



Faculty and Student Immersion in Community: A Review of *Building Bridges: Community and University Partnerships in East St. Louis*

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Faculty and Student Immersion in Community: A Review of *Building Bridges: Community and University Partnerships in East St. Louis*

Building Bridges: Community and University Partnerships in East St. Louis, by Kenneth M. Reardon.
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Community engagement success in higher education is measured by the degree of reciprocity, level of mutual trust and respect, and achievement of identified outcomes for the community partner(s) and the university or college. *Building Bridges: Community and University Partnerships in East St. Louis* provides one of the best examples of the essential elements of a successful revitalization effort in which key student learning opportunities and faculty leadership merge with resident commitment, knowledge, and patience to address one of the most compelling issues of our time, the re-development of legacy cities. The book depicts elements of place-based education and participatory planning that result in community changes that successfully incorporate diverse histories, cultures, social structures, beliefs, traditions, and behaviors to meet community needs.

Keywords: *building bridges, community development, community–university partnerships, urban planning*

Success in higher education community engagement can be measured, in part, by the degree of reciprocity, level of mutual trust and respect, and achievement of identified outcomes in partnerships developed between community representatives and the college or university. Kenneth Reardon's *Building Bridges: Community and University Partnerships in East St. Louis* offers an exemplary account of the essential elements of a successful revitalization effort grounded in the principles of community engagement. In the case described in the book, key student learning opportunities and faculty leadership are effectively merged with resident commitment, knowledge, and patience in an effort to address one of the most compelling issues of our time: the re-development of legacy cities.¹ The book illustrates elements of place-based education (also known as the pedagogy of community; Lane-Zucker, 2019; Sobel, 2004) and participatory planning, resulting in a broad community change effort that validates diverse histories and cultures, incorporates social structures, and balances beliefs, traditions, and behaviors in ways that meet community-identified needs.

The story in *Building Bridges* begins prior to 1990, when Kenneth Reardon, a new faculty member at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), inherits a dying community partnership that previous faculty and staff had established with the residents of East St. Louis (ESL). Reardon's narrative navigates the reader through the next several years, depicting an imperfect but wholly effective relationship between struggling and proud communities, local government, private businesses, and a regional land-grant university located almost 200 miles away. The story-like quality of *Building Bridges* makes it a gripping tale that hooks the reader from the opening paragraph. It integrates so much of what makes community engagement compelling—social-justice commitments, the human condition, optimism, grassroots action, interpersonal conflict, socioeconomic and racial inequality, and political activism. It is as much a useful guide on effective

urban planning and the ethical tenets of community work as it is a grand narrative on persistence, hope, and building authentic community relations to achieve monumental outcomes.

The format of the book, centered on in-depth case descriptions and analyses, showcases the manners in which relationships were built between individual key community members, the faculty author and his colleagues, UIUC students, local clergy, activists, and others, all of whom exhibited or developed a strong sense of commitment and resolve for the East St. Louis community. Neighborhood projects depicted in the book brought together a massive cross-section of engaged actors—often between 100 and 150 community partners as well as university students and faculty working together for a common cause. In one instance, for example, 150 undergraduate and graduate architecture, landscape architecture, and urban/regional planning UIUC students participated in constructing a playground and establishing a farmers market as the sole source of fresh fruits and vegetables for the residents at a reasonable cost. The reader quickly develops a connection with, and an affection for, the key players, whose passion, drive, knowledge, and honesty are sources of inspiration.

Building Bridges is organized into 15 chapters as well as an afterword that provides a fitting follow-up on the central players and outcomes in East St. Louis's revitalization. Chapters 1 through 3 provide a historical foundation from community as well as university perspectives. Chapters 4 through 10 focus on community-engagement programs operating in different East St. Louis neighborhoods. The content in Chapters 11 through 13 highlights advanced community-engagement projects focusing on housing, rail, and education. Chapters 14 and 15 capture the essence of what transpired between East St. Louis and the UIUC over 10 years—and what continues to the present day. Reardon makes the strong case that successful community engagement is interdisciplinary. In this case, involvement of a variety of disciplines—including urban planning, architecture, landscape architecture, recreation, sports and tourism, and applied life sciences—was key to the progress made in East St. Louis. This, along with a critical update to curricular programming at UIUC, emphasized the importance of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary academic approaches to fostering effective community development. For example, previous program requirements in architecture, landscape architecture, and urban planning rarely incorporated content about the “historical origins, unique roles and contributions, key theories and concepts, technical language and basic methods used by those outside of their own narrowly bounded discipline” (p. 176), although once employed, graduates were certainly expected to work with other disciplines and develop mutually beneficial knowledge. However, as a result of the engagement in East St. Louis, several programs now have built-in interdisciplinary seminars, studios, or lectures. Another example of increased emphasis on interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary perspectives derives from a program, Urban Extension and Minority Access, initially offered as three distinct disciplinary initiatives. After three years of lukewarm progress, the program was recast as an interdisciplinary project, with much resulting success.

