

Promise Parent Leadership Academy (PPLA) and Clemente Veterans' Initiative (CVI) Newark: Two Hyperlocal, Anchor Institution Initiatives to Engage the Urban Community

Charity Anderson¹ and Marcus Anthony²

¹ Joseph C. Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies, Senior Research Associate, Rutgers University-Newark, ² Joseph C. Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies, Senior Program Director, Rutgers University-Newark

Cite as: Anderson, C., & Anthony, M. (2023). Promise Parent Leadership Academy (PPLA) and Clemente Veterans' Initiative (CVI) Newark: Two Hyperlocal, Anchor Institution Initiatives to Engage the Urban Community. *Metropolitan Universities*, 34(4), 16-35. DOI: 10.18060/26592

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](#).

Guest Editors: Rochelle Smarr, Ed.D. and Chris Nayve, J.D. **Editor:** Valerie L. Holton, Ph.D.

Abstract

Urban and metropolitan colleges and universities can play an important role in innovative, equitable community revitalization. This is especially true for universities that also function as anchor institutions; there is both a challenge and an opportunity for such urban anchors to conduct their work in a manner that engages the community proximate to campus and improves the lives of its residents. This paper presents the Promise Parent Leadership Academy (PPLA) and Clemente Veterans' Initiative (CVI) Newark as two examples of how an urban, postsecondary anchor institution can establish and nurture hyperlocal initiatives to improve outcomes for underserved residents. PPLA and CVI Newark, established in 2017 and 2019, respectively, have emerged as novel, impactful, and scalable initiatives that move beyond the typical one-way flow of intellectual capital generated within the confines of a university. Instead, PPLA and CVI Newark actively engage community members in meaningful, intellectually rigorous work that adds value to the institution, program participants, and greater Newark. Data from program evaluations indicate that participants of both programs—most of whom are adults of color from low-income households—gain personal and professional skills that bolster their confidence, critical thinking, and quality of life.

Original Research

Keywords: adult education, anchor institution, community engagement, parent engagement, urban schools, university-community partnerships

Introduction

Colleges and universities can play an essential role in urban revitalization grounded in community, equity, and innovation. Those that also act as anchor institutions—that is, place-based, mission-driven organizations—can play a particularly crucial part by conducting their work in ways that explicitly improve the lives of vulnerable children, families, and communities that are often proximate to campuses. Indeed, this role is both a challenge and an opportunity for urban and metropolitan universities. Rutgers University-Newark (RU-N), an anchor institution in New Jersey’s most populous city, is committed to integrating its strengths with those of public, private, and nonprofit sector partners to bolster the social and economic fabric of the city, region, and state (RU-N, 2014). This paper presents two of RU-N’s place-based, hyperlocal community engagement projects centered, in large part, on building K-16 student success and support in Newark. The Promise Parent Leadership Academy (PPLA) and the Clemente Veterans’ Initiative (CVI) Newark, housed within the Joseph C. Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies at RU-N, are innovative, impactful initiatives that move beyond the typical one-way flow of intellectual capital generated within academia’s ivory tower and imposed upon communities (Cantor et al., 2013; Scobey, 2002). Instead, PPLA and CVI Newark actively engage community members in meaningful, intellectually rigorous work that adds value to the institution, program participants, and greater Newark.

Rutgers University-Newark’s Role as an Anchor Institution

Anchor Institutions

Universities have held various roles throughout history: as centers of knowledge, innovation, experimentation, and critical discussion and as major employers and landholders, contributing to the physical character of neighborhoods and the economic footprint of cities. Their contributions have not always been positive, though. Universities have often exacerbated, rather than reduced, the problems of urban areas. For far too long, many urban and metropolitan universities amassed contiguous property to *co-exist* with, rather than *engage* with, the cities around them (Cantor et al., 2013). In the twenty-first century, however, some universities, like RU-N, are pursuing a role as anchor institutions with a vested interest in surrounding communities (Ehlenz, 2018).

The Aspen Institute first used the term “anchor institution” in a 2001 study, defining it as an urban institution with “significant infrastructure in a specific community [that is] therefore unlikely to move,” but the concept grew out of the 1960s when some institutions remained “anchored” in cities while corporations and industries fled for the suburbs (Fulbright-Anderson

Original Research

et al., 2001, p. 2; Taylor & Luter, 2013). Anchor institutions consist of “sticky capital,” with fixed investments, like facilities, real estate, and infrastructure, and are typically large employers with significant economic assets (Maurrasse, 2001, p. 4). The literature has mainly identified universities and hospitals—“eds and meds”—as anchors, though nonprofits such as churches, cultural institutions, public libraries, and sports teams are increasingly included (Hodges & Dubb, 2012; Taylor & Luter, 2013). Academic literature often points to universities as institutions capable of fostering social cohesion and economic development in urban areas by mooring, or anchoring, various kinds of capital in place (Adams, 2003; Birch et al., 2013; Ehlenz, 2018).

