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Reparative and Equitable Practices and Partnerships

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My vision of a racially equitable Richmond is one in which resourced institutions, such as higher education, invest in reparative and equitable practices that respect lived expertise and are built on partnerships.

As a society, we value expertise. Expertise is the skill or knowledge that emerges from experience, training or study, and it is critical to addressing complex societal concerns because it helps us understand, question, evaluate and innovate. Who we consider or see as "experts" matters because it represents the perspectives we value, and informs how we see our roles in addressing community challenges. Trained experts, including academics, have knowledge, tools and resources to address complicated issues. Context experts are people with lived experience of the situation; these experts live in the places, deal with the challenges and are (already) working toward solutions. **The problem is when we systematically elevate trained expertise gained through credentials over lived expertise.**

I felt tension between trained expertise and lived expertise for the first time after Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast in 2005. This national disaster motivated the most renowned firms to provide weeks of pro bono design assistance for many communities. The hurricane literally left a clean slate in many areas, so designers established a new physical vision. Working class communities were transformed on paper through renderings of beautiful mixed-use corridors and residential areas with a new aesthetic common to coastal vacation towns. On its face, these designs were an incredible offering to the Gulf Coast communities, which had limited capacity to plan post-disaster. But there was more to the story.

I was a city planning graduate student when Katrina made landfall and was part of a university team providing technical planning assistance in Mississippi. My team felt the resistance from that initial planning and design work, and observed that the experience left communities skeptical about planners and designers from outside of their communities. So much of the designs were inappropriate because the firms were not from or familiar with the Gulf Coast, and did not incorporate local and lived knowledge about the history, culture, or physical characteristics of the region. Most residents were displaced by the hurricane to other cities, so only those with considerable resources to return for this planning event could participate in the charrettes and public meetings. In the end, none of the design schemes developed by these out-of-state firms were implemented; local residents and officials simply called them "pretty pictures"—beautiful renderings of a wealthy coastal community, which was not *their* community.

Despite all of the classroom learning, this was where I learned that those with degrees and certifications are not the only—or even the primary—experts in community planning and decision-making. Little did I know then that I would spend my career as a university professor continuing to wrestle with the tension between trained expertise and lived expertise in my teaching and research.

I accepted a faculty position in Urban and Regional Planning and Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in the L. Douglas Wilder School of Government Affairs, primarily because VCU was among the few urban public research universities that was also classified as community-engaged, which means that community engagement is institutionalized into VCU'S mission, identity and commitments. VCU was a national leader in

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community engagement, and had built infrastructure to support the development of responsible community-university partnerships.

VCU, like other public research universities, was established with a civic mission to develop knowledge that could enhance the economic and social conditions in communities and to prepare students to play an active role in a diverse, democratic society. Despite universities' efforts, many lack the infrastructure required to build mutually beneficial community partnerships that result in tangible benefits for the surrounding residents. It is time for higher education to renew this civic mission and do the hard work of self-reflection: How are we teaching students to understand and play active societal roles toward racial justice? Are we succeeding in developing mutually beneficial and non-paternalistic partnerships with communities?

As a white, female academic working at a large, urban public research university in Richmond, Virginia, I regularly critique my role and responsibility as a researcher and teacher, training (mostly white) city planning students to work with and serve (mostly Black) communities. Although racial and ethnic diversity has increased among university professors, there is still an imbalance between faculty and students. As a profession, urban planning is still exceedingly white, raising the importance of assessing the role of whiteness in planning education, and what that means for how we have been advocating, teaching, engaging, and planning for equitable cities.

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My dual role as a professor and a planner accentuates the importance of problematizing the profession's history of swooping in to initiate, fix or otherwise address community issues without first understanding the community context and engaging with lived expertise. Co-production of knowledge and humility need to be a critical part of shifting planning's approach to power. As we rethink our roles and responsibilities, we should invest in reparative and equitable planning practices that include 1) acknowledging structural racism as a societal problem; 2) prioritizing lived expertise; and, 3) building long-term and mutually-beneficial partnerships:

Acknowledge Structural Racism as a Societal Problem

We need to acknowledge, teach and address policies that have reproduced structural racism in our communities, including Richmond. In 2018, when Rothstein's *The Color of Law* was published, I used it in my classroom. Although I had previously taught about policies that racially segregated our cities, this book pulled together in one place the evidence of these policies and their impact on racial segregation. When my students read the book, they felt a lot of emotions, but one that was consistent across white, Black and brown students was outrage; how could they have not known the extent of this systematically imposed racial segregation? What followed was an honest and hard discussion, which some white students characterized as uncomfortable. This was an important *first* conversation, one which students referred to and built upon as they started to "see" how the legacy of structural racism is imprinted in our streets, parks and neighborhoods. The discomfort started to dissipate in their second, third and ongoing conversations, and it was replaced by the beginnings of a collective determination to redress the harms of urban planning.

