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### Navigating Trinity Culture: Students' Pathways to Urban Citizenship In Hartford

Isabella Dresser

isabella.dresser@trincoll.edu

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**Navigating Trinity Culture:  
Students' Pathways to Urban Citizenship In Hartford**

A thesis presented

by

Isabella Dresser

to

The Political Science Department

in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for Honors in Political Science

Trinity College  
Hartford, CT  
May 17, 2022

Abigail Fisher Williamson

Thesis Advisor

Stefanie Chambers

Department Chair

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## **Introduction**

### **I. Overview**

Colleges claim to inculcate civic skills, in part through experiential learning programs in their surrounding communities. But how do these programs achieve their goals for different students and across differing settings? Trinity College—a four-year liberal arts college located in Hartford, Connecticut—is unique as a small, predominantly white institution situated in a predominantly Black and Brown city. In theory, the distinct nature of a privileged residential college in a marginalized urban space presents the opportunity to form a diverse community through mutually beneficial partnerships. Such outcomes are possible but are not so easily achieved. Instead, divisions exist between Trinity and Hartford.

This thesis will examine to what extent community learning programs at Trinity foster a sense of urban citizenship. I define urban citizenship as a sense of membership in the city, which then promotes civic engagement. An ideal urban citizen identifies as a city resident and takes part in the community. A college student urban citizen likewise identifies as a resident and cares for the city's welfare, beyond just belonging to the campus community. Their engagement with the city stems from a sense of membership and connection, rather than other motivations. How do college students become urban citizens? Do higher education community learning programs promote a sense of urban citizenship? Do they do so for both white students and students of color?

Trinity College and Hartford will serve as a case study to answer these questions. Through 42 interviews with students of color and 14 interviews with white students, the study finds that community learning programs have the potential to inculcate a sense of urban citizenship. Both students of color and white students find value in community learning but are

impacted differently along race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Students of color participate in community learning at higher rates and value connections with Hartford. Simultaneously, many of these same students critique their community learning experiences as superficial. Such a critique demonstrates a clear form of urban citizenship; students of color want interactions with the community to be mutually beneficial. They see themselves as a part of a community and are concerned if their community is being exploited.

Comparatively, feedback from white students demonstrates how community learning programs can be eye-opening and transformative. While their experiences are mostly characterized by positive learning outcomes, it is often framed through their own personal growth. Community learning seems to be aiding white students' advancement towards urban citizenship by showing the realities of disparities present in Hartford. However, an already established sense of fear of the city, or at least a disconnect, amongst white students and some higher income students of color serves as a barrier to achieving urban citizenship.

This chapter will provide a literature review that builds a definition of urban citizenship and explains the importance of civic engagement within the context of higher education. Informed by existing literature, this thesis contributes to the push for ethical civic engagement structures within colleges located in urban areas.

## II. **Unpacking the Meaning of Urban Citizenship**

### Historical Context

Since the 1990s, scholars have increasingly studied the diminishing culture of American civic engagement. Civic discourse has moved away from pluralist debates; fringe groups dominate advocacy spaces as the public becomes more disengaged; and communities are no

longer sharing spaces, activities, and resources (Skocpol and Fiorina 2004). These signs point to an unsettling reality for civic engagement: people no longer have strong ties to their community.

In two of political scientist Robert Putnam's books (1993, 2000), he explains the inner workings of participatory democracy via civic engagement. Using the concept of social capital, Putnam asserts that a combination of networks, trust, and reciprocity creates a strong community by enabling collective action. He demonstrates that the U.S. has experienced a sharp downward spiral away from civic engagement (Putnam 2000).

However, civic engagement cannot and should not be taken as an all-encompassing solution to any singular problem or singular situation. Civic engagement for its own sake does not necessarily contribute to creating an equitable society. In actuality, civic engagement can be co-opted as another channel of power for the most privileged sector of the population to promote solutions that benefit themselves (Fiorina 1999).

As resources dwindle at Trinity and an era of social justice reform rises, the burgeoning institutional efforts of CHER to connect the community and college point to a turn towards a new, ethical chapter. Now, as the institutional efforts begin to align with social justice initiatives, it is now time to critically look at how these programs affect the civic connectedness and behavior of students.

### The Need for A New Outlook and Definition of Urban Citizenship

Urban citizenship encapsulates an individual's sense of membership in the city, which drives civic engagement. In previous literature, civic engagement and American civic duty are too general a term when looking into the granular political behavior of a small community. Thus, there is a need to define the exact context of civic behavior in a small urban place. For the purpose of establishing a term that will encompass the political action and space for

sociopolitical behavior in a small city, I will be setting out to explain this version of urban citizenship.

To add a necessary stipulation, most literature on citizenship obviously leads scholars down the road of examining the politics of immigration with a focus on formal state recognition of individual membership. Here, I focus on citizenship not in terms of formal membership, but in relation to a sense of belonging and an associated move to contribute through civic engagement.

### Citizenship as A Frame of Civic Engagement

In many theories of participatory democracy, civic engagement is a key expectation of citizenship. The need for a robust participatory system to solve local issues emphasizes the importance of prioritizing civic engagement from the community for the community. Furthermore, prioritizing the political power of community members for community issues can create a healthy ideation of citizenship—where a sense of belonging is placed in an individual's participation with others (Holston 2001).

Contemporary political scientists also critique the current state of American democracy, especially when focusing on the micro-level of democratic participation. Mattison (2010) argues that political participation has become superficial. Political power and clout is often concentrated in distant corners of public affairs to the few elite actors. The effects of Cold War politics have shaped democracy to mean two key concepts: anti-communism and an avenue for consumption. The nature of democracy on the individual-level has been morphed into a space that only invites gimmicky commentary on the national stage and adversarial relationships between neighbors (Mattson 2010). However, citizens who can gather to form a robust democratic public allows all to ultimately form critical and common skills to promote democracy (Mattison 2010). Citizenship has a legitimate tie to the political behavior of civic engagement.

A strong participatory democracy can build a strong sense of community. *The Rebirth of Urban Democracy* examines five mid-size cities after the development and implementation of a citywide network of neighborhood associations. The investment in organized attempts to increase residents' levels of participation in local issues brought communities closer together (Berry, Portnoy & Thomson 1993). Such commitment to their city through organized forms of participatory democracy also led to higher rates of satisfaction.

Local civic engagement allows us to look beyond the elite capture of national politics. Berry, Portnoy, and Thomson's study emphasizes civic participation beyond the singular facet of voting. The authors persuasively argue that voting on its own will do little to revive citizenship in a democracy. Instead, public engagement and channels where people can learn from each other and connect are the most effective way to solve community problems while building strong ties to neighbors (2). Emphasizing face-to-face democracy is a noble pursuit in mitigating the usual adversarial nature of politics and the politics of everyday, community level problems. Thus, this current project finds tremendous legitimacy in understanding citizenship through the civic engagement of the residents of a community.

### Narrowing the Scope of Citizenship to Urban Spaces

The concept of an urban environment is understood as a crucial, impactful factor to an individual's political behavior. The city, and how someone perceives it and themselves within it, informs and potentially shapes the experiences of college students. Moreover, the city and the reactive experience that is born out of it serves as a contrast to a college student's hometown experience.

Cities are a product of capitalistic development that now shapes how people experience struggle and disseminate policy solutions. Political scientist James Holston describes the

diminishing relevance of citizenship on a national level (2001). Instead, nations are a patchwork of cities, used as nucleuses of community life and work for recently arrived immigrants and disadvantaged populations. Not only have cities been a space where elites in power have zoned off space for specific marginalized groups, but it is also a critical space for democracy to flourish. Shaping a city to segregate the have-nots from the haves manifests in two ways: a community is formed by their collective experience of the same issues and abuses that occur in the city, and residents are left to use democracy as a tool to improve their quality of life (Holston 2001). Through the process of experiencing the consequences of often discriminatory policymaking and capitalism, the city becomes a crucial spatial token of breeding democracy, thus shaping the meaning of citizenship. Holston has his own definition of urban citizenship, where he draws out three general principles (326):

1. The city is the primary political community
2. Urban residency is the criterion of membership and mobilization
3. Rights-claiming occurs to address the urban experience

Through these commandments, Holston is able to emphasize the importance and key tenets of living in a city and its relationship with democratic power. In this definition, Holston is heavily relying on the historical and political context a city provides when thinking of local, national, and international democracy. A consistent metric of Holston's definition of urban citizenship is residency, which stretches to all people who are living within the city's limits. Therefore, this understanding of democratic policymaking and problem solving includes college students.

Instead of seeing nations as a homogenous mass of policy ideas and norms, urban citizenship validates the immense presence that cities have on democratic participation. Democracy—and striving to attain democracy in the pursuit of acquiring or protecting individual civil and human rights—is a strong enough force to create citizenship (Holston 2001). This idea

is particularly prolific in urban centers, where systemically oppressive policy manifests in the abuse and criminalization of its citizens while unintentionally creating a unifying reality.

Cities stand as a significant context for rejecting the idea of a homogeneous national identity, and instead factor in the past and current oppression that is unique to urban centers. Without relying on national pride, urban residents do create a sense of community that is tied to the geographical position of their home and the policy enacted within the context of the metropolis (Appadurai and Holston 1996). Additionally, policy in cities often is shaped through the differences between subgroups or even the differences between the urban and suburban areas. Citizenship in an urban place is therefore shaped through a difference-specific approach to the conceptions of rights and policy solving strategies (Appadurai and Holston 1996).

What Holston misses, however, is that beyond just experiencing the present consequences of historical and contemporary biased policies, people can find a sense of belonging with each other by mobilizing together. The benefits of civic engagement and democratic participation to solve collective problems can make individuals feel more positively about their community and their local government (van Holm 2019). Once the nuanced political environment of urban citizenship is established, this study can now examine the prevalence of strong ties between community members in a city.

### College Students as Urban Citizens

College students are unique in that they are typically less likely to be involved in traditional avenues of civic behavior. A report on American first-years by UCLA shows a sharp decline in students' interest in politics over the decades since 1984 (Pryor et al. 2010). Young adults, even those pursuing a higher degree, are typically not attending public hearings, testifying in local forums, or even voting; and there are racial/ethnic and income disparities in civic

engagement rates that prevent equitable democracy (“Youth Voting and Civic Engagement in America” CIRCLE). However, college students are active and easily engaged through organizations that center around students’ interests. Why should engagement efforts be isolated to exist within the campus gates? Colleges are already a backdrop for students to form and find opportunities to mold their sense of self. Higher education has a specific responsibility to orient students to be urban citizens that will benefit both the community and the students.

In examining the presence or absence of strong ties to a city from college students, it is vital to understand the role higher education has in urban citizenship. A critical question that this study is grappling with is: How much responsibility does education have in shaping people’s commitment to be civically engaged? Higher education is a privileged experience for most Americans. While Americans are pursuing bachelor’s degrees at higher rates in the past decade, four-year colleges remain a space of opportunity to enter a higher paygrade. Colleges are often seen as a mix between personal responsibility on the student and partial accountability on the institution, to provide a cohesive understanding of the world. It follows that any ideals surrounding civic engagement also are partially placed in the hands of the higher education system (Westheimer and Kahne 2003).

Taking the assumption that higher education does have a role in shaping students’ ideology on civic engagement, we can then begin to dive into if and how students become engaged. Curricular opportunities, co-curricular involvement, membership to a religious group, and a history of being civically engaged before college shape individual engagement in college (Van Stephenson 2010). Furthermore, strong relationships between college students lead to strong social networks (or social capital) that support recruitment for participation in “good deeds” and foster “norms of reciprocity” to promote others’ welfare (Van Stephenson 2010).

Ultimately, the power of colleges as institutions is their power to encourage the development of social networks between students through the goals of civic engagement.

Few scholars have examined how a college's location intersects with its efforts to promote civic engagement. Moreover, the study described above falls into the pitfall of accepting the existence of a monolithic "college student" stereotype, often assuming a white, wealthy individual. Instead, this thesis examines how students of color's experience may differ from white students' in both their experiences living in Hartford and as Trinity students.

### Implications For This Project

Urban citizenship is a sense of membership to the city, emerging from membership is a will to be civically engaged. Civic engagement is ideally used as a signal of an individual's care and commitment for the city's welfare because they themselves are an equal member within it. Taking the term "citizenship" to heavily rely on civic engagement is important in establishing who can be included and to what a person is a "citizen." Including civic engagement as the main qualifier of citizenship allows for this study to include recently relocated college students, who are coming from across the country and the world, to Hartford.

Studying their levels of civic engagement is a crucial intersection of understanding young adults' willingness to participate in community life in an urban environment. Furthermore, students' perception of the city and their motivators for participating in community learning opportunities will expose strong or superficial ties. Recognizing the nuanced political conditions that a city provides will give further understanding of Trinity College students' political behavior. The information gathered from this study—and relying on this particular understanding of urban citizenship—will be used to improve co-curricular and academic bridges between the college and the city.