Rutgers University-Newark: *In and Of Newark*

In 2014, RU-N developed a strategic plan focused on an anchor institution agenda, underscoring its essential role in Newark’s revitalization and development. The agenda involves the integration of RU-N’s academic and economic resources to address six impact areas: (1) equitable growth; (2) building educational pathways; (3) STEM in the public interest; (4) safe and just cities; (5) arts and culture for social change; and (6) leveraging diversity (Harkavy, 2016; RU-N, 2022). With its goal to “improve life and create opportunities for all residents,” RU-N’s agenda exemplifies a clear “social purpose mission,” which introduces community-focused values into institutional missions (Taylor & Luter, 2013, p. 14). RU-N’s discourse on its anchor institution status makes its mission clear:

Since the 19th century, a key element of the mission of American universities has been to engage with the public in identifying and solving problems. ... We reject traditional models of “public service” in which faculty and students do things for a public that is regarded as passive and needy. Our work is deeply collaborative. We know that the talent and potential within Newark, and its legacy of social justice activism, which stretches back to the 1600s, is key to transforming the city and the nation—as well as transforming our university. (RU-N, 2022, n.p.)

To this end, Ira Harkavy, associate vice president, and founding director of the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania, argues that there is an ethical imperative for universities to contribute to their local communities: “Universities are among the most powerful institutions in advanced society. ... Why do universities exist? They exist to improve the world” (Oldach, 2021, n.p.). The primary motivator for urban and metropolitan universities like RU-N to engage in the hard work of building social cohesion and fostering community development may well be founding higher education principles, such as John Dewey’s nineteenth-century call for universities to embrace civic engagement, or the motivator may be a sort of enlightened self-interest, or, perhaps more likely, some combination (Harris & Holley, 2016; Hodges & Dubb, 2012). Regardless of the motivation, RU-N’s discourse tied to

Original Research

the production of human capital and social mobility and its commitment to being “not just *in* Newark; ... [but] *of* Newark” are explicit and evidenced by initiatives like PPLA and CVI Newark (Addie, 2020).

Newark, New Jersey: The Place in RU-N’s Place-Based Mission

We would be remiss not to contextualize the *place* in RU-N’s place-based mission. Higher education began as an urban institution in Europe but assumed “pastoral ideals” in America (Garton, 2021, p. 86). With time, however, urbanicity has re-emerged as a defining feature of postsecondary education in the U.S. (Garton, 2021). Urban-serving institutions like RU-N represent 68% of colleges and universities in the U.S. and serve 20 million students, making their campuses essential for implementing transformative change (APLU, 2022). Urban and metropolitan areas, once anathema to the American ideal of higher education, are increasingly recognized as rich environments for contemporary postsecondary education—what the founders of the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU) saw as the “urban advantage” (CUMU, 2022, n.p.).

With an estimated 2021 population of 307,220, Newark is the most populous city in New Jersey and the second largest in the greater New York City region after New York City (United States Census, 2021). Newark occupies a paradoxical position in the metropolitan region: it is home to thriving arts and cultural institutions, Fortune 500 companies, colleges and universities, hospitals, real estate development, and transportation hubs, but the poverty rate (26.3%) is over twice the national average (11.6%), and Newark’s median household income in 2020 dollars—just \$20,924—was well below that of the rest of Essex County (\$63,959) and the U.S. as a whole (\$71,186) (Semega & Kollar, 2022; United States Census, 2021).

Employment in Newark is highly inequitable. While most residents are Black and Latinx, 60% of the people employed in Newark are White. This disparity cannot be explained by residents not wanting to work or being unqualified for employment (New Jersey Institute for Social Justice, 2017). The educational landscape is likewise concerning. Segregation in New Jersey’s schools is among the worst in the nation. It is worse than any state in the American South (O’Dea, 2018). To illustrate: Asian and White students make up about 55% of all students in N.J. but 87% of students in low-poverty schools. Forty percent of N.J. students are Black or Latinx but comprise 80% of students in high-poverty schools, with low academic achievement and graduation rates and high dropout rates (Tractenberg et al., 2019; Tractenberg & Coughlan, 2018). Just 15.5% of Newark residents aged 24 and older hold an associate’s degree or higher in a state where nearly 41% of residents do (United States Census, 2021).

Original Research

Newark has experienced both the consequences of systemic discrimination and the emergence of substantial investment, particularly in the city's downtown corridor. Newark has many established anchor institutions, such as RU-N, as well as a network of community-based organizations and a long history of activism (Marga, 2022). Nancy Cantor, chancellor of RU-N since 2014, and colleagues (2019) argue that "The challenge is how to create ... an architecture of participation and inclusion that lays the groundwork for inequality to be supplanted by *equitable* prosperity and growth, rather than the counter-narrative we see so frequently of gentrification and displacement," (p. 28), concluding, "There is no doubt that Newark, though in the early stages of transformative change, has moved beyond the stage of mere ideas and conversations" (p. 35).

