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# Connecting People, Places, and Pollinators: A Year-long Classroom and Community Collaboration in Portland, Oregon

## Introduction

“Canvassing field day-rain or shine,” is prominently stated in the syllabus for Portland State University’s public administration course, PA 312: Foundations of Community Leadership. As planned, a group gathered on a chilly Saturday morning in October in outer East Portland, Oregon. Twenty-eight undergraduate public administration students, two nonprofit staff members, one instructor, and one teaching assistant huddled in a circle. Clipboards were distributed containing neighborhood maps, surveys, and informative flyers. Students were fitted with a neon vest and a name tag. Some showed nervous faces, and the uncertainty of talking to community members palpable. The group was gathered to conduct surveys with residents for local nonprofit organization, Green Lents. They were stationed around churches, bus stops, intersections, and the local farmers market. Nerves quickly fell away as students began talking to residents and collecting wayfinding information to inform the Lents Green Ring project, spearheaded by the local nonprofit organization, Green Lents. Students who participated in this canvassing effort on that cloudy October morning were part of a larger project spanning over the entire academic year.

This unique project at Portland State University (PSU) has been revolutionizing undergraduate community-based learning (CBL) efforts since the collaboration started in 2012. This case study involves a deep look into a year-long CBL effort involving three university instructors, two undergraduate student fellows from PSU’s Institute for Sustainable Solutions (ISS), Green Lents, a neighborhood-based nonprofit, and approximately seventy-five undergraduate students. In recent years, PSU and the public administration department have collaborated on several projects in the Lents neighborhood. In 2016, the Malden Court community orchard was a project that also involved more than 75 PSU undergraduates students and PSU faculty in the earlier development of this same model (Kecskes, Sumner, Elliott & Ackerman, 2016). That project, an earlier expression of the same partnership referenced here in this case study, was documented in the book *University-Community Partnerships* (Wortham-Galvin, Allen & Sherman, 2016). People, Places, and Pollinators (the 2017-18 centerpiece project of this article) draws inspiration from

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and builds upon the social sustainability revelations that emerged over the previous three years of intensive and intentional collaboration with departmental faculty, undergraduate students, ISS fellows and members of the Lents neighborhood (Kecskes, Joyalle, Elliott & Sherman, 2017).

The details of the Lents Green Ring project collaboration are documented in this case study over the course of the 2017-2018 academic year through the perspective of an undergraduate student fellow deeply involved with the project. The author worked closely with students of PA 312 and co-facilitated project planning and communication between university faculty, students, and community partner, Green Lents. This essay describes the salient aspects of this collaboration and shares notable insights from this experience.

## **Project Stakeholders**

### ***PA 312: Foundations of Community Leadership***

PA312 is an undergraduate public administration course within the Civic Leadership minor at PSU's Hatfield School of Government. This upper division course introduces foundational leadership strategies and ethical concepts that create space for everyday citizens to come together. In the classroom and alongside nonprofit partner, Green Lents, students generate passion and knowledge as emerging leaders, and work together to overcome their own personal, and sometimes historical or systemic barriers to community participation.

Students are encouraged to immerse themselves as leaders in their communities by challenging the misconception that there is hierarchical distance between leaders and community participants. This model of leadership is demonstrated in the classroom by closing the gap between the students, instructors, and undergraduate student fellows (teaching and program assistants). For example, in the classroom, students share the responsibility of leading the class through facilitation activities where they explore and discuss theories of leadership. In the field, the instructors and student fellows canvass alongside students, demonstrating the community-lead leadership style the course aims to instill. This method of teaching and facilitation translates directly into real work and community action. Overall, the course exposes students to personal leadership development and community engagement strategies necessary to enact real life social change.

### ***Institute for Sustainable Solutions***

The Institute for Sustainable Solutions (ISS) at Portland State University fosters collaboration between PSU faculty, students, and community partners. Its Sustainable Neighborhood Initiative (SNI) program provides funding and project management support for the collaboration between

Green Lents and faculty in PSU public administration civic leadership academic program. ISS supports a significant part of the structure of this collaboration by funding two undergraduate student fellowship positions (Institute for Sustainable Solutions, 2017). These positions help increase the leadership capacity, project scope, and peer-to-peer mentoring for PA 312 students in the classroom and in the field. One student fellow works in the classroom to help students understand theoretical leadership concepts that will be applied in the field and acts as an advocate for the students by being aware of their needs. The other student fellow is placed in the community with Green Lents. They focus more specifically on what roles the students will occupy while out in the community and navigate how student skills and experiences fit into the organization's project goals and mission. Both ISS student fellows remain in their positions throughout the entire academic year. They act as liaisons for the class and organization during project coordination meetings to provide a consistent connection between each of the academic terms.