### **III. Review of the Literature**

Current literature on defining and outlining civic engagement and its impact on creating community will establish the importance of looking at civic engagement amongst college students. Specifically, there are theoretical and practical frameworks that argue that community learning is an effective conduit engaging college students in their surrounding city.

Understanding the utility of community learning will be helpful in measuring civic engagement and identity-based ties to the community. My research project will not only connect these concepts but will also expand on how student racial/ethnic identity and a culture of fear of urban spaces affect community learning programs and their ability to foster urban citizenship.

#### Defining Civic Engagement

Civic engagement indicates the strength of a community, the connection amongst individuals, and even the overall condition of our democracy. A foundational author in the study of civic engagement, David Campbell, defines civic participation as “public spirited collective action that is not motivated by the desire to affect public policy” (26). This literature review will be working off Campbell’s preliminary understanding of civic participation to tie in the active elements of identity, place, and education to understand college students’ path to being engaged citizens.

Other authors have provided four criteria to measure civic engagement: community service, collective action, political involvement, and social change through formal and informal associations (Adler and Goggin 2005). These four elements are important in narrowing the broad term “civic engagement,” and can similarly be integrated with author Susan Ostrander’s

definition that specifically considers college students: student learning, curriculum transformation, community-defined priorities, and knowledge production (2004). Ostrander's piece is especially illuminating in understanding the forces pushing higher education towards civic engagement. She is able to articulate *how* students are being educated now, along with pointing out colleges' goal to include civic engagement in their curriculum. One question Ostrander asks is "How can both university and community concerns be addressed?" Her work partially investigates the relationship between the communities on and off campus but does not entirely contextualize the racial and ethnic tensions with current social justice movements that are at play when looking at campuses in urban settings. For example, one of the five campuses Ostrander studies is Brown University, which does not have the cultural and social tensions that are more common in more diverse, urban cities. Both sets of criteria, one more general and the other tailored for college students, aid in creating a framework to measure civic engagement.

#### Identity & Civic Engagement to Foster Urban Citizenship

My objective is to examine the factors shaping how college students become committed to the urban community they are placed in. In particular, I aim to examine the intersection of individuals' race/ethnicity, urban origins, and other characteristics. Unfortunately, there is less literature on how these characteristics of identity collectively relate to civic engagement. There are studies on how urban adolescents undergo a change in perceptions of their own environment through civic engagement; or even how civic engagement through religious institutions in rural communities has a negative correlation on crime (Ben Kirshner et al 2003; Lee and Bartkowski 2004). All of which are interesting in observing the effect civic engagement has on one's identity, yet this study will be focusing on how identity may be a contributing factor to civic engagement.

What are the links between identity and civic engagement? First considering the earlier stage of life, a global study of over 5,000 adolescents, sampled from three stable and four transitional democracies, showed that young people whose family emphasized social responsibility as an important moral were “more likely to consider public interest an important life goal” (Flannagan 1998). Upbringing is important in many political behaviors, but especially considering civic engagement.

Beyond the influence of family there is also the factor of place-based identity. Homogeneous and affluent towns reportedly have lower civic participation rates than diverse, lower-income cities (Oliver 1999). There are strong arguments that suburbanization, and the exclusionary policies that segregate suburban towns from other areas, limit regional social problems. Lack of conflict actually disincentivizes citizens from being involved in their community. Factoring the idiosyncrasies of family dynamics as well as suburban/urban/rural hometowns will be important when analyzing the potential identity-based barriers of civic engagement.

Beyond place-based identity, this literature review must spend some time analyzing the intersections of race and civic engagement. In a powerfully vulnerable essay by Cornell alumna Gabrielle Hickman, she references W.E.B. DuBois as she reflects on the two-ness of service as a Black college student:

“I have often felt a double consciousness of sorts. I have not always known how to manage the power and privilege inherent in being in a position to be of service to others. I have not always known how to handle the assumptions made about my connections to the communities I engage with, especially when those communities are made up of people who look like me” (86)

Hickman is referring to the complex role that racial and ethnic identity has in a system where service can often be a tool for white saviorism (2015). Racist, sexist, and classist pedagogy exists in the practice of volunteerism and community service—especially when college students are

poised to be the providers of a service. Establishing race and ethnicity as a key component of ethical community engagement will be vital in understanding college students' path to becoming civically engaged in an urban environment.

Community learning can become a “pedagogy of whiteness” where strategies and connections reinforce the norms and privileges developed by and for white people (Mitchell et al 613). As a result, a pervasive missionary ethos forms and often twists community engagement to become a project of making “them” more like “us” (Mitchell et al. 616). Establishing race and ethnicity as a key component of (un)ethical community engagement will be vital in understanding college students' path to becoming civically engaged in an urban environment.

### Community Learning and Civic Engagement

Studies suggest that community learning (often called “service learning”) has meaningful impacts on the civic engagement of young people. In a comprehensive literature review of education and community learning, Campbell identifies how knowledge of politics and government, educational success, and healing conversations on systemic, personal, and political issues can be formed through community learning (2019). Taking the optimism that community learning provides, this section will be examining the pedagogy of community learning and its relationship with community engagement.

There is a consensus in scholarly literature that community learning is an effective way to bolster civic engagement and social justice initiatives into the classroom for college students. A study by Myers-Lipton notes the effectiveness of community learning programs for students' sense of civic responsibility (1998). Students who took community learning classes versus students who did not take those classes developed a more negative view on education but were more inclined to be civically engaged in the community. However, Myers-Lipton's study is blind

to the role of identity, and instead focuses on how community learning connects to civic responsibility.

Another study by David E. Campbell confirmed his hypotheses that schools have an impact on whether adolescents are likely to become civically engaged (2008). He further specifies that an academic environment that is open to grappling with current political questions correlates with greater civic knowledge and higher rates of participation. The strong links between civic education and civic engagement emphasize how academic community engagement can shape college students' levels of civic engagement.

Few studies, however, examine how community learning courses impact different students in varying ways. Hartwell (2010) argues that community-service based classes provide insight into a potential transformation towards self-awareness for both privileged and non-privileged students. Taken together, these studies suggest that community learning courses have the power to foster civic engagement in college students, and perhaps a deeper sense of urban citizenship.

### The Divide Between Trinity and Hartford

Trinity provides an ideal setting to examine these questions. The college has a complicated relationship with Hartford, and efforts to examine students' political behavior within the context of the college's history with community learning is necessary in imagining urban citizenship for students.

*In the Shadow of the Ivory Tower*, authored by urban historian and professor at Trinity College Davarian Baldwin, details the isolationist history of the college and the political choice to create barriers that kept the city out to this day. In the early 1990's, after a car chase between two rival gangs, the school leveraged the shocking event to make its final move to close off the

campus to the city: folding the previously public Vernon Street into the private campus and raising 20-foot-tall iron gates around its perimeter (Baldwin 2021). Trinity's history is rooted in attempts to isolate itself from the rest of the community on the institutional level.

Beyond institutional history, there are also preexisting dynamics among students. A project, led by the Education Studies department and the Center for Hartford Engagement and Research (CHER), further explains the relations on and off-campus through the perspective of first years. A report conducted in 2019 by Trinity students for CHER interviewed two groups of first-year students: those who had and had not participated in Community Action. The research team found that 19 out of the 30 First-Year interviewees mentioned safety ("Preliminary Findings from Interviews with First Year Students at Trinity" 2019). These findings insinuate a fear of Hartford that is a part of students' shared experiences on campus. Interestingly, this same study by CHER and the Education Studies department found that interviewees that were involved in Community Action expressed their comfortability within Hartford at a higher rate compared to their non-involved counterparts. This report is a great preliminary indicator to examine identity and civic engagement levels of Trinity students to determine membership to Hartford.

Overall, the college seems to be turning towards a new era of civic engagement with the recent foundation of the CHER in 2018. CHER serves as a hub for community learning courses, the Liberal Arts Action Lab, Trinfo Cafe, the partnership with Hartford Magnet Trinity College Academy, and the Office of Community Service and Civic Engagement. Data from CHER shows that participation is not equal across the student population. In 2019 CHER reported that 34% of Black students and 30% of Latinx students at Trinity participated in at least one of CHER's partnerships, as compared to 23% of white students (cite the 2019 report). In that same year only

6% and 8% of the entire student population were made up of Black and Latinx students, respectively. Such rates illuminate a distinct underrepresentation from white students.

Heading into the findings in the subsequent chapters, the responses from the interviewees are within this context—Trinity has a contentious relationship with Hartford which informs the civic behavior of the student population and that there may be trending behavior along racial/ethnic identity and levels of involvement in the community.

### Takeaways from the Literature

There are a few key consensuses I will take away from the literature when heading into my research. Firstly, community learning is a valuable tool that can bolster civic engagement amongst college students. Secondly, community learning and civic engagement are tangible building blocks in creating a cohesive community. Lastly, there is a divide between Trinity College and the Hartford community. My research questions will dig into finding how college students become urban citizens and examine expressions or rejections of becoming urban citizens.

## **IV. Methodology**

What is shaping urban citizenship for college students, and what role do community learning courses have? To answer these research questions, a diverse range of students were asked to share their experiences through semi-structured interviews. The 56 interviewees participated in an hour-long conversation where they were able to describe their perceptions of Hartford, experiences with community learning, and classroom discussions on systemic racism, diversity, and equity.

The interviews were conducted over Zoom to be audio-recorded then transcribed for analysis using Dedoose, an online mixed-methods data analysis platform (Version 8.0.35). Analysis proceeded through an iterative and inductive process of coding to identify key feedback from participants. Then, evocative quotes were identified and paired with brief analytical memos for each interview. Since codes are not mutually exclusive, multiple thematic codes could be applied to participant responses. Drawing on a post interview demographic survey, we analyzed patterns of response by specific forms of identity like race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, first-generation college status, and hometown origin. The findings below highlight patterns of engagement and perceptions of Hartford across differing students across campus.

To examine differing perspectives, the 56 interviews are divided in two samples: students of color and white students. All participants were identified through the CHER database, which tracks student engagement with programs and community learning courses. The first sample consisted of 42 randomly selected students of color with varying participation in community learning courses interviewed in the summer of 2021. Students from the classes of '21-'24 who were actively enrolled at Trinity in the 2020-2021 academic year were randomly selected for participation. The selection was further segmented into three groups based on their level of community learning (CL) engagement, including classes at the Liberal Arts Action Lab:

- No CL engagement: Enrolled in no CL courses
- Some engagement: 1-2 CL courses
- High engagement: 3+ CL courses

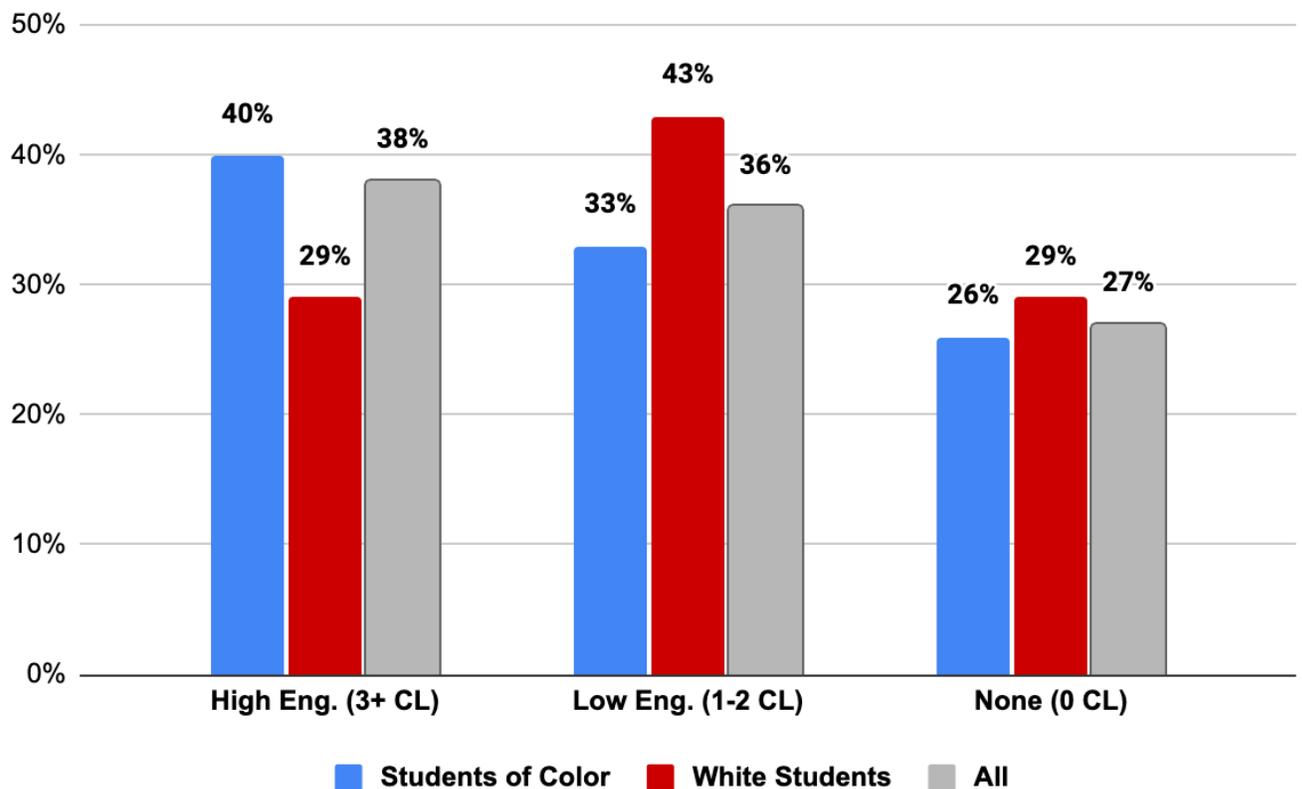
CHER's database did not include demographic information like race and ethnicity. In collaboration with Trinity's Analytics and Strategic Initiatives Center, they were able to provide a random sample of a hundred students of color across varying engagement levels. From three rounds of recruitment emails, 34% (33 out of 96 students of color emailed) responded and participated. At the end of the summer the original random samples were used to invite

additional students to participate in focus groups. By August 2021, four small focus groups with a total of nine participants were added. Thus, the full sample includes 42 students of color.