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Our perspectives are shaped by our experiences, but also by what we learn. We have a responsibility to learn, teach and acknowledge urban history—generally, and the specific ways that racist policies have excluded communities of color in Richmond from homeownership, wealth-building opportunities, and access to educational resources, jobs and healthy neighborhoods. We need to continue to acknowledge the racist legacies of our universities and institutions, and confront their roles in enforcing systems of oppression. It may feel uncomfortable, especially for white people who are trying to reconcile their roles in this history. But there is important learning to be done as we wrestle in this discomfort, seeking to emerge better equipped to help plan for racially just cities.

Prioritize Lived Expertise

Better decisions are made when they are informed by both trained expertise and lived expertise. This truth was evident when my planning studio class was asked to work with North Highland Park on a Quality of Life Plan in 2011. In our first meeting with community advisory board members, we spent time discussing what "quality of life" meant for residents. My students noted that many of the ideas they were eager to share—based on best practices they had researched—were not consistent with what they heard from residents that day. At the time, Highland Park was not interested in bike lanes or green walls, but about public safety, employment opportunities and youth empowerment. My class had to pivot quickly that day, letting go of preconceived ideas, and pursuing new options based on what we learned from residents.

In addition to community-university relationships, prioritizing lived expertise is also relevant for other institutions with decision-making power. Trained and lived expertise can work together in a complementary, and not hierarchical, relationship. RVAgreen 2050, the City of Richmond's equity-centered climate action and resilience planning initiative, adopted a structure that prioritized (and compensated) experts with lived experience, and used their knowledge as a guide for establishing plannning goals. In this initiative, trained experts offer data, access to research, and synthesis of information that can be shared with the community, while experts with lived experience identify priorities, local history, and trauma that is critical for informing decisions.

Build Long-term and Mutually-Beneficial Partnerships

As a resourced institution, higher education must model sharing power as knowledge-builders for our students. If we want to use research to support community priorities, we must commit to building infrastructure that supports long-term relationships with the community instead of rushing into a community, eager to contribute, fix or otherwise do their work, and then leave. It is through partnerships that we can realize more effective and equitable outcomes for community challenges. But inequitable power dynamics often make long-term community partnerships difficult to sustain and inequities even harder to redress.

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As of this writing, Richmond does not have strong examples of the long-term, mutually beneficial partnerships that are necessary to support an equitable city. But we *can* work toward building them if we are led with intention as opposed to leaning on established or institutionalized ways of doing things. Based on my experience, research and teaching, partnerships need to start with humility and a willingness to learn from each other. They demand time and resources: initially, to establish relationship, trust, and learn about others' goals and needs; and then as an on-going manner to support idea generation, implementation, dissemination of work. And, just like any relationship, partnerships need frequent communication, compassion, and adjustments here and there to thrive.

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Conclusion

A racially equitable Richmond is possible only through the investment of many. Among others, city planners, universities and other anchor institutions have an important role to play in eliminating racism in their internal systems, policies, and structures, but also in their practices of interacting with and valuing the expertise in the community. As part of this, white people and institutions need to use their power, privilege and resources to help dismantle systems of oppression. *A racially equitable Richmond invests in reparative and equitable practices that respect lived expertise and are built on partnerships.* It will demand intention, possible discomfort, and a willingness to make mistakes, learn and adjust.

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Meghan Z. Gough is an Associate Professor of urban and regional studies and planning at Virginia Commonwealth University's L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs. Her work emphasizes civic capacity building and planning for more livable and equitable communities. Meghan's contributions to research help to elevate the importance of community-based decision-making and partnerships in the development of plans and policies to support sustainable community development.