Interrogating University and Community Partnerships: Reframing How University Engagement Impacts Local Organizations

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Benjamin Forman

Committee Signatures:

Sarah Michaels
Sarah Michaels

Eric DeMeulenaere

Stephanie Puente

Abstract

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Since the 14th century, people have written about the "town-gown" strain due to the differences between the "elite" university students and residents of the college town (Seybolt, 1921.) This thesis focuses on the relationship between Clark, an urban, research university located in Worcester, Massachusetts and Centro, the largest, minority led nonprofit in Central Massachusetts. Although only a mile apart, it has become apparent that there has been a series of disconnects that exist. I use ethnographic methods (participant observations, interviews, conversations) in order to understand Clark and Centro's definition of partnership and the sources of these disconnects. This work suggests that othering and differences in understanding of community (our streets vs. our people) as well as the differences in how each institution values partnership are the causes of disconnection. The hope is that this case leads to steps for change locally and the broader issues raised are helpful to others faced with similar challenges.

Sarah Michaels, Ph.D.
First Reader

Eric Demeulenaere, Ph.D.
Second Reader

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Table of Contents

Page

Introduction

A Snapshot: Centro's First Hispanic Heritage Breakfast
October 12, 2018 - Assumption College

3 Miles from Main South in the upscale Forest Grove neighborhood of Worcester was Centro's first "Hispanic Heritage Breakfast" at Assumption College. Assumption College feels far away from the urban center as it is set back from the road and adorned by trees, ponds, and a guard gate at the front of the winding driveway. In the middle of the campus, next to a large chapel is Assumption's newest building, where the breakfast was held in a large ballroom. The front of the room was framed by wainscoting on the walls and in the middle, a podium with the Centro logo. Circular tables dressed in white cloth and full table settings were filled with people proud to support Centro. The air was filled with the delicious smells of a catered breakfast and Spanglish chatter.

The breakfast was meant to honor Centro's partners and supporters throughout the years and it took almost a year of planning to find the funding and location. Tickets cost $50 a person, though many groups or businesses bought a whole table to meet the quota for advertisement at the event. Attendees included a Latino candidate in the Massachusetts' governor's race, local university presidents, and prominent Latinx business leaders. In total, there were over 200 people in attendance.

The breakfast began with a Christian prayer from the president of Centro before thanking everyone for their attendances. Each statement of gratitude and or milestone that was shared from the president elicited a large applause and even whistling from the

attendees. Both keynote speakers spoke of their family's immigration, which got claps and nods of empathy. After the formal speeches, I went to thank and congratulate Rosa who I directly volunteered for, but she was swamped with different organizations coming up to her to discuss future partnerships.

I was happy to see so many people interacting with Rosa and expressing their positive impressions of the event since it had taken so much work. She had also been worried about attendance and who would actually show up. Before the event I saw the list of those attendees and noticed I was the only one coming from Clark. I found this strange as almost every other college and university in the city had at least one representative going. When I asked Rosa about it, she said she had emailed our president and a staff member in the office of community relations, but neither had replied. I figured I would look into it and maybe even ask the office of community relations to support my attendance as they have a budget for community events. Upon following up, I got a very odd and troubling response. I was told that the office of community relations could not support a table because their budget had already been (mostly) used up for the year. I thought this was strange as it was October in the Fall semester. This meant I had to have professors and family members sponsor the cost of the table. After the breakfast, I would dive into what's really going on between Clark and Centro.

Piecing Together the Dilemma

The first question that came to mind for me was why wasn't Clark there when it seems such a natural fit for these organizations to partner? As a student and tour guide for the Admissions Office, I've seen Clark's stance on active community engagement and participation from students. Since Centro is only one mile down the street and very active in the city, it felt strange that I was one of the first students to ever work there. In addition, I had never even heard of the organization before a professor mentioned it to me, nor had anyone else I talked to on campus. This led me to reflect on how those "at the top," such as administrators, affect the relationships students forge with the community. How does Clark choose whom they partner with and what does Clark not partnering with Centro mean? Was there a bad history or did neither of them ever make that much of an effort? I had several questions swarming in my head as I pursued my research into their relationship. Ultimately, I decided to focus on questions that would give me the best idea of what's going on between the two institutions and why.

The first question is: **What are the sources of disconnection between Clark and Centro?** I wanted to better understand the history that created the disconnect between Clark and Centro, as well as understand how universities and nonprofits might be approaching engagement in a broad sense similarly or differently.

My second research question is: **How do Clark and Centro understand the meaning and value of partnership?** I wanted to clarify where Clark and Centro are coming from in

their engagement. Answering this question might expose how differences in power and status create challenges in pursuing a mutually beneficial relationship.

My last research question is: **Once an understanding of partnership comes to light, what can be done?** Only with deeper understanding of the first two questions could one be in a position to promote a mutually beneficial partnership between the two institutions. My hope is that my findings are not just beneficial for Clark and Centro but can serve as a perspective into university and community nonprofit relationships more generally as well. Understanding this particular case might provide new and well-grounded insights and hopefully push institutions to think critically about their own positions in their partnerships.

Ethnographic Background

In this section, I provide background information about my sites, the people I've worked with, and myself -- what I bring to this project, what my values and assumptions are. Since this last element is often neglected in traditional research on university and community partnerships, I want to begin with my own background and positionality.