The second, smaller sample comprises 14 white students who were interviewed in the spring of 2022. The CHER database and the Analytics and Strategic Initiatives Center were used in the same way to procure a random sample of white students enrolled in the 2021-2022 academic year. Three rounds of recruitment emails were sent to 67 students, resulting in a response rate of 21% (14 white students).

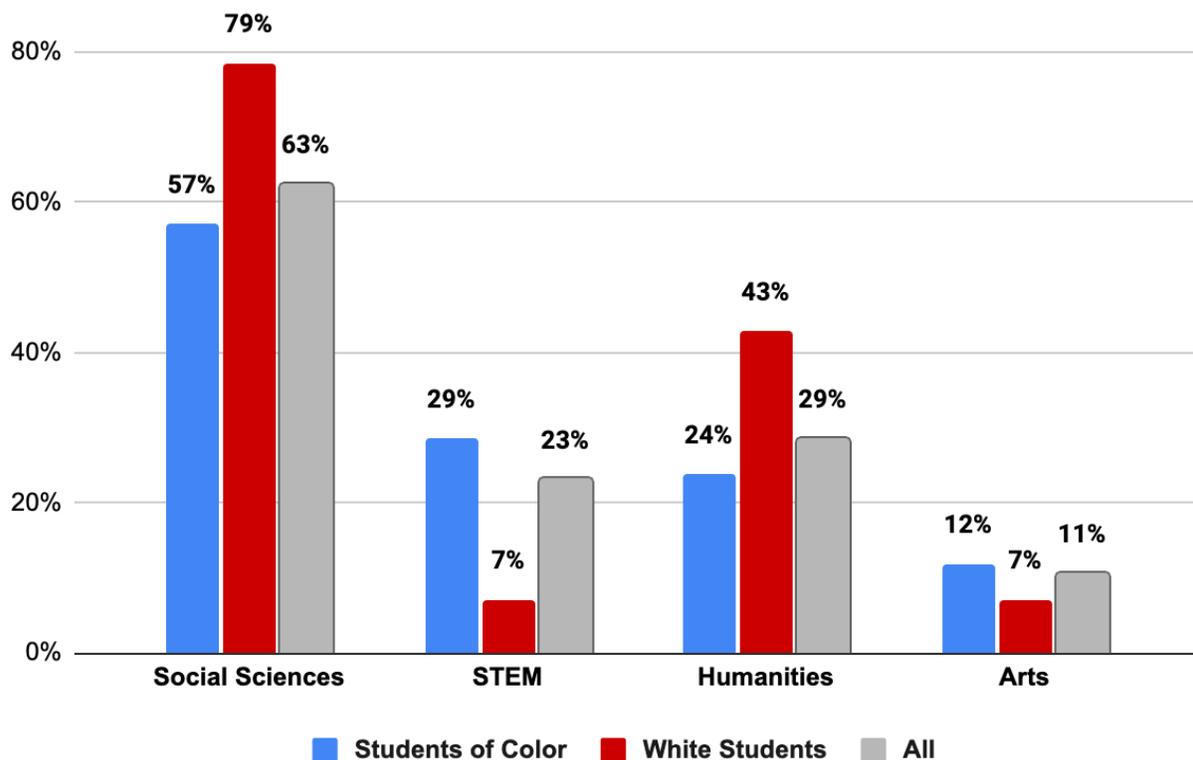
As mentioned above, the entire sample was categorized by three levels of community engagement. Figure 1 demonstrates that, throughout the entire sample, there is a relatively even distribution of students with high, low, and no experience with community learning courses.

**Figure 1. Sample Characteristics by Community Learning Participation**



Class year and major are also evenly representative of the college as a whole. Figure 2 displays the proportion of each major in the samples. The proportions do not add up to 100% because one student could be majoring in multiple disciplinary divisions. More than half of the sample are social sciences majors, in line with Trinity students as a whole. In terms of class year, the sample shows an even distribution outlined in Figure 3. Ten recent graduates of color from the class of 2021 were interviewed. During outreach to white students in the spring, graduates of 2021 were not included in the recruitment process. All first years are excluded from this study in order to exclude minors.

**Figure 2. Sample Characteristics by Academic Major**



**Figure 3. Sample Characteristics by Class Year**

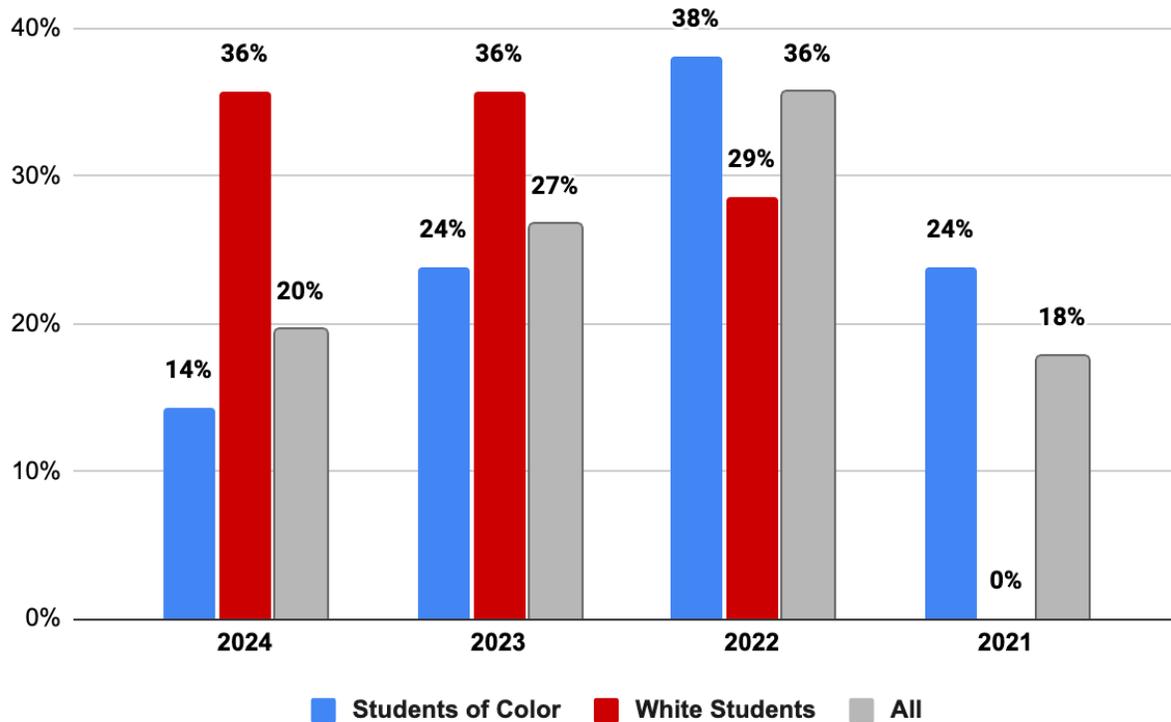


Figure 4 presents the gender breakdown of interviewees by male and female identification. To protect the identity of interviewees, there is no further disaggregation of any interviewees that identify as non-binary. Within the white student sample there is an overrepresentation of women, which is an unintended consequence of a low response rate from men in the random sampling process.

