

Enacting Environmental Justice Through the Undergraduate Classroom: The Transformative Potential of Community Engaged Partnerships

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Abstract

In this paper, we document our efforts, as activist scholars, to cultivate among our liberal arts students a critical environmental justice consciousness through engaging with community organizations. We detail our efforts to make the classroom a space in which to engage environmental justice beyond a narrow and short-term focus on the disproportionate impact of environmental harms in low-income and minority communities to a more expansive and consistent attention to histories of inequality and processes of marginalization. We argue that community engaged partnerships afford opportunities for educators to combine theory with practice and disrupt students’ assumptions about what or who constitutes the environment. Our socially privileged students, in gaining a better understanding of structural/historic privilege and how their own positionality implicates them in environmental injustice, have been able to re-evaluate and reframe their political and theoretical commitments and carve out meaningful ways to contribute to environmental justice work.

Cultivating a Critical Environmental Justice Consciousness

Nestled among the picturesque San Gabriel foothills in Southern California lie the Claremont Colleges. As part of an elite consortium of liberal arts colleges, these institutions boast access to a variety of resources and are increasingly popular among students who wish to pursue majors in environmental analysis. While many Claremont students are drawn to environmental issues because of personal connections with the “great outdoors,” such experiences, as critics have long noted, are also inherently raced and classed. For example, when students are asked about why they are drawn to environmental studies, responses typically include reflections on personal engagements with wilderness camping, identification of figures such as John Muir as key environmental heroes, and a desire to “save the earth” more generally (Cronon, 1996; Merchant, 2003; Romm, 2002). Such inclinations, while legitimate, also reveal class- and race-specific trajectories into environmentalism and underscore privileged access to transportation, equipment, and open spaces, the reification of particular figures as the face/founders of “the” environmental movement in the United States, and a more general tendency whereby students do not interrogate or acknowledge structural and historical processes which might lead to environmental crises, or their own positionality in relation to such processes and intersections (Crenshaw, 1991; Guthman, 2008; White, 1996).

In response to such realities, which we dare say are shared by other liberal arts institutions, this paper seeks to document our institutional and curricular efforts—as scholar activists—to cultivate among our students a critical environmental justice (EJ) consciousness through collaborative community engaged partnerships. We define critical EJ consciousness as a perspective and awareness that moves beyond a narrow and short-term focus on the disproportionate impact of environmental harms in low-income and minority communities (pedagogically, for example, EJ is often relegated to a one- or two-week module within another environmental studies course) to a more expansive and consistent attention to histories of inequality and processes of marginalization.

Cultivating a critical environmental consciousness from an environmental justice perspective will, of course, vary depending on the institutional context and make-up of the student body. As feminist scholars of color whose students are primarily upper-income, white, U.S. citizens, we find it necessary to start from a conceptual and theoretical standpoint that accounts for the structural forces that produce environmental injustice, in addition to focusing on how environmental harms impact minority communities. We do this in order to critically examine both how racialization manifests as a process and an achievement, and how power operates within and between groups.

In our classes, we thus constantly attend to this metalanguage of race and note how teaching

about environmental racism, as perpetuated by historically specific policies, practices, or directives that “differentially impact or disadvantage [whether intended or unintended] individuals, groups, or communities based on race or color,” may also encourage whites to “suspend their awareness of persistent racialized distributions of privilege and to look only for expressions of racialized disadvantage” (Murphy, 2006, p. 113). Consider this all too common student response to a question we posed at the start of the semester: what comes to mind when you think of Environmental Justice? More often than not, responses will be some variation on the theme that environmental justice is “environmental issues for people of color,” (coded in various ways as “about pollution in inner-cities,” or “people’s lack of access to resources,” etc.). Such answers, while partly accurate, frame environmental justice in terms of impacted communities rather than a deeper exploration of how white privilege—as “the hegemonic structures, practices, and ideologies that reproduce whites’ privileged status—intersects with class and gender to produce different degrees of environmental justice (or a lack thereof) for different players (Pulido, 2000, p. 15). In our classrooms, then, cultivating a critical EJ consciousness is inseparable from the exhausting and often fraught work, given our own raced and gendered positionalities, of constantly interrogating white privilege (Strobel, 2004).