Joseph C. Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies: A Signature Component of RU-N's Anchor Mission

PPLA and CVI Newark are housed within the Joseph C. Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies, a signature component of RU-N's commitment as an anchor institution for the metropolitan area. Since it was established in 2000, the Cornwall Center—named after the late Joseph C. Cornwall, a widely respected civic leader in N.J.—has brought the campus's intellectual talent and other resources to bear on the challenges of revitalizing Newark and similar urban communities in the state. Specifically, Cornwall's work falls into three categories: (1) research to increase knowledge about what works in urban and regional policy development and how; (2) public informing to ensure stakeholders and decision-makers are armed with the best possible information and have opportunities to discuss it with one another; and (3) demonstration projects that show how research can be translated into impactful social interventions. Cornwall's role is to incubate projects by staffing them, helping to develop a resource base, and, with community partners, building capacity to ensure long-term viability. PPLA and CVI Newark are examples of such demonstration projects.

Hyperlocal Engagement: Two Anchor Institution Initiatives in Newark Promise Parent Leadership Academy (PPLA)

Background

The Promise Parent Leadership Academy (PPLA) draws on several parent engagement models. One of them is the Logan Square Neighborhood Association's Parent Mentor program, a grassroots organization that partners with schools to improve academic outcomes and school climate in Chicago, Illinois. Established in 1995, the Parent Mentor program has grown to

Original Research

include more than 600 mentors across Illinois. Research suggests notable impacts: Schools have reported significant reductions in the numbers of students scoring in the bottom category of readers, and being a parent mentor is associated with improvements in students' reading outcomes and the numbers of parent mentors who regularly read with their children at home (Palenque LSNA, 2022). At the core of PPLA is the idea of developing parents—who are also Newark community residents—with the skills to help schools reach important academic goals. PPLA parents serve as liaisons between other parents and community partners, work as thought partners by identifying needs within schools, and serve as leaders in the community.

Overview of PPLA

Established in 2017, PPLA is a collaboration among Rutgers University-Newark, Newark Public Schools (NPS), and the Fairmount Heights Neighborhood Association—a largely African American neighborhood in the city's West Ward. Through our collaboration, we seek to leverage the intellectual talent of our stakeholders and fulfill PPLA's mission: to build strong, reciprocal relationships between families and schools throughout Newark. PPLA is a two-generation program that supports parents and caregivers and is designed to provide literacy support for struggling readers in the early grades while concurrently providing parents with personal and workforce development. PPLA prioritizes working with students who perform at the bottom quartile of literacy benchmark assessments in high-need elementary schools. Since the program's inception, parent participants have served as tutors and attendance improvement specialists in Newark's West Ward. PPLA was started with a Chancellor's Seed Grant from RU-N, plus additional funding from the Chancellor's Office.

PPLA members are compensated for their work and devote most of their time to supporting literacy instruction in the early grades. Prior to working with children, parents receive extensive training to equip them with skills to provide adequate academic support to children. The training introduces PPLA members to components of K-2 literacy and benchmark assessments such as letter identification, reading comprehension and fluency, sight word recognition, and spelling. Parents also receive ongoing training that includes on-the-spot coaching, feedback, and strategies to best meet students' individual educational needs. Strategies include independent and shared reading, supporting mini-lessons, working on a specific reading intervention provided by the teacher, and helping students select texts based on their instructional levels.

Once onboarded, parents provide approximately 25 hours/week of in-person and virtual academic assistance to students in kindergarten, first, and second grades throughout the academic year. At each location, parents provide academic support to approximately 60 students both during class time and after school, as well as individually and in small groups. Students reside in underserved Newark communities, attend hypersegregated schools with over 90% Black and

Original Research

Latino student populations, and score in the bottom quartile on the fall English Language Arts benchmark assessment. The program aims to improve students' academic outcomes and attitudes toward reading.

In addition to initial onboarding training, PPLA members receive academic and nonacademic professional development delivered by staff from Rutgers, NPS, and various agencies throughout greater Newark. We integrate pillars of the community school movement in our professional development: integrated student support, expanded learning time and opportunities, family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership. *Integrated student supports* include learning about available health and social service supports, the importance of early identification of health and learning disabilities, using Newark's cultural resources, limiting screen time, and developing a library habit. *Expanded learning time and opportunities* refer to supporting tutoring, mentoring, and after-school programs. *Family and community engagement* includes learning about organizations and resources in the community. Under *collaborative leadership*, parents learn about strengthening relationships, including parent-teacher relationships, and developing leadership skills. Thirty-eight parents have participated in PPLA, 33 of whom are women. The age range for members is between 21 and 70 years old. Thirty-six participants self-identified as African American, while the remaining two self-identified as Latinx or Hispanic.

Outcomes to Date

PPLA is committed to continuous improvement. We conduct semi-structured interviews with participants so that they can reflect on their experiences, and the program can make course corrections based on participants' feedback. Additionally, we review weekly reflections, journals, and other program artifacts that participants submit to describe their successes, challenges, surprises, and expectations. In this section, we present our findings to date, demonstrating seven PPLA participants' wide range of experiences in the program. Results are divided into "promises" (i.e., perceived positive experiences and effective aspects) and "challenges" (i.e., perceived difficulties experienced in the program). Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities.

Emergent themes were established after analyzing the textual data. New themes were created after similar emergent themes were consolidated through reduction, and new clusters of themes, defined as superordinate themes, were established. Superordinate themes that emerged from interview transcripts, notes, and parent reflections included: transforming self, strong bonds, and programmatic challenges. "Transforming self" includes parents' perceived personal changes, including increased confidence, self-control, and advocacy. "Strong bonds" include close connections parents established with children and their relationships with fellow community

Original Research

members. “Programmatic challenges” include attendance and academic support, changing initiatives, and institutional barriers parents faced as members of PPLA.

