




## Rapid Community Innovation: a Small Urban Liberal Arts Community Response to COVID-19

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### Abstract

Stories of community resilience and rapid innovation have emerged during the global pandemic caused by COVID-19. As communities, organizations, and individuals have had to shift modalities during the pandemic, they have identified ways to sustain community well-being. Prior to COVID-19, colleges and universities were hailed as anchors of economic and social resilience and well-being for communities of place. In this light, this commentary highlights stories of rapid community innovation occurring at Hobart & William Smith Colleges in the Finger Lakes region of New York. A series of vignettes are presented showcasing lessons and on-going questions regarding rapid pivots, community values, and diversity and inclusion during (and after) the pandemic. Overall, these insights can inform future local collaborative development efforts post-COVID-19 between colleges/universities and their local community.

**Keywords** Social Innovation · Community engagement · School-University partnerships · Well-being education · Service-learning

### Background and Purpose

Communities across the world have been shocked by COVID-19; however, stories of resilience (big and small) have arisen, showcasing rapid innovation during this time of crisis. Despite quarantine and physical/social distancing, various community stakeholders and institutions have remained steadfast in their foci on community well-being. For some local communities, colleges and universities have been sources of institutional support but also models of innovation. This rapid innovation can be purposed to

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uphold the well-being of the campus community among students, faculty, staff, alumni, as well as local community members.

This commentary features vignettes from students, faculty, and staff recounting responses to COVID-19 by Hobart & William Smith Colleges, a small liberal arts institution in the Finger Lakes region of New York, USA. The rapid community innovations found threaded throughout our interconnected campus and community took place from March to June 2020 during the pandemic. They are shared to highlight unique differences, establish common ground, and explore possibilities for community innovation during and post-COVID-19 to better understand how these responses can be leveraged to inform rapid community innovation as a practice to enhance community well-being.

Prior to COVID-19, the U.S. economy had climbed out of its recent Great Recession. During the climb, local colleges and universities were cited as sources of economic recovery and resilience, especially for small to mid-size cities (Bach 2019; Davis 2016). In terms of social and community resilience, college towns have served as anchor institutions for many municipalities, their constituents, and their enterprises (i.e., nonprofit, public, among others) to collectively work towards enhancing community well-being (Talmage et al. 2020a).

The large exogenous shift caused by COVID-19 has shocked communities both socially and economically, and this crisis has required rapid innovation. Colleges and universities can serve as hubs for localized community innovation aimed towards enriching community well-being (Talmage et al. 2019, 2020a, b). These innovations need not be aimed at large radical social change; they can be meaningfully small in scale (Talmage et al. 2020b). Overall, social innovation is more than imitative reaction; it often demonstrates novelty or, in the least, discovery (Shockley and Frank 2011).

This commentary features multiple stories of rapid small-scale innovation tied to community well-being at Hobart & William Smith Colleges and Geneva, New York, a small metropolitan area (~16,000 residents) along Seneca Lake, one of the eleven glacial Finger Lakes. To highlight moments of resilience during a crisis while also attempting to operationalize rapid community innovation, vignettes were collated from faculty, staff, and students across our campus community. Unfortunately, the traditional social science literature (e.g. economics, management, community development) is scant on defining rapid, small-scale forms of community innovation, especially during times of crises. Other more emergent and critical fields regarding space such as tactical urbanism (e.g., Lydon and Garcia 2015; Mould 2014) and DIY urbanism (Douglas 2014) can be drawn upon to expand mainstream social science understandings of rapid innovation tied to community well-being. For now, this piece intends to start discussion on these matters in the local development and community well-being literature.

