Retrospective Analysis of Participatory Decision-Making in a Park's Construction in Lafayette, Indiana

Joshua Randall
Purdue University, randalj@purdue.edu

RETROSPECTIVE ANALYSIS OF PARTICIPATORY DECISION-MAKING IN A PARK'S CONSTRUCTION IN LAFAYETTE, INDIANA

Joshua Randall *(Botany and Plant Pathology)*

STUDENT AUTHOR BIO SKETCH

Joshua Randall is a graduating senior in Botany and Plant Pathology at Purdue University. He has been working in the McAdam lab studying plant ecophysiology and evolution for the past three years. Beginning in fall 2020, he will begin a PhD at Yale University in the Ecology and Evolutionary Biology program with plans to study urban plant physiology and the role humans have in modern evolution. He has been involved with the Purdue EPICS program since spring 2017 and worked with Faith Community Development Corporation on the park project since fall 2017. Throughout this time, he has served in leadership roles in EPICS and has been engaged in the local neighborhood meeting group, which serves as a source of information and collaboration for the project. In this article, he describes his experiences in collaborating with the neighborhood and how its characteristics have shaped the park project and his perspective of service-learning.

INTRODUCING THE PARK AND THE NEIGHBORHOOD

The People's Park or the Creative Park project has been an ongoing collaborative project between Purdue Engineering Projects in Community Service (EPICS), Faith Community Development Corporation (Faith CDC), and the residents of Lincoln Neighborhood in Lafayette, Indiana. This paper describes the tension between service-learning projects in external communities and the power structures that remain underdiscussed by students participating in them, as well as the necessary steps toward collaboration and inclusion of stakeholders in those communities. Faith CDC is a local nonprofit invested in improving the Greater Lafayette community through economic development and affordable housing. They have also created two community centers that Lincoln residents use, Hartford Hub and NorthEnd

Community Center. Hartford Hub has programming aimed at afterschool children to provide a safe space as well as other resources and events for the community. The present project was initiated by Faith CDC in 2017 as an open-ended request to increase local children's interactions with creative and complex thinking as well as decreasing time spent indoors at the Hartford Hub. With few parameters constraining the project, the EPICS team has focused on finding out the desires and needs of the community that would be using it. The result is a multiphase playground composed of puzzles and play components that include the ideas, themes, and needs of the children and neighborhood.

Lincoln is considered one of the poorest neighborhoods in Lafayette with an average income of $23,000 as well as being predominately African American compared to adjacent neighborhoods (Cedar Lake Ventures, 2018).

The City of Lafayette has labeled the area as an opportunity zone for economic development (Carlson, 2018). Opportunity zones are those areas where several governmental bodies have come together to provide support for increased development. In the case of Lincoln, this involves tax benefits and special city support for businesses related to medical services and the preexisting industries. For several years, the neighborhood did not have a neighborhood association or collective voice. Faith CDC has created a Lincoln meeting group to facilitate connection between neighbors and hopefully resolve long-standing concerns. It is composed of residents of Lincoln, Faith CDC employees, local business owners, representatives of the city, and nonprofits working in the area. Discussions in the meeting group acknowledge lack of income growth compared to similar neighborhoods in Lafayette, continued neglect by the City of Lafayette, and decisions by powerful forces resulting in maintenance of the status quo. The Creative Park itself hopes to provide an asset to the community according to their desires without requiring investment of funds by residents.