Table 1 illustrates recurring superordinate themes for each program participant and indicates if that theme was present in more than half of the cases.

TABLE 1. Recurrent superordinate themes

Themes	Taffy	Maria	Mercedes	Olivia	Keon	Jackie	Rhonda
Transforming self	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Strong bonds	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Programmatic challenges	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Promises: Transforming Self “Transforming self” is defined as those changes in a person that allow them to positively modify their behaviors, actions, or thoughts, resulting in higher self-confidence or positive beliefs about oneself. The results indicated that PPLA members experienced professional growth, increased self-control and confidence, and developed leadership and advocacy skills. For example, Taffy described instances where she could transform herself by developing professional skills. She described her experiences participating in impromptu meetings with community leaders, university officials, and nonprofit executives as part of her work in PPLA:

They used to just throw us in meetings in front of these big people, and you just got to talk, and it’s like, it was one of my biggest fears cause I’m like tongue-tied, I don’t know what the words to say, and he [PPLA director] would just throw us out there, so I came accustomed to it. So now it’s like it comes naturally now.

Similarly, Rhonda believed that her experiences allowed her to understand the importance of comprehending multiple perspectives while completing projects. By participating in PPLA initiatives, Rhonda stated that she learned to “see things from both sides, the Board of Education, working as a parent and staff and learn[ing] how to move, talk, and be understood.”

Maria stated that PPLA allowed her to modulate her temper, learn patience, and walk away from tense situations:

When we first started, my temper, I would go from a zero to a thousand real quick. I mean, I still speak my mind, so that doesn’t hold me back. But now I just learned to have patience, not every action needs a reaction, and sometimes it’s just better to walk away.

Original Research

Likewise, Jackie articulated how she transformed from being quiet to becoming more vocal about addressing school and community issues:

But I can honestly say before being in Promise Parent, I was a mute. I would just observe and just sit quietly the first year, um, the first year prior to being in Promise Parents, I would just observe. They can't shut me up when it's a problem.

Like Jackie, Olivia mentioned that her experiences helped her become a leader and a strong advocate. When asked about the program's benefits, she stated, "It actually helps parents to realize their potential." Olivia discussed how she learned to express her opinions and frustrations: "I'm more vocal about what I like, what I don't like, where I can improve." Olivia also asserted that participating in the program motivated her to develop as a person: "PPLA definitely encouraged me to broaden my horizons as a mother-educator, you know, um, to learn more myself and read more."

Promises: Strong Bonds PPLA members share similar demographics to the students with whom they work. The results indicate that PPLA members strongly bonded with the children and fellow parents. PPLA members reported building trusting relationships with children in school or the community. Members indicated they could build strong bonds with children, see them smile, work through students' challenges, provide academic assistance, mentor students, and lead community events.

Keon mentioned building strong bonds with students through his experiences providing attendance support to chronically absent children: "I created a very good bond because I was going into class, um, pulling the kids out of class for about 45 minutes each." Like Keon, Mercedes described how her love for students sustained her interest in working in a challenging environment. After experiencing high frustration with the program and school policies, she focused on her students: "I'm here for those kids. I'm not here for Newark Public Schools anymore. I'm here for those kids."

Challenges: Programmatic Challenges PPLA program initiatives provide parents opportunities to participate in school-based activities and events aimed at improving educational or social outcomes for school community members. The results indicated that PPLA members implemented attendance and academic initiatives but also experienced issues when program priorities shifted between the first and second years of the program. Participants reported difficulties such as implementing attendance initiatives for chronically absent students and providing academic support to students who performed significantly behind grade level.

Challenges: Implementing Attendance Initiatives The implementation of attendance initiatives included members' participation in activities to decrease chronic absenteeism. Olivia mentioned

Original Research

that while participating in an attendance improvement program, she experienced challenges contacting parents and families because PPLA members did not have adequate space or a dedicated phone to call parents who had chronically absent children. Consequently, she felt that she was not able to maximize her ability to provide adequate support.

Like Olivia, Jackie mentioned challenges in working to improve student attendance. She stated, “It was a struggle at first because they [PPLA administrators] wanted it done a specific way, but we didn’t understand exactly what to do. We’re constantly told, like, you’re not doing the tracking sheet correctly.” Rhonda recalled a conversation with a frustrated parent of a chronically absent student: “You said you were going to help me with transportation. I need bus tickets. My kid’s been absent for three days now. I have no way to get the child there.” While Rhonda believed that she was able to identify the reason for the child’s absences, university policies and bureaucratic challenges prevented her from implementing the initiative.

Summary All participants reported that experiences in PPLA were transformative. PPLA members stated that their experiences allowed them to develop professional and personal skills, partly by interfacing with middle-class professionals from various institutions within the school. Parents developed leadership skills, collaborated to create tailored workshops for families, established trusting relationships with children and other PPLA members, and collaborated with seasoned professionals who had the skills, knowledge, and resources to help PPLA participants complete member-led initiatives.