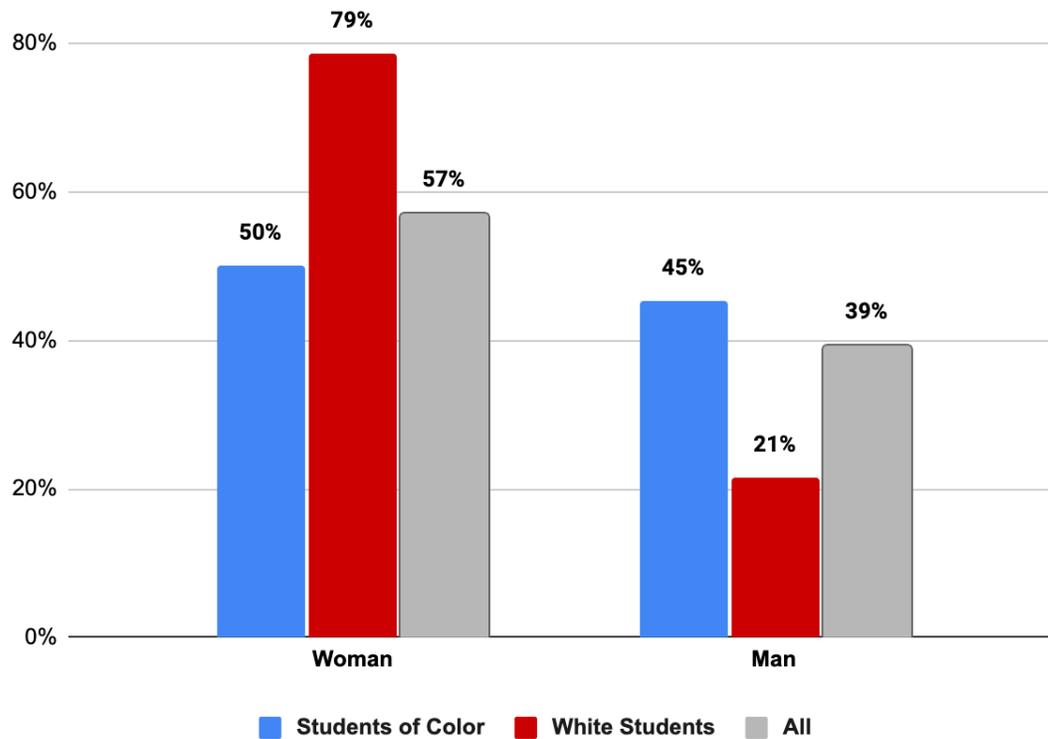
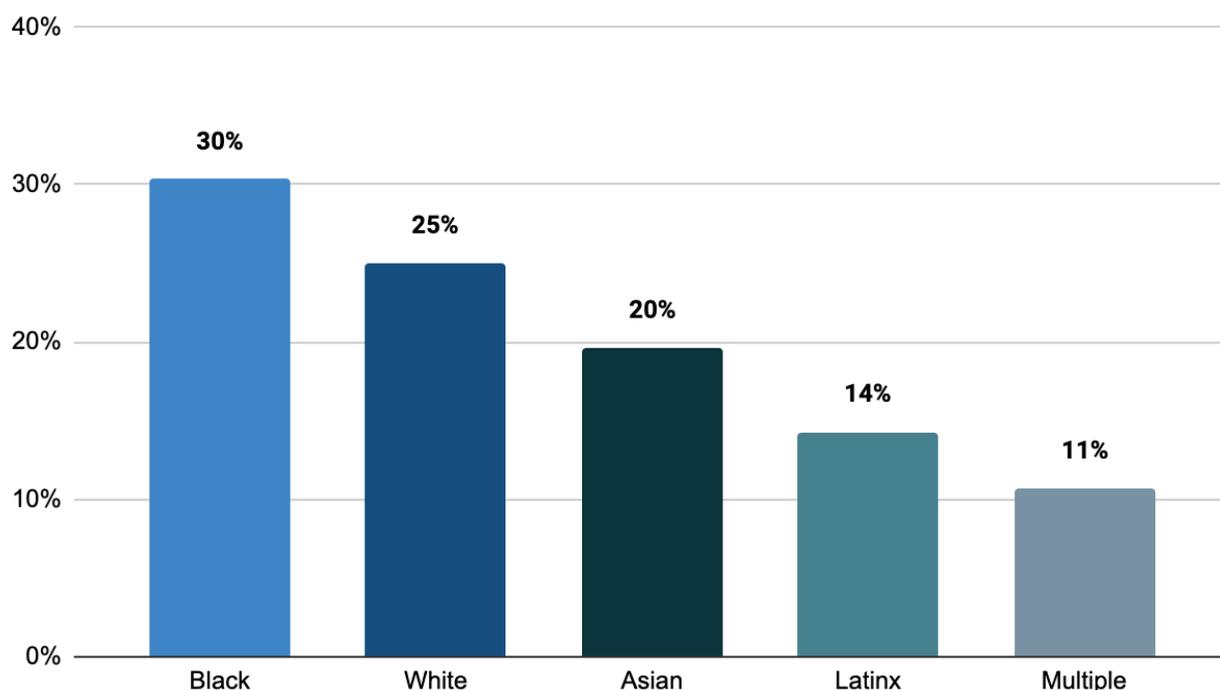
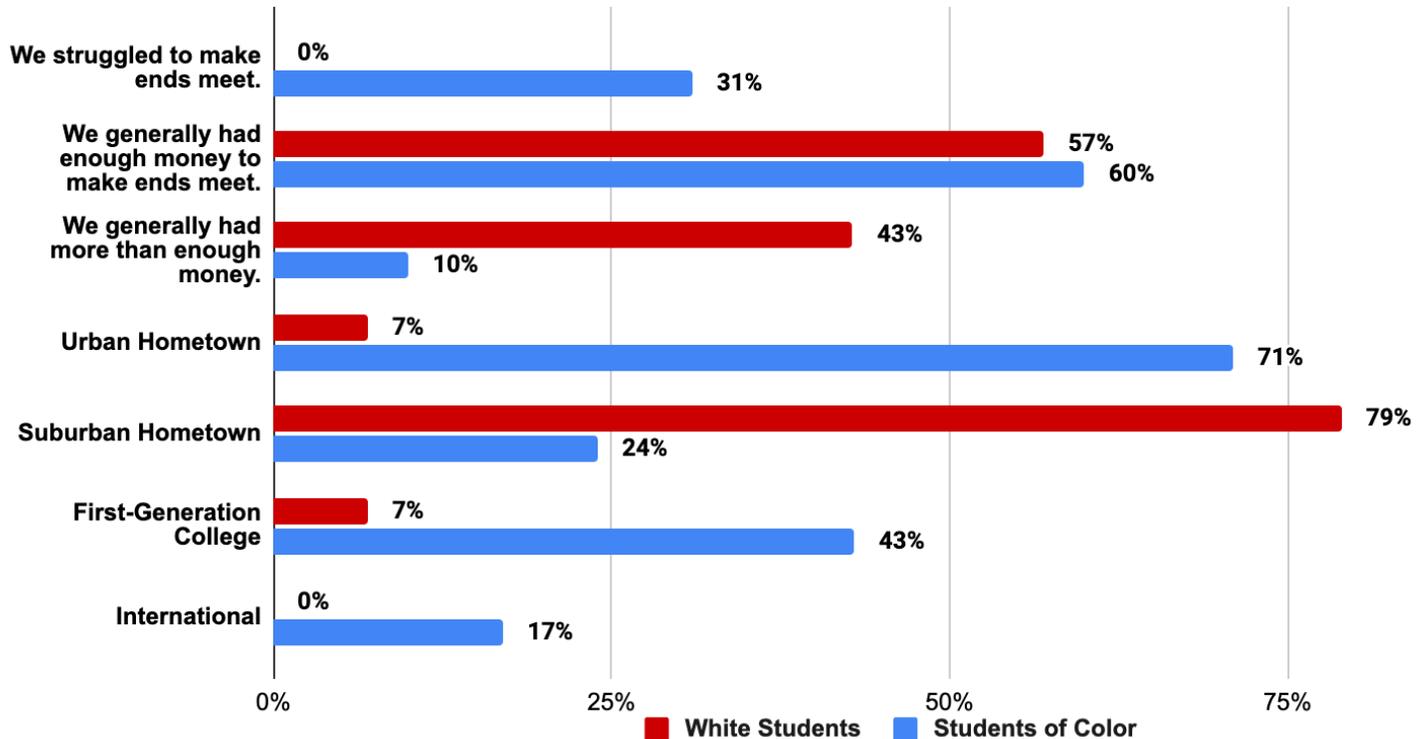
**Figure 4. Sample Characteristics by Gender**

Figure 5 displays an overview of the racial and ethnic breakdown of the entire sample, before zooming into some key characteristics of the two separate samples. The percentages are calculated with the entire sample size of 56 interviewees and demonstrate a good representation of race and ethnicity within the sample. However, Latinx students are underrepresented at 14%, a fact that needs to be examined further in the future.

**Figure 5. Sample Characteristics by Race and Ethnicity**

Regarding the students of color sample, Figure 6 shows there is good diversity in terms of socioeconomic status, first-generation college, and domestic or international origin. Notably, over a third of interviewees of color are first-generation college students and almost a fifth are international students of color. Of the white student sample, the fourteen interviewees mostly identified as being from upper- or middle-class households, having at least one parent graduate college, and growing up in suburban hometowns. Notably, white interviewees were mostly from suburban hometowns and of higher socioeconomic status. There were no white students who identified that they/their household struggled to make ends meet. Further research could focus on outreach to white students of low-income households on campus.

**Figure 6. Comparing Sample Characteristics of Students of Color and White Students**



A comprehensive and diverse sample of interviewees allows this study to gain more insight into the motivations behind students' civic behavior within the context of their status as Trinity College students in Hartford. This study hopes to analyze and identify the sources of urban citizenship amongst Trinity College students. However, there are slight limitations to the sample in achieving this goal. Firstly, findings may extend to similar private liberal arts colleges in urban settings but are unlikely to apply to other types of higher education institutions in other settings. Secondly, there was a low response rate during the recruitment process for white interviewees. This resulted in a much smaller sample size and less variation across demographic characteristics. While the sample does have a good distribution of community learning

experiences, other identity-based qualities such as low-income status, first-generation college student, and urban hometown were low. Future research may benefit from oversampling white students who belong to these groups. Despite this limitation, there remains significant variation across this large sample of interviews. Typical literature that examines identity within political behavior often uses a robust sample of white people to establish the default norm of measurement. Then, voices of color are added to compare. This study, instead, does the opposite, starting with the experience of students of color.

### Roadmap for the Rest of the Study

To demonstrate college students' path to citizenship and the role community learning plays, the next chapter will examine students' sense of membership. Membership will be framed through students' perceptions of Hartford and their positionality in Hartford. Chapter Three will explore Trinity students' civic engagement experiences, particularly their feedback on community learning and discussions on systemic issues in the classroom. As the chapters will outline, there are critical behaviors and experiences that demonstrate the ideal form of urban citizenship amongst students of color at Trinity. White students' outreach exposes a weaker sense of urban citizenship, which is emphasized through explicit fear of Hartford yet a tremendous transformation *after* community engagement experiences.

For white students, community engagement courses help to inculcate a greater sense of urban citizenship, in terms of developing greater connection, empathy, and knowledge. However, for students of color, participating in community learning alongside white students can be exhausting and hurtful when they feel pressure to mine their own trauma to serve as educators to white students, or re-live societal divisions through white students' naivete. The following

chapters provide insight on exactly *who* sees themselves as a part of the Hartford community and the role higher education plays in fostering urban citizenship.

## **Chapter Two: Finding a Home in the City...or in the Bubble**

### Overview on Membership

To embody urban citizenship, students must engage civically based on their sense of belonging in the city. A sense of membership is the foundation of building a committed community. Ideally, membership would look like an individual feeling comfortable in the community and sees themselves as an equal to other community members. To gauge sentiments of closeness and commitment to the city, students were asked to compare their initial reactions of Hartford, current perceptions, and perceptions from other people. The following chapter will explore Trinity students' sense of membership to Hartford, comparing interviews with students of color and white students.

Students of color shared how their sense of membership to Hartford is rooted in their identity. Most students of color felt attracted to and comfortable in Hartford due to its rich diversity. Students' hometown origins were associated with their perceptions of Hartford, with students from urban backgrounds demonstrating more positive impressions of the city. Outreach to white students contrasted with culture shocks to the city.

The responses also provided insight into the sources and subsequent impact of negative perceptions of the city, illustrating the exact nature of weak ties between Trinity students and Hartford. An overwhelming portion of students observed how there is an omnipresent narrative that Hartford is dangerous to Trinity students. A significant portion of students of color identified white students as the primary group that possesses these views. This observation is confirmed in the responses from white students who express fear of Hartford. A smaller number of students of color, largely higher income and Asian students described how they are also concerned for their own safety.

The findings illuminate a persuasive pathway for Trinity students to fear Hartford, essentially the antithesis of what it means to be an urban citizen. Fears of safety and stereotypes fuel a deep divide between the campus and Hartford while students are left to navigate the racial and class-fueled implications.

### **I. Students' Own Perceptions of Hartford**

Examining students' own impressions of the city, there is a dominant trend that students of color find a strong sense of belonging to Hartford through identifying with the diversity of the city. However, outreach from white students illustrated the culture shock to the city and tendencies to isolate themselves within the campus' borders.

Among students of color, almost half of the interviewees (48%; 20/42) identified a feeling of belonging and a clear sense of familiarity in Hartford. As one highly engaged senior who identifies as Black and Hispanic said, "I think that's a big reason why I decided to go to Trinity was because I instantly felt comfortable in the environment outside of Trinity's gates. It just reminded me of home" (82). Of students who immediately identified a positive impression of Hartford upon arriving at Trinity, 16 were from urban hometowns (constituting 53% of urban origin students interviewed 16/30) as compared to three from suburban hometowns (30% of suburban students interviewed (3/10)).

Over half of respondents (55%; 23/42) also specified that the diversity of Hartford shaped their impressions of Hartford in a positive way. Both urban and suburban students saw Hartford's diversity as a key draw to Trinity at similar rates (50% and 60%, respectively). Across tracked demographic data, students of color overwhelmingly described a positive emotional tie to the

city upon arriving at Trinity. Such sentiments of comfortability and understanding demonstrate membership to Hartford from these students of color and students like them.

Among white students, there were distinctly different perceptions of Hartford that emphasized the disconnect between these students and the city. Firstly, the responses revealed different sources of positive associations of Hartford from white students. A little over half (57%; 8/14) of respondents stated that they saw Trinity College's location in a capital city as a key draw to enrolling. Many students described how the resources of an urban center was an asset, including a low-engaged woman in her sophomore year who said "I was excited to be in an area where you had access to a city because with the center of Hartford you have all these places that you can get to really easily" (105). Convenience and opportunities were highlighted in these responses, indicating a different source of value than students of color identified.

A smaller portion also expressed how they observed familiarity with Hartford because of their proximity to urban spaces (36%; 5/14), which served as a factor in shaping their positive views on the city. Unlike students of color who also shared this feeling, white students' familiarity was not associated with their hometown. Of the five, four students identified their hometown as suburban and one as rural. They did describe assigning familiarity with Hartford because they were comparing their own hometown's proximity to an urban center, which they either visited often or even traveled there to perform community service in high school (2 out of five said they traveled to a nearby city to engage in community service). A white woman from a suburban town in the Northeast describes her perceptions of Hartford, rooted in her experience attending private high school in a city like Hartford:

[The city she attended private high school] is a really, really poor community. I mean, they struggled a lot with drug addiction crime. The city is extremely diverse. It's full of immigrants who are trying to make a better life, better lives for themselves. And so a lot of students that went to [the private school], their

families were first generation high school or college. So it was definitely very different than what I've been exposed to and what I grew up with. The environment is a lot like Hartford, you know? Despite it being so different, it was just a city. It's a city. So it's not. I was not used to that at first, but then I got really used to it and I became extremely engaged in my high school...I think it was good exposure for me about what the rest of the world looks like (102).

While positive associations based on a sense of familiarity are identified in both students of color and white student outreach, there is a significant lack of belonging to that community from white students.