## Centering the Responses in Place

Hobart & William Smith Colleges (HWS) is a private liberal arts college serving around two thousand undergraduate students with around two hundred full-time faculty members (i.e., ~10:1 student ratio). Class sizes average around sixteen students per course. The student body is 80% White, 60% non-New York students, and 5% non-USA students. Nationally, the school is known for its study abroad programs, alum



networks, and community engagement and service (HWS, n.d.). *Forbes* magazine has also recognized the school as a strong return on investment for students. This accolade comes in contrast to high tuition costs (\$55,835; \$71,600 including fees and room and board). To offset the high costs, 86.5% of students receive some form of financial aid (HWS n.d.).

One of the hallmarks of HWS is its Center for Community Engagement and Service-Learning (CCESL). Aside from CCESL's national recognition demonstrated by its 2010 and 2020 Carnegie Community Engagement Classification, CCESL spearheads collective impact efforts to improve cradle to college/career success for the children and youth in Geneva, New York. The initiative is anchored by HWS and is aligned with the national Strive Together Consortium and guided by the organization's Theory of Action. An advisory and executive board work in partnership with six action teams, and together with many stakeholders are proud that the graduation rate for the local high school has improved for Hispanic students by 8% since 2013 and for Black students by 14% over the past six years (Geneva 2030 2019). However, more progress is needed. Local children and youth also have improved in regard to summer learning and social well-being, which will indirectly have lasting positive impacts on local well-being (Geneva 2030 2019; Talmage et al. 2020a, b).

CCESL is supported by a Service-Learning Advisory Council (SLAC), which discusses and reviews programs that advance the teaching and scholarship of community engagement, including initiatives for curricular and faculty/staff development and assessment tools. SLAC meets around six times an academic year, corresponding via email/phone as well. This group of faculty and staff, with student and community partner representatives, works with CCESL to:

- Plan and implement engaged learning programs and events such as service-learning workshops, engaged scholarship initiatives, invited speakers, and other presentations;
- Provide oversight and feedback on the Community-Based Learning (CBL) Scorecard, CCESL's service-learning assessment instrument;
- Coordinate the annual Community Engaged Scholarship Forum (i.e., student presentations of community-based research projects); manage the annual selection of the HWS Civically Engaged Faculty Award, the Community Partner of the Year Award, and Compass Award for Outstanding Engaged Student Scholarship; and,
- Provide vision and advice to foster and strengthen the engagement of HWS with many different communities of place, identity, and interest, among others.

Geneva consists of around sixteen thousand residents between its city and township. Economic inequality and food insecurity are acknowledged as prevailing issues for area residents (Talmage et al. 2020b). Geneva demonstrates proportionally greater numbers of children living below the poverty line and households needing food assistance/SNAP benefits compared to national U.S. figures (Talmage et al. 2020b). Many local residents are also politically active, holding local protests and rallies even during the pandemic (e.g., post-George Floyd death by police in Minneapolis, Minnesota) (Buchiere 2017; Cutillo 2020). Aside from dormant winter months, the area showcases food abundance with robust regional agricultural systems, including farm-to-table restaurants, farmers' markets, food/farm-stands, food pantries, community-supported



agriculture, compost/growing cycle programs, alcoholic/nonalcoholic beverage enterprises, and university research stations. Finally, Geneva is home to approximately two hundred nonprofit entities (TaxExemptWorld 2020).

While HWS is the fourth largest employer in Ontario County, it is only one of many social institutions that has responded to the substantial needs in the area during the pandemic. This commentary continues by supplying a collection of vignettes from individuals affiliated with CCESL (some who serve on SLAC). These vignettes are presented in no particular order, but they highlight various rapid community innovation that occurred at HWS and in/with Geneva to sustain or enhance community well-being during the pandemic. After the vignettes, comments are made about commonalities and unique variations to enhance local/community well-being.