Future

PPLA was established under an initiative that allowed RU-N to allocate significant resources to launch the program. Expanding PPLA will require long-term investments and commitments from private foundations, government grants, university resources, and buy-in from local schools. Planning ahead, we will request funding and are attempting to become a partner with President Biden’s Student Support Initiative, which aims to help underserved communities recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. To date, we have secured financial and human resource commitments for the 2022-2023 academic year and have requested funds from private foundations, RU-N, and the State of New Jersey for future years.

Clemente Veterans’ Initiative (CVI) Newark

Background

Original Research

Clemente Veterans' Initiative (CVI) Newark is a free, college-level humanities course for veterans and military-connected civilians. CVI is part of a broader humanities initiative under the academic aegis of Bard College: The Clemente Course in the Humanities (CCH). CCH was established in 1995 by the writer and social critic Earl Shorris (1936-2012), who was inspired to start the course while researching a book on poverty and its causes. Shorris visited a maximum-security women's prison in New York as part of his research. There, he asked an inmate, Viniece Walker, why she believed people were poor. "Because they don't have the moral life of downtown," Walker replied. Puzzled, Shorris (2013) asked Walker what she meant by the "moral life." "You got to begin with the children..." she said. "You've got to teach the moral life of downtown to the children. And the way you do that, Earl, is by taking them downtown to plays, museums, concerts, lectures." Shorris, seeking clarification, asked Walker if she meant the humanities. Looking at him as if he were, as Shorris put it, "the stupidest man on earth," Walker replied: "Yes, Earl, the humanities" (p. 5).

Ameliorating poverty and its effects, Shorris concluded, required more than employment or money. Beginning with a class of about 25 adults, Shorris, along with several professors he had recruited, established a free humanities course at the Roberto Clemente Family Guidance Center—the social service agency for which the course is named—in New York City. Clemente is based on the idea that by studying the humanities, individuals who have been denied access to cultural, economic, and social opportunities develop the skills to improve their lives and those of their families and communities. One way that the humanities can help disenfranchised adults, according to Shorris (2000), is by engaging them to be more "political," but not "political" in the sense of voting:

The humanities are a foundation for getting along in the world, for thinking, for learning to reflect on the world instead of just reacting to whatever force is turned against you. I think the humanities are one of the ways to become political ... in the broad sense: The way Pericles ... used "politics" to mean activity with other people at every level, from the family to the neighborhood to the broader community to the city/state in which he lived. (p. 127).

Since 1995, Clemente has grown to over 30 sites—all urban with one exception—in the U.S. and Puerto Rico and has reached over 10,000 adults (CCH, 2022). A standard Clemente course is nine months long; covers literature, philosophy, art and U.S. history, and critical thinking and writing; meets weekly for four hours; and, for students who successfully complete the course, culminates in six transferable credits from Bard College. Because CCH strives to remove barriers, the course is free, and there are minimal requirements for admission: prospective students should live under 200% of the federal poverty level, be able to read a newspaper in English, and be over 17 years old. The course is designed to be rigorous—as a college course should be—but accessible to motivated and engaged adult learners.

Original Research

Overview of CVI Newark

In 2013, CCH received a call from a Gold Star mother whose son had committed suicide after serving in Iraq. She had recently read *The Art of Freedom*, the last book written by Shorris, and was convinced that if her son had been able to attend a Clemente Course, he would still be alive. When this call was mentioned at the annual meeting of Clemente's academic directors, they shared stories of veterans who had enrolled in their courses across the country. What academic directors saw and heard from these students was that the course was often a lifesaver; it had helped many veterans step out of their despair and isolation to re-engage in their communities with a renewed sense of hope and purpose.

With this in mind, CCH launched the Clemente Veterans' Initiative (CVI) in 2014 to provide a humanities-focused intellectual community for veterans struggling to adapt to civilian life. Like a traditional Clemente course, CVI is free and open to all veterans, as well as military-connected civilians. Unlike a traditional Clemente course, though, CVI courses are a semester-long, award three transferable credits from Bard College, and focus specifically on themes of war, reconciliation, duty, and sacrifice through literature, history, philosophy, and art. By removing major obstacles to participation, the course provides a low-risk, high-reward opportunity for adults who are interested in pursuing education but may feel intimidated by the process of formally enrolling in college, have negative experiences in prior educational settings, are unfamiliar with higher education culture, and/or are unable, or unwilling, to navigate the bureaucracy of postsecondary education.

CVI differs from other programs serving veterans and nontraditional adult learners in several ways. First, CVI is open to *all* veterans, regardless of discharge status. Veterans with less than honorable discharges are stigmatized and are at higher risk for untreated mental health conditions, homelessness, criminal justice system involvement, and suicide than honorably discharged veterans. At CVI, we accept that the circumstances of a veteran's service and discharge are complicated and believe that affordable, intellectually challenging, and supportive educational opportunities should be accessible to all.

