

INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL CONCERNS

COMMUNITY CASES

THE OUTSIDER EFFECT

SUMMARY: Exploring the insider-outsider dynamic and the impact of feeling like an outsider.

CASE TYPE: Reflective

Reflective cases are internally oriented. These cases invite reflection on one's own place in community engaged work. They typically will not have clear 'right' answers and are open to many interpretations.

FOCUS AREAS	LEARNING OBJECTIVES
• Belonging • Perception • Power Dynamics	1. Reflect on the dynamics of power, privilege, and labeling in immersive experiences. 2. Explore what mutuality means in cross-context relationships. 3. Consider strategies to move from "helper" to collaborative partner. 4. Recognize how perception shapes intent and impact and how it can influence engagement.

SCENARIO

Giselle is a rising sophomore studying finance and accounting. She's incredibly excited as she has been chosen for a very prestigious summer internship with a local nonprofit which assists community members with financial literacy programming and personal accountancy. Giselle will be working directly with community members as they seek to organize their personal financial lives to move towards their goals. Giselle took a course her freshman year that discussed authentic community engagement, focusing on the importance of engaging people as partners, but especially as leaders in their journey towards their own goals. Giselle sees this as a perfect opportunity to be a real partner to those she works with. She is looking forward to immersing herself in the community she is seeking to assist.

However, Giselle notices that every day during her first week, she is introduced to community members by her team as "the helper from the university." She can tell her team members mean well, but this strikes Giselle as opposite her intentions. How can she be a partner to them if she is framed as an outside helper? She wonders how, or even if it's possible, to feel immersed in a community that might always see her as separate. After another week, she begins to feel like an outsider—set apart by her role, education, and affiliation. Should she talk to her supervisor about this? Or is she hoping for something that's just not possible?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why might community members label Giselle this way? Would you feel uncomfortable in this scenario?
2. What assumptions or expectations come with Giselle being "the university helper"? Does this label convey something to you or the community about power, privilege, or role?
3. In what ways could this label be both welcoming and distancing?

4. How can being labeled this way impact Giselle's sense of belonging? How can being labeled this way impact her relationship with the community?
5. What does a mutual relationship look like in an immersive experience? What barriers might exist to creating truly mutual relationships?
6. How can you navigate power dynamics while still being of service?
7. How might Giselle respond to her partners about her concerns with this label?
8. What small or large actions can help shift relationships toward collaboration?
9. How can you communicate that you are there to learn as much as to help?
10. What does it mean to be an "outsider-insider" in a community? How can you earn trust without assuming belonging?

FACILITATOR CONSIDERATIONS

- **CONTEXTUALIZE THE EXPERIENCE.** Labels often reflect how others understand insider-outsider roles—but may carry or imply unintended power dynamics.
- **POSE THE CHALLENGE.** Mutual relationships are built through humility, listening, and long-term trust—not just helpful actions.
- **EXPLORE INTENT AND IMPACT.** Challenge students to think from the perspective of others. While a label might be intended well; it has an impact. But so does their response. Mutuality and patience are key.
- **FRAME THE POTENTIAL.** Help students understand that being an outsider is not inherently negative, but awareness and reflection are essential for respectful engagement.

CLOSING QUESTIONS

- What's one thing you learned or thought about differently during this discussion?
- What do you think it would take for someone to become a real insider? How would you describe the process and what the outcome would look like?
- What would it look like for someone to become an insider in your community?