Fortunately, a growing number of higher education environmental studies programs and courses are moving in the direction of engaging a critical EJ consciousness through their curricula and pedagogy. Reflecting the growth and direction of the EJ scholarly literature over the past 15 years (Holifield, Porter, & Walker, 2009; Mohai, Pellow, & Roberts, 2009; Pulido, 2000; Sze & London, 2008; Turner & Wu, 2002; Williams, 1999)—as it has moved beyond first generation siting studies of the 1990s (Anderton, Anderson, Oakes, & Fraser, 1994; Been & Gupta, 1997; Bullard, 1994) to become more nuanced, theoretically rigorous, and expansive in its analysis of environmental ills—there are now entire college courses devoted solely to the topic of Environmental Justice. A quick Google search for “environmental justice course syllabus,” while not comprehensive, results in well over thirty EJ syllabi from academic institutions ranging from research universities to liberal arts colleges. While these syllabi feature different scholarship and disciplinary approaches, they are significant in that they represent an opportunity for students to have a sustained focus on issues and

processes of environmental and social inequality. More importantly, these EJ courses tend to incorporate community-based projects, which require students to engage directly with EJ organizing efforts on the ground. We argue that this combination of theory and practice holds the potential to disrupt fixed assumptions about what or who constitutes the environment, and might serve to partly unmask the ways in which environmental injustices are produced through “fatal couplings of power and difference” (Gilmore, 2002). In the following article, we explore and analyze one such community engaged partnership, and critically reflect on its potential and limits in fostering a critical EJ consciousness among our students.

Community Engagement in Our Own Back Yards

In order to more deeply understand processes that produce environmental injustice, and then combat these forces in partnership with community groups, we start by engaging EJ in our own backyards. To this end, we focus on the Inland region of Southern California, which is at the center of an expanding goods movement industry that originates from the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach and stretches eastwards to the inland regions. Scholars have documented numerous negative environmental injustices associated with this industry, including increased air pollution from diesel trucks and trains, and low-wage contingent work in the warehousing sector, all of which disproportionately affect low-income communities of color in the Inland region (Cho, Christman, Emsellem, Ruckelshaus, & Smith, 2012; De Lara, 2012; Matsuoka, Hricko, Gottlieb, & De Lara, 2011; Sarathy, 2013). In 2001, the South Coast Air Quality Management District found that Mira Loma Village, a low-income Latino community in Riverside County less than 15 miles from the Claremont Colleges, had the highest levels of particulate pollution in the nation. Similarly, the estimated cancer risk for communities near the San Bernardino Railyard is typically above 500 per million, one of the highest rates in the nation (O’Kelley, 2001). Yet, these stark realities are invisible to most students at the Claremont Colleges. How can this gap in knowledge and lived experience be rectified? How might students and community members work together to improve environmental well-being in an airshed that they all share?

In the fall of 2011, three Claremont College faculty members came together to partake in a

novel experiment—to engage our students in a cross-course, cross-college community engagement project with the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice (CCA EJ), one of the oldest and most renowned environmental justice organizations in the Inland region of Southern California. Rick Worthington, a professor of politics (Pomona College) who studies scientific expertise and participatory democracy, had a long-established relationship with CCA EJ, and had connected various students to the organization for internships in past years. Brinda Sarathy, professor of environmental analysis at Pitzer College, taught classes on environmental justice and was developing a new research agenda on toxics in Southern California. Like Worthington, Sarathy had developed a relationship with CCA EJ. Finally, Gwen D’Arcangelis in gender and women’s studies (Scripps College) focuses on the gendered and racialized politics of science, medicine, and environment, and was interested in connecting her students to community work.

Fortuitously, all three of us not only knew one another, but also just happened to be teaching courses on environmental and social justice in the same semester. At first, we informally shared our aspirations to broaden the consciousness of our respective students about issues of power and inequality, and the struggles that groups of people have enacted to address these inequalities and achieve social justice. As we continued our conversations, however, an intersecting paradigm of critical pedagogies emerged. It gradually became apparent that we could pursue a cross-course collaboration that might both benefit our students and CCA EJ. Indeed, each of us was already planning to incorporate some type of community-engaged work in our classes, and this was a chance to try and coordinate our efforts and goals.

