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## Differences Among First-Year Students' Perceptions of Hartford

### Introduction:

In trying to evaluate the newly created Community Action Gateway program at Trinity College the following research question was designed:

“How do Community Action Gateway (CACT) students differ from two comparable groups of Trinity students on retention, and perceptions and experiences of Trinity and Hartford, over time during the program's first three years?”

Professor Dougherty requested our assistance as part of the Ethnographic Methods and Writing class. The project was divided in three sections. The first section, conducted by Professor Dougherty himself, consisted of gathering enrollment information from Trinity Institutional Research for the following groups:

- I. CACT students- applied to Gateway, and were selected due to higher ratings from Admissions and demographic mix (n=15)
- II. Other CACT applicants -- applied to Gateway, but not selected (n=13)
- III. Highly-rated non-CACT applicants -- did not apply to Gateway, but have similar Admissions ratings and demographics to the CACT students (n=15)

Once the data gathering was finalized, an online survey consisting of questions and an interactive map was sent by the sponsor. The students mission was to look at the diversity in responses, awareness, and involvement with the community across the three groups. In order to accomplish

this, students designed and conducted face-to-face interviews. This also gave the students the opportunity to learn how to conduct research, and learn more about the perceptions and experiences of Trinity and Hartford.

### Statistics and Response Rates

Of the 43 students who applied to be in the Community Action Gateway Program, fifteen students were selected. Of those fifteen students, nine were willing to take part in this research project. That is a 3:5 response rate (60%). Out of the thirteen members who were not selected, eight were willing to take part in this research project. That is a 8:13 response rate (61.5%). Out of the fifteen members who did not apply to the program, only two responded. That is a 2:15 response rate (13.3%). In total we had a 44.2% response rate.

### Group Three Omission

We decided to omit Group Three, the students who did not apply to the Gateway Program but had similar admissions ratings and demographics. Because only two members signed up to take part in this project it is difficult to say that their responses would be similar if we had more members in the group. We think since this group consisted of students who did not apply to the program they were less inclined to care about Hartford so it was less likely they would volunteer to take part in this research project. For the future, we hope to interview more of these Group Three members by offering better incentives to them.

### Objectives

Professor Dougherty hand selected the fifteen individuals who were accepted into the Community Action Gateway Program. This is important as we are not able to say if the program

directly made students perceptions of Hartford differ from the non-members. What we were focused on is tracking the similarities and differences between the members and non-members retention, perception, and experiences of Hartford. This study was not designed to show that the members of the program were different to begin with. It is important to point out that this research is only looking at the first few months that these members have been a part of the program as this program just started in the Fall of 2017 so we are unable to analyze the retention aspect of the research question.

### Lit Review:

Before we started our research, the three of us explored other sources of literature so we could establish a theoretical framework on our subject. In after reviewing other sources of literature we discovered the engagement theory. The engagement theory can be defined as, “students participation in educationally purposeful ideas through high-impact practices, such as service learning, affects the experiences, learning, and successful outcomes that a student will have throughout college (Kuh *et al.* 2005). CACT students are educated through experiences and learning. We will be comparing how the CACT members will be compared to the non-CACT members.

To make sure that the definition of the engagement theory is clear we also define the term service learning. Service learning is defined as “a pedagogy in which students learn by active participation in organized services that address community issues and is linked to academic study through structured reflection.” Service learning is the engagement that CACT members participate in while at Trinity through community based research and learning about the city of Hartford’s history.

Another study evaluating the SERVE Program at Ignatius University, New York, found that the initiative “increased students’ awareness of political and social issues; heightened their commitment to philanthropy; fostered their interest in pursuing socially responsible work ; and strengthened their commitment to working for social change” (Seider *et al.* 2010. )

### Archival Results

Before conducting the interviews, it was necessary for the students to have a better understanding of relationship between Trinity College and the Hartford community. In order to do that, students conducted a series of visits the college archives and digital repository. The students’ mission was to look at the College’s history of involvement with the Hartford community over a period of fifty years, and perform a comparative analysis of the initiatives, expectations, and motivations. To answer this question, we visited the Watkinson Library with the intent of looking for yearbooks, articles, documentation on pre-orientations and community learning, and/or any possible information pertaining to Trinity’s involvement in the community. In theory, these materials should provide a timeline of the College’s involvement in the Hartford area, thus allowing us to better understand the philosophy behind what drove the initiatives and how they changed over time. We would then apply the information collected to appropriately evaluate the influences of the Community Gateway Program in the way students experience and connect with Hartford.