### ***Green Lents***

Green Lents is a local nonprofit in Portland, Oregon that started in 2009 as a grassroots community group with a focus on environmental projects in the Lents neighborhood. In 2012, it was officially recognized as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Green Lents' mission to engage the community to develop a more livable, thriving community has manifested in various programs including a community tool library, a community orchard, and a pollinator habitat program (Green Lents, 2017a). The Lents neighborhood and East Portland, in general, lack basic infrastructure like proper lighting, safe crosswalks, and accessible sidewalks. Lents is also one of Portland's most diverse neighborhoods and about two out of every five residents speak a language other than English.

In 2015, Green Lents developed the Lents Strong Community Action Plan by conducting an inclusive community listening project, Livable Lents (Green Lents, 2015c). One of the resulting actions from the Lents Strong plan was the prioritization of the Lents Green Ring project. "The Lents Green Ring is a community place-making project that seeks to improve neighborhood safety, accessibility, and livability. Physically, it is a loop of neighborhood streets and greenways that need upgrades like better crossings, connected paths, sidewalks, and improved signage" (Green Lents, 2017b). This project had been developed as a concept through a coalition of various organizations that are focused on equitable infrastructure development in Portland. The Lents Green Ring's mission is to "connect people, places, and pollinators" (Green Lents, 2017b). These three concepts created a framework for Green Lents' collaboration with the students in PA 312 during the 2017-2018 academic year.

## **Overview of the Project**

The year-long community-based learning project is comprised of three, ten week academic terms, each with a different group of students, taught by a different public administration instructor. The unique structure of the course enables this work to transcend the boundaries of a ten-week academic term. With project management support from ISS staff and two undergraduate student fellows, the project is carried through the entire academic year. In the initial planning meetings between stakeholders in the summer, 2017, Green Lents was still in the early stages of the Lents Green Ring project. This left project details to unfold as the year progressed, each term falling into a similar meta-framework with slightly varying methods and outputs.

Students in each ten-week term went to the Lents neighborhood on several occasions. Initially, students participated in a walking tour of the neighborhood where they were invited to simply listen and observe as they walked a portion of the Lents Green Ring. Students returned to the neighborhood for a second time and participated in a two hour canvassing session. Final partnership outputs from each term varied depending on the needs of the community partner at that given time. During fall term, students facilitated a stakeholder meeting informing key players about the Green Ring project; in winter term, students planted a pollinator habitat with Lents residents along the Green Ring; in spring term, students co-facilitated a community forum in Lents.

### ***Fall Term: Places***

Due to the added capacity of students, Green Lents was able to conduct targeted outreach through intercept surveys. Students were stationed around the neighborhood on a Sunday, gathering information from residents concerning walkability and safety. Many surveys were collected at the Lents Farmers Market and in other surrounding areas. A small group of Spanish speaking students engaged with residents at a local church before and after the service. Students asked residents what routes they take to and from that given area in order to gather spatial information about where residents saw accessibility issues for walkers and cyclists. During the second canvassing day, Green Lents strategically stationed students near two neighborhood elementary schools. Students spoke to parents as school was released about the routes their children take to and from school to further understand areas for infrastructure improvements.

Students ended the term by leading a stakeholder meeting to showcase their work and survey results from Lents. This presentation left PSU faculty, staff and senior administrators as well as city representatives quite impressed. They were excited to extend and deepen their own engagement with this effort. Despite only being one term into the project, the stakeholder meeting provided fall term students with closure and purpose. While the meeting was clearly

beneficial to the nonprofit partner, it was also important to create a final output to nurture the motivation and engagement of students and the work they did that term. The instructor and student fellows intentionally chose to avoid assuming any formal role; students designed and facilitated the entire meeting.

The stakeholder meeting allowed the individual student leadership assets to shine through in different ways. Some students used their public speaking skills to facilitate the presentation, while others worked to ensure the room felt welcoming and inclusive. For example, one student created a mural that was displayed during the meeting; this artwork served as a creative response to the leadership theories discussed in the classroom. Other students designed informative flyers that were handed out by student greeters as guests entered. Seats were arranged in a half circle around tables that were filled with student gathered quotes of their experiences. The meeting exceeded expectations for undergraduate field research and nurtured Green Lents' relationship with local government stakeholders to gain momentum for the Lents Green Ring project.

### ***Winter Term: Pollinators***

The goal of winter term was to engage Lents community members on potential placemaking projects along the Lents Green Ring. The CBL efforts this term consisted of one door to door canvassing day, a story collection field day, and a pollinator planting. In addition to the canvassing training that occurred in the classroom prior to going out in the field, a de-escalation training was introduced. The training was held by a volunteer from the Portland Peace Team, a group that provides nonviolent conflict resolution trainings for the public. Due to the nature of the door to door canvassing technique, this training ensured students were well equipped with strategies to handle encounters that may occur on canvassing day. Students canvassed Lents door to door in targeted areas within the Green Ring, with a focus on placemaking projects like creating signage and murals as well as building benches, and pollinator habitats. Surveyed residents were asked to prioritize projects that they would like to see on their block or, in some cases, on their property.