THE SERVICE-LEARNING COMPONENT

Through several iterations of designs, an interdisciplinary EPICS team developed a plan to build a tree house–themed park to be constructed in spring 2020. EPICS is a cocurricular organization at Purdue that focuses on service-learning and human-centered design. It focuses on "hands-on" learning with stakeholder partners across the world, but the Neighborhood Sustainability (NS) team has focused on supporting Faith CDC in Lafayette, Indiana, including the park project. I have been on the NS team for the entirety of the park project and the association with the Hartford Hub, but the rest of the team has been in flux over the past few years. My positions as a design lead, project manager, and project partner liaison have allowed me to consider the project from several perspectives. As design lead I focused on how we made decisions and incorporated neighbors' opinions; as project manager I have focused on the timeline of construction and preparing underclassmen; and as project partner liaison I began the work to develop our relationship with Faith, Lincoln Neighborhood, and other local groups invested in development. The EPICS team listened to neighbor requests, brainstormed how and what to include, designed a layout, and have been altering it to meet the regulatory requirements and changing needs of the community since fall 2017. Almost all interactions between EPICS and Lincoln residents is facilitated through a neighborhood meeting group that was resurrected in fall 2016, a semester before the project began. This limits the scope of discussion of the project as only regular attendees can participate and is likely to skew perceived opinion because of the demographic differences between the neighborhood and meeting group. The team has used the meeting group to present progress, ask questions, and seek suggestions on the direction and acceptability of decisions that have been made. In addition to the meeting group, the team has also used the Hartford Hub as a place to visit the children, use different kinds of games to gain information for puzzle design, and seek additional feedback regarding the status of the park.

THE PROJECT

To support the Hartford Hub in its mission, the EPICS NS team has collaboratively designed an interactive, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)–compliant park for the children of the north-end Lafayette community to enhance their creative and social skills through physical play and problem-solving. The Creative Park was named for the project request of a creative play space. Initially, it had few specific requirements by the project partner, which allowed the team to develop several different possible outcomes before choosing the current playground design. The primary needs described by Faith and residents of Lincoln have been low maintenance, no hiding spaces, a creative outdoor space, and a place that involves more children than the smaller play space across from the Hub. The park is to be located within a 50' x 70' lot adjacent to and owned by the Hartford Hub, and consists of two two-story towers and a platform connected by short bridges (Figure 1). In addition to play equipment such as a slide and climbing structures, puzzles and games will be placed throughout the park to stimulate learning, collaborative play, and creativity. To achieve ADA compliance, at least 50% of play components will be accessible to children via a ramp or the ground. Another unique feature of the park is a small-scale rock-climbing wall along the rear boundary of the park, serving as both a fun play feature and a barrier between the playground and a busy street on the other side. This wall is composed of a climbing wall using traditional hand holds, a wall made up of gaps between lumber, and a hardboard wall to be painted as a mural by the neighborhood. The green space in the front of the park will also facilitate physical activity in the park and provide a space the Hartford Hub can use for neighborhood block parties or other community events. Pervious pavers, rain barrels, and native plantings will be integrated to meet user needs of a natural structure and support drainage improvements in the neighborhood. In addition to these "infrastructural components," five
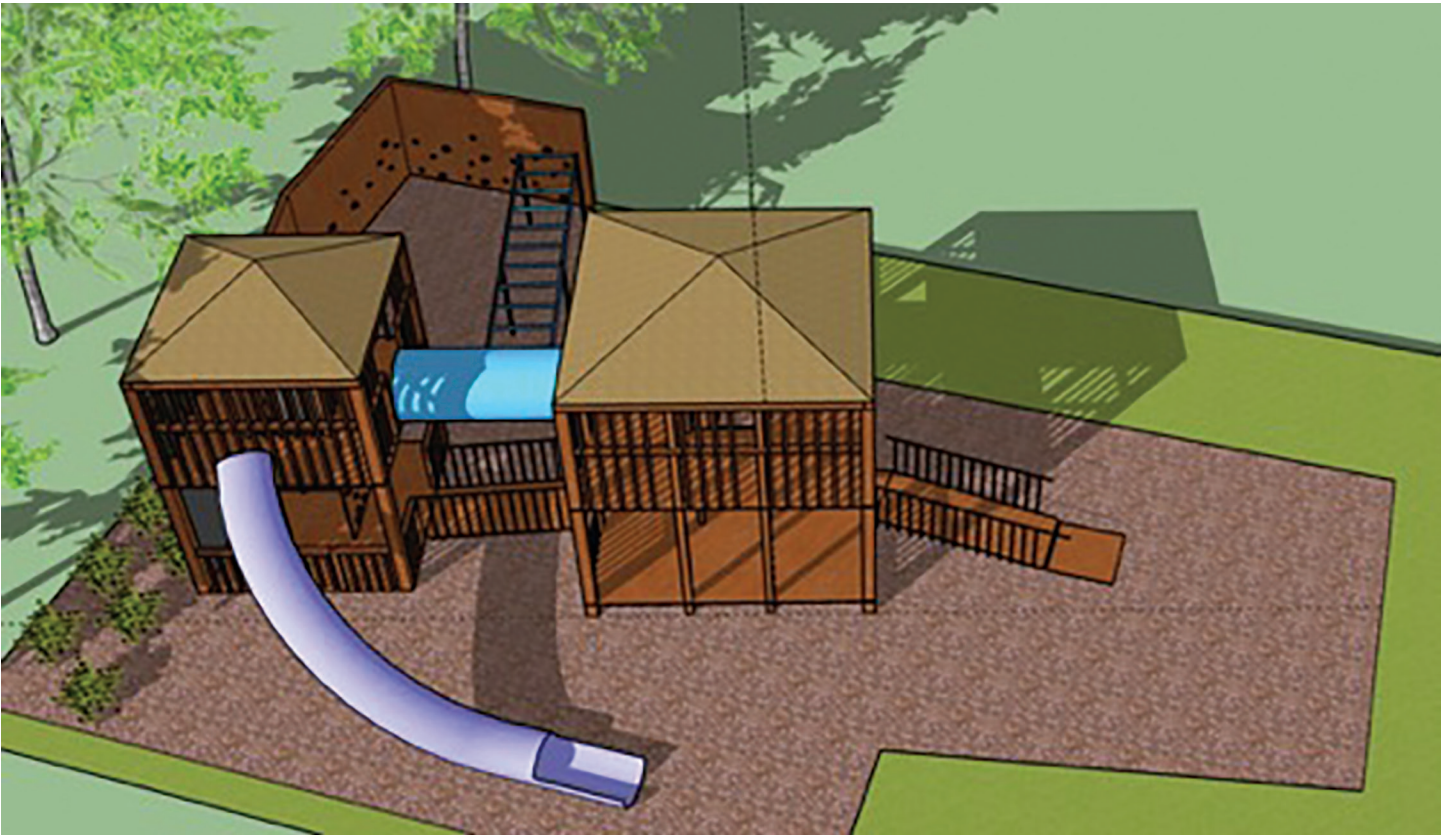
Figure 1. The People's Park, to be constructed in 2020 following the end of quarantine.