The course is also unique in that it does not require veterans to use G.I. benefits. Under the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, the V.A. will pay for up to 36 months of educational benefits, meaning benefits can run out before completion. CVI offers those considering furthering their education an opportunity to enroll in a college course without starting the 36-month clock (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022). Lastly, CVI is not focused on vocational training or discrete skill-building. The course rests on believing that all adults *can* learn and deserve access to a rigorous

Original Research

education typically reserved for society's elite. It is often assumed that studying the humanities isn't "useful," but recent studies show that the humanities provide a path to lifelong learning; push students to think creatively and critically, to reason, and to ask questions; encourage greater civic participation; and help people feel more connected to their history, society, and community.

The Joseph C. Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies successfully piloted two CVI courses during spring/summer 2020 and spring/summer 2021 with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities' "Dialogues on the Experience of War" grant, the purpose of which is to foster "the study and discussion of important humanities sources about war, in the belief that these sources can help U.S. military veterans and others think more deeply about the issues raised by war and military service" (NEH, 2022, n.p.). Whereas the national CCH model is focused on low-income adult learners broadly conceived, the NEH funding dictated that Newark's course be explicitly geared toward veterans and their close friends and/or family.

According to the most recent data from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2019), 5.4% of New Jersey's veterans live below the poverty line. As a whole, the state's veterans are older and have a higher unemployment rate than the national average. Within Essex County, of which Newark is a part, about 3% of residents are veterans, slightly below the state average of 4.4% and the national average of 6.8% (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019). Newark was largely chosen as a site for a CVI course because of the academic director's multi-year experience researching Clemente at sites across the country and her familiarity with, and advocacy for, the course. Although Newark is the state's most populous city, there are few data available on the city's veterans. Indeed, the dearth of information about Newark-area vets is lamentable given that veterans are at increased risk for homelessness, suicide, physical and mental illness, and substance use disorders than the general population and, thus, in need of targeted services (Thurston, 2022).

Cornwall's first CVI course, which began as a traditional, in-person course, moved to Zoom as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded. The second course was held entirely online and experienced no attrition. CVI Newark students reported that the class felt like a "community" and a "family," which likely contributed to our success with retention. Retaining nontraditional students in higher education is typically a challenge due in part to students' complex lives. Similar Clemente courses expect an attrition rate of 40%.

Learning opportunities are not distributed equally among adults, especially in urban areas. CVI Newark is dedicated to increasing access, believing that education can promote a more reflective and active citizenry and enhance students' social and economic stability. The fact that CVI is entirely free to students and there is no minimum education requirement for enrollment is by

Original Research

design—precisely to increase access for marginalized adults interested in re-entering the educational pipeline. CVI Newark’s commitment to open access draws a variety of adults into a learning community—young and old, vets and civilians, and myriad races and ethnicities. Unlike many college courses, ours mirrors Newark’s rich diversity.

Together, Cornwall’s CVI courses have reached nearly 30 adult learners aged 19 to 76. Our students—62% women, 38% men—have largely been people of color who identify as Black and Latinx, but our courses have also served students who are Chinese, Brazilian, multiracial, and White. Students have been veterans of the Air Force, Army, Navy, Reserves, and National Guard with military experience throughout the world, including the U.S., Middle East, Germany, Japan, and Libya. Civilian students have been friends, family members, and spouses of veterans.

Outcomes to Date

Evaluation is central to the course’s success. We utilize a pre-/post-test design in which participants complete validated scales: the Groningen Reflection Ability Scale (GRAS), the De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale, and the Social Network Satisfaction Scale. The surveys are designed to measure the social and reflective benefits of participating as well as outcomes key to the CVI model: increased civic engagement, increased critical thinking and writing skills, improvements in overall functioning, and the social and emotional benefits of being a part of a learning community. Participants are asked, in part, to reflect on how they feel about higher education, as well as their confidence levels to achieve; their opinions of the course and the extent to which they believed it impacted them academically and personally; and their participation in community groups, volunteering, and voting.

Findings from evaluations of our two cohorts to date demonstrate that CVI Newark (1) provides opportunities to explore the diverse experiences of veterans (“The class brought veterans with other people from the community together. This gave them the opportunity to share their experience of war with others.”); (2) invites participants to reflect on and share personal experiences (“I learned that we don’t always know everything about war. It was a great experience learning from others. I learn[ed] that people can view situations in a number of ways, and we must respect everyone’s opinions and views because people see things through many lens [sic].”); (3) fosters an understanding of and appreciation for the humanities (“The humanities expand your horizons in all aspects of life. The arts are a necessary part of a good life.”); (4) helps participants develop humanistic skills for inquiry and discussion (“I really liked describing different paintings and analyzing poems. Now I have the ability to connect with paintings, drawings, poems, and break it all down.”); (5) creates a supportive environment and encourages a cohort to form (“We [the class] were like family. ... I really enjoyed seeing them every week.

Original Research

And with this pandemic amongst us, it really made a difference. Not being able to mingle, it [CVI] helped me so much living alone.”); (6) promotes personal development and continued learning (“I learned from everyone. We all had a story to tell. I am glad I was accepted into the class. It makes me want to enroll in school again. I am eager to learn more about history, art, music, and literature.”); and (7) connects students to resources. CVI Newark relies heavily on qualitative data, like student voices, to gauge the program’s success and areas for improvement.