Green Lents received a grant from East Multnomah County Water & Soil Conservation District for materials to create a pollinator habitat. Two homeowners were identified through student canvassing efforts to receive the planted habitats. In their survey, these residents indicated that they would be interested in having a pollinator habitat on their property. With short notice, they were contacted and eagerly agreed to have students at their home soon afterward. The students had no prior knowledge of creating pollinator habitats; while some had experience gardening, others had never even used shovel. One student said during their introduction to community

residents in the field that they felt extremely out of their comfort zone. In response, the homeowner, knee deep in fresh mulch, gave the students a botany lesson. It was not planned to have a high school science teacher and an urban farmer as community resident partners, it occurred serendipitously. However, as students discovered through praxis, the assets in a community are not always obvious but are often identified through relationship building and conversations. This was a powerful moment for the students as these Lents residents were identified through a student-initiated conversation on the canvassing day.

It is important to note that students did not enter the planting day with expert knowledge or understanding about pollinators, nor did they have the physical materials to facilitate it. They did however show up willing to serve, excited to learn, and strongly supported by our Green Lents partners with plants and tools. This group experienced a unique learning opportunity, one extremely relevant to community leadership: the knowledge they gained that day came directly from the community. The tone set in winter term was one of storytelling, capturing a place through different mediums in order to communicate experiences and interactions between people and places. Arc GIS Story Mapping technology was introduced in order to house field notes, maps, photos, videos, drawings, and interviews gathered by students during their time in Lents. During winter term students produced a Story Map representative of their experience. The output was produced as a work in progress, with the original intention to be built upon from students during spring term.

### ***Spring Term: People***

The goal of spring term was to culminate the efforts of all three terms to produce place-based stories for the Lents community forum that occurred in spring. The CBL efforts in spring term consisted of a community walkabout, one door to door canvassing day, one Green Ring story gathering day, and a community forum. In addition to the background presentation from Green Lents and ISS who again presented a partnership overview during the first week, the presentation also included a review of the work accomplished in fall and winter terms. Based on the success of winter term's de-escalation training, the de-escalation training was incorporated into the spring term canvassing instruction as students prepared to participate in more door to door canvassing efforts to build on the information gathered in previous terms.

In addition to conducting more resident surveys, students created place-based stories with the information gathered from all three terms. To accomplish this, students worked in five different groups, each highlighting particular intersections and neighborhood assets along the Lents Green Ring. Over 150 surveys were gathered throughout the academic year and digitized by students so they could identify themes from residents related to neighborhood concerns and priorities.

Students went out to Lents again, this time on their own, to gather photos and further engage with community spaces through conversations and observations. With the accumulation of student gathered information and materials, each group produced a large poster that displayed the assets and areas for improvement in a particular section of the neighborhood.

The community forum was held at a local elementary school in Lents on a warm Saturday morning in June, as students approached their last week of the term. Many students entered the forum with uncertainty, some were nervous about navigating difficult conversations from residents about homelessness and frustrations with City of Portland bureaus. However, students were quickly surprised by the level of interest coming from the community as the room filled with community members and other stakeholders excited to engage. An outline of the Lents Green Ring was taped on the floor and each group of students was stationed according to where there location fell along the Green Ring. At each station, small groups of students stood alongside their poster which detailed the assets and areas of improvement for that location, a zoomed-in map of the area, and an interactive sheet where residents could prioritize particular improvements with sticky notes and colored dots.

The small gymnasium of the elementary school was beaming with positive energy. There were toys and face painting for children, large colorful posters and maps filled every bit of wall space and residents shared food and conversation with one another, students, and city bureaus. Several students were at each poster; this facilitated high quality (often one on one) dialogue with residents. Student presence at the forum allowed for attendees to have personal conversations; students shared that some interactions lasted for 20-30 minutes. This deepened students' understanding regarding the deep complexity of and challenges often associated with turning theory into practice. During the production of the event posters and material, students were deeply engaged with the stress and frustration of organizing final drafts of material between stakeholders while also trying to meet critical deadlines. Students witnessed, and worked through, the complexities that take place in order to pull off a community event such as this. This experience was a lesson in leadership, as the most impactful leadership moments often happen through communication, patience, and compromise behind the scenes.