puzzle-based play components have been designed with the intention of being built into the initial phase. These include a music wall, a magnetic sandbox, a tic-tac-toe–connect 4 game, maze wheels, and a maneuverable ball drop. The park will continue to be designed according to a phase-based construction plan to ensure funding for the second tower and additional puzzles. Whether the primary goal will be a success is yet to be determined due to the stay-at-home order, but this four-year relationship with the community has helped me understand the intricacies of development and the dynamics between residents and more powerful city officials and developers.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Throughout this time two major themes have arisen: the collaboration with Lincoln residents is both complex and important to maintain the nature of the project, and the park project underscores feelings of inequality, stagnation, and colonization for the neighborhood that remain ignored by the city and developers. I will present positive and negative aspects of the relationship that we have built with Lincoln and Faith in the sections on collaboration and inclusion. Afterward, I will use discussions, meeting group documents, and official city publications

to discuss the inequality present in Lincoln that continues to underscore daily life and the interactions students have with residents.

COLLABORATION

One of the core tenets of EPICS is collaboration and support of project partners and stakeholders or "human-centered design." This translates to making decisions according to the goals and stated desires of those most directly affected by the project at hand. For this park project, this includes the children and families in Lincoln Neighborhood as stakeholders and Faith CDC as the project partner. To understand these goals, our team must engage with all stakeholders, a limiting step for many projects in Lincoln. Chianelli (2019) describes the strongest limitation of engagement as a general lack of a feeling of safety by residents. He proceeds to also list several other hypothesized reasons and while some of his points are valid, the stance that this team has taken toward stakeholders, as one of collaboration rather than providing a service, was explicit in order to prevent top-down decisions from adding to that list. In this context, service refers to providing projects to recipients according to users' description of needs and collaboration refers to developing projects through feedback and interaction

with potential users during the entire process. The initial change to one of collaboration over service came as a result of feedback on previous projects by gatekeepers from the city. Collaboration is more effective than service because it reduces the need for successive redesigns due to mismatched assumptions and encourages users to be more invested in the final products. However, the consideration of stakeholders as primary decision makers complicates the designations of project partner and stakeholders.