One of our primary intents was to promote the work of social justice by leveraging students’ skills—in writing, conducting interviews, GIS, and research, and their relatively privileged access to resources such as time, computers, data, and scholarship—to facilitate community-identified agendas and efforts. This activist-pedagogical approach consciously broadens the scope of student learning beyond a discrete set of skills or content, to incorporate on-the-ground experience in the challenging work of social justice. Accordingly, we made clear that our project was not a traditional model of “service learning,” which typically characterizes student engagements with community organizations. Much like charity-giving, in the service-learning model students offer their services to

an organization, and in return acquire “real-world experience” (Boyd & Sandell, 2013, p. 5). In essence, students engage in a sort of exchange with the community organization, without the opportunity to meaningfully cultivate the self-reflexive and relational process of community-building and social change. At best, this means that students gain experience and skills, while organizations get more laborers. Moreover, what often occurs in reality is that the organization must spend precious time and resources designing projects that students can ably do in a short time period and with little to no background on the work the organization does. In such a context, one of two difficulties may arise—organizations exhaust the resources they have on the students’ projects and/or students are shunted to busy work tasks such as stuffing envelopes.

In contrast to the service-learning model, we positioned our collaboration as one of community engagement, which seeks to align student learning with the needs of a community organization. A community engagement project may be envisioned as a social justice endeavor wherein students, following the lead of the community organization, work to facilitate (in the short- or long-term) community-identified goals and/or needs (Costa & Leong, 2012; Maguire, 1987; Parisi & Thornton, 2012). When community engagement projects are carefully planned, they can result in broadened student learning beyond basic content and skill knowledge to a longer-term understanding of and commitment to social justice. For us, therefore, student learning was contingent on directly engaging with CCA EJ’s needs, demanding both flexibility and adapting to a non-traditional classroom structure and expectations.

Building a Foundation: Toxics Tour and the Organizing Academy

Prior to identifying project areas for student engagement, it was paramount to orient all of our students to some of the EJ issues in the Inland region, and to also familiarize them with CCA EJ’s process of working with communities. To this end, students in our classes went on a CCA EJ led “toxics tour,” to visit with and learn directly from impacted communities in Mira Loma (Riverside County) and the City of San Bernardino. The student reflection below highlights how this full-day toxics tour not only connected students with individual community members and their lived experiences, but also linked to theoretical concepts covered in class readings and provoked questions about barriers to justice. One student said:

I found our toxic tour field trip to provide a necessary context for this week's readings in the way that we could apply the theoretical parts of the articles to the reality of the Inland Empire.... [The tour] also led me to wonder how much of an obstacle the language barrier is for members of CCAEJ, given that they are a grass-roots organization and rely heavily on communicating with not only other community members, but also with the policy makers they are pushing for change.

In addition to the toxics tour, CCAEJ's Executive Director Penny Newman and staff member Sylvia Betancourt engaged our three classes in an Organizing Academy teaching module over the period of two separate weeks. Each of these sessions lasted 3 hours, and represented a significant time commitment on the part of CCAEJ to impart to students a baseline understanding of their core values and organizing strategies. At these sessions, our students learned about CCAEJ's first struggle against toxics in the 1970s (the case of the String-fellow Acid Pits near Glen Avon), and the start of their work to organize the Inland Empire around environmental justice issues. Students were also introduced to community organizing; for example, CCAEJ described its key organizing principles of power map analysis, wherein key actors and decision-makers are identified, plotted along an axis of decision-making power and leanings on the various issues affecting CCAEJ's communities. Finally, CCAEJ explained their primary philosophy of "building relationships"—that building people power within and across communities was the underlying means and goal to achieve "environmental justice," and regain the power/control from outside decision-makers to make the decisions that better their own communities.

