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Informing Brown's Engagement with Providence and Rhode Island

This past summer, I served as a Laidlaw Scholar at Brown University where I participated in the pre-determined "Using Research to Inform Brown's Engagement with Providence and Rhode Island" research project led by Dean Mary Jo Callan. Callan serves as the Vice President for Community Engagement and Stark Family Executive Director of the Swearer Center, the campus's center for public service. The project's research lead was Aaron Castillo, a graduate student. For the duration of the summer, I worked as a researcher on this project alongside Ellie Morvatz and Haleema Aslam, both rising juniors. The project's objective was to (1) conduct and communicate research to inform aspects of Brown University's community engagement strategy through conducting community engagement benchmarking research from peer institutions, (2) analyze extant, publicly available community- and neighborhood-level data, compiling and analyzing extant data from the Swearer Center and peers at Brown University, and (3) gather and analyze data from community partners in Providence and Rhode Island. Serving as a researcher completing these goals over the summer, I was able to research how the university can better engage with and give back to the surrounding community.

I was interested in the pre-defined "Using Research to Inform Brown's Engagement with Providence and Rhode Island" project because of the project's focus on investigating Brown's engagement with the community, which I thought would be critical in the process of holding a wealthy and established institution such as Brown accountable and help provide substantial data

on whether or not we are properly giving back to our community. Being part of another community-based fellowship organized by the Swearer Center: the Bonner Fellowship, part of our orientation included learning about Brown's lack of adequate restitution for the surrounding communities. Frequently, institutions such as Brown (dominating wealthy and predominantly white institutions) have contributed to the gentrification and displacement of local communities, while failing to address the needs and concerns of those who live in the surrounding areas.¹ Moreover, these institutions often have significant financial resources that can be used to support local organizations, create job opportunities, and provide access to education and other resources that can help lift up marginalized communities that may not be allocated for such; Brown, in particular, has controversially and historically not paid its due taxes, which has deprived the community of funds.² As a student at Brown, and therefore someone who is contributing to and benefitting from this institution, I wanted to be part of this research to reveal whether Brown is actively working to address these issues and investing in the well-being of their surrounding community and then thus determine how Brown can leverage their resources to support the surrounding community to reduce inequity.

After the application process in February, in late March, the Laidlaw scholars were chosen. In early May, orientation took place over a weekend for Laidlaw scholars. My research project was one of many within the Brown Laidlaw program this summer, including group and individual projects. As the very first Brown Laidlaw cohort, during our orientation, we scholars met to introduce ourselves, discuss our expectations over the summer, and learn how to

¹ Pickens, Katy, and Rhea Rasquinha. "Gentrification and Displacement in Providence: Urban Renewal, Economic Markets, Historic Preservation." *The Brown Daily Herald*, April 13, 2022. <https://www.browndailyherald.com/article/2022/04/gentrification-and-displacement-in-providence-urban-renewal-economic-markets-historic-preservation>.

² Rasquinha, Rhea. "Brown's Payments to Providence, Explained." *The Brown Daily Herald*, March 3, 2023. <https://www.browndailyherald.com/article/2023/03/browns-payments-to-providence-explained#:~:text=10%3A04pm%20EST-,As%20a%20nonprofit%20institution%2C%20the%20University%20does%20not%20pay%20property,t%20the%20University's%201764%20charter>.

effectively and emphatically conduct our research in, more than likely, an area we aren't familiar with or aren't native to. This aspect of our orientation particularly was important to me—because the research I was part of was based on Brown's engagement in the community, it was crucial to acknowledge the existing dynamic between Brown as a rich, predominantly white institution, and the surrounding Providence community of which we have had a historically exploitative relationship with. Brown has had a history of not paying appropriate tax amounts to the community, expanding into low-income and predominantly minority communities, and other problematic actions that have made our relationship with the community precarious. Although now, Brown is much more intentional and conscious of how its actions affect the surrounding community, these workshops during orientation really helped prepare me to engage in this research and situate me in this relationship.