While safety has been a priority for this project and previous service-learning groups in Lincoln, limiting the impact of strong authority and increasing the voice of the users has always been critical to success. There are two strong reasons why collaborative feedback is more valuable than top-down decision making. The first is that safety is difficult to define and often is prejudiced according to previous life experiences. As I describe later, there was a homeless encampment around the proposed site; this was seen as a clear breach of safety by some individuals while a cause for concern for the individual by others. Another example is the specific focus on removing "hiding places" from the playground to allow for continuous surveillance of the children by volunteers. This is already something that is specifically defined by ideas of control, acceptable behavior, and what kinds of relationships strangers with authority are allowed to have. While this user need is planned to be included, there is little offered for preventive safety measures. There will not be public restrooms, needle exchange, night warming stations, or any infrastructure that could be life saving for individuals who are homeless or addicted to drugs. The second reason that the avenue for feedback matters so much is that this neighborhood is a historically African American, impoverished space. It has been consistently utilized as a labor pool for local industry and a space for the city to make plans around, including the introduction of the economic opportunity zone. As described in the section on inclusion, nonprofits focus on their specific goals and needs over those they have been tasked with helping even in settings of "urban governance." Public servants in the city have also described neighbors in Lincoln as lazy, poor role models, and uneducated. Including these dismissed individuals is crucial to beginning the social healing that the neighborhood needs.

Our implementation of collaboration has focused on the use of neighborhood meeting sessions and informal interviews with children at the Hub. Project initiation, user needs, and design components have been suggested and edited using these tools to ensure the project is reflecting the desires of the neighborhood. However, this strategy has also resulted in asymmetrical feedback and park design because of the nature of the meetings and the attendees. As described by Carey et al. (2018) and confirmed by anecdotal evidence from neighbors, there is both a wealth gap and a resulting power differential between upper and lower Lincoln. The project was initiated several years previously, potentially shutting out new opinions regarding the base components and decreasing the likelihood of engagement as new neighbors join the meeting group. Compounded with the group being primarily made up of Hub representatives and upper Lincoln residents, the opinions of the most marginalized are more likely to be unheard. This impact has been reduced as the children at the Hub are representative of lower Lincoln and their opinions are considered for the construction of the park. Issues of safety are shared by both upper and lower Lincoln residents, but concepts of value and, more importantly, ideas of ownership are lost without the integration of both groups.

Two examples of differences in values between upper and lower Lincoln include disagreements regarding how to respond to the houseless population present nearby and integration of sustainability concepts into the park. It was discovered in the past year that the space at the westernmost portion of the park is used as an encampment for at least one houseless individual at some times of the year. Human-centered design concepts should apply to all people regardless of their assets; however, several upper Lincoln residents and other organization leaders responded with suggestions on how to maintain safety while excluding the houseless. When the children at the Hub were confronted with ideas of houselessness, they suggested using the funds from our corporate partner, ZF, to provide tents and supplies instead. While it is unknown whether these are values absorbed from the children's families or the Hub volunteers, there is a stark difference between different residents in how to treat different kinds of people.

The second example follows from conversations in the meeting group and at the Hartford Hub about inclusion of native species and utilization of green space effectively. When asked to describe a perfect park, the children included fruit trees and shrubs as a crucial part of it, benefiting them. There was a lack of interest by the meeting group in sustainable plantings until a presentation by Wabash River Enhancement Corporation and Lafayette RENEW in February 2020. Wabash River Enhancement Corporation works to improve the land surrounding the Wabash River and disseminate information about clean water to residents in the Wabash River

Valley. Lafayette RENEW is another nonprofit that is focused on wastewater in the community and the impacts of combined sewer and rainwater overflow. Afterward, the conversation shifted, and the majority voted that the space needed to be used to limit flooding and include native plantings. Taylor (2000), an environmental sociologist, wrote that social location or position in society and in relation to different conditions directly results in specific understandings and opinions of environmental issues. Taken in context, these events highlight that understanding that values differ alongside wealth and access to power is important during service-learning.