Who I am In This Research

I grew up in a neighborhood outside of Philadelphia made up of the same demographic as myself, White and Jewish. I had the privilege of attending a private Quaker school for the entirety of my education before university, which played a role in both preserving my bubble and popping it. The school was laid out on 50 landscaped acres

in a different suburb, 10 minutes away. Many students were white, although it was more racially diverse than my neighborhood and offered scholarships to low-income students that couldn't afford the tuition. Despite this, there was a divide in social spaces and groups, which was the first time I was consciously aware of racial or economic divides in my own school or everyday experience. I remember in seventh grade going to North Philadelphia for a field trip to assist in a classroom. Many students were making fun of the area and yelled taunts at residents outside the window. I was very anxious as I had never been to an area so impoverished and quite frankly, black. Since the field trip, I noticed my internal monologue becoming less about how I'm anxious and more about who I am in that space, as well as the ways in which I othered. I believe this switch happened as in Quakerism, constant reflection is encouraged and when I thought about the trip after, I was troubled by the way I was viewing others and the little criticism I was placing on myself. Since then, I have worked to be more conscious of my own thinking when entering unfamiliar spaces.

The other aspect of my school that has stuck with me was the language program. All of the teachers were very well-educated and many had even worked in the field they taught about as professionals before becoming teachers. Since I was 5 years old, I had been exposed to amazing Spanish teachers, teachers who had grown up speaking the language and went to graduate school to teach the language. This helped me strengthen my Spanish skills and become a proficient speaker, which has opened several pathways for me, including the ability to work at Centro. I have also been able to speak someone else's language rather than expecting them to speak English, which has given me the opportunity to listen to more people tell their stories.

Clark University

Clark is located in Worcester, Massachusetts in the Main South neighborhood. It is the smallest urban research institution in the United States with approximately 3100 students total. The university is predominantly white in contrast to Main South, which is predominantly Latinx and Asian. Clark embraces the English motto "Challenge Convention: Change Our World" and the Latin motto "Fiat Lux" (let there be light). Another important characteristic of Clark relevant to this research are their community engagement initiatives. Clark has been honored by several national organizations for their commitment to the local neighborhood as well as the partnerships they have created within Main South (e.g., Princeton Review among others).

Centro Inc.

Centro is the largest minority, led non-profit in Central Massachusetts[1]. Centro is located in the Main South neighborhood in Worcester, about a mile from Clark. Their main mission is to assist families and individuals in becoming self-sufficient through services such as a food pantry, assisting in the citizenship process, aiding elders in recreation and health, and providing children in home therapy. Centro also recently co-created the NACDC (New American CDC,) which was created to build more housing and promote development in the area. Historically, Centro was focused almost entirely on the Spanish speakers, but has expanded immensely to better serve a wider population.

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[1] This is one of the first facts that the staff at Centro say when describing the organization

Conceptual Framework

My research is grounded in an effort to better understand the disconnects between Clark and Centro. But as I approach my data, I'm not starting with a blank slate. I come with particular interests, with ideas from the literature, and certain patterns I've seen in comments from people I've worked with. In analyzing my data, I've found it helpful to think about what I'm seeing through 4 broad lenses, which have emerged over time, and have helped me narrow my focus. I think of these lenses as my conceptual framework, focusing my gaze in analyzing my data. These lenses help me look closely how each side defines the notion of partnership.

The Other

The notion of othering comes from Simone De Beauvoir in her book "The Second Sex" (De Beauvoir, 1949.) She discusses how othering occurs from a gender binary standpoint, in which women are othered from men through the idea that men are thought to be independent and essential as opposed to women being dependent and inessential (p.2, De Beauvoir.) The idea of othering has developed as different ethnographers and philosophers have interpreted the concept differently. Two theorists that study othering in their book, "Representing the Other: A Feminism & Psychology Reader" look at the effects of othering from a broad sense, which has informed my thinking (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1996.) Their stance on othering is as follows,

"Others, by definition, are oppressed and marginalized by the dominant culture:

consequently, their cultures and traditions are typically represented as inferior or

pathological...we use the Other to define ourselves: 'we' understand ourselves in relation to what 'we' are not" (p. 13, Kitzinger & Wilkinson.) As stated from the Kitzinger & Wilkinson piece, there is an aspect of marginalization that is inherent to othering, which perpetuates the metaphorical distance between groups. The concept of othering has helped me to identify when I see this action of differentiating between "us" and "them" at Clark and Centro.

Poverty Pimping

I take the term "poverty pimping" from work by Cann & McCloskey (2014.) The authors focus on how a white tutoring project profits from black and brown bodies through celebrating their successes rather than how they were ill-equipped to work with the population (Cann and Mccloskey, 2014.) The article goes on to state, "Colleges have been accused of being 'poverty pimps,' using the surrounding community as 'pockets of needs, laboratories for experimentation, or passive recipients of expertise'" (P. 84.) This is seen through the acquisition of funds which the community sees little to none of, as well as temporary student involvement in community for resume building and in turn, the community seeing little to no sustainable participation. Poverty pimping is an idea I have seen enacted at Clark and continue to be conscious of throughout my project because it affects the perception other institutions are going to have of the university as well as presents a clear demonstration of how the power universities have over neighborhoods can perpetuate the exploitation marginalized populations face.

