

OVERCOMING BARRIERS FOR LOW CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

PURPOSE

Authentic and inclusive public engagement efforts are essential for a just, equitable, and sustainable future. However, community engagement practitioners have long struggled to reach historically underrepresented groups, such as low-income families, young people, renters, communities of color, recent immigrants, and speakers of English as a second language. Research shows that these groups participate in civic engagement activities at a lower rate for many reasons, such as work conflicts, lack of childcare, lack of transportation, language barriers, and even distrust in government due to historical discriminatory practices and a lack of responsiveness when they do express needs and concerns.

On the other hand, groups that more actively participate in public engagement efforts can have outsized influence over decision-making, often perpetuating power imbalances at the expense of minority and underserved populations.

This community-based research project will approach public engagement using non-traditional, yet emerging, approaches to community development. Specifically, we will explore, develop, and implement processes that center around creative, artist-led activities and compensation to residents. This leads us to two research questions:

- How does compensation intended to overcome financial and other barriers impact civic participation among individuals from historically low participation groups (e.g., low-income people, communities of color, recent immigrants, speakers of English as a second language)?
- How can artist-led outreach and engagement increase civic participation among historically low participation groups?

While the compensation to participants and artist-led process are distinct tools for engagement, both have individually been shown to produce positive results. This project also provides an opportunity to show how these tools function together.

The project responds to objectives for the City of Iowa City to form and support neighborhoods through the existing neighborhood association framework. Neighborhood associations can strengthen neighborhoods through shared decision-making, social cohesion, and activities that improve quality of life. In Iowa City, they also provide a direct connection to the local government, amplifying neighborhood needs and providing access to grant funding.

This project will specifically support efforts to form a neighborhood association for the neighborhood that includes Pheasant Ridge and properties along Westwinds Drive and Walden Drive. This neighborhood is one of the most diverse areas in the city, home to many University of Iowa students, Black and African American families, and immigrant families, largely from Sudan and Jordan. The neighborhood is predominantly renter occupied. Most importantly, the project will focus on supporting the residents of the neighborhood.

EXPERTISE

Associate Professor Loyce Arthur is an accomplished teacher and social practice artist, who has

worked extensively with communities locally and internationally. She is well known in Iowa City for bringing the Caribbean and Brazilian carnival parade traditions to the community and is part of the team behind the Oracles of Iowa City mural project.

Associate Professor Travis Kraus has been a community and economic development practitioner and currently leads numerous community engagement efforts across the state each year as director of the Iowa Initiative for Sustainable Communities.

Loyce and Travis have an ongoing, innovative, and interdisciplinary collaboration for teaching and community engagement. Their collaboration merges two courses from their respective departments, bringing together students in the arts, humanities, social sciences, engineering, and more. Both courses are designed to include a community-based project, and through this collaboration they have helped community partners develop a highly successful StoryMap website called [Grow-Black Owned](#). This project will continue their work together to support community partners and provide impactful engaged-learning experiences for their students.

Both Loyce and Travis are well connected to the local arts ecosystem, including serving on boards for arts non-profits. Existing relationships with other community organizations will also help inform the process. In particular, representatives from the South District neighborhood, which [recently became a SSMID](#), and Astig Planning, which recently compensated participants in their [Inclusive Economic Development Plan](#) process, can provide insight to guide research methods and engagement activities.

Ayman Sharif, Outreach and Engagement Specialist for the City of Iowa City, will serve as the lead community partner contributor for the project. A native of Sudan, Ayman moved to Iowa City in 2013 from United Arab Emirates, where he had been working as a translator since 1998. Ayman earned a University of Iowa bachelor's degree in environmental planning and policy and a master's degree in urban and regional planning. Ayman also became a U.S. citizen in 2019. In his time with the City, Ayman has become a familiar face to existing neighborhood association leaders and has been working to support the development of new neighborhood associations.

PROCESS

The project continues long-standing relationships between the research team and City partners and responds to a stated goal for the City to support the formation of new neighborhood associations, particularly in the study area for this project.

As the project develops, we expect to grow our team by adding neighborhood residents/champions, representative from the Neighborhood Center located within Pheasant Ridge, and a local artist. This will be the core team.

The faculty and student researchers will conduct a literature review and case study research to inform the community engagement process. As an example, [Healthy Democracy](#), which expresses a mission to “in elevating the voices of everyday people, bringing new faces to public decision making, and designing a more collaborative democracy together,” has completed planning projects that promote more democratic decision-making and provided compensation to participants. Locally, the recently completed Inclusive Economic Development Plan also provided compensation to study participants.

Following these models, the core team will identify and implement a process to engage a panel of neighborhood residents in facilitated discussions and workshops, providing small stipends and employing other strategies to remove barriers to participation, such as providing childcare assistance. This Panel of residents will be representative of the diverse population, with considerations for age, gender, location of residence, race & ethnicity, educational attainment, experience of a disability, and renter/homeownership.