INCLUSION

An important distinction to be made in inclusion is whether organizations are included in efforts to expand and at what scales this includes. Including as many people described or self-described as stakeholders in a project is key to ensuring success, but this can be difficult without previous attempts at organizing, especially in communities experiencing high mobility and safety concerns. A simple remedy is using the organizations that provide resources or are already supported by stakeholders. In our experience, the EPICS Neighborhood Sustainability team applies this strategy by involving officials from the City of Lafayette, religious groups, and now semi-informal structures like the neighborhood meeting group. This has been a positive strategy; however, inclusion of larger groups, such as corporations and strong nongovernmental organizations, can lead to the establishment of specific goals and value shifts away from residents' priorities. Martin (2004) described the role of nonprofits in urban governance, a neoliberal strategy of delegating authority to private organizations, and their role in oversight of development and organizing in different communities. We have been lucky enough that the impact of corporations has been minimal on the design, but the further the project stretches on and the more reliance we have on outside groups, there is a chance for new ideas to be implemented in place of residents' desires. Ideas about what should occur and when are easily compromised in the moment, such as inclusion of sustainability strategies at the park. I reiterate that the principles of individual stakeholders should remain at the forefront of all decision-making.

Inclusion of groups that may appear "invisible," such as people with disabilities and working families, is equally important as more vocal groups like wealthier, abled residents. During our design process, we have attempted to focus on including play components and characteristics of the park that would benefit wheelchair users and neurodivergent children. We have not seen nor been told of any children with these characteristics, but in a mobile neighborhood with a long-term deliverable, including support for everyone is a necessity. Our choice to include ADA compliance as a priority comes from three sources, current Lafayette policy, neighbor suggestions, and the principle of human-centered design. The City of Lafayette currently has a program to update and include ADA compliance in the majority of public buildings; as a new structure it is encouraged that we help meet this goal. One neighbor who has limited mobility has specifically requested that the park be made walker and wheelchair accessible for her. She is one of the longest residing neighbors and a consistent member of the neighborhood meeting group, which has encouraged us to retain ADA compliance. The last point regarding human-centered design can be difficult to define in projects like this because of the tendency for stakeholders to change, but as we have neighbors present suggesting ramps and inclusive structures it can be translated into ADA being a human-centered priority. These also play into a larger theme of shifting goals with the shifting demographics of stakeholders. Neighborhoods are not static, leading to changes in individuals, demographics, and values even over the course of a single project. Generally, ideas about cost effectiveness, ease of use, and safety are shared by most stakeholders of the project, but how this is actualized during decision making can change. Whether ADA is actually a priority and who will care for the park following completion continue to shift over time. To account for these temporal shifts in priority values and park maintenance and sustainability, we believe that having committed members of a project team, in order to maintain a sense of congruity and detailed goals, can help ensure certain groups of people are not left out at a certain point in time.

Providing a project deliverable that meets the expectations and needs of the community is necessary for the success of the project as well as for the neighborhood. This might seem obvious, but still requires reiterating as it involves making hard decisions that appear contradictory. The less obvious portion of this question regards the value of listening to stakeholders. How much do we listen? The goal is as much as possible, but when the stakeholders consistently say to make decisions without them, it can be disheartening to students. This can be worsened with the rationalization that caring about collaboration is youthful idealizing about reality. I think that this is the area that is the hardest to deal with, even keeping in mind the points that I have made about inclusion and collaboration. Our stakeholders are routinely excluded during decision making, resulting in increased

feelings of voicelessness, but this seems to be less of a concern than the completion of the project. Human-centered design requires consideration of the history and inequality engrained into the situation that we have entered, as well as reflecting on the dynamics of the relationships created between project partners, stake-holders, and the design team. The emphasis on inclusion and collaboration is important as new students attempt to engage with this community without prior knowl-edge and relationships to a devalued group of people. The next section will discuss more specifically why this project is important and the collaborative work done consequentially is as well.

