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Respond, Revise, Reimagine: Examining Trinfo Café's Legacy of Community Engagement in an Evolving Hartford

When done well, academic community engagement has the potential to cultivate meaningful relationships and advance social change. By unifying the resources and student talent of universities with the organizing experience and community knowledge of residents, academic community engagement offers the unique opportunity to merge otherwise siloed-off justice coalitions. However, many academic community engagement programs are counterproductive, inflicting harm on communities by upholding oppressive power hierarchies and failing to challenge the root causes of structural injustice. In order to promote ethical and effective community engagement, programs must maintain mutually beneficial relationships between communities and universities (Bauer et al. 90) while addressing structural injustice (Vincent et al. 115). Trinfo Café, a community engagement space directed by Trinity College, exemplifies how university programming must change in order to maintain standards of academic community engagement. Established in 2000 to improve technology access and digital literacy in Hartford's Frog Hollow neighborhood, Trinfo Café has pivoted to hosting student-run events and a community garden, among other initiatives ("A Community Space"). Trinfo Café's past technology programming model meets the academic community engagement standards of mutually beneficial relationships and structural change. As Trinfo Café evolves to meet the adapting needs of Frog Hollow, the community garden upholds standards of academic community engagement while the student-led events fail to foster reciprocal relationships or systemic change.

Successful academic community engagement programs facilitate reciprocal relationships between students, faculty, community organizations, and residents. Universities must be intentional about engaging community stakeholders in every step of the academic community engagement process to promote equitable participation. Mutually beneficial relationships subvert hierarchies between the university and the community, sharing power equally among all parties (Bauer et al. 90). Moreover, community-engaged learning must recognize the assets of all stakeholders. Ethical and effective community engagement programs challenge the perception of communities as "problems" and embrace knowledge derived within the community (Mitchell et al. 621). Finally, a reciprocal relationship invites mutual respect and trust (Hickmon 87). To build a strong academic community engagement model, all parties must form genuine relationships rooted in equity and mutual respect.

Beyond facilitating mutually beneficial relationships, ethical and effective academic community engagement addresses the root causes of structural inequality. Without integrating systemic change into academic community engagement programming, universities reinforce structural inequities that actively harm marginalized communities. In order to challenge the root causes of injustice, universities must orient community action to structural inequalities by

contextualizing community needs in a history of racism and oppression (Mitchell et al. 614). Academic community engagement models that center social justice go beyond providing resources to temporarily alleviate suffering and partner with community stakeholders to address the underlying causes of inequity (Vincent et al. 116). Advancing social change requires that academic community engagements name and subvert systems of oppression.

Trinfo Café's early engagement with the Hartford community promoted genuine relationships anchored in mutual benefit. Between 2000 and 2018 (Espinosa), Trinfo Café's services were overwhelmingly focused on technology access (Howard). Trinfo Café's daily operations included adult digital literacy courses, free computer and Wi-Fi access, software programming tutorials, and technology donations (Howard). While the community engagement model focused on technology programming, Trinfo Café executive director, Carlos Espinosa, expressed how Trinfo Café was fundamentally a space to connect with others. "Trinfo Café is a place of encounter," Espinosa stated in a 2014 interview for the Trinity Reporter (Howard). Stories of Trinfo Café's past are animated with rich relationships and bright characters. Jeremias Vasquez, a student worker, describes hearing stories of a "chatting section" in the back of the café where community members frequently came to relax, have a coffee, and talk to whoever was willing to listen. The success of Trinfo Café's early model was grounded in relationships. Hickmon describes this process of deep relationship-building as developing trust between universities and communities (87). By providing a welcoming space for community members to engage with each other and Trinity students, Trinfo Café's technology programming was an avenue to develop genuine relationships bound by trust.

These authentic relationships were further strengthened by mutual benefit. Student workers received work experience and training opportunities while community members gained access to free digital services (Nelson). Additionally, by providing free website development services for Hartford organizations, Trinfo Café built upon the skills and resources of the community (Espinosa). In doing so, Trinfo Café integrated the technological expertise of student workers with the organizing talent of community partners ("About Us"). This mutual benefit framework rejects the assumption that communities are sources of problems (Hickmon 88) and embraces the community as rich with culture, knowledge, and expertise (Mathieu 292). In utilizing university resources to reinforce existing community organizing, Trinfo Café's technology-centered programming acknowledges that all parties are capable of both giving and receiving. By building trust through relationships and rooting action in mutual benefit, Trinfo Café's previous model meets the academic engagement standard of reciprocity.