We anticipate that Panelists will not likely have been civically active previously. A series of facilitated panel discussions and workshops will elevate participants as the neighborhood experts and leaders, with a shared goal of strengthening quality of life for all neighborhood residents and establishing new connections to the City. A desired outcome of this process for the City would be the cultivation of leaders and officers of a formal neighborhood association.

We will measure the effectiveness of this process through surveys and interviews assessing attitudes and behaviors of participants at the beginning of the project and at later milestones.

To complement these efforts, the artist will work with student artists and the neighborhood representatives to conceive of creative ways to involve the broader neighborhood community. Examples of activities that have been successful elsewhere include turning local recipes into works of art to be displayed at a community dinner, collecting stories of residents and developing ways to share those stories through dance, music, and/or theatre, and creative and interactive art installations. Creative community engagement activities will aim to strengthening neighborhood identify and cohesion, helping to build the foundation for an effective neighborhood association.

RECIPROCITY

The principles of reciprocity and mutual benefit are central to this project. Whereas research and community engagement can often be extractive, taking knowledge from communities to the benefit of people elsewhere and leaving communities unchanged or worse off than they were before, this project prioritizes empowerment and compensation.

The project ultimately aims to improve quality of life for neighborhood residents, but also provides direct financial resources to resident panelists, alleviating some of the burden of volunteering their time and energy. The City of Iowa City will benefit by gaining awareness about how best to serve residents, who will have a platform for expressing their needs and opportunities. The artists will be compensated and advance their own social practice (undervaluing creative work is a prevalent issue). Students enrolled in the class will have meaningful learning experiences that help shape their professional and academic careers.

The research process will shape the tangible outcomes for the community partners but are likely to include a final report that supports the formation of the neighborhood organization and an art experience or installation.

The faculty members will disseminate research findings though conference presentations and articles. The knowledge gained will also support future community collaborations and grant applications that build on the anticipated success of the model.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

Project objective #1: Increase participation among neighborhood residents in a community development process, specifically the establishment and visioning of a new neighborhood association.

We did successfully implement our community engagement model, which was designed to use incentives and other support mechanisms to recruit individuals who might not otherwise have participated. With support from the grant funding, we had an initial goal to recruit 10 study participants and ended up with 11. We sought to overcome barriers to participation primarily by offering financial compensation, childcare, and translation/ interpretation services. Recruitment materials included four languages (English, Arabic, French, and Spanish) and sent to all households in the neighborhood with a link and QR code to a website and participation survey (also translated). From the responses, participants were randomly selected to match specified the neighborhood's sociodemographic profile. The participated in individual "storytelling" interviews with students enrolled in the course, providing valuable insight regarding their needs and desires within the neighborhood context. Childcare and interpretations services were provided in neighborhood meetings. Meetings were held in a facility (the Pheasant Ridge Neighborhood Center) that was easily accessible to participants and generally regarded as a safe and welcoming environment. 100% of study participants showed up for one or more neighborhood meetings, alongside many others that were not part of the study.

Project objective #2: Incorporate arts & culture into the community building process.

This objective was achieved. Community engagement was not designed around creative meeting facilitation techniques, but the role of arts & culture was a large focus for the group and ancillary neighborhood activities. In collaboration with neighborhood residents, UI students from the course, local artists, and other stakeholders, the group completed a series of public art projects during the summer and fall of 2023. Additionally, a UI Theatre Arts student who was part of the course designed and conducted a theater workshop for neighborhood youth.

Project objective #3: Understand the importance of financial compensation and other support mechanisms to engaging study participants in this particular project.

This objective was partially achieved. Of the 11 participants, 5 participated in exit interviews (qualitative) and 1 declined because of time constraints. 5 have not yet responded. Preliminary analysis shows that the provision of incentives and support services played a significant factor in participants' decisions to respond to the call, although desire to actively serve the community was also mentioned. This is a very small sample size and not intended to establish generalized findings.

Project outcome #1: Through collaboration and community engagement, the project supported the successful creation of a new neighborhood association now called the Wonderful Westside Neighborhood, the creation of a neighborhood vision statement, and a series of neighborhood projects and initiatives, primarily focused on public art, traffic safety, and youth recreation.

The Wonderful Westside Neighborhood Vision Statement: The Wonderful Westside Neighborhood will be a safe, peaceful, and desirable place to live, work, and play. We will work together to empower inherent leadership, improve economic and social well-being, strengthen sense of belonging, and make connections with resources as we elevate, celebrate, and integrate the diverse cultures and voices of our residents.

Project outcome #2 (societal impact/student success): We employed arts & culture as a tool for engaging residents and building community within the neighborhood.

The community development aspect of the project served as a basis for a successful application to the City of Iowa for a public art grant, which was primarily written by a graduate student in the course. UI faculty and students, neighborhood residents, 2 neighborhood youth groups, and local artists helped complete a series of murals at the Pheasant Ridge Neighborhood Center. Another student designed and, with the help of other students from the class and from the Theatre Arts Department, led a theater workshop for neighborhood youth to supplement activities offered by the center. The art reflects and celebrates the cultural diversity of the Wonderful Westside Neighborhood, and because of the success of the project, collaborators hope to do more public art.