THE PARK AND INEQUALITY

The park is part of a collaboration between Faith CDC and Purdue incorporating the desires of the community. As it comes from two institutions rather than being organically developed by residents of the community, we have to consider its relationship to institutional inequality and the impacts of capitalism on marginal-ized groups. Specifically, using ideas of common pool resources, mobile communities, development aid, and formal versus informal institutional frameworks, we can consider Lincoln Neighborhood in this context. As someone who has only recently begun living in the space under different socioeconomic and cultural conditions than the majority of the community, it is important to note that these are academic projections rather than exclusively ideas brought forth by neighbors.

Common pool resources are valuable resources defined according to the ability for many people to use them with limited methods of excluding others (Travers et al., 2011). These traits usually result in one of three situations: a body controls the resource using violence to ensure proper usage, the resource becomes private property, or a group collectively organizes the resource according to their own set of rules. This last option has resulted in more effective use and long-lived com-munities surrounding the resource, notably including Valenica, Spain for their water allocation canals and land management in Cambodia (Travers et al., 2011). Water and land are two physical resources that fit this cate-gory, but access to clean air and the ability to not live in poisoned land also meet the conditions of a common pool resource. However, this requires strong community relationships and a system to enforce rules. Commu-nity resources and parks can also fit into this category of common pool resources. Artist Kathy Evans wrote a piece titled "HARTFORD wormholes" that describes conditions in Lincoln that relates to this concept (2018):

Figure 2. An art installation in the NorthEnd Community Center including all neighborhoods in northern Lafayette. Lincoln is the southwesternmost neighborhood, composed of the three corner sections. The objects surrounding the 3D map are found objects from the neighborhood.

On Hartford there is no Home Owners Association defining the edges, life has a bent realism, a deep texture, and its own economy. . . . It was a light-filled refuge on a block with a lot of uncertainty and the beautiful rhythms of life as it moves with neighbors through the season and the years. Necessity removes the feathers from the nest, there is pain, problem solving, doing what it takes to get by. I had known my own version of this before I landed there and learned a new language. Decisions

made might seem crazy from the outside but there is an internal logic to regard.

This reflection describes how life is reliant on neighbors and that these communities determine ways of living and economy. This has been more specifically spelled out by the neighborhood meeting group by defining their own community assets and the value that they ascribe to them (Lincoln Neighborhood Meeting Group, 2020). During this past year, the meeting group has written and sent a letter to the Office of the Mayor of Lafayette highlighting their efforts, acknowledging their assets, and describing changes they would like to see in the near future: "Key assets, such as St. Elizabeth Hospital, historic Greenbush Cemetery, the former Lincoln, Washington, and Linwood schools, Lafayette Reformed Church, Coca-Cola Bottling Co., and Budgies reflect the history and spirit of Greater Lafayette. Other neighborhood assets include the Salvation Army, Transitional Housing's new Engagement Center, and Home with Hope housing." The meeting group acknowledges further that a great amount of recent positive changes have been due to their own collective efforts; additionally, they see the power of the city and institutions to further degrade their ways of living. Previous studies of the neighborhood saw consensus regarding negative changes made to the community, which are still raised at meetings this year (Area Plan Commission, 1995). These include the growth of St. Elizabeth, the growth of Salem and Union streets, and loss of public spaces and commercial properties in Lincoln Neighborhood. All of these points focus on a lack of control over the community by residents maintained by forces above the neighborhood meeting group but that could be confronted using principles of organization described by the common pool resource literature.