Communication

Communication is a broad notion and used to mean many things by many people. I use it here to examine intercultural differences, which is defined as analyzing the behavior when members of two or more cultures interact (Gudykunst, 2000.) In their book, "Handbook of Intercultural Communication," Kottoff and Spencer-Oatey identify "real-world problems" in this field, such as, "misunderstandings and the impact of cultural factors on the making of meaning; conflict and the impact of cultural factors on relationship management and development; gatekeeping and discriminations, the impact of unequal power relations on communication; and identity perception" (Kottoff and Spencer-Oatey, 2012, p.4) These issues are further contextualized and attempt to be solved through discourse as well as theories that investigate how these issues affect interaction amongst different populations. This literature has informed the lens of communication in the specific case between Clark and Centro, as the nuances and difficulties of intercultural communication arose.

Community

This lens has informed the ways in which Clark and Centro define the communities they are trying to serve. There are several different ways one could define community in "community engagement" as many types exist in the Main South neighborhood. One could think about community from a geographical standpoint in which the community are those who reside in the closest streets to yours. Another way to think about community is by identity, such as the racial and ethnic communities within Main South. These interpretations are important as how one identifies the community they are trying to serve

affects who they are going to partner with and the types of partners that will be formed. Based on my experience from admissions, I went into this project thinking that Clark may lean towards to the geographical interpretation of community. I made this presumption based on the partnerships that we are told to mention on tours are all within a few blocks of campus. I also had this belief because several students live off campus, but typically only within a quarter mile.

Keeping my preconceived notions in mind, I read literature on community engagement at the University of Pennsylvania, as their community engagement initiatives are well-known. Their office for community partnerships is called the Netter Center, which is led by Ira Harkavy (Harkavy, 2004.) The Netter Center released a toolkit on the part anchor institutions, universities and other large community stakeholders, should have in community partnerships. It became clear that their initiatives were geographic as the locality of engagement was emphasized throughout the kit. A statement from the toolkit I found insightful to the effects of place-based engagement is, "The geographical areas in West Philadelphia, immediately outside of Penn's investment area, are still challenged by urban social issues. The value of housing within the catchment area of the Penn Alexander School has skyrocketed" (P. 95, Harkavy.) From this quote, I understand how defining community based on local geographies can create investment only in certain areas, which in the case of Penn, perpetuated the inequity between the "investment area" and "the outside." Understanding how community is defined by Clark and Centro helps to expose the similarities and or differences in priorities and perspectives in partnerships.

Defining Partnership

My conceptual framework aids in building a foundation to understand what exists between Clark and Centro as well as frame what goes into a partnership. Through breaking down the notion of partnership into various components (my lenses), I am better situated to assess the relationship in a more systematic and specified way. In addition, recognizing the variables of partnership through different perspectives that are presented from the literature and comparing these with my own data helps to create a more comprehensive understanding of partnership.

Methods

In this research, I take an ethnographic approach in collecting and analyzing my data. An ethnographic approach is used in studying specific groups or subcultures and for my purposes, helps me to uncover the "why" and "in what ways" groups connect or fail to connect. "Ethnography literally means 'a portrait of a people.' An ethnography is a written description of a particular culture - the customs, beliefs, and behavior - based on information collected through fieldwork" (Harris and Johnson, 2000.) This type of research also takes into account the subjectivity that inevitably comes with a participant researcher. I find this important as I am invested in both spaces and a participant observer in both Clark and Centro, bringing my assumptions, previous history, and values to both sites. Ethnography (supporting constant reflection, triangulation of data sources, and member checks) also encourages making one's own perspective explicit. I found the stance of both a "reflective participant" and "not disinterested observer" to be helpful

during conflict or confusing moments. I could observe, record, and then later write about the happening, and follow up with more questions of my community colleagues, in my effort to understand the meaning of what was going on.

Participants

In this section of my methods, I will identify my participants – or key informants – who I identified, interviewed, and learned from. This participant section is intentionally in my methods as my identification of key stakeholders emerged from my research. Particular people in each site came up recurringly in my field notes as having a notable presence in the organization and neighborhood. Therefore, it was out of my ongoing ethnographic fieldwork that the stakeholders I wanted to focus on emerged.

Clark:

The Admissions Office: I have worked in admissions for the entirety of my time at Clark and have gained a strong sense of how Clark wants to portray their presence in the neighborhood based on "the script" admissions counselors and tour guides use. There is no written guide of what to say, rather at the beginning of each year, admissions coordinators traditionally pass down what tour guides can say. In addition, representatives from departments around campus such as the university police and community engagement give a spiel to the admissions office on what to say. All of the speeches we are given are solely from the perspective of Clark University staff and "sell the school."

There are no specifics that we are told to say, however the information passed down regarding our partnerships and community engagement are one sided and outdated. For example, we are told a fact we could mention is that 100% of varsity teams participate in community service. This is true, but teams cleaning up a local street for 2 hours counts for this fact. Another example is mentioning that our track is built adjacent to the Boys and Girls Club in the neighborhood so we can both utilize it. However, very few people actually have keys to the field, and it unused the majority of the time. I have found the admissions office to be an interesting place for learning about how Clark interprets their stake into the community because I have found this to be a place, from my experiences, where our initiatives and statistics are idealized rather than realized.