## Rapid Social Innovation Vignettes

### Responding through Community Engagement

The CCESL office upholds HWS's commitment to community engagement and community engaged learning across various facets of the HWS. Community engaged learning, as pedagogy, has had to shift given the challenges presented by the pandemic. Conceptually and literally, through interdisciplinary programs, study abroad, internships, and service-learning, CCESL proudly supports student learning in partnership with the regional and local community. Yet, social/physical distancing protocols and the necessity to be physically apart has forced us to rethink partnership, reciprocity, and engagement. CCESL staff and SLAC members have built their careers around a commitment to community engagement and student learning. The group of authors for this piece has been inspired by the innovative and proactive strategies implemented to ensure that community engagement remains a key underpinning of our liberal arts institution and relationships with the Geneva community during (and after) the pandemic.

Our (CCESL) office staff partnered with local communities to create a website [ConnectGeneva.com](https://connectgeneva.com) to help locals and students mitigate the impact of COVID-19. The website provided bilingual (Spanish and English) information regarding community resources and information about COVID-19. The website featured information and videos from community agencies and individuals. In particular, the website provided information regarding food distribution efforts and financial assistance opportunities. The website also allowed individuals to provide feedback about their pertinent local needs and issues. While individuals needed to be socially/physically distant, the website was aimed to bring people together virtually to share their experiences and address their needs. Also, the website provided socially distant in-person and virtual volunteering opportunities to the broader community. Finally, CCESL worked with ENTR 220 – Social Innovation at HWS to garner feedback to enhance the website and corresponding social media to promote user access (HWS 2020a).

It was important to the local and campus community for CCESL staff to be a part of the [ConnectGeneva.com](https://connectgeneva.com) effort, which primarily focused on Geneva community members, given that the vast majority of students had departed campus. When classes are in traditional session, community partners welcome students to their



organizations to collaborate on service-learning, community-based research, and internships. With the unfolding challenges precipitated by COVID-19 and students adjusting to off-campus and on-line learning, CCESL redistributed the time that would have been spent supporting Alternative Spring Break trips, tutoring programs, and the annual HWS Community Sale to [ConnectGeneva.com](https://connectgeneva.com). Through related weekly COVID-19 community task force meetings with social service providers and through co-managing [ConnectGeneva.com](https://connectgeneva.com), it became apparent to CCESL staff that Geneva community members did not have full zoom account privileges or a full familiarity of opportunities available to keep important conversations moving forward with the use of technology. CCESL staff thus hosted numerous advisory board meetings so that sessions would not expire at 40 min, taught partners Zoom tips and protocols, co-organized a bike collection for local youth, and helped facilitate a mask distribution effort in the local community. The collective impact initiative, known as Geneva 2030, also adjusted and created a YouTube channel of America Reads tutors who sought to engage students remotely. This initiative cultivated a list of virtual tutors to support summer learning and distributed a list of in-person and virtual summer programs available to K-12 students that honored NY state COVID-19 guidelines and regulations. This shift will hopefully bolster the value that HWS and CCESL place on being an active, invested, and engaged partner with the Geneva community whether students are physically present or not.

## A Global Instructional Reflection

“Environment and Development in East Asia” is an upper-level social science course that analyzes the relationship between commodities, communities, and conservation in Southeast Asia. After completing units on rubber cultivation in colonial Borneo and shrimp farming in Thailand, we prepared to transition into a discussion of the intimate relationship between rice cultivation and rituals in the lives of the Balinese. Before we could embark on our Bali unit, however, the way in which we would interact for the remainder of the semester abruptly shifted from in-person to remote teaching/learning due to the recent emergence of COVID-19, a novel coronavirus that would soon bring life as we knew it to a halt. As I prepared to teach about Bali in an asynchronous teaching/learning environment, I found myself taking refuge in the Balinese principle of *Tri Hita Karana*, which Fox (2011) describes as the three pathways for “achiev[ing] well-being” (p.x). The more I read about *Tri Hita Karana*, the more convinced I became that I needed to dedicate more class time to this idea, particularly in the context of a global pandemic that was “chang[ing] what we do and how we do it” (Phillips 2020, p. 107) in immeasurable ways.