While other students have noted safety concerns as the primary reason for engagement with the neighborhood to be difficult, this assumes stability in the neighborhood first. Mobility, as described by Coulton et al. (2012), is often the strongest source of lack of engagement. Coulton is a community development researcher interested in neighborhoods and mobility. She describes five types of neighborhoods according to how stayers, newcomers, and movers consider the area and reasons for moving. Lincoln would likely be considered a trap or a neighborhood of choice depending on whether Lincoln as a whole or lower Lincoln is considered. This is important because traps have moderate mobility rates, but well-being outcomes remain the same or worsen, resulting in frequent short-distance moves. A neighborhood of choice also has moderate mobility rates, but

outcomes are improving, resulting in newcomers having a positive opinion in contrast to stayers. Many of the newcomers tend to have a positive opinion when attending neighborhood meetings, especially compared to some of the stayers. The rates of mobility are strongly linked to inconsiderate landlords with minimal methods of recourse, safety issues related to the war on drugs, and institutional attempts at destabilization. This final point includes both the expansion and subsequent retraction of St. Elizabeth from Lincoln and Hartford Street as well as changes made to Salem Street (Area Plan Commission, 1995; Hanna, 2020). Both of these issues stem from control from above without the ability for local organizations to be included in the conversation in a meaningful way. Decreasing mobility is associated with increasing well-being outcomes, something that previous Purdue groups have considered.

In addition to the two projects described in the *Purdue Journal of Service-Learning*, numerous projects have occurred "across the river" between Purdue and Lafayette neighborhoods. With the introduction of Faith CDC, Habitat for Humanity, Lafayette Transitional Housing, St. Elizabeth nursing school, and other organizations in Lincoln Neighborhood, it has quickly become a destination for service-learning. This includes groups focusing on teaching cooking, providing insight into community center management, small business creation, street water and erosion control, reduced-cost housing, houselessness, asset definition, and introducing manufacturing careers to children. Many of these projects focus on ensuring that community members are meeting goals set by the city, state, or organizations using a development aid approach (Carey et al., 2018; Chianelli, 2019). This gift economy of Purdue projects is helpful for certain demographics interested in the services, but in many instances, these have limited appeal and impact as described in *PJSL* articles. Cultural anthropologist James Ferguson, author of *The Anti-Politics Machine,* describes how international development organizations select specific communities in which to focus money and efforts toward solving "technical" problems of the economy without considering the impact of the state and different individuals during implementation (Ferguson & Lohmann, 1994). Students attempting to solve technical problems like lack of small businesses or the consequences of aging infrastructure, without considering the role and political agenda of those who implement plans and the stakeholders most affected, will likely see long-term qualitative measures remain unchanged.

Another consideration for Lincoln is the distinction between formal and informal spaces and privately

owned and publicly owned institutions. The list of assets described by the meeting group includes examples that combine each of these characteristics; a formal public space is Lafayette Transitional Housing (LTHC), an informal public space is the Greenbush cemetery, a formal private space is the Coca Cola Plant, and an informal private space is Budgies. Lafayette Transitional Housing is a nonprofit working in the community to provide resources to houseless individuals. The Greenbush cemetery is a historical, government-operated site including military and civilian graves. The Coca Cola Plant is an old private manufacturing facility converted to storage and distribution. Budgies is an ice cream shop that acts as a gathering place for the community. Formality in this instance refers to directed actions rather than legality. These are important because these distinctions also relate to ownership. While all of these assets were listed, the informal spaces are prioritized when considering community resources. In addition, the relationship between residents and the institution matters; Columbia Park, further east in Lafayette, is considered more valuable to the neighborhood than public resources that provide services like Food Finders and LTHC in Lincoln. Food Finders is a nonprofit food bank available to low income residents in Tippecanoe and adjacent counties. These two provide services that keep many people alive. Lincoln does not have a dearth of assets, but the type that they conform to results in many residents not recognizing them.

I have been very fortunate to work on this project alongside many people who care deeply about their community in order to improve well-being. I also know that many other students who have worked alongside me and in other projects in Lincoln have come to the community with good intentions and left with positive feelings. However, acknowledging that we can improve as an academic institution in how we relate to our neighbors is a necessary step to seeing the material conditions of Lincoln and its residents improve. I believe that encouraging the preexisting organizations and relationships in the community without presupposing necessary steps or goals would go a long way in this regard.

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