The Office of Community Relations: I first met with the vice president of the office when I was looking at Clark as a senior in high school as we had a mutual family connection. The vice president is an older, white male who attended Clark University. He told me about the University of Pennsylvania Netter Center and their influence on Clark's community engagement work. We also spoke about Clark's part in creating the local Community Development Corporation named the Main South CDC. His motto in community partnerships that I first heard him say when I was a senior is "alignment through enlightened self interest." One example of this phrase in action is the Boys & Girls Club in Worcester moving to Main South .Clark built their track there and in exchange the club helped the Main South CDC build affordable housing and has provided volunteer opportunities for students. This is the first explicit time I heard geography explicitly matter

as well. This office works with the office of community engagement closely to focus their work directly in Main South. I interview a staff member in the office of community relations, which will be analyzed in the data analysis section.

Centro:
In this section, pseudonyms are used to protect the privacy of those at the organization.

The Marketing Department: I have worked in the marketing department at Centro for over a year and have gotten to know each individual very well. Fernando is from the Dominican Republic and loves to joke around. He is very well connected to the area and walking down the street, people will yell to him in Spanish. At Centro, he works as a case worker for families and typically goes into homes to see the services an individual needs. Rosa is also from the Dominican Republic and runs a few businesses. She and I will "chismear"(gossip) which also helps shine light upon more transparent views from Centro staff. Betsy also works in the department, but she is newer and only speaks English, so there are fewer interactions with her. Lastly, there is the head of the marketing department, Maria, who I interviewed and directs the marketing projects that go on. She is also the point person for media coverage and community outreach.

The President: Jorge has been the head of Centro for several years. He is middle aged and from Puerto Rico. He attended Clark to receive his master's degree and is very familiar

with the school. Jorge is religious and often thanks G-d for his and the organization's

successes. He is very well spoken and bilingual in English and Spanish. Recently, he

helped to start the NACDC (New American Community Development Corporation) in the

same building as Centro. I was able to interview Jorge and gain more insight into how he

views Centro's impact, the importance of partnerships, and specifically their relationship to

Clark.

Data Collection

My data collection methods were consistent with traditional ethnographic

approaches (Carspecken, 1996.) Ethnographic research consists of, "spending considerable

lengths of time interacting with people in the study setting, observing and recording their

activities as they unfolded through means such as field notes, audio and video recordings,

or both. A hallmark of ethnography is extended, firsthand participant observation and

interactions with participants in the study setting" (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995.) In my

data collection, I wrote field notes and made audio recordings (with permission) in

informal and formal settings in order to best capture Clark and Centro's beliefs and

attitudes towards partnership.

Critical ethnography takes data collection one step further by interpreting and

connecting the information found to several variables. This can include inferences about

how power differences between sites and groups can affect data, how the researchers own

biases may impact interpretation and what is actually recorded as data and making

conjectures about the data can be connected to larger forces in culture and community

(Bernard H.R., 2002.) My field notes and recordings were collected with the purpose of being able to make inferences and connections upon analysis, with an interest in power, equity, and redressing power or economic imbalances. In addition, the field notes and recordings are a product of a long period in the field doing observations and interviews to interrogate and understand Clark and Centro's respective approaches to community engagement.

In addition to critical ethnography encompassing the above approaches, I also choose it as it best aligns with my epistemological stance. I believe research is inevitably affected by the researcher's own lived experiences, opinions, and beliefs as their own experiences and positionality impact the interpretation of the data, and even what is collected as data. This is a stance acknowledged by ethnographers -- that research presented should do its best to be transparent and impartial, but understands researcher perspective, assumptions, and positionality is inevitably a component of how data is seen. I kept these values in mind, worked to continually interrogate my own preconceived notions and assumptions (often with the help of my academic cohort) and worked to make my own assumptions explicit, when writing field notes and conducting interviews.

My field notes are mainly "chicken scratch," as I wrote down happenings or moments that seemed relevant or impactful to my research. This could include passing comments at either site or even jokes that seemed to have an underlying message, such as a co-worker at Centro commenting on my "fancy clothes." My interviews were somewhat planned as I went in with open-ended questions, but often let the conversation take its own course. I formally interviewed two workers at Centro and one staff member at Clark. The

particular people I chose were due to their heavy involvement and visibility within Main

South. The questions I asked both sides differed based on what I had thought they would

best be able to speak to.

I went into one interview at Centro with the following set of questions. She was not

as high up as the other, but I thought would have a clear idea of Centro's goals in

partnership as she is in the marketing department:

1. Do you find yourself code switching when you go into other spaces?

a. Can you think of any uncomfortable experiences that have arisen?
2. How do you define partnerships with other organizations or universities? What is a partnership to you?
3. Can you think of an instance where there has been an issue with a partnership?
4. Has there been an issue with Clark and do you have an idea why?