Importantly, the in-class sessions with Newman gave students an invaluable opportunity to directly engage with a veteran environmental justice organizer, and be inspired by her stories of activism. In hindsight, these sessions quite brilliantly made students accountable for their upcoming projects, in ways that a simple grade at the end of class would never have. Community members and environmental justice activists had taken time out of their busy and burdened days to share experiences



Students observe impact on communities during toxics tour.

with undergraduate students, and almost everyone understood that their project work needed to "give back" in a meaningful and responsible way. Even more than the preparatory work each instructor did in their respective classrooms, the Organizing Academy training sessions with CCAEJ prepared students for the dual learning tasks of environmental justice and community engagement. Again, the student reflections on these in-class modules stress the lengths to which CCAEJ went to cultivate a relationship with students before assigning them to particular projects:

"Overall, I really admire the passion that both of the women from CCAEJ have, but most importantly I admire how they refuse to step back and continue to pressure despite all the ridicule and disrespect they have encountered in efforts of providing a better environment for their community. I am looking forward to organizing and learning from them in hopes of implementing what I learn there in justice issues within my own community."

"Another aspect of the academy that stood out to me was the model we analyzed; specifically, I was interested in the way organizers help develop policies from the ground up. Although in the grander scale it may seem as if some groups or organizations are not in support of affected communities, organizers such as CCAEJ have found ways to influence policy making by working with individuals within these agencies. Because these agencies may not be in tune with the actual needs of communities, it is important that members have a voice in the decision-making process. Thus, building these relationships can also be a useful tool for organizers and supporters alike in helping shape policy that directly affect community members. Overall, I was really excited to learn so much from these women and about organizing in general."

Project Areas

Subsequent to the toxics tour and Organizing Academy modules, we developed three kinds of projects (oral histories, policy research, and community engagement), in collaboration with CCAEJ, through which to channel team-based student engagement, and which are outlined below. In talking with our respective classes, we once again emphasized that this effort was not a traditional model of service learning but rather one of community engagement and community-based research. CCAEJ also made it known that they were organizationally over extended, with a limited amount of time and staff to devote to supervising students. We thus asked that each student team delegate one “point person/leader” who was charged with communicating between their teams and course professors and CCAEJ.

The first project area entailed conducting oral histories (in-depth interviews) with community members. Students interviewed members about their experiences with environmental problems and their work with CCAEJ. Oral histories served in large part as an assessment, one that CCAEJ sorely needed, but had limited capacity to implement on their own. Oral histories were modeled after a CCAEJ authored report on health and human rights in San Bernardino. The goal of gathering oral histories was to develop a similar report to highlight communities from throughout the Inland Valley. D’Arcangelis’ class, whose course focused on social justice based community research, added feminist interview methods to CCAEJ’s existing interview protocol (Matsuomoto, 1996); these methods are meant to empower interviewees by making transparent and diminishing the power held by interviewers. For example, interview questions were modified in ways that encouraged interviewees to answer prompts on their own terms; interviewers carefully introduced themselves, their backgrounds, the purpose of the interviews, and let interviewees know that they could opt out of any portion of the interview; finally, all interviews would be checked with the interviewees to ensure accuracy of representation. This set of projects included the following activities:

Students developed a community map of their assigned area, identifying sites with high impacts or potential impacts to the community. This was through an interview with one or two community members at one time.



Workshop modules prepared students for their projects.

In teams of two, students interviewed two community members from their assigned area: Jurupa Valley, Moreno Valley, San Jacinto, Fontana, Perris, Norco, and Bloomington. Students profiled their assigned community, highlighting history; demographic information (age, income, ethnicity, education); issues confronted by the community; impacts on the community; efforts to challenge those targeting the community; community’s proposed solutions; and community’s vision for environmental justice.

The second project area involved policy research wherein student teams analyzed city general plans, air quality standards, and transportation policies and focused on one of the three following topics: (1) Southern California Association of Governments—Regional Transportation Plan, East-West Corridor Route Project, Routing Truck Traffic; (2) California Air Resources Board—State Implementation Plan, including rail locomotive idling rules; truck idling rules; and freight transport; and (3) land use in the Inland Valley—map to include overlay of age, income, ethnicity, education, and current zoning, areas designated for warehousing/industrial use, and environmental justice element in a city’s general plan.