Half (50%; 7/14) of white interviewees, on the other hand, expressed explicitly negative sentiments towards Hartford. Of this portion, four respondents (57%) described how moving to a city from their hometown was a culture shock to them. One low-engagement woman in her senior year said, "I remember driving up Broad Street and being like, 'Whoa, like, where are we going?' Because you see buildings with bars on the windows and stuff. I had never really been in cities, ever...I didn't leave campus for a while" (100). Similarly, five respondents (71%) that held negative initial impressions also characterized Hartford through general sentiments of apprehension or fear. An unengaged senior described his first impressions in comparison to his hometown:

I think most people have the same idea of Hartford: that it's not too good an area, as a high crime city, falling on some hard times. Driving around, you can see that as well, especially coming from a wealthy suburb. And then this guy, [indicating himself] coming to see how the other half lives (109).

Clearly, seeing Hartford as "the other half" suggests that this white student and others like him do not feel a sense of membership. Respondents holding negative impressions of Hartford were evenly distributed across suburban and rural hometowns in the sample (60%; 3/5 and 40%; 2/5, respectively).

## II. Perceptions of Safety Concerns in Hartford

Safety was overwhelmingly mentioned by all interviewees. However, students of color spoke of safety mostly in the context of wrongful stereotypes casted upon Hartford, which are perpetuated by white students. Concurrently, white students are concerned for their own safety when they step off campus. Students of color who express concern for stereotyping Hartford as dangerous are exemplifying patterns of urban citizenship, while white students and some higher income students of color are expressing the exact antithesis of urban citizenship: fear.

Negative impressions grounded in fear and othering from white students are emphasized through a greater rate of concerns for safety, compared to students of color. Over two-thirds of the respondents who identified as a person of color mentioned safety (69%; 29/42), but nearly all specified that their white classmates perceived Hartford as dangerous (86%; 25/29). A much smaller portion of interviewees of color specified that their family members and close friends were worried about safety off-campus (21%; 6/29). One low-engagement Asian woman in her junior year described an exchange about engagement in Hartford that they see as common on campus:

It was mostly just random people that didn't know where I was really from that would tell me, like, "Oh, be careful, Hartford's dangerous." Hartford is impoverished really is what they are talking about. And that was basically it and, you know, people connect being poor to all types of drug use and criminal behavior, I guess. So they were just trying to warn me. I remember some person actually was like, "Don't worry. Like you have everything you need on campus, you'll never have to leave." And I was just like, why would I want that? (26)

Concerns about white students' perceptions of Hartford came up frequently among students of color, regardless of these students' race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, or hometown origins. For instance, about half of students from urban and suburban backgrounds raised this issue (60% (18/30) and 50% (5/10), respectively).

However, there are slight deviations to the rejection of stereotypes of Hartford amongst students of color. A small, yet distinct portion of students of color indicated that they shared those perceptions and fears for their own safety. This group comprises six responses (21%) who described feeling of uneasiness and associations with danger when leaving campus. A low-engagement Asian woman, when asked about their impressions of Hartford, said, “I feel like this is controversial, but I don't really feel safe here. Even my friends, some of them go running [off campus]. I can't imagine doing that” (19). They go on to contrast this feeling, interestingly, with their level of high comfort in West Hartford—a wealthy and white suburb of Hartford. The same student also identifies two factors that fuel their feelings of anxiety when going off campus: the frequent campus safety email alerts of local crime and their upbringing in a wealthy, white suburb of New York City.

Among students of color, being of higher socioeconomic status, an international student, and or Asian seems to be associated with feeling unsafe in Hartford. Three of the respondents are international students (50%) and five out of the six respondents are Asian and/or Pacific Islander (83%). All six respondents mentioned their own safety concerns identified as either being in the middle or upper-income categories. In sum, some students—especially affluent international and/or Asian students—associate safety concerns with Hartford’s urban environment.

The analysis from the outreach to white students reflects the conclusions expressed by students of color. A significant portion of white interviewees said that they have concerns for their own safety when on campus (71%; 10/14). Furthermore, white students who described their own concerns often mentioned how their families warned them of the dangers of Hartford before enrolling. One low-engagement man in his sophomore year said that his family friend graduated from Trinity years ago and “his mom said, ‘Oh don't ever leave campus alone. If you step a foot

off of campus you're going to get hurt” (110). White students are warned about Hartford’s purported dangers by their family and carry these fears when they arrive on campus.

### **III. Evaluating Changes in Perceptions**

Of the students who described their own fear of Hartford, about half of both students of color and white students experienced a change in their own perceptions over time. Of the six students who were initially concerned for their own safety, three experienced a change in views (50%). Two of the three students who transitioned from associating danger with Hartford to having positive associations with the city are international students from urban areas and the other is from a rural hometown and identifies as Black.

A little over half of all white students interviewed expressed how their own perception of Hartford has changed over time (57%; 8/14). All described how it shifted towards a more positive perception from their initial negative impressions. A highly engaged sophomore white woman describes her own drastic shift:

I have totally changed my perspective on Hartford. I just remember I was so initially turned off by it. I did not want to go. I wanted a cute little college town. I didn't think I could walk off campus, which really bothered me. But now I walked off campus and I realized I can still do that. It's just different than I was anticipating for myself...And now that I'm here, I can't really imagine myself anywhere else. I think Hartford has a lot to offer, and I think it's underrated how much it has to offer (99).

Similar sentiments were expressed, interestingly, by most of the white students who described how they had concerns for their own safety when arriving in Hartford. Of the ten students who personally held fears of venturing off campus, eight (80%) also said that they experienced a change in perception of Hartford as less dangerous. The following chapter will begin to piece

together how and what caused students' negative perceptions to change through community learning programs.

#### **IV. Perceptions Affected by Others**

Students described how negative impressions held by others is an innate facet of Trinity culture and admit that stereotypes have even influenced their own experiences of Hartford during their early years at Trinity. When asked to reflect on other students' perceptions of Hartford, students of color explained how fearing Hartford was pervasive. A strongly held narrative that Hartford is dangerous is a shockingly clear barrier to students' path towards becoming urban citizens.

In the context of rejecting persuasive negative stereotypes of Hartford, nine students of color (21%) described how their own perceptions of Hartford changed over time towards a more positive point of view. One Hispanic woman described how she "had that period where I didn't want to engage with Hartford because I saw an immediate dislike of Hartford specifically by white students. I think that's kind of what sparked my interest in saying, 'No, this place is actually really cool and I'm going to prove it to you by going out to these spaces'" (4). These nine students described how they had to make distinct choices to shift away from viewing Hartford as a dangerous place. All but one of the interviewees identified as a first-generation college student (88%); and most generally had enough money growing up (78%; 7/9).

In a similar vein, a few white students identified how their peers' negative perceptions of Hartford stood as a barrier for them overcoming their own fear of the city. From this same conversation, a low-engagement junior commented:

I had heard all the stereotypes that people get like, 'Don't stick around in Hartford, go to West Hartford. It's so much better.' It's basically the suburb you

want to be in and coming into Trinity, that was kind of like ‘I didn't want to be caught in Hartford,’ especially at night, which I don't think anyone really does at Trinity. But I have definitely adhered to the stereotype of ‘Oh my friends and I, we just go to West Hartford like there's not much to do in Hartford.’ That was kind of my freshman year mentality (106).

The same student went on to describe how stereotyping Hartford feels like a part of Trinity’s culture. Several responses identify white students as the main source of negative comments regarding the city.

## **V. The Trinity Bubble**

The influential and dominant narrative that Hartford is a dangerous place is fueled by stereotypes that otherize the city as well as fracture relationships inside the campus. This suggests that there is a pervasive culture that attempts to steer students away from becoming urban citizens.

Almost half of the students of color interviewed (48%; 20/42) described a tension within the student body’s perceptions of themselves and the campus. This divide was framed through the influence of others’ perceptions of Hartford, particularly around safety, and was often labeled as the “Trinity Bubble.” As one Asian student from an urban hometown expressed, “I found that Trinity was itself like a bubble. In Hartford, it felt very detached, especially freshman year when I was interacting with other upperclassmen...they would always be like, ‘oh, you don't want to leave campus because it's dangerous” (42). A highly engaged recent graduate described this tension from their own perspective as both a lifelong resident of Hartford and student at Trinity:

When I got into Trinity, everybody [from home] was just like, ‘good luck, Trinity doesn't care about Hartford, like they don't care about us. So you better milk them. You better get everything you can out of them’... but I was like, I'm not going to be that Trinity student, born and raised in Hartford, that doesn't do anything in Hartford and that doesn't speak up for the city (75).

Whether students of color underwent a change in perspective or were able to critically observe others' opinions of Hartford, many brought up the prevalence of racist and classist stereotypes that are being perpetuated on campus and thus are enforcing the divide between the college and Hartford.

A significant majority of white students referred to the “Trinity Bubble” (71%; 10/14). There were two clear narratives when this “bubble” was mentioned. Firstly, it was mentioned in the context of describing white students' own civic behavior and decisions in avoiding leaving campus. One non-engaged white student from a suburban hometown reflected on her first year at Trinity:

When I first came to Hartford, I was a little nervous about being in a city because I grew up in a suburb like half an hour from Boston, a super suburban town. But I was also really excited about that because I had never lived in a city, so that was fun. But then when I got here, I realized that we don't really live in the city at all, like we're in a bubble. I remember freshman year I didn't go off campus often...It didn't feel like I was living in Hartford. It just felt like I was living on campus (108).

Students who noted the divide between Hartford and Trinity to explain their own behavior tended to have little to no engagement experience.

On the other hand, engaged white students (80%; eight out of the ten students who mentioned the “Trinity Bubble”) would refer to the “divide” as a critique of their peers or of Trinity College as an institution. One highly engaged white woman responded to a question on the effectiveness of community learning courses at Trinity by saying:

I think that you can get through your whole time at Trinity and never engage in the Hartford community once. And I don't think that is good. There's a lot of attitudes surrounding Hartford that need to be addressed by the student body specifically. I would say that the people who care about and want to be involved in the community are doing great work. I just wish that more people on campus realized they were a part of it too (99-2).

Many students perceive the model Trinity student as “not a part of” Hartford, indicating that the College is not achieving a sense of broad-based urban citizenship among students.

Concurrently, a specific and common comment from almost half of the interviewees who identified as students of color was concern about other students stereotyping Hartford (48%; 20/42). A Black woman in her sophomore year mentioned that they often heard peers expressing that Hartford is violent and that there is rampant gang violence, though students expressing those stereotypes “haven’t been anywhere in Hartford” (99-1). Students of color are showing that their connection to Hartford is often rooted in their identity; however, a feeling of division is being bolstered as coded or overt signals across campus warn all to avoid the city the college is situated in.

White interviewees commented on the prevalence of white students stereotyping Hartford community members as well. A junior without community engagement experience recounted an interaction with Trinity students during an admissions trip, before she enrolled:

[During a campus tour] the admissions people made a statement kind of about Hartford, and they were just addressing what I think they thought was an elephant in the room for a lot of the parents and kids that were touring. They were kind of just like, ‘we know it’s not the best area, but we have a lot of resources’...I will say most of those remarks definitely came from white students that were already on campus (102).

A majority of white students (64%; 9/14) echoed students of color’s assessment that white students on campus frequently stereotype residents of Hartford as dangerous.

The nuanced differences in viewing the “Trinity Bubble” also emerged in less explicit ways. Varying greatly from responses from students of color, a little over a third (36%; 5/14) of white student respondents referenced how they felt valued by Trinity as an institution. When reflecting on choosing Trinity, white students would describe how admissions events and/or offers of scholarships and academic opportunities determined their likelihood of enrollment. A

sophomore with low engagement described their reasons for coming to Trinity, “I fell in love with the school. I was in love with the buildings. It was prestigious. They gave me some money and I was like: That's great” (110). Another low-engagement woman in her senior year had a similar experience that emphasized the impression Trinity made:

I came to Trinity mostly because I got a good deal. They admitted me as one of the Design Fellows of our class. I did that program freshman year and they gave me some money for that. So that was enticing. I wanted to stay in New England. Didn't really know a ton about anything else (100).

Expressions of feeling supported by the college from white students and feeling comforted by the campus emphasizes how white students feel at home at Trinity. Feelings of belonging to Trinity are juxtaposed with how students of color feel at home in Hartford; while also being confronted with hurtful stereotypes of the city that stigmatize students.

## **VI. Summary of Findings**

Students of color are, for the most part, demonstrating qualities of an ideal urban citizen. These students easily identified a feeling of belonging and a clear sense of familiarity in Hartford, particularly citing the city’s diversity as a main draw to enrolling at Trinity. However, a significant portion of students of color mentioned that *other* students are afraid of Hartford.

Those concerns highlight white students’ responses to their own perceptions of Hartford. Most white students characterized their impressions and following perceptions of Hartford through their concern for their safety, or at least a disconnect between themselves and the community. Such sentiments outline a perfect opposite to urban citizenship, urban fear.