The next person I interviewed at Centro was higher up and I knew he managed a lot

of the partnerships that Centro had. I went into that meeting with the following questions,

although not all of them were able to be answered:

1. 1. How would you describe Centro's impact in Main South?
2. How do you think partnerships help you achieve your mission, can you give an example?
3. Do you think cultural differences hinder partnerships or create difficulties in understanding. It could be a language barrier, it could just be how you act in a code switch way?
4. How would you describe a mutually beneficial partnership?
5. Have mutually beneficial partnerships arisen with a university?
6. What are the reasons for creating the New American CDC?
7. What do you think of the TDI?
8. Would you ever sit at a table with the Main South CDC and Clark to collaborate?
9. Are there any other things you would say about partnership or about Clark/the Main South CDC?

At Clark, I interviewed a staff member in the community relations office. Similarly, to the previous interview, not all the questions were able to be answered:

1. How would you describe Clark's impact in the neighborhood?
2. How would you describe Clark's partnership with Centro?
3. Have you worked with the president of Centro?
4. What were the events they've come to you to sponsor that you weren't able to?
5. Have they ever come to you to co-sponsor a grant or anything?
6. Have they come to you about the new CDC?
7. Do you think they should consolidate with Common Ground or Main South?
8. Do you know Thomas prior?

The interview with the Clark staff member was influenced by my Centro interviews, so I altered my questions to get into more specific ideas such as the CDC's. I solely enacted field notes and audio recording in my data collection due to privacy concerns, which limited the imagery that could have been provided by video recording.

How I Approach My Data

In order to analyze my data, I began by scanning my field notes and the transcripts of my interviews and conversations, noting any mentioning (either explicit or implicit) of the concepts or lenses that make up my understanding of partnership (communication, community, othering, and poverty pimping.) This allowed me to compile quotes or moments where the notion of partnership either between Clark and Centro arose. Following these compiling's, I scanned for "key quotes" from the interviews that were relevant in any way to partnership and labeled them by category, such as communication or othering. In order to be categorized, the word did not have to be said explicitly, rather if
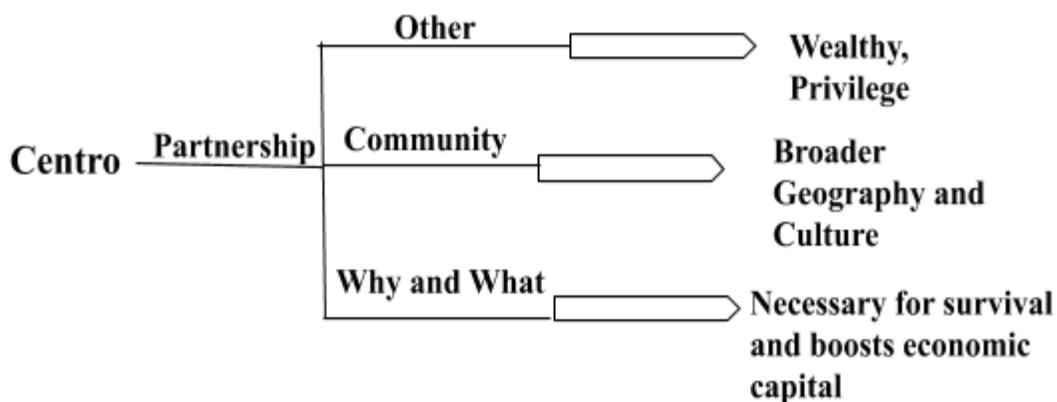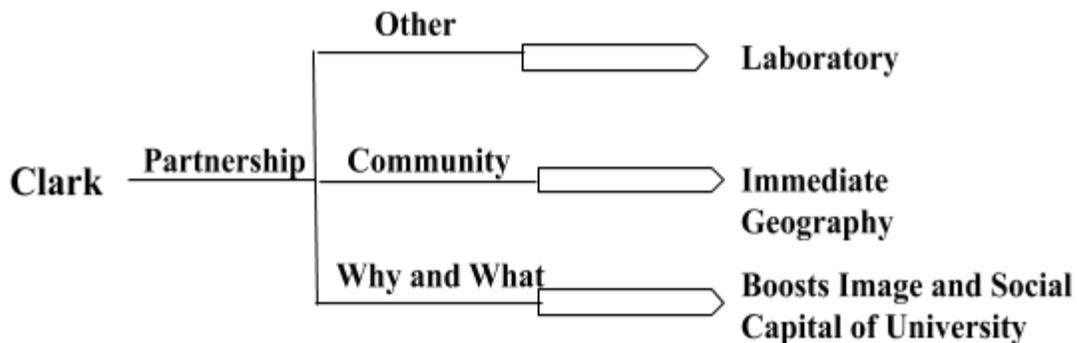
the term is in any way implemented such as "othering," or the way in which that person or site communicates is referenced, that quote is labeled.

After I had my categorizations and coding, I began to dig deeper into specific happenings and quotes. The process of digging deeper consisted of doing "directed free writes" using the moment or quote as a prompt (or query) This is a tool for reflection (a technique I've used in the past which derives from my Quaker education). The process is simple: you read the "query" (a quote or anecdote) and for a set period of time (typically 10 minutes), and you simply have to write -- without picking up your pencil). This forces open-ended but focused thinking about the subject. This helped me to remember other moments or quotes that connected or relate the moment or quote to the greater context of Clark and Centro. These reflections led to the beginning of my findings in regards to my research questions through my lenses. An example of this, which will be expanded upon in the following section, is how community is viewed differently by Clark and Centro based on a number of ideas/constructs relating to culture (ethnicity, language, experiences, relationships) and prioritization (goal, impact). I worked with initial codes, graphed mentions, and used this initial analysis to help me further develop my conceptual framework, which in turn led me to revisit my data.