While preparing slides for this new material, I soon settled on a plan that would allow me to first introduce the principle of *Tri Hita Karana* on an abstract level before transitioning into a series of concrete examples of how *Tri Hita Karana* manifests in the day-to-day lives of the Balinese. I would then draw parallels between this principle and *gotong-royong*, a similar philosophy common on neighboring Java that “takes the collective life as the most important” (Bowen 1986, p. 546). After spending time highlighting how *gotong-royong* (or mutual assistance) is practiced through “reciprocal exchange” (Bowen 1986, p. 546) of labor and resources across Indonesia, I would then task each student with identifying an example of how a similar ‘ethics of care’ may in



fact be evident in their own communities as myriad people across the world work together to ‘flatten the curve.’ Each student would then report back to the group, sharing details on the type of care work that was emerging in their local area in response to COVID-19.

The morning after the assignment was due, I opened the discussion board and began reading the students’ submissions. Some students aptly stressed how staying at home and physical/social distancing when in public are central to an ethics of care. Others went on to document specific instances in which individuals united to protect and advance community well-being the face of a common enemy: COVID-19. For some, care-work involved neighbors pooling resources such as cleaning products and personal protective equipment (PPE) to redistribute scarce items to those in need. For others, examples of mutual assistance were best captured by local efforts to keep every member of their communities fed, whether through public schools offering free meals to their students and their families or by local businesses delivering prepared meals to those on the front lines of our collective battle with COVID-19. Regardless of the particular example they elected to showcase, each student’s submission expressed a similar sentiment: A desire to see people put the well-being of their communities first from here on out. Thus, I am left wondering whether we might be on the cusp of a major shift in how we interact with one another. I only hope that the shift I see on the horizon is one in which leading with kindness is more the norm than the exception.

## **A Classroom Pivot**

After the abrupt transition to online learning in March, a faculty member in the Psychology department at HWS designed two assignments related to the well-being of children and families in the local community in her 200-level child psychology course. For the first assignment, students were asked to read a brief article about supporting children at home during the coronavirus crisis from the Child Mind Institute website (<https://childmind.org>). Through a discussion thread prompt, students were then asked to identify the following:

- 1) Challenges that COVID-19-related circumstances (e.g., physical/social distancing, schools closed) were creating for children and families;
- 2) Unique challenges that particularly vulnerable children living at or below the poverty level might have been facing (a theme emphasized throughout the course); and,
- 3) Creative ideas for activities that parents/children (preschool through grade 5) could complete at home, with links to online resources when possible.

A student in this course who was also a work-study student for the CCESL Office on campus was compensated for the time that it took her to compile the links posted by her peers. She organized the activities into categories that touched upon many domains of a child’s life such as indoor activities (e.g., various games, kid-friendly cooking, scavenger hunts), exercise (e.g., yoga videos for children), outdoor activities (e.g., exploring nature, obstacle course), arts, crafts and science (e.g., origami, lunch doodles, science experiments), online fun (e.g., math lessons, free audible books), and virtual tours (e.g., zoos, museums, theme parks). The course instructor shared this information with the



local community by posting a link to a Google spreadsheet in a Facebook group for parents in the local community,<sup>1</sup> sending it to teachers at a local elementary school and distributing it via email to faculty and staff in the college community. Several students in the course also shared the link with their own local communities (e.g., a mother who was an elementary school teacher, neighbors with young children). The students' contribution to the community did not stop there.