Most concerningly, students from both samples describe how there is a pervasive culture of vilifying and stereotyping Hartford residents as dangerous. A portion of white students also elaborated that those stereotypes hindered their willingness to engage in Hartford. To completely analyze the meaning of membership (or lack of membership) amongst students, this study will

look at the civic behavior of these students in community learning programs and classroom discussions on systemic issues.

## **Chapter Three: Community Learning is a Bridge for Some and a Tool for Others**

### Overview on Civic Engagement

Urban citizenship, as defined in this study, requires individuals to feel a sense of membership in the city where they reside. From that sense of membership, a feeling of responsibility to the city emerges, which can be actualized through civic engagement. Civic engagement is an essential demonstration of commitment to the city. This chapter examines how Trinity College students' experience or lack of experience engaging with Hartford reflects their mixed status as urban citizens.

Significant portions of students of color marked positive experiences engaging in Hartford through their chance to form valuable connections and have rewarding experiences. Students of color critique some of their community engagement efforts as superficial. A small number of white students agreed that some aspects of their community engagement experiences were performative for the benefit of the college. Such critiques demonstrate urban citizenship; students who want engagement experiences to have mutual benefit are invested in the welfare of the community. In contrast, white students' experiences were generally positive, as they described their experiences as a transformative learning opportunity.

A vital component of community engagement, as it is facilitated by higher education, is examining conversations within the classroom. Students of color described the serious obstacles they face in the classroom during discussions of diversity, equity, and systemic racism. The overwhelmingly common trend was the exhausting role they had to assume during discussions of race and racism. Students of color specifically cited other white students as harmful in the classroom, and a smaller portion said the same of professors. In contradistinction to the feedback from students of color, many white interviewees had positive experiences during these

conversations and expressed transformative perceptions about systemic issues. A small portion of students also critiqued conversations on diversity, equity, and systemic racism similarly to their peers of color, noting that such conversations lacked complexity.

Understanding systemic racism could be seen as an element of urban citizenship. Engagement with issues critical to a diverse city and its communities is vital to come from a place of understanding instead of saviorism. For the interviewees of color, they have this knowledge; for white students it comes as a revelation. This exacerbates divides and points to a critical question: who feels comfortable where and when?

The campus is fractured on the inside and outside. The personal levels of understanding and strong ties of empathy are diametrically opposed to an omnipresent fear and demonization of Hartford by the white population on campus. When white and non-white students are interacting together in community learning settings there is a divide, which is a replica of an identity-based divide between Trinity College and Hartford. It is the classroom, coupled with the mission to engage in Hartford, that must be improved to mend these schisms.

### **I. Positive Community Engagement Experience in Hartford**

All students interviewed were asked what went well and what did not go well in both their community learning courses and community engagement experiences, if applicable. One emerging theme was the sense of value students gleaned from their experiences. The factors of positive experiences sharply contrasted between students of color's responses and white students. Students of color assigned value to long-lasting and meaningful connections with their community partners. Valuing and enjoying good relationships with community members exemplifies a student's status as an urban citizen. On the other hand, white students characterized their positive experiences through learning outcomes. Students described how they learned about

the realities of systemic issues in Hartford and learned to be more empathetic. While surely these qualities—awareness of systemic issues and empathy—are necessary to be an urban citizen, it is unclear whether white students have fully actualized these qualities. Instead, they seem to be in the beginning stages of becoming aware of systemic issues and gaining empathy for others.

To illustrate, of the 31 students of color who had taken a community learning class, 16 described how they were able to form valuable connections with community members (52%). Of these responses, several would refer to their ability to identify with community partners, making their experience more fruitful. Of this group, fourteen students are from urban hometowns (87%) and were able to specify how their lived experiences brought a deeper, more complex level of understanding about how to engage in Hartford. As covered in the previous chapter, this sense of belonging creates a sense of membership. This sense of membership within students of color is spurring and shaping their engagement. A highly engaged junior spoke to this trend: “I think coming to Trinity, a lot of students think that we're kind of above the community. Well, we have some kind of privilege, but the people around here are minorities, like myself, so I learned to connect with the community in that aspect” (14).

Several responses specified that community learning and the engagement component of the course gave them the opportunity to interact with people that they otherwise would have never met, allowing them to learn and exchange ideas. Approximately a third of the responses from students of color generally discussed how they found their experience to be rewarding (32%; 10/31). One highly engaged sophomore described her experience working at a local branch of a national non-profit:

I'm actually still working with them now as an intern for the summer because I loved our work so much. I've always had a passion for [this policy topic]. And I think that, even though our partnership was also mostly over Zoom, our community partner was much more engaged and really grateful for the work that we were doing... I met with people all over the nation and also plenty of people in

Hartford. So, it felt like I was getting much more of a kind of like web of how things connect and where things are and what [the organization] does. (58)

Many students of color like the one quoted above cited the long-lasting connections they made, the positive work environment, and the meaningful work they were able to contribute as factors characterizing their community engagement experiences as a rewarding experience.

Ten of the fourteen white students interviewed had at least one community engagement experience. Of the ten, more than two-thirds (70%, 7/10) described all experiences engaging in Hartford as positive. A smaller portion of three white respondents mentioned that they formed valuable connections with the community (30%; 3/10). The few who mentioned that they made connections with community members reflected on how those bonds made their experience enjoyable, “[Working at a local community center] was my direct point of contact with the city. And it's very interesting to listen to local activists and become friends with local activists and artists” (110). White students referred to connections made through the work being done, unlike students of color who also added how their common identities worked to make those connections.

In terms of resources provided by the campus to engage in Hartford, five responses from students of color (16%) specified how group engagement opportunities—distinctly the Community Action Gateway and P.R.I.D.E. (Promoting Respect for Inclusive Diversity in Education) Orientation, a first-year residential peer mentor program for students from underrepresented backgrounds—allowed them to bond with their peers and make lasting friendships inside campus.

Similarly stated, but at a higher incidence, seven white students (50%) mentioned organized groups on campus as a positive bridge to engagement and connections with other

students. The Community Action Gateway and Cities Gateway were referenced, as well as the Liberal Arts Action Lab, JELLO, and ACES.

## **II. Critiquing Community Engagement Experiences as Superficial**

A significant portion of students of color took the chance to share substantive critiques on the structure and outcomes of their community engagement experiences. As discussed in the literature, there is a pervasive issue of institutions using community engagement as a window dressing to virtue signals to the community and to the higher educational system (Baldwin 2021). However, students of color are quickly recognizing and critiquing any occurrences of superficiality in community learning programs. This critique is a paradigmatic behavior of urban citizenship. Students who criticize extractive engagement initiatives are demonstrating their care for the welfare of the community.

Nearly half of engaged students of color (48%; 15/31) said that their experience was superficial. For the most part, the interviewees would emphasize this critique by explaining either the constraints of time in a semester-long schedule or through assignments that seemed like they were meaningless for the community partner. One highly engaged senior explained these two factors at play:

I feel like the school and the organizations have to create something for us to do versus we do something that they need us to do... In the Action Lab, I kind of felt the same way like they didn't really know what they wanted us to do. They wanted us to help with something that we really couldn't help them with because it was outside of the semester time (5).

Among students of color, first-generation college students and urban origin students were more likely to raise these concerns. Of 17 engaged first-generation students, 9 raised these concerns. Of 25 engaged urban origin students, 10 raised these concerns.

In a focus group session, two highly engaged recent graduates of Trinity described how their assignments felt superficial. One explained that since they were not able to get a significant amount of feedback from impacted populations, the entire project felt “botched” and that it was a missed opportunity to develop a higher quality product. In this case, he explained how standards of ethics were disregarded to meet deadlines. The other recent graduate in the focus group commented that they wished they had up to a year to complete their project. Despite both wanting more time and losing meaning in their projects, they were still pressured to complete it, as their time and class credits were at stake. As a result, they added that a tone was set early in the community learning course and ultimately led to a sense of apathy from the community partners as well:

Because we're just students and we're not getting paid—and also because it's a semester long and we have limited time—that even though we learn a lot from the experience and we benefit a lot from it, whether it's criticizing the experience or because we learn something fruitful from the experience, I don't think the partners benefit that much. They just sort of know that we're just there to be there or we are there for such a short amount of time that they're not going to invest that much into us (804FG).

A disappointing paradox forms. Community partners may have an impression that students are only committed to fleeting partnerships, which causes community partners to divest responsibilities from the students. Students noted that they consistently ran out of time and/or spent their semester doing trivial work as a result of poorly managed community engagement opportunities.

In stark contrast, an overwhelming majority (70%;7/10) of engaged white students did not share any critiques of their engagement experience. When prompted to share any experiences that did not go well, respondents would sometimes describe moments of feeling unsafe while walking or traveling around Hartford, rather than specific critiques of the community learning

program. These comments were a relatively small portion, less than a third, of all fourteen students interviewed. All references of feeling unsafe in the context of being in Hartford and off-campus were made by women who shared experiences feeling unsafe after being catcalled (28%; 4/14).

A distinctly lower number of white interviewees also described how a specific aspect of their community engagement experience was superficial (30%; 3/10), echoing the critiques from students of color. They explained how the restrictions in place for COVID-19 combined with the lack of coordination within the project resulted in feeling “this disconnect between me and my community partner” (99). The same student explained how they were tasked with making promotional social media posts, but they were posted incorrectly and two hours before the event. They described how the work done had felt pointless. Similar to engaged students of color, this white student also contrasted their experience with mutually beneficial and rewarding community engagement experiences.

The other two highly engaged students who characterized their community engagement experiences as superficial specifically criticized Do It Day. Do It Day is a community service event, hosted by the college’s Office of Community Service and Civic Engagement, where varsity sports teams participate in a mandatory service project throughout the city. The two students gave the same critique from two different perspectives: one as a student-athlete participating in Do It Day and the other as a student-worker helping to coordinate the event. Both described how (white) student-athletes on Do It Day were judgmental and reluctant to be there, resulting in the work feeling superficial and another point of contact where white students would “look down on Hartford” (107).

It is important to reflect on how negative qualities of community engagement at Trinity affects students’ path to urban citizenship. When looking at coding patterns across other

categories, the same students who were able to reflect and criticize their experiences also found value and were not shown to be deterred from engaging with Hartford. Ten of the fifteen students of color who labeled their community engagement experiences as superficial are highly engaged students (66%). Likewise, the small portion of white students who had the same critiques of their community engagement experiences were also all highly engaged in the community (100%; 3/3). Observing extractive engagement practices and seeking mutually beneficial experiences within the community signals to the ideal characteristics of an urban citizen.

### **III. Differing Engagement Experiences**

Anticipating these differing experiences, interviewees of color were specifically asked whether/how community engagement experiences differ for students of color at Trinity.

Examining the possibilities that students of color have a different experience than white students was effective in exposing the multiple factors that shape negative and positive experiences.

Students of color noted that they often more easily formed connections in the community than white students, given shared racial or ethnic identity. Over two-thirds of the interviewees with engagement experiences observed that they have an easier time connecting with community partners and residents than their white peers do (77%; 24/31). Sometimes these connections were formed through practical situations as well as identity and cultural reasons. For example, one highly engaged Hispanic woman in her senior year simply observed that she was able to make deeper connections with the clients she met at an immigration center she was partnering with because she spoke the same language (2).

Similarly, a low-engagement Black man described how it is an asset to be able to relate to community members, and this common ground of experiences and identity allows students of color to avoid coming off as privileged and disconnected: “I can relate to the pain and struggle

that you go through...so when we have those conversations, it's not like we're just watching. We deeply care about that because we know they are our people. It's affecting our people” (39). To this student and students like him, engaging in Hartford has stemmed from a sense of membership to the community. Connecting to the meaning of existing in a familiar community evolves into an ethical and thoughtful civic engagement. Responses about an enhanced ability to connect with community partners came especially from students of color from urban hometowns (75%; 18/24).

Other students of color reflected on how community engagement revealed the contrast between white students’ knowledge, background, and awareness and their own, as a person of color. Students of color saw their white peers as less informed or less connected, perpetuating divides on and off campus. The perception of white students being “behind” on concepts of systemic racism was often observed as coming from a place of white saviorism or simply lacking relatability. One highly engaged Black woman talked about the opportunity the squash team has to coach young Hartford students, and pointed to these complex racial and cultural dynamics at play when comparing herself and her white teammates:

I just feel like it's more meaningful when people of color are doing these things mainly because it's like, these are my people. You know what I mean, like we're helping each other. For example, when the middle schoolers would come to play squash, a lot of them would be gravitating towards the volunteers who are people of color... it just made them more comfortable. I always felt like the white people were there because they felt like they kind of needed to be, it gave white-savior-complex vibes. Which is sad to say, and I'm sure this doesn't apply to every single white person, but for the most part, we are more connected to the work. I feel like it's more genuine, and I feel like it's received more comfortably by the community (82).