Findings

I begin my findings section with my "table of disconnections" (Table 1) as it visually demonstrates my findings. The table is meant to provide a visual explanation to my first two research questions which aim to understand the sources of disconnect for Clark and Centro, as well as how they understand partnership.

Table 1: Table of Disconnections

Clark — Partnership

- Other → Laboratory
- Community → Immediate Geography
- Why and What → Boosts Image and Social Capital of University

Centro — Partnership

- Other → Wealthy, Privilege
- Community → Broader Geography and Culture
- Why and What → Necessary for survival and boosts economic capital

     The first two arms extending from partnership are "other" and "community" which are two terms I use to understand the notion of partnership. Although these terms were in my conceptual framework, they have a place in my findings section as I learned these are notions that come up in partnership. Branching from those are how those notions can be seen from Clark and Centro. The third branch that extends from Clark and Centro is "Why and What." These broad question words title my third branch as these are the ideas I was able to answer in regards to how Clark and Centro value partnerships. As evident from the

words extending from "Why and What" these reasons differ, ultimately relating back to a third disconnect between Clark and Centro.

Othering: Woo Rats Vs. Wealthy Whites

A powerful disconnect that arose in my research was the impact of "othering" that occurs at Clark and Centro. Othering has been something I've seen at Clark since arriving my first year and at Centro. I have noticed othering through oral expression as well as intentional "moves" that differentiate others. This notion of "othering" has disconnected Clark and Centro as the action of othering enunciates the differences and disparity between the institutions rather than the strengths and advancements partnership could bring. The following sections will offer observations and quotes from individuals at both Clark and Centro, which demonstrate the othering that goes on.

Reflection from February 7, 2019: It was my first time going to the Blarney Stone (our local neighborhood bar) on a Thursday Night. The Blarn as students refer to it, is a popular dive with Clark students as the drinks are cheap and the popcorn is free. My friends and I decided to go as one had recently celebrated a birthday, so we wanted to celebrate. As we stepped inside to where the bouncer checks ID's, I looked around and didn't recognize anyone. This was rare as on Friday's and Saturday's the bar is packed with students. I saw my friends with confused faces as well, but we still decided to go inside. We picked a table near the back to hang out and people watch. About 10 minutes into sitting down, someone we were texting joined us and immediately states, "It's all fucking Woo Rats in here." My friends nodded in agreement and we decided to leave.

The top definition of Woo Rat on Urban Dictionary: a local of Worcester, Massachusetts. Often show up at parties, they are sketchy and have no business at our functions (2003.)

I insert this definition from Urban Dictionary that was posted several years ago to solidify that "Woo Rats" is not an isolated case, but rather a derogatory term that has been passed down and continues to live amongst students as a way to separate ourselves. This term has not just been taken on by students, but also administration in a sense. There are cases that I and others have witnessed in which the community is said to be a "laboratory" for our research. This is fitting with the students' use of Woo Rats considering the role of rats in experiments as well as the treatment of rats in laboratories. Given the common usage of this terminology it is not surprising that the partnerships that Clark does have are either long-standing or located in very close proximity to Clark.

Reflection from December 5, 2018: It was one of the first snowy days of the semester, so I dressed extra warm before going to Centro. Without thinking anything of it, I strapped on my LL Bean boots over my J Crew Khakis and zipped up my Barbour jacket. When I arrived to Centro, I signed in and went upstairs to start my day's work in the marketing department. They immediately started bantering with me.

"Ayy zapatos de cuero caros" (Ayy expensive leather shoes
"Y esa chaqueta woah" (and that jacket, woah.)
"Donde vas despues de esto jaja" (where you going after this haha.)
"Los estudiantes de Clark tienen que dinero" (Clark students got that money.)

This wasn't the first time that comments were made about my clothes or about students at Clark, but one I remember the most vivid. At that point I had been working there for almost a year, so I had become much less conscious of myself. This is what surprised me about their comments. That a year later, they were still joking around about how I was different. I noticed while I worked at Centro that banter is a part of the work culture and in some ways when they bantered with me, it was a sign of being accepted and trusted. However, this time it felt as if there was an undertone that suggested my status as a student and upper-class individual is still the first way I am seen.

At Centro, I noticed pretty quickly how the staff there othered college students. Many workers at Centro had taken classes at Clark but decided to not continue with their degree due to cost, which led some to classify Clark as a "school for the rich." In addition, many students that come to volunteer for Centro come from another college about 45 minutes away that purely partners with Centro for the community service hours, which has created assumptions about unreliability and reinforced the "white saviour complex" that nonprofits often face.

The result of both organizations othering one another is a major hindrance to the possibility of partnership. I have found that the ways in which Clark students other is more problematic as labeling locals as Woo Rats and actively avoiding them is only perpetuating the ways Centro feels about students. Those who work at Centro are mainly minoritized people, which not only heightens the marginalization that occurs, but also increases the

difficulty for them not to actively "other" as others are constantly "othering" them. Therefore, I believe the notion of othering and the way it is enacted is a source of disconnection not only because each organization views the other in a way different than the respective organization would view themselves, but also the organization with greater privilege (Clark) is reinforcing toxic community engagement by referring to the community as a laboratory.