The second assignment with implications for the well-being of the local community occurred during the portion of the course focused on emotional development. In a discussion post, students were asked to identify a children's book dealing with the topic of emotion, to briefly describe the specific emotions included in the book and the lessons conveyed in the story, and to make connections with course material. Once again, the books were consolidated onto a Google spreadsheet,<sup>2</sup> which categorized the books by type of emotion and included YouTube links to full-length versions of most of the books. The spreadsheet included books examining a wide spectrum of emotions including happiness, sadness, anger, fear, anxiety, empathy, compassion, and frustration. The course instructor shared the spreadsheet link with a local community reading organization called Geneva Reads (<https://www.genevareads.org/>) who, in partnership with the CCESL Office on campus, created a poster containing a brief description of the assignment and a link to the spreadsheet. In addition to being posted on the Geneva Reads Facebook page, the poster was shared through the various channels mentioned previously to serve as a resource for parents who were looking for books aimed at helping children cope with their emotions during this incredibly challenging time when local libraries were closed.

### **Creative Placemaking through Participatory Public Art on the Web**

As part of an independent study in "Creative Placemaking," we, a pair of students guided by a faculty mentor in American Studies, set out with a two-part set of goals spaced across the weeks of our spring semester. Our first goal was to research the field of Creative Placemaking as an area of interdisciplinary study bringing together public art, civic engagement, social justice, and community planning (The National Consortium for Creative Placemaking 2019; Webb 2014; Wilson and Mantie 2017). Our second goal was to apply our learned theory to practice through the design and implementation of a local project in Geneva, NY. Within the literature of Creative Placemaking, we quickly found our focus in public art events and how they impacted the cultural, social, political, and economic well-being of communities. We were particularly inspired by planned events that were accessible to everyone and used the power of shared art-making and interactive storytelling to bring community members together in collaboration with local leadership. In addition to the ideas in Creative Placemaking, we also found inspiration in the work of two artists doing place-based work, Amanda Maciuba and Sarita Zaleha.

<sup>1</sup> Actual link: [https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1\\_r1WU-2QwV\\_1FBbxGBPYRFqiIHUvo4nI37VIn26W8UA/edit#gid=0](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1_r1WU-2QwV_1FBbxGBPYRFqiIHUvo4nI37VIn26W8UA/edit#gid=0).

<sup>2</sup> Actual link: [https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1athqnLC81wK\\_Uba40uDeUsk-MDsD2SEjOaHNKfinkUaA/edit#gid=0](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1athqnLC81wK_Uba40uDeUsk-MDsD2SEjOaHNKfinkUaA/edit#gid=0).



Maciuba, who primarily works in printmaking and bookbinding, interested us because she uses local storytelling in her visual work. Through community-based workshops and archival research, she assembles human stories, cultural landscape histories, and ecological narratives of the surrounding site to offer a critique of a local place's values, expression, and ideas. Maciuba's work aims to show how human actions alongside uncontrollable factors of time and nature (including something like COVID-19) come together to affect both what our landscape looks like and what our human agency is there (Maciuba [n.d.](#)). The artist Sarita Zaleha similarly engages with local places, but more directly through community dialogue in on-site textile workshops with visitors at her exhibitions. For Zaleha, visitor-participant storytelling at the exhibition site is as important as the "art," the textiles collaboratively produced (Zaleha [n.d.](#)). Both Maciuba and Zaleha produce political work and directly engage with the public through community-based workshops and dialogue, something we knew we wanted to emulate in our project.

In addition to their inspiring approach to art-making and political activism, these two artists taught us to think smaller in order to have a greater impact. We decided we wanted to produce a booklet with which we could direct a storytelling workshop at a community arts event for local children in early May before classes ended. We began working with two books to help guide the final project: *Once Upon a Time I Was* - a self-reflective journal (Bakker 2014), and *How to Make Books* (Smith 2007). Pulling ideas from these books and our earlier studies, we sought to create miniature books filled with prompts designed to help readers think about their life, experiences, memories, and their sense of place and belonging in Geneva.

However, as the global COVID-19 pandemic surfaced, we had to alter the project. Our faculty advisor would remain in town, but we had to return to our homes in other areas of the country. We would not be able to hold a local event with children and, even more so, there was an obvious new need for home-based activities for children to do might help them notice their locations with rosier glasses. Rather than holding an in-person event in our college's town as we initially intended, we began to pursue online methods of dissemination and move towards a free downloadable booklet geared towards children in grades K-5. As we shifted into online meetings and work sessions with our professor and each other, so did our final project! Creative Placemaking was not something we expected to go online, but that's where we took it.

