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Recommended Citation

Dixon, Jennifer. "Rutgers Partners with Newark PL for Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation." *Library Journal* 5 Apr. 2018: n. pag. Online.

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Rutgers Partners with Newark PL for Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation

by [Jennifer A. Dixon](#)

Apr 05, 2018 | Filed in [Programs+](#)



Newark Public Library Main Library

Photo credit: Jim.henderson via Wikimedia Commons

Two New Jersey institutions—Rutgers University–Newark and the Newark Public Library (NPL)—have joined forces to bring racial healing and empowering dialogue to the campus and community. In August 2017, the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) announced the selection of ten higher education institutions across the United States, chosen from 125 applicants, to implement new [Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation \(TRHT\) Campus Centers](#). The AAC&U, with grant support from the Newman’s Own Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, provided an initial award of \$30,000 to each host institution to develop programming that addresses inequity and tension and to encourage racial healing; the others chosen include Austin Community College, TX; Brown University, Providence, RI; Duke University, Durham, NC; Hamline University, St. Paul, MN; Millsaps College, Jackson, MS; Spelman College, Atlanta; The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina, Charleston; University of Hawai’i at Mānoa; and University of Maryland Baltimore County. Rutgers is the only TRHT program to partner with a local library. According to Sharon Stroye, director of community engagement for the Rutgers–Newark School of Public Affairs and Administration, NPL was a natural fit as a partner in light of “the services the library already provides, the historical importance the library has already had in the city,” and its seven physical locations, which enable the TRHT Center to present programs throughout the city. Conducting programming throughout Newark is a key part of the New Jersey TRHT Center’s unique approach, she explained. “One of the things that we want to be for the community is a convener,” she said, avoiding “silos” of

services and programs. Rather than developing one physical location, the TRHT Center at Rutgers–Newark will encompass multiple spaces throughout different library branches. AAC&U has developed an approach meant to support program participants as they build up their own centers. This includes an annual TRHT Institute, which convenes TRHT grantees from across the country; webinars on topics like evaluation and “Healing Circles” facilitation; and an online collaborative space for the TRHT Campus Centers to share ideas, successes, and challenges. The TRHT Center at Rutgers University–Newark will “leverage our existing resources and filter it through a framework that looks at narrative change and racial healing,” Stroye said. To assess the success of the program over the three-year grant period, leaders will measure attendance at programs, gather responses from the community about “what racial healing looks like,” and monitor public media coverage to determine the extent to which public conversations about race and inequality have shifted.

A CASE FOR ENGAGEMENT

Tia Brown McNair, AAC&U vice president for diversity, equity, and student success, noted that the application review process sought out institutions with a coherent vision for advancing the TRHT goals of healing and open exchange. She explained that Rutgers–Newark, “with no majority racial/ethnic group among its students, broad differences across gender, class, religion, and sexual orientation, and other markers of diversity, made a compelling case for how [it] would engage...students, other campus members, and the surrounding...community. The race based turmoil that has plagued the city of Newark before and after the 1967 riots also made Rutgers–Newark an important place to begin the work of TRHT Campus Centers.” McNair also told *LJ* that collaboration with a library makes perfect sense for developing a TRHT Center, given the reputation of libraries for openness to local community needs. AAC&U has additionally collaborated with the American Library Association on creating “Healing Circles” for TRHT Campus Centers and local libraries, and found that library efforts connect with the “truth telling, narrative change, and relationship building” at the core of the TRHT approach. The team behind the TRHT Center hopes that it will facilitate connections between the university and the local community. According to Dale Colston, principal librarian with NPL, there “has been a perception that Rutgers University–Newark events and programs are for the academic community only, although many are in fact freely open to the public. The THRT team hopes to seek the participation of all Newarkers in on-campus events—and to encourage students and faculty to visit off-campus spaces.” The TRHT plan aligns with NPL’s strategic plan to become an innovator and to provide a space where the entire Newark community can learn from one another and come together for conversations about social ills like racism, sexism, and ageism. As Colston described it, “Library staff is excited about this project because it fits so well into all we do every day.” Collaboration with Rutgers–Newark will provide added support for citywide efforts to develop unique programming that speaks to the needs and concerns of diverse Newark communities. “Over the next few years, we hope that the THRT team—which includes students,

scholars, administrators, and other partners—will bring thought-provoking programs, meaningful dialogue, and cultural entertainment to help heal the city of Newark,” said Colston.

PROGRAMMING FOR HEALING

TRHT Center programming at Rutgers–Newark only began in earnest in January 2018, with events such as talks addressing DACA or the Charlottesville riots, or the library’s recognition of National Day of Racial Healing on January 16. The National Day of Racial Healing event incorporated spoken word poetry and art displays on campus, and Stroye described initial responses as “engaged” and “powerful.” The art displays and presentations related to racial healing, and encouraged participants to dive in to multigenerational and multiethnic conversations, giving patrons the opportunity to tell their own unique stories. Earlier in the day of the January event, Rutgers–Newark students and representatives from NPL set up tables in a public area on campus, to draw students into conversations and creative exercises on racism. Students stopping by the tables were prompted to complete crafts or to write down on pieces of poster board examples of words that they would use to combat racism or derogatory terms. Stroye emphasized that the Rutgers–Newark TRHT project is a true team effort, with a group of individuals from Rutgers, NPL, and the New Jersey Institute of Social Justice committed to meeting on a weekly basis to discuss plans and strategies. “The goal is to make this a fixture in the community” even beyond the three-year grant period, Stroye said. Overall, the Rutgers–Newark space is the beginning of a much larger-scale project, and organizers at AAC&U envision, in the long term, scaling up the program to 150 Campus Centers throughout the United States.

Association of American Colleges & Universities

Newark Public Library

Racial Healing & Transformation Campus Centers

Rutgers University–Newark

Truth