Project outcome 3# (societal impact): A number of the participants, when attending the meetings, mentioned that it was the first time that they had come to the center and appreciated the opportunity to meet their neighbors and talk about relevant issues.

Although the study group was small (11 participants), individual exit interviews suggest that the incentives and support services were effective in encouraging participation among neighborhood residents. Participants expressed very positive feedback about having received invitations in the mail translated in three languages (based on languages spoken in the neighborhood), financial compensation, childcare, and interpretation services. Some respondents mentioned valuing efforts that did not directly benefit them (such as translation/interpretation) because it demonstrated an inclusive process. Some would not likely have participated without such incentives. It is important to note that this pilot study did not include a control group and does not make any generalizable conclusions.

The Wonderful Westside Neighborhood **needs you!**

Help imagine the future of our community!

Two ways to get involved...

1 **Attend neighborhood gatherings and activities.** Watch for details about upcoming events open to all neighborhood residents.

2 **Join a special neighborhood leadership group.** Work with the University of Iowa on a neighborhood project.

Up to \$250 is provided for each participant, up to 10 people.

Randomly selected residents will be asked to join two interviews and three neighborhood meetings.

All adult neighborhood residents are invited to join this project. No prior experience or skills required.

Visit bit.ly/WonderfulWestside or scan the QR code to learn more and sign up by March 31st.



IOWA



Avez-vous entendu parler du nouveau « Wonderful Westside Neighbourhood Association » ?

Aidez-nous à imaginer l'avenir de notre
merveilleux quartier !

Il y a deux façons de s'impliquer :

1

**Assister à des réunions et activités
de quartier.** Surveillez pour les détails
sur les événements à venir ouverts à
tous les résidents du quartier.

2

**Joignez-vous à un groupe de
dirigeant de quartier.** Les
participants seront invités à participer
à deux entretiens et à trois réunions
de quartier.

Tous les résidents de 18 ans et plus du
Wonderful Westside Neighbourhood sont
éligibles.

**Jusqu'à 250\$ de compensation sont
offerts à chaque participant, jusqu'à
10 personnes.**

Les réponses sont dues avant le 31 mars
2023.

Visitez « **bit.ly/WonderfulWestside** »
ou scannez le code QR pour en savoir
plus et inscrivez-vous.



Scannez le code

IOWA



¿Ya estas enterado de la recién creada asociación llamada **La Maravillosa Asociación de Vecinos del lado Oeste?**

¡Ayuda a imaginar el futuro de nuestro maravilloso vecindario!

Hay dos maneras en las que puedes involucrarte:

1

Participando en las juntas y actividades del vecindario. Esté al pendiente de los detalles de los eventos que se llevarán próximamente a cabo y que serán abierto para todos los vecinos del área.



2

Uniéndote al Grupo de Liderato del Vecindario. Se pedirá que los participantes asistan a dos entrevistas y a tres juntas del vecindario.

Toda persona mayor de 18 años, que sean residentes del Maravilloso Vecindario del lado Oeste son elegibles.

Un máximo de \$250.00 se darán como compensación a cada participante, 10 participantes máximo.

Interesados deberán presentarse antes del 31 de marzo del 2023.

Visita **bit.ly/WonderfulWestside** o escanea el código QR para más información y para registrarte.

IOWA



نتطلع لتصبح وندرفول وستسايد حي سكني ينعم بالأمن والسلام كما
نتطلع لنراها مكانا محببا للإقامة والعمل والمرح. سنعمل معا لتمكين
القيادات المتصلة وتحسين الأوضاع الاقتصادية والاجتماعية وكذلك
لتعزيز روح الانتماء وخلق التواصل مع الموارد المتاحة فيما نداوم
الارتقاء والاحتفاء والجمع لتنوعنا الثقافي واصواتنا المتباينة.

تتعاون مجموعة من أعضاء هيئة التدريس والطلاب
بجامعة أيوا مع حي وندرفول وستسايد وبلدية مدينة
أيوا سيتي والنير هود سنترز لجونسون كاونتي في
برنامج متميز لتيسير الحوار والفعاليات لتأسيس
تنظيم منظمة مجتمعية بالحي

نسعى لتعاون 10 من سكان الحي للمشاركة في هذا
العمل. أول خطوة هي تعبئة النموذج الملحق أدناه
بتاريخ 31 مارس 2023. سيتم اختيار عشرة
أشخاص عشوائيا للمشاركة.

كل مشارك سيطلب منه حضور ثلاث اجتماعات
والمشاركة في مقابلتين شخصيتين خلال شهري
أبريل ومايو وستستغرق كل مقابلة حوالي ساعة
واحدة.

سيتلقى كل شخص 50 دولارًا عن كل حلقة ويمكن
كسب ما يصل إلى 250 دولارًا في المجموع.



IOWA



Research Development Office
Internal Funding Initiatives Annual Reports



Research Development Office
Internal Funding Initiatives Annual Reports



