## **Project Impact**

### ***Students***

Through their work on the Lents Green Ring project, students had the opportunity to examine systemic issues while amplifying community-led initiatives. Students left this experience understanding leadership as an act of listening, observing, and encouraging others to



step to the front. Each group of students was diverse in their skill set, interests, and experiences. By allowing flexibility in project details, student interests and assets were able to drive and shape project outputs. As a result, students experienced transformational learning moments which were generated from situations that required critical thinking and problem solving. Through true hands-on engagement, students recognized that community building is not always as glamorous as it is portrayed in readings and class discussion. Due to the values and mission of Green Lents, students experienced authentic, inclusive engagement at the neighborhood level.

### ***Green Lents and the Lents Community***

Green Lents' partnership with PA 312 has greatly increased the organization's capacity for engagement throughout the academic year. As a small grassroots organization, operating with only three employees, students increased canvassing, engagement, and research capacity. Working with over seventy-five students, two ISS undergraduate fellows, and three instructors throughout the year added unique perspectives and life experiences which allowed the organization to do targeted outreach. For example, during fall term, a group of Spanish speaking students were able to canvass a local community church and received eight surveys from that area alone. During winter term, a pollinator habitat planting was completed in a matter of hours with the hands and feet of eighteen students, faculty, and ISS stakeholders. During spring term, students produced place-based stories that helped capture the assets along the Green Ring and gained input from residents during the community forum to inform Green Lents as the organization moves forward in planning and implementation. Overall, student engagement efforts helped the Lents Green Ring project gain momentum as Green Lents moves into the next stages of the project in the coming months. Over the course of three academic terms, students gathered and digitized over 150 resident surveys about Lents Green Ring related priorities and projects. Most importantly, through the process, students informed community members about Green Lents and formed relationships with residents at a much larger scale.

### **Insights Moving Forward**

Aligning with key insights from the course main text, stakeholders of this work agree that the most influential leadership moments happen through listening, observing, and acting through small gestures that make others feel welcome and heard (Block, 2008). These important moments occur when participants share space, time, conversations, and experiences with one another. CBL opportunities create a space where these leadership strategies, conversations, and connections can be made and explored. Below are some final insights intended for future stakeholders in this project as well as other universities exploring the concept of a year-long, nonprofit and higher education institution collaboration. When proposing this project at the beginning of the term, students often feel intimidated and overwhelmed by the scope of the

work. While some students step into this experience naturally, others have to push themselves far out of their comfort zone. Therefore, it is vital to the success of students and to the project as a whole that professors and student fellows provide consistent encouragement and support throughout the process. Instructors should be cognizant of each student's emotional and physical capacity to engage during each stage of this project.

While operating under a certain degree of uncertainty and flexibility is at times necessary for the project it can be very unsettling for students. College students are often familiar and more comfortable working under the traditional paradigm of a typical college course. The syllabus for PA312, which is filled with tentative dates and undetermined project requirements, can be startling to students. This project includes many moving parts and small details that are dependent upon the assets of the students as well as the resources and needs of the organization at that given time. This proves to be a powerful leadership lesson for students, as leaders often have to be patient and receptive of community needs and willing to be flexible as a result. When it is framed as a learning experience, students are often receptive to transparent communication from the instructors about project details as they unfold, as long as the communication and reassurance remains consistent.

CBL efforts depend on relationship building and thrive off of trust, communication, and respect. These relationships are not only vital between students in the classroom but are also important in upholding the foundation of a unique year-long project such as this. Stakeholders in this project depend on a large degree of trust and communication; balancing the needs and the capacity of a university and a nonprofit organization is undoubtedly a challenge at times. Through this process it was clear that both the nonprofit and the institution wanted structure but neither stakeholder could fully meet one another's needs at all times. The priorities and timeline of a ten-week course compared to the project timelines of a new and growing nonprofit are not always in line. Stakeholders have to work hard to find a balance between the two. Term outputs in particular would be more successful if planned prior to the start of the term to ensure that students and faculty are better aligned. Moving forward, flexibility in the process does allow for a natural progression as students bring forward different assets. However, it is important that the framework for the project is designed and co-produced by all stakeholders in advance.

## **Conclusion**

Community engagement is not flashy or obvious. It does not happen with large gestures but rather in small and quiet moments that often go unnoticed. These moments cannot be orchestrated in the project planning process. Designers cannot plan for students to spark up a conversation in Spanish with a resident, pick up a shovel for the first time, or connect with one another in a way that entirely shifts their perspective. The mystery in this work is that sometimes

the successes are small and take place during one on one conversations. In a year-long community project such as this, these seemingly minute successes and relationships can build and grow beyond what was ever predicted. CBL opens a door for transformational experiences--sometimes small, sometimes profound--for university students, community members, community organization staff and for university faculty. My own consistent engagement with this project has taught me that therein lies the mystery, magic and power.

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