After several weekly meetings and critique sessions, we produced three educational activities to promote continued learning through child-centered and creative methods. These are: the *Today I Am* booklet, the *Daily Comic*, and the *Mind Map*. All instructions and maps are provided in English and Spanish. We produced an informational website<sup>3</sup> to accompany the project and to provide a virtual gallery so that children could share their work and see what their peers were creating. While this project was originally going to run as an activity with 20 children in a park in Geneva, NY, the pandemic created an opportunity for much wider impact.

During our test of the project in early May, the *Today I Am* booklet activity was utilized by children in Columbus, OH, Geneva, NY, Los Angeles, CA, and Buenos Aires, Argentina. During summer 2020, *Today I Am* will be distributed with report cards to children enrolled in the Geneva public school system (1000+ students), the

<sup>3</sup> Actual website: <https://ceturino.wixsite.com/todayiam>



copies paid for by the Geneva 2030 initiative, which is supported by CCESL. We have received feedback that these booklets provide families with excellent ways to facilitate challenging conversations with children, giving children the space and tools to reflect on their own terms. In response to the success of the project, we intend to create two additional booklets to help children think about current events in ways that resonate with where they are developmentally. These booklets will guide reflection through drawing and writing regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and the current protests around police brutality and the Black Lives Matter movement. Ultimately, we believe that the pandemic's requirement that we go online for the project portion of the independent study helped us create a project with substantially wider impact not only in terms of the number of children served, but also in terms of being able to provide value to more families during our contemporary pandemic moment.

### **A Student Group's Strategic Answer**

Prior to COVID-19, HWS Votes, a non-partisan student group, primarily provided in-person voting-related experiences between students at our institution, ranging from voter registration efforts to civic engagement conferences. After spring break, we were met with the challenge of a dramatic shift to the virtual world and an unprecedented logistical nightmare in regard to voting. With elections continuing to be pushed back, the U.S. Census on hold, and in-person polling becoming less of a reality, obstacles began piling up during this pivotal 2020 presidential election year. Geneva political engagement groups also sprung into high gear maneuvering through a newly virtual world and learning how to communicate and spread information to their voters like never before. We began to work closer with the local League of Women Voters' chapter, discussing the Ontario County Elections and the political process in general.

After spring break, HWS Votes team began to discuss how to keep students civically engaged as well as brainstorm ideas for the ambiguous nature of the fall. In April 2020, we began to hold weekly political couch parties over Zoom to have a space for students to ask any questions regarding voting. We ran these meetings until the end of the semester and plan to extend them through summer 2020 as we prepare incoming first-year students for a momentous Presidential Election season. Along with these Zoom meetings, HWS Votes leaders also partnered with the intercultural affairs office on campus to host a meeting to discuss the election changes and help students register to vote.

While developing our ALL IN Democracy Challenge plan for 2020–21 this spring, we took into account that our efforts in the fall may be entirely virtual, entirely on-campus, or a mix of the two. With a historic Presidential Election coming in November, Plan A, Plan B, and Plan C will all have to rely on many campus and community partnerships to boost voting registration, voter education, and voting rates at HWS.

During this time of quarantining and physical/social distancing, HWS Votes has virtually built, fostered, and bridged community connections—and will continue to do so in the fall. Committed to inspiring a greater desire for political literacy, local residents and the student body can continue to come together. We are proud that despite the many things competing for the attention of our Colleges' President during the spring of 2020, she signed the All In Campus Democracy Challenge (HWS [2020b](#)),



which affirms a non-partisan institutional commitment to encourage students become politically engaged and participate in voting and bridge the disparity between voter registration and the voting rate. Despite the pandemic, HWS Votes recognizes that these efforts remain needed on campus (even virtually) during these continually shifting and challenging times.