Historically, although the College had been involved with the hosting community through a series of mini projects, “its city engagement accelerated in the 1990s when gang violence and

drug trafficking created neighborhood crisis” (Trostle et al. 2003). Nevertheless, Trinity’s involvement in the community became prominent in the years following 1996, after the creation of the Community Learning Initiative (CLI). The CLI since it began in 1995 “has connected Trinity students across disciplines with the many communities that make up the Hartford area. Students, faculty and community organizations come together in collaborative partnerships to carry out projects that both strengthen student learning and benefit the community” (Trinity College). According to Elinor Jacobson, former director of community service, before the push of service learning and civic action into the curriculum, “a relative handful of faculty members were engaging students in hands-on learning in the community. Long before CLI, community learning was limited to internships in the city, which the “majority of students still graduated without having done” (“Trinity’s Learning Initiative” 16). This explains why during our visit, most of the existing documentation pertaining to the institution’s involvement with the community comprised reports advocating for and citing the benefits of community learning.

The annual summary of The Community Learning Initiative in 2001-2002 said: “though only 10 departments participated in the 1997, by 2002 almost 20 departments were involved in Community Learning.” At least twenty of these courses are offered each semester for students to take now in 2017. The annual summary of The Community Learning Initiative from 2002-2003 showed that 601 out of 734 students said that the community fieldwork helped them become more aware of the community needs. Furthermore, 652 out of the 734 students said that the community fieldwork enhanced their learning and understanding of the course topics. Indeed, the College’s involvement with the community is an issue that only started to receive great attention by students and faculty in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Consequently, it is in this time period

that the College begins to receive a substantial amount of grants such as the Kellogg Foundation Grant of 1998, which funded initiatives such as TrinCafe, fostering community engagement and learning. Additional grants would be offered by community allies, such as the Atlantic Philanthropies Grant for Community Health Care, and by alumni, including the Steven D. Levy'72 Fund for Urban Curricular Program.

The archival data reveal two important trends about the College's involvement in the community. First, the vast majority of the College's initiatives are curriculum based and led by the administration and/or faculty. Although the number of student led organizations and clubs involved in the community has increased significantly over the past 10 years, there is still a lack of student initiatives and engagement in the existing community programs. Administration and faculty presence in reports and articles far surpasses those of students, whose voices are more centralized on issues of tensions with the neighboring community. A recent article by the Trinity Tripod states, "Trinity College attempts to involve its' students with the Hartford community through groups such as the Cities Program, the Community Learning Initiative, and other volunteer opportunities. However, when I asked students about their experiences while living in Hartford, few see Trinity's connection to the city as something to be embraced" (O'Byrne 2016). This trend is apparent in the lack in number and variety of pictures showing student involvement in the community as we move down the timeline into the early years of the College's existence. Moreover, the existing student led initiatives are rarely held outside the campus grounds. Events such as Halloween on Vernon, Sambafest, and the Hip Hop Festival, require that Hartford residents come into the campus instead of bringing the resources to them, and consequently forcing students out of their comfort zones. Although these activities are seemingly innocent,

they continue to foster the sense of “otherness” and the resulting division between Trinity students and Hartford residents. This is not to say that students do not leave campus, but even when they do, the existing relationship with the neighborhood influences the places they allow themselves to venture to.

### IRB

Before we began research we completed an Institutional Review Board (IRB) form that explained directly how this research project was going to be conducted. Once we gained approval from the committee at Trinity we were able to begin doing research beyond the Literature Review and Archival Research.

### Methods:

As members of the Anthropology of Methods class we learned about various methods that are used in order to conduct anthropological research. We decided to conduct face-to-face interviews to learn about the students perceptions and experiences of Hartford. This way we would gather more open-ended responses from the students instead of just the close-ended responses from the survey that Professor Dougherty had sent out. The open-ended interview allowed the students to elaborate on their perception, fears, and attitudes towards Hartford. This gave us a richer level of detail that we would not otherwise be able to obtain with close-ended survey questions. The difficult part was deciding what questions we should ask and the order they should be in. After multiple practice interviews of rewording questions and rearranging the order of the questions we decided that these questions would allow us to gain the most information out of the students: Interview questions (with follow-ups such as “Tell me more” or “Why?”)

1. What is the first word that comes to your mind when I say Hartford? Why that word?
2. How would you describe Hartford to people who have never been to the city?
3. Did Hartford play a role in why you picked Trinity? Why or why not?
4. Have your perspectives about Hartford changed since you arrived at Trinity? If so, how?
5. How do you feel when Hartford residents walk onto the Trinity campus?
6. Since arriving at Trinity, where, if anywhere have you gone in Hartford?
7. How do you feel when you walk off the Trinity campus into the neighborhood?
8. How do you think Hartford residents view Trinity students?
9. Tell me what you know about Trinity's connections to the city of Hartford.

We decided that the first four questions are light questions that offer as a warm introduction to the interview. These aren't that deep and are more impulsive in order to allow for the students to get comfortable with this interview. Then questions five through nine were made to challenge students to explain how they feel about Hartford. These questions were made some students uncomfortable and made them really think unlike the first four.

Finally, I have three simple demographic questions:

10: How do you describe your gender?

11: How do you describe your race or ethnicity?

12: How do you describe where you grew up? Urban, suburban, or rural?

Professor Dougherty asked us to end with those three demographic questions in order to keep track of the students for future research. We would also keep the answers to these three demographic questions to search for more trends in our data analysis.