Graduates consistently report that the course represents a “turning point” in their lives, expands their worldviews, cultivates critical thinkers and stronger writers, and deepens students’ tolerance and respect for others’ opinions. Students report being more likely to vote and volunteer and feeling more confident in their ability to ensure a better future for themselves and their families—effects reverberating through communities. As one graduate stated, “My mind is not only open now, but it’s open *all the time*.”

Future

CVI Newark advances RU-N’s strategic priorities: investing in anchor institution collaboration, leveraging our diversity, and building civic dialogue. One major area that captures much of the scholarly expertise and civic-oriented interests in anchor institution work involves K-20 educational pipelines and pathways; CVI may act as one such pathway to postsecondary education. Nationwide, we see the imperative to increase college completion for lower-income and working-class students, especially in communities of color. COVID-19 has further disrupted the postsecondary pipeline, and students have borne the brunt of this disruption with fewer resources and more responsibilities. CVI seeks to address this.

Graduates have routinely expressed a desire to continue with CVI, and we plan to offer additional courses for them. “I hope there are more courses like this one,” a Navy veteran and 2020 graduate wrote on her course evaluation. Similarly, a 2021 graduate who served in the Air Force during Vietnam said he’s on “pins and needles” waiting for the next class. Civilian students expressed the same wish: “I’m so glad that I have taken this class,” said a 65-year-old civilian student in our 2021 cohort. “I would take it again if it was available. This was the best class I have ever taken.”

CVI Newark began with two years of funding from the NEH, and we intend to sustain the course over time. The New Jersey Council for the Humanities (NJCH) has committed three years of funding to the project, and CCH continues to lend its expertise and technical support. Compared to other interventions, creative and intellectual engagement through CVI is relatively inexpensive and scalable. At roughly \$20,000 for a semester-long course serving 15-20 students and \$60,000

Original Research

for a yearlong course, the classes are sustainable over the long term with adequate funding streams.

Final Thoughts

This paper aims to present PPLA and CVI Newark as two examples of how RU-N conducts its work as an anchor institution to improve community members' lives and suggests that other urban universities can similarly establish and nurture hyperlocal initiatives to improve outcomes for underserved residents. RU-N has endeavored to fully integrate its mission into its operations and partnerships, as evidenced through PPLA and CVI. Both programs seek to expand underserved Newark residents' capacity and intellectual talent. CVI does this by engaging veterans and military-connected civilians in humanistic inquiry, and PPLA develops parents as literacy specialists to serve under-performing students—a benefit to students, who reap the rewards of individualized and small-group instruction, and parent participants, who hone new skills, interface with other adults, and are exposed to new job pathways. As such, both programs are examples of how a university can strategically implement projects aimed at improving individual and collective well-being.

Establishing these programs helps urban universities like RU-N break down long-standing barriers between the institution and its surrounding communities. Walking the anchor mission walk sets an example for other universities to be “of” and not merely “in” their cities. Initiatives like PPLA and CVI Newark build stronger university-community relationships and offer opportunities for practitioners, researchers, and community members to work collaboratively to solve problems and present the campus as a place open and welcoming to the public—a place where everyone belongs, whether enrolled as a student or not.

In closing, cultivating and sustaining positive relationships between universities and communities is extremely valuable yet complex work. PPLA and CVI Newark are not without challenges. Both require steady funding streams to operate, and the ever-changing winds of private philanthropy can sometimes act as obstacles to long-term sustainability. Recruitment and retention are also obstacles that both programs face, and both have to work continuously to build, maintain, and improve relationships with community members who may harbor distrust for large institutions generally and RU-N specifically. Like most institutions of higher education, RU-N has to be mindful of operating in silos. While both programs are housed within the Cornwall Center, they largely operate in isolation, despite having broadly similar overall goals and serving similar local populations. We hope that PPLA parents will participate in CVI or smaller humanities-based topical workshops, discussions, or, perhaps, one-credit offerings. CVI may act

Original Research

as a low-risk opportunity for parent participants to try a college class for free in the familiar environment of the Cornwall Center, perhaps acting as a pipeline to further education.

References

- Adams, C. (2003). The meds and eds in urban economic development. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 25(5), 571–588. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9906.2003.00003.x>
- Addie, J.-P. D. (2020). Anchoring (in) the region: The dynamics of university-engaged urban development in Newark, NJ, USA. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 102(2), 172–190. <https://doi.org/10.1080/04353684.2020.1729663>
- Alperovitz, G., Dubb, S., & Howard, T. (2008). The next wave: Building university engagement for the 21st century. *The Good Society*, 17(2), 69–75. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20711302>
- Birch, E. L. (2013). Anchor institutions in the Northeast megaregion: An important but not fully realized resource. In S. M. Wachter & K. A. Zeuli (Eds.), *Revitalizing American cities* (pp. 207–223). Penn Press.
- Cantor, N., Cooper, T., Brown, M., & Englot, P. (2019). Tackling “The Two Americas” with city-wide collaboration in Newark. *Journal on Anchor Institutions and Communities*, 2, 27–38. <https://www.margainc.com/>
- Cantor, N., Englot, P., & Higgins, M. (2013). Making the work of anchor institutions stick: Building coalitions and collective expertise. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 17(3), 17–46. <https://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/jheoe/article/view/1052>
- Clemente Course in the Humanities (CCH). (2022). *About the Clemente Course*. <https://www.clementecourse.org/about>
- Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU). (2022). *About CUMU*. <https://www.cumuonline.org/about-cumu/>
- Ehlenz, M. M. (2021). “Can you imagine what’s happened in Durham?” *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 87(1), 45–61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2020.1782766>
- Ehlenz, M. M. (2018). Defining university anchor institution strategies: Comparing theory to practice. *Planning Theory & Practice*, 19(1), 74–92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2017.1406980>