Generally, students of color move confidently in community engagement experiences because they have either experienced the issues at hand and/or understand the systems of power and struggle that manifest in a community.

The feedback and perceptions from the respondents of color reflect onto the learning outcomes from engaged white students. The takeaways white students gleaned from their experiences engaging in the community were centered around their own shift in perceptions of Hartford and the sociopolitical systems of an urban place. Half of white interviewees (7/14) said that they learned the extent and realities of their own privilege through engaging in the community. A sophomore man with low engagement experience described his personal transformative journey interning at a community center:

I grew up in a Republican household. I started to figure out that conservatism doesn't fit with my identity. But those principles still linger with me for a long, long time. But after spending a lot more time here, and especially after living here in a city, it's totally reshaped the way that I think. ...[I used to think] rich people have what they have because they worked hard for it and the poor people have what they have because they didn't work hard. But after coming to Trinity, that was shattered immediately...I think the most impactful thing to me was working with community members. Like going to the [community center] every Wednesday, talking to the people who have lived in Hartford for their entire lives. I mean it's easy to read a book about it and think 'that's poverty, that's something that happens.' Okay, but it's different. It's different when you talk to someone about it and how it impacted their life (110).

Similar experiences were shared by white students and the same portion of interviewees also described how they learned to be more empathetic after being a part of community engagement programs or classes (50%; 7/14). One sophomore who has not participated in a community learning course but did volunteer for Halloween on Vernon reflected on the impact the experience had: "I think my perception of other people in the city kind of shifted to, 'Oh, these are people with families.' They also just want what's best for their kids and the community at the end of the day" (98). While this student underwent personal growth and small steps towards urban citizenship, this statement also emphasizes the severe transition from dehumanization to empathy towards Hartford residents.

Eleven white interviewees described their own transformation towards being more empathetic, realizing their own privilege, or both. Over half of these white interviewees (54%; 6/11) self-identified as having more than enough money growing up in their household. Of the eleven, eight interviewees (72%) were considered low or not engaged in the sample.

While these observations show a clear pathway for white students to gain an empathetic mindset, it also validates critiques of white students from the interviewees of color. The learning outcomes articulated by white students provide evidence for the concerns raised by some students of color. Specifically, white students can be harmful in community learning spaces because they are ignorant to the systems of power and oppression at play *before* engagement. A concerning portion of white students, especially white students of high SES, enter the community with ignorant intentions or misinformed biases, even if they do ultimately become positively transformed by the experience.

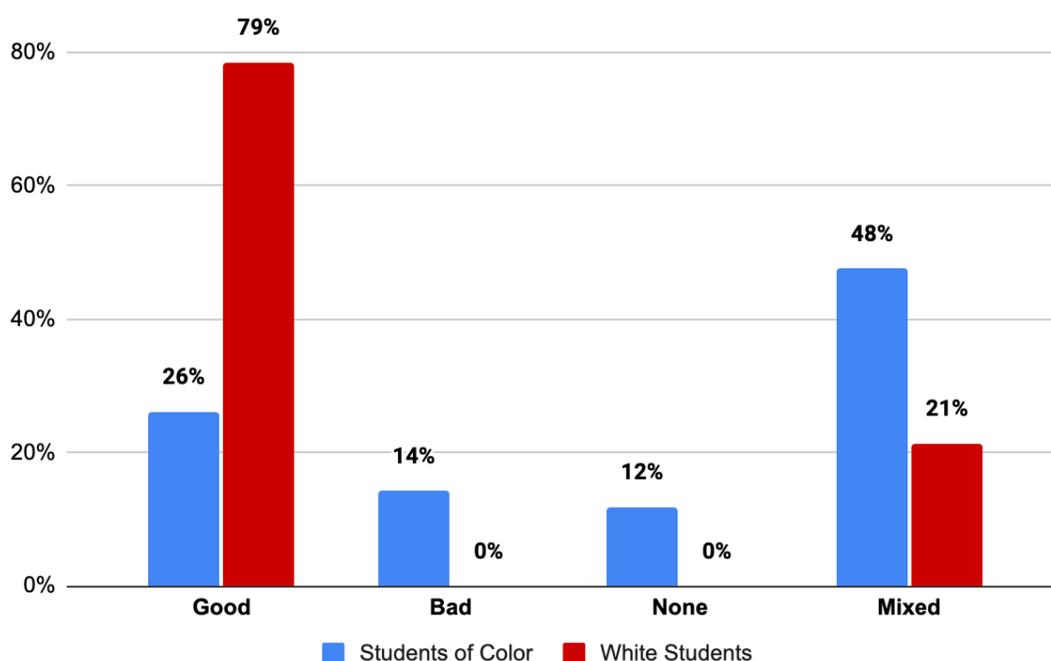
Regarding these students' status as urban citizens, it is shaky at best. An urban citizen would understand the central challenges of systemic racism facing a predominantly Black and Brown city. Since white students are unaware of disparities and inequities, they move through community engagement programs without care and ethical intentions for community members. Meanwhile, students of colors' actions are already informed by these issues when they engage in Hartford, thus demonstrating a care for the welfare of the community and a sense of membership. The different stages of awareness and understanding of these relevant systemic issues creates a dissonance between students of color and white students, as they are in different stages of becoming urban citizens. A potential space to close this gap is the classroom.

#### **IV. Differing Classroom Experiences**

This divide between students in community engagement experiences is not unsolvable. The classroom can be a transformative and informative space for all students to understand what it means to be an urban citizen and the responsibilities tied to engagement. The interviewees were asked to describe their experiences with conversations surrounding diversity, equity, and racism. The interviewees would sometimes specifically talk about community learning courses, but mostly would talk of memorable positive and negative conversations in any classroom on campus. Thus, it is important to note that these responses and subsequent analysis can be used to characterize Trinity's classrooms as a whole, and deeper investigation may be necessary to solely hone in on community learning classes.

All responses were sorted into four categories: good conversations, bad conversations, no conversations, and mixed experiences of good and bad conversations. The breakdown and comparison between the two samples is displayed in Figure 1, with interesting themes emerging from the responses that highlight the assets and flaws of the classroom setting when discussing systems of racism and oppression.

**Figure 1. Differing Classroom Experiences**



The findings explain that students' critiques of community engagement experience are also reflected in conversations about systemic issues within the classroom. As illustrated in Figure 1, almost half of students of color describe conversations about diversity, equity, and systemic racism as a mix of good and bad ones. Students of color's feedback describes how, for them, participating in community learning alongside white students can be exhausting and hurtful when they mine their own trauma to educate white students, or re-live societal divisions through white students' naivete. Students of color are demonstrating high levels of membership to the city by critiquing weak discussions on systemic issues, issues that are necessary to understand *before* engaging in Hartford.

White students once again reaffirm the critiques of students of color through their contrasting feedback. A vast majority of white students characterized these same conversations as good, with a small minority having mixed experiences. Conversations about systemic issues on race and equity make white students feel comfortable, while students of color are harmed or uncomfortable. The discrepancy between students of color's experience to the positive white student experience points to disparities in the classroom.

An overwhelmingly common trend mentioned among students of color was the exhausting role they had to assume during discussions of race and racism. A third of the responses described an experience where they were pressured or compelled to use their personal trauma as class material to persuade other students that their experiences with racism are real (33%; 14/42). An extremely compelling story from a highly engaged Hispanic male graduate describes how confusing, frustrating, and vulnerable it is to participate in discussions about equity and racism if other classmates are not open-minded:

Some students go to community learning classes and they're learning about these subjects for the first time. It's not an experience that they had to live through every day. And so some of them are like, "*Oh, my God, this is the first time I've*

*seen these things from that point of view.*” But it's uncomfortable. You know, it's like, why are you questioning the reality of the situation that a lot of students go through? It's invalidating to hear another student in class say, *“oh, is this really racist?”* Well, yes, it is, Bob. It is racist. And it's because they're learning about it as a subject in school. They don't experience these things. It almost feels like sometimes these discussions are trivial.

Then when you bring your personal experiences into it, you kind of don't want to at the same time because you don't want people to view you in a certain type of way. But at the same time, you want to make them aware that, *“Hey, this is real shit”*...When I was taking [CL course] we were talking a lot about how a lack of groceries and fresh markets is a race issue in urban communities and rural communities. I brought my own personal experiences into the conversation. And it kind of feels like you do that to make the class, I guess, more aware of the reality of these things...And then [white] people just kind of look at it and they're like, *“Oh, OK, now this is real.”* But it also makes you kind of feel like...I don't know how to explain it, like exposed and naked in a way. You feel uncomfortable with yourself because now you're overdoing it and you're like, *“Now I'm speaking too much.”* All for the sake of these people having to learn and to make these conversations stronger (804FG).

As this reflection describes, students of color are frequently confronted with weak or offensive conversations about systemic racism and often feel compelled to offer up their own vulnerability to other students who either do not understand or reject the outcomes of a racist society that students of color may have experienced first-hand. Students who are altruistically pushed to share their trauma for the purpose of providing richer discussions are ultimately hurt when taking on this role.

Within this same critique, many students added that their anxiety and feelings of vulnerability were heightened even further when other students would stay silent and only provide “blank stares” in response to their lived experiences (85). Twelve of the fourteen interviewees (86%) who identified this trend were either Black or Latinx students (9/14 and 3/14, respectively) and over half of students who spoke of their exhausting role in the classroom described their household as middle to low socioeconomic status (6/14 and 6/14, respectively). This demographic breakdown reflects the societal oppression and lived experiences of systemic

racism that many young, lower-income adults of color go through. The same association holds true through their critiques of the classroom. Students of color who do feel compelled to provide their experiences of trauma and oppression often are not met with compassion or reciprocal effort to make discussions fruitful.

The responses detailing the painful and frustrating reality for students of color in the classroom pointed to a specific source of dysfunction. A third of the respondents said that white students were harmful to the discussions and general environment of the classroom (33%; 14/42). Several had experiences of taking these exhausting roles within the classroom and identified white students as the primary perpetrators of microaggressions. For example, one low-engagement junior described how they were spotlighted in class by white students in the room while discussing Somali infrastructure in an urban studies class, “Everyone in the class, with the exception of the people of color, looked at me. I had to tell them ‘*I’m Black, but I’m not African.*’ I have no idea. I’m not Somali and I don’t know how its infrastructure is” (51). The presence of microaggressions or outwardly insulting actions both in community learning classes and other classes have clearly been a poignant, negative feature of students of colors’ academic experience around conversations of diversity and systemic issues.

Meanwhile, outreach from white students showed higher portions of positive experiences during conversations about diversity, equity, and systemic racism. An overwhelming majority of white interviewees said that these conversations went well (79%; 11/14). Similar to the learning outcomes from community engagement experiences, classroom discussions on systemic issues were often an eye-opening opportunity to learn about systemic issues and become aware of their own privilege. A woman in her senior year recounted how:

All discussions have been really positive. Introduction to Human Rights was the first time I ever heard about redlining, and that was really eye-opening for me. I really didn’t understand it at all until that class. We spent a lot of time on it, which

was really interesting and helped me understand New England in a whole different way. I remember we had a conversation about like Hartford versus West Hartford, and then I thought of my hometown because my hometown is in a very similar position [as West Hartford], like with differences in public school systems and public funding and things like that just varying greatly, even in towns that are right next to me...I just learned so much that I felt like I should have known already (108).

In fact, realizing the extent and reality of disparities driven by systemically racist institutions came up frequently from white interviewees. Out of the eleven who had positive conversations, six (54%) said that they learned of societal inequities for the first time or developed a greater understanding during these discussions. Of this portion, all identified their hometown as a suburban environment, and all had at least one parent graduate from college. The reality of white students' experiences means learning about systemic issues through other people of color's experience. While learning and understanding societal issues that are relevant to Hartford is key to being a part of the community, white students' journey towards these realizations come at an inopportune time.

There was some deviation from a small portion of white interviewees. Three interviewees identified conversations on diversity, equity, and systemic racism as lacking in nuance (21%). A woman in her sophomore year spoke to this point in her own experience during a community learning class:

The class that I took was Elementary Spanish, where we had that component of cultural study and where you need to leave campus. But there was never any conversation about the communities or the inequity that you would face as someone living in Hartford as a person of color versus white students going to Hartford. It seemed like very token activism like, 'Oh yes, let's learn about cultural studies in Hartford,' yet they're all events organized by white people. It felt very disingenuous to kind of market that as everything that you needed to learn about cultural learning when it wasn't, it just kind of brushed the surface (105).

Similar to students of colors' concerns, these white students described how conversations are inappropriately basic. The same students did also describe positive conversations that aligned

with their peers but were distinct in their sample as holding mixed views of classroom discussions on racism and systemic issues.