### **Voices of Protest and Love: A Zoom Teach-in**

This project emerged as a first step to meet civic, academic, and psychosocial needs made front-stage by the killing of George Floyd at the knee of a Minneapolis police officer on May 25, 2020. Students, long-term community members, and faculty of color, most notably, demanded to be heard; while all of us sought to listen, learn, and mobilize politically in Geneva in which around three out of every four residents is classified as White (U.S. Census Bureau [2014–2018](#)).<sup>4</sup> Just as local and national in-person protests have been modified due to the epidemiological context of COVID-19, we sought to construct an appropriate framework for this gathering that safely met the needs of all participants while also acting to extend our reach outside the Geneva area. The Vice President for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion<sup>5</sup> on campus facilitated a small planning committee comprised of activists, faculty, and staff members to create the 4-h Zoom platform entitled, “Voices of Protest and Love: Liberatory Knowledge in the Hour of George Floyd” on June 13, 2020, as the first of an ongoing series.

Those of us on the planning committee felt compelled to provide a platform to amplify the work of the BLM (Black Lives Matter) Geneva activists (unaffiliated with HWS), an academic framework for ongoing learning about systemic racial violence and inequity, and a safe discussion space. The program that materialized digitally through these tenets prioritized such voices and worked to enable learning and healing. A recent alumna of the academic institution acted as emcee, fore-fronting her role as community organizer. Two additional BLM activists who opened the session with this call to purpose joined her:

We are here to think about what is happening and what to do about it. We are going to ask: What does true liberation mean? Does it mean the same thing for each of us? How do we go about achieving it? Who does the ‘educating’? Which voices are privileged and which are silenced? These are vexed and contested questions but when you live in a society where too many are taken from us too often, in a place where even requests to breathe are fatally ignored, these are conversations that we cannot afford to delay.

The program continued with a young poet’s spoken work, followed by a wide-ranging scholarly discussion about the intersection of racism and pandemic with a Geneva focus.

<sup>4</sup> This estimate includes the following proportions: 68% of White, Non-Hispanic/Latinx residents plus 6% of White residents who also identify as Hispanic/Latinx.

<sup>5</sup> Cosponsoring programs included Africana Studies, Intercultural Affairs, and the Office of the President; all of which worked closely with the non-collegiate local activist organization, BLM Geneva: The People’s Peaceful Protest.



As the teach-in continued, civic and academic voices alternated. A husband and wife team representing the local Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. Committee and the African American Men's Association, respectively, spoke about the importance of voting and community support. Colleagues at HWS presented condensed histories of Anti-Black violence in the making of the U.S. and the second compared Black oppression and decolonization of the mind in Apartheid South Africa with that of African Americans. Between these lectures, BLM Geneva activists built on this knowledge with perspectives situated outside of academic discourse by asking, what is going on locally? What is activism like? What are the challenges? What are your hopes? How is this connected to a national movement? The program concluded with facilitated Zoom breakout sessions to allow participants to reflect upon what they learned and to discuss how these ideas can be mobilized into action for social change.

One hundred and five people attended this first-in-a-series event, the great majority of whom stayed for the entire four hours. This session sparked empathy and renewed calls to action, but also productive and pointed critiques about the use of words and how relational authority can be applied to silence others. These could be interpreted as indicators of success. Voices of Protest and Love was created to promote a wide variety of voices, especially those of persons of color, from inside and outside of the academic institution that initiated it. Future plans include a physically distanced viewing and discussion of the documentary *13th* at a nearby drive-in movie theater and a Virtual Symposium on Belonging.