Community: Our Streets VS. Our People

The next finding regarding the sources of disconnection is how Clark and Centro define community. This idea of differentiating between what those at Clark and Centro meant by community arose during conversations about CDC's (Community Development Corporations.) During the observation and interview process, a large point of contention that absorbed much of the attention of key stakeholders was Centro's new CDC that is just getting started. The name of the CDC is the "New American CDC." Centro is located less than a mile from the Main South CDC, the one closest to Clark as well as co-founded by Clark. At first I thought the conflict between the CDC's was a question of funding, but upon further investigating, it became about need. The question or really argument that the Main South CDC was making is that a new CDC is not necessary as they are already serving the neighborhood of Main South, whereas the NACDC believes they are filling a gap that is not geography based, but people-centric.

I am beginning with this conversation of CDC's because it was very clearly important to Clark and Centro throughout my research, but also symbolizes the greater issue of defining the community differently. The conversations about the CDC first began

by a professor of mine telling me (in the context of our conversation) that there is bad

blood between Clark and Centro. When I questioned her further, the only comment she

would make was about the "CDC issue." I made sure to bring this up to those I interviewed

at Centro and this is where the conversation exploded into a larger topic.

I [13] asked one staff member at Centro about why the NACDC was created and he

responded with the following, "Well because, in all 5 of the community development

corporations, not one of them is led by...has the majority board of… or has hired a person

of color within the development and financing realms. And so, at some point, people of

color… Need to be able to do things for themselves and not rely or depend on others to do

it for them. And, we wanted to require the knowledge, expertise, and ability to do for

ourselves" (Centro Staff Member, 2019.) This quote was insightful as it focused on the

empowerment of those within the organization as well as who the organization intended to

impact. CDC's are traditionally geographically based, and while the NACDC does have a

physical region they aim to serve, they ideas introduced in this quote add another layer to

their mission, which is people-centric. When asked the same question, another worker at

Centro stated, "It was to answer the community's needs. You know you say, "are you

gonna help us, you gonna help us?" After a while you see they're not going to do anything,

then what's the next step? Okay, try and help them yourself." The piece on empowering

the people stood out brightest for me as her answer also centered around self-initiation.

In contrast to Centro's emphasis on people, Clark takes a more traditional approach

when I probed a staff member in the community relations office.

Clark Staff Member, February 2019: When I asked about why he thinks that the NACDC came about, he responded, "I mean there's some question about territory. I mean you got the Main South CDC already serving this area, do you really need another one? Is there great demand for it? They can do what they want as long as they can and I don't know what they need from the state. But frankly it came out of nowhere. And it may serve their purposes for development, but I don't where they stand." The word in his statement that sticks out to me is "territory." As organizations with missions to aid underserved populations, it is a peculiar situation to become territorial about. In addition, territorialism is traditionally connotated with geography, but from my observations, Centro does not see their CDC's mission focusing on a specific geography, as much as it is people. Therefore, a disconnect comes about in the conflict due to the organization's goals being approached in two different manners.

The way in which this comes back to Clark and Centro partially lies later in the understanding of how partnership is valued, but also the issue of how the CDC's are tied into each organization. The President of the Main South CDC has openly declared he will do anything to ensure the NACDC does not succeed (this is according to workers at Centro and Clark.) If Clark is openly supporting and funding an organization that is this blatantly negative towards Centro, how can a partnership occur? I have found the question of community to live in the source of disconnection category as the CDC issue has created conflict, however as mentioned before it also leaks into how each organization values partnership and emulates the greater priorities of both institutions.

Valuing Partnership: Similarities and Differences

A major component of my project was understanding how Clark and Centro value partnership. Throughout the research I was eager and almost expecting to find only differences that it was not until deeper reflection at the end that I realized there were similarities I should not discount. Data collected from observations and direct quotes from interviews both clearly stated mutual beneficially is desired. Both organizations had found that there was a history of being taken advantage of or attempts to be taken advantage of for funding or public support, but not seeing the same benefit as the other partner. Given the disconnects, I was surprised not that the same term was being used for what the organization's desired, but rather that there was a consensus around the definition. Clark and Centro stated they want their partnerships to be an equal amount of work as well as an equal amount of an award. However, despite this agreement on how a partnership should work, the differences continue through whom they partner with as well as why.

Continuing from the previous segment, how each organization defines community is a important component of how partners are chosen. For Clark, partnering with organizations that are within the immediate streets is highly prioritized as demonstrated by the continual use of the word "stabilize" by the worker in the community relations office. This word was within the context of stating that one of the main goals of partnering with immediate organizations is to "stabilize" the neighborhood. This is a part of the mission he believes Clark has for community engagement, which is "the alignment of enlightened self interest." This is to say, if Clark partners with you, Clark wants to see visible improvement

in the neighborhood whether that is safety, beautification or another improvement to attract students.