Methods

Because the research project lasted, in essence, only two months—we began in late June and ended in late August—we all had to move quickly with the research. Our research project was split up into four different projects: Project 1, which focused on working with Swearer Center staff to enhance data about university resources in Salesforce, Project 2, which was comprised of working with Swearer Center staff and other engagement offices to collect, clarify, enter and analyze data about priorities collected from community partners in Providence and Rhode Island, Project 3, which entailed beginning with what was available in Salesforce, and then compiling and analyzing extant engagement data from the Swearer Center and peers at Brown University, and lastly, Project 4, which conducted community engagement benchmarking research from peer institutions and benchmarked research which primarily focused on websites

and related publicly available information about how community organizations can access university resources.

I was assigned to work on Project 1 and Project 3. As previously described, one of the main goals of our research project was to develop and input Brown's data for community engagement into the program Salesforce, which was the aim of Project 1. Brown's usage of Salesforce as of this year has been newly developed. Consequently, Ellie and I, as the researchers assigned to this project, as well as Callan and Castillo, were all unfamiliar with the program. Although Ellie and I received training on Salesforce from an administrator not part of the project, we still had many questions throughout the process of consolidating data and inputting it into Salesforce. Additionally, this project certainly took up most of my time throughout the research. Ellie and I's job was to comb through data submitted by various Brown administrators on the communities they had worked with. Ellie and I split up 640 responses, meaning that I was allocated 320 to read through and identify any partnership projects. Going through all of these responses, we determined which projects that were mentioned were considered surrounding community projects that needed to be accounted for in Salesforce.

The next step was to actually input this data into Salesforce. Surprisingly, while the first step of this process was more time-consuming, the second step of this process—inputting data into Salesforce—was more difficult to grasp. Unfortunately, Ellie and I discovered that some of the data Ellie had inputted was wrongly inserted through an incorrect process. Thus, at one point, which was about two weeks before the end of our research duration, we had to redo some of our data. This mistake set us back in our goals, although we were able to recover and achieve our goal for the summer for how much data we were able to input into Salesforce: about 100

partnerships/projects each. While Ellie and I identified 414 partnerships and projects that needed to be inputted into Salesforce, we were only able to input about half.

The other project I was assigned within the research project was Project 3. Project 3 was much easier both in my comprehension of my expectations as well as in relation to time. Haleema and I worked on Project 3 together, which was the purpose of creating a heat map to visually demonstrate where Brown interacts with its surroundings. Thus, Haleema and I's jobs were to split existing data from Salesforce into partnerships or projects with the surrounding community and determine where these organizations (more often than not non-profits) were based location-wise. We specifically researched what neighborhoods in Rhode Island were these projects based on and then categorized them according to the issue area the organization focused on, which Aaron was then able to visually portray on the heat map. Haleema nor I worked directly on the map itself but rather helped organize the data that would be shown. Because Salesforce doesn't hold much data yet, as well as the fact that Haleema and I were able to split the workload, I only sorted through 200 partnerships, 400 in total. The heat map as of yet has not been finished, but all of the existing data has been sorted and is ready to be shown.

Findings

Out of all of us researchers, I was the only one who was working remotely. Being a first-year student, I was hoping to be able to participate in Laidlaw from home. My research team was extremely understanding and accommodating to my virtual and remote needs—I was able to attend meetings virtually and was allocated work I was able to complete from a remote location. However, at times, working remotely was a bit difficult for me. I wasn't able to fully submerge myself in the community research since I wasn't based in the community at the time, so I often

felt disconnected from the content of the research. Ethically, this bothered me—I now know moving forward that when I am to participate in community research again, such as next summer, I would want to fully commit and immerse myself into the experience by living, even if it's only part-time, within the community. I do not feel comfortable conducting community research in an area where I am not actively involved.

Additionally, the research I conducted wasn't exactly what I imagined. The research was much more data-orientated than I expected. When I initially applied, I expected us researchers to be really engaged with the community, meeting with them, and asking them about their perspectives on our engagement. I expected our research to be more future-orientated, not inventorying our current research. Although the project wasn't what I envisioned, the work we did was paramount in establishing the database of existing research. This will be imperative for community members, both in and outside of the Brown community, to find and connect with existing research partners and projects. Furthermore, the work was important in identifying gaps in our community partnerships—which will be especially apparent with our heat map once it is completed.