In addition to fostering mutually beneficial relationships, Trinfo Café's past community engagement programming addressed the roots of systematic disparities in technology access in Hartford. While Trinity college's affluence ensures that students have access to high-quality digital resources—Apple desktops, a virtual reality studio, drones, and more—the surrounding Frog Hollow neighborhood has historically been deprived of technological services. In fact, in 2014, only 6% of Trinity College's neighboring community members had access to the internet (Howard). In offering free digital services to over 12,000 annual users, Trinfo Café's technology

programming contributed to bridging the digital divide between Trinity college and Frog Hollow residents (“About Us”). In doing so, Trinfo Café disrupts entrenched systems of white supremacy, economic injustice, and neocolonialism that seek to maintain a devastatingly unequal distribution of resources. By anchoring technology programming in a broader vision of equity, Trinfo Café succeeded in engaging standards of social justice and structural change (Vincent et al. 115). Trinfo Café’s focus on systematically removing barriers to technology access in Frog Hollow demonstrates an engagement with the root causes of digital resource disparities, a critical element of structural change (Bauer et al. 91). Therefore, Trinfo Café’s commitment to identifying and challenging systematic disparities in technology access aligns with the academic community engagement standard of structural change.

As Trinfo Café’s mission transforms to accommodate changing community interests, the community garden sustains the organization’s past success in creating mutually beneficial relationships. Founded in 2012 by Trinity Professor Susan Masino, Trinfo Café’s community garden provides free plots of land for Hartford gardeners to grow their own produce (“Faculty Members Reinvigorate”). While the community garden certainly expands access to free, healthy foods, it is also a place of connection. As Carlos Espinosa explains, the community garden “creates the opportunity for different folks to come together.” (Nelson). According to Claudia Gonzales, a Trinity Individualized Degree Program student and Hartford resident, “building relationships is exactly why [she] signed up” (McKeon). Though simple, the act of Trinity students and Hartford residents gardening alongside each other demonstrates a broader commitment to togetherness. With no “givers” or “takers,” power in the community garden is lateralized. Students, faculty, Hartford residents, and community organizations are all stewards of the garden, planting, watering, and harvesting together (Nelson). All parties are equal, active participants who are collaborating together for a common goal: ending food insecurity. This principle of equitable partnership draws from academic engagement standards of mutuality, which situates all parties as equal partners in the creation of community programming (Bauer et al. 90). By developing rich relationships grounded in collective action, Trinfo Café’s community garden rejects the pervasive narrative of the university as a savior.

Under the community garden model, all stakeholders are engaged in the pursuit of justice. Trinfo Café’s community garden programming not only demonstrates reciprocity in power dynamics, but also in the production of knowledge. As Alicia Camuy, a Trinfo student employee, explains, “agriculture and food are big parts of our distinct cultures, and it is truly a joy to learn from each other and community members throughout this gardening process” (Nelson). Camuy’s reflections on her engagement with the community garden reflect reciprocal learning, a cornerstone of the Critically Engaged Service Learning (CESL) community engagement standards (Vincent et al. 117). Unlike traditional models of community engagement that anchor action in academic knowledge, Trinfo Café’s current programming model draws on community expertise to maintain the community garden. By facilitating equitable relationships rooted in collaboration and shared knowledge, Trinfo Café’s community garden initiative upholds the academic community engagement standard of reciprocity.

In addition to cultivating reciprocal relationships between Hartford residents and Trinity students, the community garden continues Trinfo Café's previous successes in advancing systemic change. Though Trinity students help maintain the community garden ("Our Programming"), harvested produce is directly distributed to the community (Nelson). In doing so, Trinfo Café's community garden expands the accessibility of affordable, fresh food in the Frog Hollow neighborhood ("Garden Information"). The creation of sustainable food justice programming disrupts the food apartheid that deprives low-income Black and Brown communities of healthy food. In creating new avenues for food distribution, Trinfo Café's community garden structurally alters systemic food inequalities in Hartford. According to Bauer, Kniffen, and Priest, for community engagement programming to advance social change, it must transcend charity's fixation on short-term crisis mitigation (90-91). Trinfo Café addresses systemic barriers to food accessibility by building a community-led food network, restructuring the way in which the local food economy operates to ensure that all community members are fed.

Beyond expanding the availability of healthy foods in Hartford, the community garden model also addresses systemic poverty, which underlies food insecurity. According to Carlos Espinosa, Trinfo Café's long-term vision is for the community garden to sell produce grown by Hartford residents, allowing community gardeners to earn money off of their gardening expertise. The community garden's focus on addressing the root cause of food insecurity—poverty—aligns with the academic community engagement standard of structural change. Ethical and effective community engagement programs that affect structural change identify and address the conditions that create injustice (Bauer et al. 91). By supplementing food accessibility services with economic opportunities for Hartford residents, Trinfo Café's community garden addresses the underlying force of economic injustice that drives the Frog Hollow food desert. Therefore, Trinfo Café's community garden meets academic community engagement standards of structural change, challenging systems of structural oppression that underwrite food insecurity.