At Centro, partnering is also about mutual beneficially, but the who becomes much broader. As a nonprofit with limited funds, their goal is prioritizing reliable partners rather than immediate neighbors. More recently, it has also been about partnering with those that can enrich the people they serve. This has been evident through partnerships with local businesses on how to cook healthy with food pantry items or with art museums on showcasing more Latinx art. Both Clark and Centro are focused on partnering with those who can best serve their clients (for Clark, the students and for Centro, families,) but the approach Centro takes is much broader in terms of geography and type of organization. This brings to light a key issue of the research, Centro's desire to partner with Clark, but Clark demonstrating limited to no interest in Centro.

Just while I have worked at Centro, they have made several attempts to partner with Clark on a more permanent basis. I say this because Clark does host a annual Film Festival for Centro, but the partnership stops there. The evidence of Centro wanting a stronger partnership with Clark is substantial. Coming full circle to the snapshot this paper began with, Clark was the only university not present. The marketing department at Centro emailed Clark's office of community relations and president multiple times, but never received a response. A couple of months later, Centro honored the president of Clark at their annual financial report meeting with "community partner of the year," he did not show up. During one interview at Centro, it came up that Centro had called the community relations office at Clark to sit down with the Main South CDC, and they refused. All of

these examples are focused on Clark's poor communication, but I do this to show Centro's determination to partner with Clark as they feel can still enrich their organization despite geographic distance whereas Clark completely dismisses Centro due to the one-mile gap.

Moving Forward

Throughout this project, I was regularly thinking about what actionable steps Centro and Clark could take. For several months, I pictured key stakeholders sitting down at a table and I, the mediator, conducting a forum about how to improve the engagement that exists between the institutions. I also thought about sitting down separately with each stakeholder to go over how their institution could improve upon their practices to better the relationship. It wasn't until the final stages of my thesis that I realized that the "next steps" for Clark and Centro may not involve each other. The best course forward might be to continue what they have now (The Latin Film Festival and an occasional volunteer from Clark,) but not work to overhaul their current relationship. In addition, I have developed a better sense of my position within the two institutions. I have learned that while I have gone back and forth between both Clark and Centro and have a vested interest in both, that does not entitle me to be the bridge, or mediator, or fixer. Once I came to these conclusions, I was able to start thinking about what my role could and should be after this research when I begin my masters program next year at Clark.

When I think about the next steps for Clark and Centro, given these two understandings (that the future may not involve each other and that I should not be the bridge between the two), I return to the sub-title of my thesis ("Reframing How University

Engagement Impacts Local Organizations"). In this thesis, I have deconstructed the ways that Clark perceives their engagement with Centro, and I contrast this with the actuality from my experiences within Main South and at Centro. The action of reframing is about painting a more holistic picture of the partnership that exists, based on stories and conversations with those at Centro, rather than just from the perspective of the university. Keeping this in mind, there are two goals or "courses of action" I propose to continue this work.

The first course of action is working with key stakeholders at Clark such as the community relations office, to help Clark reframe the way it perceives the community and take steps to help students reframe the way they see the community. One step could be having a panel of local organizations that Clark has not engaged with as frequently to discuss their perceptions of Clark and the improvements in engagement that they would like to see. At this panel, I would invite Clark's key stakeholders to be in attendance so they can hear directly from these organizations. In my research, it was evident that Clark has several disconnects with Centro, and Centro is just one organization. I would like to dig up more information on the disconnects with other organizations to gain a stronger understanding of how Clark's approach to engagement may be disregarding important community organizations.

The second course of action I would like to take is flipping my title to look at how nonprofit engagement impacts local universities and take on a new. Throughout my project, I inquired how Clark perceived Centro's engagement towards them to be through field notes, happenings, and interviews, but I did not make it the focus of the project. In

reframing how nonprofit engagement impacts local universities, I would take a positive stance in that I would focus on collecting the benefits nonprofits offer. However, this project would not be constructed in a way that is advertising why universities should work with nonprofits, it would be conducted in such a way that frames nonprofits as anchor institutions in their own respect with power in social and linguistic capital that universities may not have. The steps I wish to take in the future are reflective of the foundation laid by my findings as they aim to expand the ways in which universities can produce more equitable engagement and how nonprofits can capitalize on the existing capital they have.

This project has prepared for my future steps as I am more knowledgeable about how Clark and Centro define partnership, this helps me understand how university and nonprofits interact in general. I have also become familiar with the personal challenges that can arise in doing ethnographic research. Developing trust and maintaining my relationships at Centro was difficult with scheduling and my own lack of confidence in Spanish. There were several times where I most likely could have collected more data if I had pushed myself to speak up in Spanish even if it was in broken Spanish. At Clark, it was uncomfortable questioning the status quo of engagement as someone who has been involved in their admissions and community relations departments. A particularly hard moment was interviewing a key staff member in Clark's community relations office. He had me turn off the recorder at one point because he believed I was taping his answers on behalf of Centro. In a way, this project had begun to break down the trust I had built with these offices at Clark. I never thought ethnographic research would be a smooth or clean process, but I did not expect that playing the role of the researcher would create the

suspicion and assumed distrust people felt. Gathering information as a researcher was much more difficult than before when I was just a friend or co-worker. In future research, I will continue to work harder to think through relational challenges and practices in order to maintain trust, but also still be able to engage in challenging issues. I want to be seen as a researcher in praxis who is working to be an agent of change through the work that I do in understanding urban community engagement.

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