Original Research

- Fulbright-Anderson, K., Auspos, P., & Anderson, A. (2001). *Community involvement in partnerships with educational institutions, medical centers, and utility companies*. Coalition of Urban Serving Universities. <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/files/content/docs/CommInvolveINSTITUTIONS.PDF>
- Garton, P. (2021). Types of anchor institution initiatives: An overview of university urban development literature. *Metropolitan Universities*, 32(2), 85–105. <https://doi.org/10.18060/25242>
- Harkavy, I. (2016). Engaging urban universities as anchor institutions for health equity. *American Journal of Public Health (AJPH)*, 106(12), 2155–2157. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2016.303475>
- Harris, M., & Holley, K. (2016). Universities as anchor institutions: Economic and social potential for urban development. In M. B. Paulsen (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (pp. 393–439). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-26829-3_8
- Hodges, R. A., & Dubb, S. (2012). *The road half traveled: University engagement at a crossroads*. Michigan State University Press.
- Kantor, P., Lefevre, C., Saito, A., Savitch, H. V., & Thornley, A. (2012). *Struggling giants: City-region governance in London, New York, Paris, and Tokyo*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Maurrasse, D. J. (2001). *Beyond the campus: How colleges and universities form partnerships with their communities*. Routledge.
- Marga Inc. (2022). *Newark Anchor Collaborative: Promoting racial equity and equitable growth*. <https://www.margainc.com/>
- National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). (2022). *Dialogues on the Experiences of War*. <https://www.neh.gov/grants/education/dialogues-the-experience-war>
- New Jersey Institute for Social Justice. (2017). *Bridging the two Americas: Employment & economic opportunity in Newark & beyond*. <https://www.njisj.org/just-the-facts-bridging-the-two-americas-employment-economic-opportunity-in-newark-beyond>

Original Research

O'Dea, C. (2018). *New Jersey hit with major lawsuit arguing it must end school segregation*. WHY? <https://whyy.org/articles/new-jersey-hit-with-major-lawsuit-arguing-it-must-end-school-segregation/>

Oldach, L. (2021). *Can urban universities be better neighbors?* American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology. <https://www.asbmb.org/asbmb-today/policy/021021/can-urban-universities-be-better-neighbors>

Palenque LSNA. (2022). *Parent mentor program*. <https://www.palenuelsna.org/pmp>

Rutgers University-Newark (RU-N). (2022). *An anchor institution*. <https://www.newark.rutgers.edu/meet-rutgers-newark/and-newark/anchor-institution>

Rutgers University-Newark (RU-N). (2014). *Rutgers University-Newark: Where opportunity meets excellence. Strategic plan 2014*. https://law.rutgers.edu/sites/law/files/attachments/rutgers_strategic_plan.pdf

Scobey, D. (2002). Putting the academy in its place. *Places*, 14(3), 50–55.

Semega, J., & Kollar, M. (2022). *Income in the United States: 2021*. United States Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2022/demo/p60-276.html>

Shorris, E. (2013). *The art of freedom*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Shorris, E. (2000). *Riches for the poor: The Clemente Course in the Humanities*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Taylor, H. L., & Luter, G. (2013). *Anchor institutions: An interpretive review essay*. Anchor Institutions Task Force. <http://community-wealth.org/sites/clone.community-wealth.org/files/downloads/paper-taylor-luter.pdf>

Thurston, A. (2022). *Why veterans remain at greater risk of homelessness*. Boston University. <https://www.bu.edu/articles/2022/why-veterans-remain-at-greater-risk-of-homelessness/>

Tractenberg, P. L., Boddie, E., Roda, A., Dougherty, D., & Mader, N. (2019). *A school integration action plan for New Jersey*. <https://theinclusionproject.rutgers.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/school-integration-action-plan-for-nj-final.pdf>

Original Research

- Tractenberg, P. L., & Coughlan, R. W. (2018). *The new promise of school integration and the old problem of extreme segregation: An action plan for New Jersey to address both*. The Center for Diversity and Equality in Education.
https://buildingoneamerica.org/sites/default/files/attachments/2018_the_new_promise_of_school_integration_and_the_old_problem_of_extreme_segregation_full_report_1.pdf
- United States Census Bureau. (2021). *Quick facts: Newark city, New Jersey*.
<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/newarkcitynewjersey/PST045221>
- U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. (2022). *Post-9/11 GI Bill (Chapter 33)*.
<https://www.va.gov/education/about-gi-bill-benefits/post-9-11/>
- U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. (2019). *State summaries*.
<https://www.data.va.gov/stories/s/bn2v-jbm5>