Seemingly in corroboration with students of colors' critiques on the exhausting role taken in the classroom, three white students mentioned how listening to other community members' experiences was a key positive component of their engagement experience (21%). A low-engagement white woman in her junior year discussed how others' stories made previously abstract inequalities more real:

I think you learn about [systemic racism] on a very basic level, like this can happen and this does happen in America. It starts on a broader like, this is what happens in our nation. But then you talk about the Hartford community around us and you realize that this is something that's happening right outside of the gates of Trinity. I think that has changed my perception, especially working in [a food bank], seeing these people that are veterans or just have lived in Hartford their whole lives and have these really heart wrenching stories of growing up in poverty...it's like, how are they really even supposed to escape this cycle if they've started at this lower tier the entirety of their lives (104).

As a second source of dysfunction, some students of color interviewed have also identified professors as being a harmful element of classroom discussions on diversity, equity, and systemic racism. A smaller portion of interviewees (7/42; 16%) critiqued their professors for their inability to create a safe environment to have fruitful conversations about race and systems of oppression. Other reported experiences where professors were overtly and/or subtly perpetuating trauma and microaggressions against students of color. One highly engaged Hispanic woman in her senior year explained the phenomenon of professors not being prepared for a sudden turn towards heavy, traumatic material in class discussions about racism.

On election day 2020, the professor casually prompted the class, which contained only women with a few women of color, to talk about their feelings on the election. Several women in the classroom began sharing personal struggles and fears for how the election would turn out, and the professor was totally unprepared to convert the anxieties of the group into a meaningful conversation. We just left the room feeling exposed without any real pay-off (1).

The interviewee commented that conversations like these often are not trauma informed and end up being unproductive and emotionally taxing on students.

A different highly engaged Hispanic man shared an experience in a political science class where they identified that all the students of color were consistently “singled out as the people that had different experiences and different points of view” compared to the other white students and the professor (79). The student explained how they felt pressure to memorize the professor’s opinions on each subject that pertained to race and oppression to be successful in the class, even if those ideas did not match their own. This is a common experience for students of color sampled in this study. Well over a third experienced a mix of good and bad conversations about race in the classroom, often depending on the professor’s approach and skills (48%; 20/42). There are specific and deeply concerning patterns of mistreatment and malpractice in these classrooms, but also a narrative towards finding professors and safe spaces on and off campus that have established respect and equity in their pedagogy.

Almost two thirds of white interviewees said that professors served as a positive presence in conversations about systemic racism, diversity, and equity (57%; 8/14). A woman in her senior year mentioned how her professors in the Political Science department were able to make conversations “meaningful and inclusive to make sure that we're talking about...intersecting identities and understanding the layers of who people are and where people come from” (100).

## **V. Summary of Findings**

As established in the previous chapter, students of color arrive at Trinity with a stronger sense of membership in Hartford and are more apt to be engaged in response to this sense of belonging. For them, community learning experiences can feel superficial since they care deeply

about mutual benefit and understand the challenges to achieving it. Students of color also describe having a greater understanding of the issues facing the city, including structural racism. All of which informs an intentional choice to be involved in the community while caring for the ethics of such interactions.

White students typically arrive at Trinity with a sense of fear of Hartford, or at least a sense of disconnection. They often know little about urban communities and the issues they face, including structural racism, and they can engage from a place of saviorism, rather than membership and connection. For white students, community engagement courses help to inculcate a greater sense of urban citizenship by developing a greater connection with the community, empathy, and knowledge on systemic issues. Community learning programs and broader classroom discussions on systemic issues were often an eye-opening opportunity to learn about systemic issues and become aware of their own privilege. However, for students of color, participating in community learning alongside white students can be exhausting and hurtful when they feel forced to use their own trauma to serve as teachers to white students.

Urban citizenship is manifesting in Trinity students but is different for students of color compared to their white counterparts. Already having a sense of membership, community engagement is seen by students of color as a way to form mutually beneficial partnerships with the community. Positive feedback and critiques of these experiences emphasize the goal of mutual benefit, exemplifying how college students can be urban citizens. White students are in a more basic progression towards urban citizenship; instead of approaching community partners as equals, engagement experiences and classroom conversations are used as a learning tool to realize their disparities and gain empathy.

## **Conclusion**

### **I. Summary of Findings**

Community learning programs have the potential to inculcate a sense of urban citizenship, but impact students differently by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. While all students find community engagement experiences in Hartford valuable in some way, students of color's civic behavior tend to embody urban citizenship more closely. Specifically, these students have a sense of care for the city's welfare via concerns of exploitative practices in Trinity's community learning programs. Feedback from white students characterize community learning courses and engagement experiences as a learning outcome for their own academic and personal growth. Community learning programs do teach white students about the realities of systemic issues and the impacts within the city, but this is only a small first step towards becoming an urban citizen.

Students of color participate in community learning at high rates and value connections with Hartford. While the same students of color said they benefited from community engagement through gaining connections and immersing themselves in the diversity of Hartford, they also critiqued some experiences as lacking in mutual benefit. These students described specific instances that demonstrate how community learning included harmful discussions about systemic racism and/ or projects that were superficial.

Critiques from students of color suggest they care for the welfare of the city, embodying the definition of urban citizenship. Students of color often want interactions with the community to be mutually beneficial because they see themselves as connected to the community. These students are highly critical of cases where Trinity is extracting benefits from Hartford while community partners do not receive the same benefits. For them, community learning experiences

can feel superficial since they care deeply about mutual benefit and understand the challenges to achieving it. The frequency of this sentiment across the interviewees of color implies that they see community partners as equal and want all interactions to be ethical.

Within the classrooms of Trinity, students of color are demonstrating urban citizenship through their critiques of discussions on systemic racism and equity issues. They have a greater understanding of the issues facing the city, including structural racism. Critiques from students of color described how their understanding of these issues is often invalidated by white voices in the classroom. White students typically arrive at Trinity with a sense of fear about Hartford, or at least a sense of disconnection. They often know little about urban communities and the issues they face, including structural racism. As a result, they can engage from a place of saviorism, rather than membership and connection.

In examining students' sense of membership in Hartford, this study also uncovered the antithesis of urban citizenship: fear. White students, International students, and some Asian students with high socioeconomic backgrounds express fear for their own safety in Hartford. Interestingly, those who participated in community learning courses and engagement experiences described how their perceptions changed over time to a more positive view. A majority of all students said that stereotyping Hartford as a dangerous place is actually an integral part of Trinity's culture, and that those stereotypes influence the entire campus to avoid the city. Urban fear is a clear barrier to students' becoming urban citizens. If a key facet of Trinity student life is to be afraid of Hartford, it poses a serious threat to the viability of membership or engagement in the city.

As a result, some white students typically do not embody an entire sense of urban citizenship, though community learning courses may move them closer to this goal. Rather than

critiquing community learning, most white students describe how their engagement experiences were positive because they learned to be more empathetic and aware of disparities. White students discuss the value of their engagement experiences in terms of learning outcomes, though not from a sense of membership. White students also described classroom conversations on systemic issues as another factor that aided in their journey of realizing disparities and systems of oppression. Unfortunately, as it stands now, community learning courses often suit the learning of white students and can be inadequate or harmful to students of color.

There is a small portion of highly engaged white students that did share the critique of mutual benefit, and ultimately demonstrated their status as an urban citizen of Hartford. The findings overall suggest that the most engaged students are the ones most aware of the complexity of community learning programs. These students are interested in mutual benefit and have a sophisticated enough understanding of power dynamics in service projects. Students who are closer to embodying urban citizenship are likely to be more critical of community engagement experiences because they feel a sense of membership and have a better sense of what it would mean for their engagement to have a deeper, mutual benefit.

More intensive and carefully designed community learning may be necessary to achieve urban citizenship amongst students who are afraid of Hartford and/or are unaware of the systemic issues that Hartford faces. Meanwhile, there must be a prioritization to foster students of color's education and engagement experiences without subjecting them to experiences and classroom discussions that prioritize white students' needs.

## **II. Acknowledgment of Limitations**

The limitations within this study clarify how the findings may be interpreted. Using Trinity as a case study reflects the uniqueness of the college and Hartford. The dynamics of

identity, education, and civic behavior are informed by and contextualized within the boundaries of a small private liberal arts college in a predominately low income, racially diverse small city.

I encourage future researchers to build off the few drawbacks of the sampling. In particular, increasing outreach to Latinx students and collecting a more diverse sample of white students who belong to the following categories: low-income households, first-generation college students, men, and urban hometowns.

Despite the limitations, the findings of this study are an asset to the existing literature on civic engagement. Mainstream academia often examines identity within political behavior by defaulting to the white experience. Voices of color are typically added to compare and contrast the (white) norm. This study is innovative in its attempt to amplify students of color's experiences as the main indicator of quality in Trinity's community learning programs.

### **III. Recommendations for Trinity and Higher Educations**

A particular point within the findings of this study revealed the dysfunction of classroom conversations on systemic racism and issues of equity. White students gain understanding of inequities and empathy, but this learning should not come at the expense of hurting students of color. The recommendations proposed begin with a new question: how can Trinity and faculty address this heterogeneity of experience in the community learning classroom?

The current state of these conversations on systemic racism issues too often relies on students of colors' traumatic experiences to prove to a mostly hostile or disinterested room that their realities with racism and systemic issues are valid. The college must be setting a universal pedagogy that prioritizes a safe space. According to Tufts University's Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), there are proven educational standards

that increase civic behavior, such tactics include: discussing current political issues, exploration of alternative perspectives, and most importantly community learning (“What the Research Says: History and Civics Education” 2021). As stated within the previous chapter, the feedback from students encapsulates all discussions, not exclusively community learning classes. As there is inherent value taken from community engagement experiences across all students, why doesn’t every classroom discussion on systemic racism attempt to tie in community engagement?

As school-community connections continue to grow, there is a chance to completely reshape the pedagogy of systemic issues in Trinity classrooms. Colleges and professors can collaborate on offering a variety of courses that deliver different teaching styles for different learning styles (Romanelli et. al 2009). For instance, students with less experience or knowledge of civics and systemic social issues may benefit more from a combination of lectures and seminars with guest speakers who are *willing* to be educators. Students looking to develop their community action skills and perspectives on systemic social issues would benefit from courses that are structured around experiential learning.

The ultimate goal would be to shift students away from the current isolationist Trinity Bubble, and instead towards urban citizenship. While there are existing tools such as the USCIS Citizenship Test (also used in the naturalization process) to quickly gauge civic knowledge through a standardized test, the college could create their own pre-matriculation assessment for civic learning as they do for math and language. Such a test could then provide students with a list of classes that would suit their knowledge level and nudge students to take courses that would bolster urban citizenship.

In discussing the educational standards of civic learning and engagement there is the question of mandates. While this is an arguably necessary step in pre-K through high school

education, higher education's nature of serving young adults may simply benefit greatly from improving classroom practices. Furthermore, as this thesis discussed, mandatory civic engagement initiatives could even be harmful to the community if students involved are not urban citizens acting from a sense of membership to Hartford.

Beyond structural reform, professors also need to be informed on how to implement equitable pedagogy in conversations about racism and systemic issues. While students of color's feedback mostly does not assign blame on professors, it seems to be the educator's responsibility to mitigate all sources of oppression during these discussions. Community learning faculty must receive support and training to hold ethical discussions on systemic racism—especially training on navigating tensions in heterogeneous classrooms.

#### **IV. Questions for Further Research**

Stemming from these recommendations on education policy and college students' political behavior, it would be incredibly useful to explore the classroom culture of Trinity more closely. This would mean teasing out the differences between community learning courses and non-community learning courses that do discuss systemic social issues. Further outreach to professors and students on this topic would help in identifying how classroom practices can improve and what works to promote urban citizenship. Ideally, a toolkit for ethical teaching practices to shape urban citizens could be created after further investigation into these topics.

If Trinity students, and more broadly college students, were able to easily find pathways to urban citizenship our entire democracy would benefit from a generation of young people that have a tremendous capacity for empathy and care of others in a home that they share.

*Acknowledgments*

Thank you to Professor Abigail Fisher Williamson, who has not only been the most helpful thesis advisor but is also my most valuable mentor during my four years at Trinity. I am incredibly grateful that I took Professor Fisher Williamson's "Political Behavior" course freshman year, and that that led to receiving her support throughout my undergraduate career. Her belief in me has been invaluable and influential to both this project and my own development.

I would also like to recognize Professor Stefanie Chambers for her thoughtful and encouraging guidance throughout this process.

Lastly, thank you to my family for being a receptive and patient soundboard. I especially want to thank my mom for her unconditional support—one sentence seems to pale in comparison to her place in my life as my ultimate role model and main source of inspiration.

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