The third project area focused on community organizing. Here student teams were paired with individual CCAEJ organizers and given the opportunity to engage in first-hand organizing and community outreach about the growth of warehousing complexes and related traffic congestion. This assignment took the most work for CCAEJ, but was also part of its long-term goal of cultivating community organizers. Students in this project worked on the following set of activities:

- Assisting in developing a Community Action Team in Jurupa Valley
- Helping coordinate and outreach for a

community workshop on land use decision-making

- Mobilizing residents to local planning commission / city council meeting
- Engaging in community mapping—identified pollution sources near sensitive receptors (primarily warehouses)
- Gathering demographic information (age, income, ethnicity, education)
- Obtaining health care access data
- Evaluating access to education, green spaces, parks, and libraries

Students kept weekly journals documenting reflections on community experiences; observations; and activities undertaken to meet the project's objectives.

In total, the Organizing Academy resulted in 41 students completing 12 oral histories of community members, 3 group-researched policy briefs, and a community organizing effort in Jurupa Valley. In addition, 3 students from the Claremont Colleges went on to present their work on a panel at the Inland Valley Clean Air Summit in Riverside in May 2012, and student research was selectively incorporated into CCAEJ documents.

The Disruptive and Transformational Potential of Community Engagement

We now turn to the outcomes of our collaboration, with a focus on the possibilities and limits of community-engaged work in fostering a critical EJ consciousness among students. The following analysis examines student reflections on community-engaged work and argues that such collaborations hold potential to both fundamentally challenge and transform student thinking and acting on environmental justice.

Disrupting and Decentering Norms

A key step to cultivating a critical EJ consciousness entailed student reflection on their own positionality. "Positionality," as we use it, refers to the concept articulated by Nira Yuval-Davis (2006) and others that marks the way in which an individual's social position, and the lived practices that stem from this position, are bounded by gender, race, class, and other the intersecting hierarchies of difference and identity. Community engagement required students to, often reluctantly, confront their social privilege and learn to adjust their norms and expectations. Yet, despite encouraging our students to approach collaborative work flexibly, and emphasizing to them that part of the

learning process would entail shifting norms to that of community-based work, many of our students (with some exceptions) clung to expectations privileging their own priorities and norms. Student expectations centered on two main issues: coordination and scheduling; and preparation and guidance.

First, students did not expect coordination and scheduling to be so difficult. For instance, with regard to scheduling intricacies, one student expressed this common sentiment: "The schedules of people living in Jurupa Valley were so different from the schedules of college students in Claremont. Once we were able to find a time that was convenient for everyone, we had an ABSURD amount of trouble getting transportation. In the end, a friend from another class lent me her car for a couple of hours (...which was yet just another layer of schedule-coordinating)."

This surprise and frustration at having to adjust to the scheduling needs of others indicates student inexperience working outside of their privileged academic bubble. Many of these students operate on the notion of fixed, controllable schedules. The biggest challenge, then, was that collaboration and coordination take up significant time.

A second, related challenge for students was working with uncertainty. Rather than the predictable routine of campus academic life, community-based work tends to emerge and evolve through a process of on-the-ground implementation. Despite our frequent attempts at expectation management—highlighting to our students that this project would require immense flexibility—most students nevertheless persisted in focusing on how project assignments did not meet their norms of structure and clarity. For example, one student expressed the stress of not knowing precisely what the parameters of their work would be: "When we first started working with CCAEJ I was very confused about what my group was actually supposed to be doing for them. I would say that one of the most stressful aspects of this project was the uncertainty."

Several students went even further, suggesting future improvements that would, in essence, re-norm the project in ways that fit with their assumptions that learning consists of pre-packaged units of information that they might peruse beforehand: "I think it would be helpful to know a little bit more about what each project entails before students choose which project they want to be working with." Another student echoed this sentiment: "my suggestions for the future would be to outline each job/position before presenting choices."

