes. There is clear evidence that student outcomes depend on the quality of these experiences, which in turn depend on the quality of partnerships between relevant campus and community members. Given concerns raised by community partners in the research literature, it is critical for colleges and universities to foster transformational rather than transactional relationships – ones that occur when all parties grow and change because of deeper and more sustainable commitments. In this article, we provide examples in three case studies of how transformational relationships developed between TCNJ and community organizations in Trenton and how multiple layers of connections among all constituencies are necessary to weave the densely woven fabric that sustains successful partnerships. We find that collaborative planning, year-round dedicated staff at the CELR, and shared and leveraged resources (including staff and alumni across all stakeholders) contribute to a partnership that provides unique opportunities for student learning at introductory and advanced levels while building the capacity of the organizations themselves.

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#### ENDNOTE

On many campuses, the language of “service” has fallen out of favor because of the asymmetry it implies (i.e., doing service

for community members). Many institutions have changed the name of service-learning on their campus to a label that connotes more full and equal partnership between campus and community members (e.g., community-engaged learning, social action and integrative learning).

#### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

#### CONSENT

The research protocol used in this study was approved by The College of New Jersey's Institutional Review Board (IRB protocol # 860 1138-19). All individuals interviewed in the study provided consent to be interviewed and provided permission for their names and organizations to be included in the article.

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