Building Bridges provides multiple examples that reflect how the residents of East St. Louis are often treated: illegal dumping of large loads of trash by private companies on unoccupied and neglected property in local neighborhoods; unmet promises from local government, higher education institutions, and nonprofits; limited security and police patrols; and neglect by area businesses. The testament to what can happen in the face of unparalleled resolve, faith, and broad-based support is compelling. For sure, anyone desiring to learn how to effect change in a struggling community that lacks adequate resources to thrive and promote health and wellness should read *Building Bridges*, particularly if their desire includes the role universities can play. Resources in the form of institutional support for faculty time and reward structure, transportation, student credit, materials, etc. are key aspects to any meaningful engagement, and they are depicted here in absorbing detail—the steps, successes, setbacks, and stresses.

To be clear, the book is not simply a “feel good” story about higher education community partnerships; it also highlights the hurdles and missteps that challenged and threatened neighborhood revitalization efforts, including political corruption, university risk management, communication

strategies, and participation in organized religion. Reardon artfully provides examples of how to mitigate, or in some cases capitalize on, these critical elements and tensions in higher education community partnerships. For example, one of the most disturbing but instructive chapters—Chapter 11, “Olivette Park, Backlash from the Political Machine”—describes the process of having to navigate local politics when accusations of academic colonialism and White privilege threaten to undermine and test even the most effective participatory planning process. In another example, Reardon describes an incident in which residents complained that they were being denied opportunities to participate in UIUC’s course offerings, which communicated an unintended paternalism and generated accusations of neocolonialism and privilege. As one East St. Louis resident expressed, “Most of us have never had an opportunity to spend a single day studying at a university like UIUC, yet [this collaboration] hasn’t provided neighborhood leaders with a single class to prepare us for our role in this important partnership. Such practices reduce our role to that of the flea on the tail of the dog” and while “we know you did not intend to do it . . . you have created a project that has reproduced a racist approach to community development that privileges the needs, opinions, and ideas of university-trained professionals over those of local leaders” (p. 163). Of course, managing expectations and serving the needs of all partners are keys to successful community revitalization. Reardon acknowledged and confronted this criticism by incorporating professional development opportunities for the community partners, leading one community member to respond, “As an older African-American woman from Mississippi I never imagined going to college. . . . You can imagine what it meant to me to finally attend college classes through this program” (p. 168).

While *Building Bridges* encompasses work in several different neighborhoods in East St. Louis (i.e., Emerson Park, Lansdowne, Winstanley/Industrial Park, Olivette Park, Edgemont, Alta Sita, and South End), the areas shared important characteristics: all were predominantly African-American, and at the center of each were churches—“the single most important institution within the African-American community” (p. 73). Reardon describes how some students’ objections to mandatory participation in religious services were overcome by reframing the rationale for attending the services, which had nothing to do with adopting religion and everything to do with demonstrating “respect for the community’s values and traditions” (p. 73). It is worth noting that several students spoke eloquently of the experience of attending a “Black” church and their newfound comfort and openness to learning through participation in such a diverse experience. Community engagement is, after all, about learning!

Reardon also describes the manners in which East St. Louis residents taught UIUC faculty much about the practical implementation of grassroots community change, even sometimes having to remind them about the principles of participatory planning. For example, when designing a youth playground, the university partners failed to adequately involve a key stakeholder—that is, the children—in the process. After correcting that initial misstep, the university partners had to earnestly accept and address the criticisms leveled at the designs by the empowered children as the process progressed. This example represents the real nature of community engagement: true reciprocity between partners with shared goals and mutually beneficial outcomes. The community offers as much, if not sometimes more, than the university representatives. *Building Bridges* offers these lessons, and so many more, in abundance.

Notes

1. *Legacy cities* refers to “older, industrial urban areas that have experienced significant population and job loss, resulting in high residential vacancy and diminished service capacity and resources” (legacycities.org).

References

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About the Author

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