Though Trinfo's current community gardening program continues the organization's history of ethical and effective community engagement, the new student-led events fail to cultivate mutually beneficial relationships between Frog Hollow and Trinity College. Beginning in 2019, Trinfo student workers partnered with university organizations to plan and implement community events ("Our Programming"). According to Jeremias Vazquez, a Trinfo Café employee, students brainstorm possible event ideas, propose them to Trinfo directors, and then, if approved, begin the organizing process (Vazquez 2021). Throughout this process, one critical element is missing: the community. Anti-Racist Community-Engaged Pedagogy demands that community voices are integrated into every aspect of programming creation, subverting oppressive hierarchies that center the ideas and interests of the university ("Principles for Anti-Racist" 2). Moreover, CESL standards emphasize the importance of an equal distribution of power among students, faculty, residents, and community partners during every step of the program development process (Vincent et al. 116). Thus, in ethical and effective community engagement programming, decision-making is a collaborative process that involves all

stakeholders. Trinfo Café's student event process marginalizes the skills, knowledge, and passions of community members by catering to the interests of university students. In developing events "for" the community without resident input, Trinfo Café's student-led events neglect principles of partnership and equitable decision-making that are critical to reciprocal community engagement programming. Trinfo Café's marginalization of community stakeholders in its student event programming indicates a failure to maintain the academic community engagement standard of mutually beneficial relationships.

Not only is the student event model unsuccessful in fostering reciprocal relationships between university and community stakeholders, but it also falls short of challenging systems of oppression. According to Carlos Espinosa, Trinfo Café began hosting student-led community events in an effort to "build [student] knowledge and expertise at event planning and organizing" (Espinosa). Trinfo Café's student events range in content from movie viewings ("Our Programming") to cultural heritage programming (Espinosa). When executed successfully, with student employees correctly identifying community interests, these events can serve as a source of enjoyment for Hartford residents. However, these events fundamentally fail to undermine systems of inequality that oppress Frog Hollow residents daily. Under the Critically Engaged Service Learning model, successful community engagement programs situate all action within the pursuit of social change (Vincent et al. 114). Thus, addressing systematic oppression can never be peripheral in an ethical and effective community engagement.

While Trinfo Café's student events may benefit the community, they neglect to challenge the broader systems of violence that the university is complicit in: racism, economic inequality, and colonialism, among others. As Gabrielle Hickmon explains, identifying systems of domination and advocating against them is critical to creating effective and ethical academic community engagement programming (91). While creating spaces for the community to embrace their culture or be entertained is important, Trinity college has the moral imperative to resist and uproot the systems of structural inequality that it helped build. To meet the academic community engagement standard of structural change, Trinfo Café's student-run events must be transformed to advance social change efforts led by Hartford residents.

Overall, Trinfo Café's transition from a technology center to a community engagement space has brought both challenges and opportunities. By expanding technology access in the Frog Hollow neighborhood while building community trust, Trinfo Café's early digital programming met academic community engagement standards of mutually beneficial relationships and structural change. In response to the transformation of the Frog Hollow digital landscape, Trinfo Café transformed as well. While the expansion of the community garden exemplified principles of reciprocity and systemic change, the student event initiative failed to facilitate mutually beneficial relationships or deliver structural change. To better meet the standards for ethical and effective community engagement for student-led events, I offer the following suggestions. Firstly, Trinfo Café student employees should collaborate with residents and community organizations to plan and execute events. In doing so, Trinfo Café would redistribute decision-making power among stakeholders and cultivate reciprocal relationships

among students, community members, and Hartford organizations. According to Carlos Espinosa, Trinfo Café hopes to pivot in this direction moving forward. During an interview, he expressed plans for “Trinity students...[to] partner with external group[s]” in the future. In addition to promoting collaboration with community partners, student-led events should connect to social change. Events should be oriented towards systematic action, identifying and interrupting structural violence in the Frog Hollow community. These events could range from workshops on how to contact local representatives, to presentations on anti-Blackness in the LatinX community, to letter-writing campaigns to address a lack of bilingual preschool programming. By focusing student events on social justice, Trinfo Café can undermine systems of oppression that marginalize Frog Hollow residents. While these suggestions reflect a brief synthesis of community engaged learning scholarship, any analysis of community engagement programming without community voices is incomplete. To fully understand how Trinfo Café’s evolution has impacted the surrounding community, the lived experiences of Frog Hollow residents must be centered. Further examination of the ways in which community perspectives may not align with academic applications of community engagement standards is critical to developing ethical and effective community engagement programming. While building strong models of academic community engagement is challenging, the benefits far outweigh the costs. In this moment of radical transformation, Trinfo Café has the opportunity to boldly reimagine academic community engagement. By connecting the resources of Trinity college with the skills of Hartford residents, Trinfo Café can pave the way for a more just Frog Hollow community.

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