

INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL CONCERNS

COMMUNITY CASES

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN DECISIONMAKING

SUMMARY: Encountering disconnect between proposed projects and community interest.

FOCUS AREAS

- Authentic Partnership
- Navigating Complex Decisions
- Reciprocity and Trust

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Reflect on the challenges of engaging communities in problem identification and solutions to structural injustices.
2. Analyze the role of listening, communication, buy-in, and collaboration in community-based work and in sustained impact.
3. Consider ethical, practical, and relational dimensions of immersive service or justice-oriented work.
4. Consider the impact of power dynamics and positionality in community engagement.

SCENARIO

Charlie is a senior studying environmental science and psychology. He is passionate about community access to healthy foods and the impact of local ecology on food access. He can't wait to graduate to start making an impact in a full-time role. In the meantime, Charlie has secured a semester-long community engagement internship, working with a local non-profit focused on food access in underserved neighborhoods. The organization asks Charlie to prepare a plan for a capstone project that he can focus on across the semester. Leaning into his interest in local ecology, Charlie spends weeks of hard work on a plan for a community garden to provide fresh produce to a neighborhood in a food desert. Charlie presents the plan, including information on an empty plot he has already obtained permission to use. The organization gives him the green light, but asks that he spend the next week talking to residents located within 2 blocks of the lot, to make sure they are on board with the plan.

As he knocks on the first door, Charlie is excited to share his vision with the neighbors. His smile weakens as he sees disinterest growing while he outlines the plan to the first house on his list. With each house, the story repeats.

While one or two homes appreciate his idea and his initiative, the vast majority are generally disinterested. Charlie mostly gets questions about maintenance of the lot, the long-term plans for a new grocery store, and the decision to use funding for his idea. A few openly tell him they do not want the garden in the neighborhood. Charlie feels dejected and unsure what to do next. This was his passion project, and he is still confident in it. But at the same time, he wants to respect the neighborhood's desires and their needs. He wonders if this is a case where his expertise places him in a position to trust his plan over the neighbors' objections. Or in this case has he become wedded to his idea instead of focusing on the real needs of the community?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What assumptions might Charlie be making about what the community needs or wants?
2. Has Charlie identified the problem properly? What is the efficacy of the proposed solution? Does the proposed solution fit the problem, based on both community engagement and outside research?
3. How can Charlie balance his desire to contribute with the need to listen and build trust? Have you ever experienced a situation where good intentions were met with resistance? How did you respond?
4. Why might community members be skeptical or disengaged from the idea of a community garden?
5. What structural and historical factors might influence the reaction of community members?
6. How would you go about learning more about community perspectives?
7. Could it ever be acceptable or permissible to disagree with the revealed desires of a community?
8. How can organizations and volunteers approach community-based solutions in a way that fosters ownership and engagement?
9. What are some respectful ways to invite participation without imposing an outsider's vision?

FACILITATOR CONSIDERATIONS

- **SPOTLIGHT AND CHALLENGE NORMS.** Community skepticism can be a valuable source of wisdom, not just a barrier. Lack of engagement with community stakeholders and top-down decision making are often common practice in this type of work.
- **APPRECIATE REAL-WORLD COMPLEXITY.** Justice work typically involves long-term relationship building.
- **FIND APPLICABILITY.** Topical ideas and solutions are not always the best solutions-in general or for a specific community. Students (and organizations) need to recognize that what works in one place might not work in another.
- **SEEK HUMILITY.** Ask students to practice "critical humility"-recognizing what they don't know and being open to learning.
- **EXPLORE HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN.** Encourage students to recognize, appreciate, and center the voices of those closest to a given problem. Point them to methodologies like design thinking and human-centered design as starting points.

CLOSING QUESTIONS

- What's one thing you learned or thought about differently during this discussion?
- How can you be mindful of power, positionality, and partnership in your future professional or civic roles?
- Have you seen situations where top down or "viral" solutions were applied to a community without their input? What did you learn from this experience?