In our research group's onboarding over the summer, Callan and Castillo additionally situated us researchers in the context of the community engagement work we'd be doing. We learned that research has illuminated the inherent challenges faced by institutions in their endeavors to genuinely share power with communities, even when driven by noble intentions because they are coming from and situated in such positions of power.³ Moreover, the indispensability of institutional cooperation for communities to achieve enduring and systemic transformation was emphasized. The literature we read also articulated the necessity of

³ White, Byron P. "Navigating the Power Dynamics Between Institutions and Their Communities." ABCD Institute | DePaul University, Chicago, 2009. <https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/Pages/default.aspx>.

anticipating potential resistance, both from institutional staff and communities, when establishing a community-university partnership.⁴

I remain optimistic about Brown University's potential to enhance its reputation as an institution with a more equitable relationship with its surrounding community. Throughout my research, the importance of dismantling such hierarchical power structures and instead fostering improved communication emerged as a prominent theme. This observation is reinforced by the existing literature we read during our research onboarding, which underscores that community-engaged scholarship demands substantial commitment not only from individual students and faculty but from the institution as a whole. I firmly believe that Brown's sustained dedication to community engagement will facilitate progress, albeit perhaps at a more gradual pace. It is crucial for Brown to engage in introspective assessments not only before entering into partnerships but continuously throughout the partnership. This self-examination should encompass an evaluation of the university's commitment to community-engaged scholarship and an assessment of the available resources for partnership initiation and ongoing collaboration, including financial, spatial, and human resources. Furthermore, I maintain that Brown should persistently ponder the question of how to distribute power, responsibilities, and authority within these partnerships. I contend that it is equally vital for both the communities and organizations in Providence, as well as Brown University, to take the initiative in providing resources and offering opportunities for student interns. In essence, Brown recognizing the needs of organizations and communities and actively seeking assistance will be paramount.

⁴ Eckerle Curwood, Susan, Felix Munger, Terry Mitchell, Mary Mackeigan, and Ashley Farrar. "Building Effective Community-University Partnerships: Are Universities Truly Ready?" *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, Spring 2011.
<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mjcs/3239521.0017.202/--building-effective-community-university-partnerships-are?view=image>.

Conclusion

The research and informative writing I conducted while part of this research is exactly what I want to do as a career as a journalist. I want to think critically about an issue affecting communities and help tell a story through my writing that will incite action. But if there's anything I learned while growing up with media, it's that no matter how much an issue is covered or promoted, it doesn't guarantee change. Through my career, I hope to both shed light on people's stories and communities' issues, while also taking action myself.

Being a researcher for this project allowed me to begin this journey and practice the skills needed for my career. My research with Laidlaw expanded my interest and experience in community engagement and understanding of the challenges facing communities in spaces with wealthier, predominately white institutions. Applying to this research project, it was delineated that by the end of the project, researchers would gain knowledge of community- and population-level data sources, skills to compile data and communicate such via research briefs and similar products, knowledge of key dimensions, elements, and tensions in higher education's engagement with community organizations, skills to interrogate, identify, and begin to navigate issues of power and positionality in the higher education community engagement. I certainly grew in my skills in all of these areas. Through Laidlaw this summer, I reaffirmed my love for community through the research we conducted.

Even if I wasn't directly involved with a certain aspect of the project, such as the interviews conducted in Project 2 or the benchmarking comparisons in Project 4, I was able to learn from interactions with my peers and our weekly check-ins where we discussed every Project's progression. I was able to work with an amazing group of like-minded civically-driven people whom I learned from and alongside about the research process and effective engagement.

I greatly appreciate the opportunity to engage in this research because of my hard-working peers and mentors who always welcomed me as a remote researcher and inspired me throughout this project to continue engaging in this work. Although our project is not yet complete—Salesforce still needs inputted data and the heat map will be created soon—the work we achieved was part of a larger initiative to develop an overview and recommendations for Brown’s future in public service, which would be presented to the university president and members of the local community. Brown University without a doubt has much continuous work to be done in giving reparations to the surrounding area and fostering meaningful symbiotic relationships with our community partners whom we have wronged throughout history. However, research projects and initiatives such as these are a step in the right direction.

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