Despite the dangers posed by COVID-19 to physical grouping, these discussions and concurrent political mobilization could not wait. This Geneva project, resonant of global imperatives, emerged from the need to rectify fundamental social inequities constructed by systematic racism. The specific public health circumstances imposed by COVID-19 forced innovation in concert with accommodation. Positive results from this initiative suggest that during this dual alarm, productive bridges can be built between institutions and from the local to the global.

## Seeking Commonalities and Unique Differences

These vignettes highlight important intersections and differences in rapid community innovation spurred by COVID-19. Common intersections found across the vignettes are reflected in the set of questions below. The royal “we” is used below to encompass roles such as community members, leaders, policy-makers, scholars, educators, and artists, among others.

### 1. Rapid Pivots:

- a. How can we enable rapid innovations that spur substantial localized impact?
- b. How can we not over-rely on large-scale social innovations from big entities (e.g., corporations, governments, etc.) when opportunities for community innovation may be right under our noses?
- c. How can short-term, rapid innovation be linked to long-term, community resilience?



- d. How do rapid innovations take on “lives of their own” after the “school” project or the planned project timeline has ended? How do those engaged in such projects continue them forward or replicate/innovate them in the future?
2. Community Values:
  - a. How can we promote thoughtful reflection among our communities regarding community needs and assets, which can tie to rapid community innovation?
  - b. How have we rethought and recorded our community needs and assets, which can be used when designing future community innovations? What have we learned from virtual/remote engagement that will allow us to “do better”?
  - c. How does working under these unique constraints (e.g., pandemic, remote-learning, physical/social distancing, etc.) expand/inhibit local capacity-building?
  - d. How does the pandemic and its many impacts offer students and community members a sense of what is possible with their projects that would not have been part of their conventional learning experience?
3. Diversity and Inclusivity:
  - a. How have COVID-19 and large-scale events such as the George Floyd killing (and BLM protests) provided avenues for greater inclusivity in community development and education work?
  - b. How have forced shifts to physical/social distancing and utilization of digital technologies showcased inclusivity and exclusivity in community development and education work?
  - c. How have forced shifts to digital modes of work fostered unique opportunities to share local work on a larger scale locally, regionally, nationally, and globally?
  - d. In regard to digital technologies, which lessons have been learned that can be carried into post-COVID-19 life in order to enhance community well-being?

## Unique Differences and Conclusion

Can we come together while staying physically apart? This commentary documents a number of ways teachers, students, and activists have adapted to COVID-19, but also have embraced the opportunity to innovate. Several have underscored how empathy and kindness can be bolstered amidst increased isolation or taking on the challenge to make one’s work accessible and useful to those beyond one’s immediate community; still others have highlighted transnational connections during a time when distances between local and global lives are digitally condensed. These are hopeful and perhaps enduring innovations that can be applied to a post-COVID-19 world, though all are dependent on the resiliency of our social institutions.

It should not be a surprise that calls for racial justice have emerged during this period of enforced distancing. Greater social equity and access for all citizens will strengthen the institutions that knit us together. This commentary describes initiatives to overcome physical distance through pedagogical connection. All of the examples originate from an academic institution. Several of them express the intention to connect, support, and



give voice to neighbors who are not affiliated with the college. While connections are being made, the town-gown divide between the campus and local community that often exists remains an ongoing challenge, despite the economic and social benefits noted at this commentary's outset (Maranto and Dean 2015).

Social resilience is both the interwoven strength of a society to endure and respond to challenges such as COVID-19, but also a process of weaving together various institutions within a given community. These examples showcase this process in action. Different actors (i.e., students, faculty, staff, locals, etc.) will take on different roles, as demonstrated in our examples. Still, these various actors can and likely must act together to bolster community resilience and well-being. What if these efforts were better woven together from the outset? Where might communities be economically, socially, politically, or environmentally, among other domains? The pandemic and our community (campus and locality) have unearthed new strategies and partnerships to build upon even after COVID-19. Hopefully, others will be inspired to share their responses and act similarly (or uniquely, with their own creativity!) in the future.

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