Community Engagement as Transformational

We argue that the unsettling and disruption of norms and expectations, as evinced through student frustrations around uncertainty, ambiguity, and lack of structure constitute a key stage of (un) learning social privilege and cultivating critical EJ consciousness. By making visible the structured (and sometimes rigid) arena of academic work, the “messy” process of community engagement enables students to confront their own assumptions that EJ work would or could fit easily into familiar academic and student paradigms. Realizing that doing EJ work meant shifting their norms and expectations eventually led to students become more self-reflexive and open to self-transformation as allies in struggles for justice.

While not all students were aware of this internal process occurring, some were able to clearly articulate a shift in outlook. One student expressed a new understanding of the time and flexibility entailed in community engagement: “Which brings me to one of the biggest lessons I learned in this whole process: the lesson of time. It takes time to do community work. And in that time, there’s a surprisingly large amount of things that can (and do) stray far from plans.” Another student highlighted the challenge to rigid expectations: “I also learned that while doing community organizing, your expectations are always shifting and changing, and you have to learn to be flexible and creative.”

Some students shifted their norms completely, centering community needs and focusing on ways to best serve the community. For example, one student, reflecting on the utility of their Spanish language ability and Latino insider status to community organizing, described the

[I]mportance of being culturally sensitive—knowing the language, cultural values and norms, and other cultural pressures. It is important to maintain cultural sensitivity and a cultural conscious because you can better engage with the residents of the community, and perhaps have a greater turnout if you culturally tailor your meetings and advertisement.

As important as it was for “insider” students to recognize these strategies of connection, equally so was the journey of “outsider” students (the majority of our student body) in learning to acknowledge their own privilege and engage with communities less privileged than themselves. Our

project provided an opportunity for these students to get outside of their comfort zones, struggle with, and become aware of their privilege. Although we had intellectually explored with students the intricacies of social privilege and outsider status, the actual on-the-ground opportunity to grapple with the challenges of crossing lines of privilege via social justice work proved invaluable. Throughout this process, we encouraged students to critically reflect on the following questions: How did their status as mostly elite white students affect their interactions with community members? How did this impact the way interviewees responded to the students’ questions or the way community members responded to student organizers? How did students attempt to bridge these gaps? How successful were students in using their privilege effectively rather than oppressively in their interactions with community members?

Student journals demonstrated that many students successfully engaged these questions. For example, one student expressed the difficulties of working across such sharp lines of privilege:

Forming relationships with the women at CCAEJ brought up personal issues and thoughts about class, race, privilege, and positionality. It became clear that the dominant power structures’ means of oppression, which can seem very much intangible to me, were a significant part of the individual and social histories of the people in Jurupa Valley. My experience of showing up as an outsider to a community that has been marginalized by the same forces that have privileged me, was at times awkward, unsettling, and uncomfortable. Understanding and addressing positionality was something I confronted while doing research for my independent study project abroad. However, I felt a slightly different experience in Jurupa Valley. After giving this some thought, it may have been the fact that we both live in the United States and that we live so close to each other, only thirty minutes apart, but have had drastically different life experiences. It forced me to begin to confront those issues in a personal way. But the women we grew to know were more than welcoming. They showed us how each of us had different tools to offer to the group and how we could learn from one another.

In addition to very honest engagement with their privilege, this student clearly honed in on a key aspect of doing community work with differently positioned members of society—personal connection. Building relationships is key to community work. To become an ally, students had to truly connect with the community and simultaneously reflect on the structures of resource distribution (or a lack thereof) that produced such differently privileged lives.

Another student echoed this notion that engagement with community is a necessary requirement of doing justice work. They pointed out that it is not enough to work only in an academic, removed setting:

Sometimes, when you are in the college, academic setting, you get into a bubble where everything you study is a distant issue you only read about and will figure out what to do with in the future. You learn how to analyze and deconstruct topics but rarely is the chance given to go beyond writing a paper. In engaging directly, I gained some investment in our interviewees, their community, and the issues they face, even though my position as a privileged student is so far from that. I also gained a level of confidence in my ability to engage with issues like this in the future.

It was this direct engagement with CCAEJ staff and community members and the subsequent self-interrogation process that ultimately paved the way for students to gain a critical EJ consciousness. One particularly insightful student explained how the community engagement project highlighted environmental justice as primarily an issue of community empowerment to fight against an unjust system:

Upon first coming to this class, I had been expecting issues of environmental justice to focus mostly upon environmental toxins in marginalized communities. As I've learned through my fieldwork, however, environmental justice goes beyond toxins and siting controversies; rather, it provides another way of framing issues of disempowerment in a community. In real-world situations, what we as students might identify as being a hazard to surrounding environmental and human

health might be seen by community activists as an opportunity to organize around a central threat to a community's ambient, economic and physical well-being.

Finally, students also honed new research skills that facilitated the work of environmental justice: "I was able to sharpen my research skills, to use mapping for the first time, and to engage in activism-oriented feminist research practices. I was thus able to put into practice the things that we have been discussing in class, and, as I was the group member who developed the template for the final policy brief, to determine how best to disseminate our group findings to a non-academic audience." The pride in their new skills and ability to apply them effectively reflects an important underlying lesson of our project; that students learned to wield their resources responsibly and to best effect in both dismantling their own privilege and forward agendas oriented towards social justice.

Concluding Thoughts

Our collaborative community engagement project enabled undergraduate students to gain a wholesale structural view of how social hierarchy shapes environment—in other words—what we see as the cultivation of a critical EJ consciousness. As one student summed up:

What struck me the most...was X saying "we're invisible." That seems to be the main issue tying all the community's EJ problems together. Concentrated housing developments, warehouses, overcrowding in schools, and air pollution are common issues in a whole host of other places. The specific environmental justice factor joining these issues is how differently a community's needs are treated when minorities, non-English speakers, and poorer households dominate the community. The government can ignore them and slip these problems under the rug or shove other, richer communities' problems onto Mira Loma and Glen Avon. Overall I think our project was a success—because of the interactions we were able to have with community members.

As evinced in such reflections, many students were able to push past their initial discomfort and resistance to the disruption of their norms and expectations through the realization that they could

have an important role to play in environmental justice and develop useful skills in the process. Focusing on what they had to contribute, individuals moved beyond the student-centered expectation of “what can I get out of this experience” to “what can I offer to this justice movement?” Overall, student testimony indicates the degree to which they took seriously the project of environmental justice. In questioning the utility of their work for community, they learned perhaps the greatest lesson—that their labor was geared first towards empowering communities and not solely for academic inquiry. In conclusion, the model we used to cultivate a critical EJ consciousness was three-fold: disrupting and unsettling student norms and expectations; encouraging student awareness of unequally distributed social privilege coupled with self-reflection on positionality; and guiding students towards centering community empowerment and fostering relationship-building opportunities.

Community engagement collaborations involving the pairing of lesser-resourced community groups with more well-resourced academic institutions (particularly the case with the Claremont Colleges) require key attention to building trust amongst the participants. In setting up the collaboration, professors should follow the lead of and center the needs of their partner community organization. In this regard, we as faculty on the one hand did extensive planning to coordinate the schedules between our three classes, various projects, and CCAEJ and, on the other hand, maintained flexibility in responding to the shifting needs of CCAEJ. In our classes, we also prepared students by assigning relevant readings and leading lectures/discussion around how community engagement is a process that entails more than the application of academic skills to “real world situations” or the acquisition of “experience in the community.” Rather, it also requires direct engagement in order to foster commitment to a community, and self-reflexivity in order to be an effective and accountable ally in social justice work. Our community-engaged collaborative project, in short, might hopefully serve as an example of how to put into practice—however briefly—a vision of social and environmental justice in the context of the undergraduate classroom.

Finally, new configurations for collaboration with CCAEJ have opened up as the result of one of the three faculty, Dr. D’Arcangelis, taking a faculty position at a neighboring state school, Cal Poly Pomona. In contrast to the largely elite student body of the Claremont Colleges, Cal Poly Pomona

is comprised of a large number of working-class students of color from the communities that CCAEJ serves. This new academic context opens up opportunities for pursuing future comparative research that explores the process of collaboration between students and community members of similar social standing (Cal Poly students engaging with CCAEJ), as well as between differently positioned students (Cal Poly Pomona students and Claremont College students), and the challenges and opportunities for student growth, dialogue, and meaningful community engagement therein.

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