## Results

We split up analyzing the interviews that we coded into four sections. The first section was looking at the first word that students used to describe Hartford. Group 1's adjectives were: city, misunderstood, different, home, opportunity, capital, diverse, diversity, and home. Group 2's adjectives were: Connecticut, hispanic community, the state capital, dangerous, peaceful, and community. Not one adjective in Group 1 was negative. This goes to show that as members of the Community Action Gateway Program they view Hartford positively as they have got to learn more about it. As one member described it as "misunderstood" they understand that Hartford is not the place that other students and members online make it out to be. Group 2 had mainly positive adjectives, except for one person who described it as "dangerous." As members who applied to the Community Action Gateway Program but did not get accepted, these individuals had a want to learn more about the city and unpack the prejudices that surrounded it but were not given the opportunity through this program. The student who described Hartford as "dangerous" said this only because Hartford "is one of the top ten most dangerous cities in the United States. So it's very unfortunate I know but that would have to be one of the very first words that comes to my mind." While saying Hartford is dangerous, is not a describing Hartford in a positive way, the student only said so because "there are statistics saying that it is one of the most dangerous cities in the country." She believed that members of the Trinity community and non members should "not be scared of it and look at all of the opportunities that it has. Especially because it is in the state capital." This goes to show that Group 2 was also conscious of the stigma that is

surrounded by the word Hartford and even though they did not get accepted into the Community Action Gateway Program, they were well aware that Hartford is not the scary place it is made out to be.

We then proceeded to analyze how students learned about Hartford and how the notions and perspectives about the city varied across the three groups. Generally, students' perspectives of Hartford were widely influenced by both upperclassmen and circulating rumors. As stated by one of the students, "the first thing you hear from people is that it is not safe and that you can't walk alone at night (...) everyone tells you that, students, faculty, everyone. They say 'stay on campus, don't go out at night' and stuff, even during the day!" All three groups of students were equally exposed to what one of the students described as "common knowledge here at Trinity", the perception that residents were not friendly and even dangerous for students. Although students in each group were aware that these problems were common to urban areas, students in the Gateway Program showed higher awareness of the negative stereotypes and their contribution to the disconnect between notions of Hartford and the reality in the city. While reflecting on why students are afraid to go into the city, one student observed, "the reason why they are afraid is because of stereotypes that people have told them, not because they have experienced it [the city]". Stereotypes which, according to students, may be heavily connected to the racial and socioeconomic differences between students and residents and resulting prejudices. In addition, although upperclassmen were the key informants, students in Group 1 were conscious that most had not explored the city or had any personal experiences involving residents. This cycle of fear and avoidance stemmed from what students called a "he said, she said type of thing". One of the most prevalent rumors across all groups was that if students

ventured into the city they would be shot. Parents and other family members also seemed to play important roles in contributing to the existing fears. When asked about negative perceptions of Hartford, one student said that they came from “parents, grandparents, stories that have happened to people they know, which are probably not as severe as they made it seem to be”. Other sources of information included the media, other college related platforms, such as College Confidential, pre-orientation programs and first year seminars. Students in Group 2 and 3 demonstrated heavier reliance on opinions from other students and stories from the media, while students in Group 1 had a better understanding of the bias in these sources. As a student in the third group emphasized, “one of my friends was looking at murder rates and probabilities of rape online not only on Trinity campus but also the surrounding areas so based on those statistics she was already scarred before she came here. Because of those pre-established fears she was not willing to leave campus”. An important and defining aspect in how students in Group 1 learned about Hartford was that they did it through exploration. Not only did they explore the city at a higher frequency they did not limit the areas they visited and were comfortable doing so. One of the students even urged his classmates by saying , “On campus since there’s people from everywhere and they come here with this idea that Hartford is bad, the advice I give them is to go in the community and explore”. Based on the data collected it is evident that students in Group 1 had a more positive perception of the city and were more willing to explore it. This may be due to the higher level of exposure they obtained as participants of the Gateway Program.

The third section of information that we analyzed was not originally coded for. After looking at all the interviews there was a recurring theme of students using safety strategies to feel safe on and off the Trinity campus. We analyzed what these safe strategies were and if they were

similar or different across the three groups. In Group 1 there was a general knowledge of safe strategies. As one member said “it’s just like any city, you don’t want to be walking around at night alone”. Every member pointed out that you just have to be street smart because you are in a city. The Community Action Gateway program may have helped shape their belief that Hartford is not as scary as it is made out to be. Members in Group 2 seemed to have way more safe strategies than Group 1 members. Instead of just saying to be aware of your surroundings these members also talked about more specific safety strategies. For instance, one member said she has pepper spray on her at all times. Another member said “if I’m walking outside, and it’s pitch black; not to have headphones in, to not have my phone out, just little techniques like that.” Another member talked about the importance of having your phone charged at all times. Group 2 had more safety strategies which could possibly be explained because they do not feel as comfortable about Hartford as they do not know as much about it compared to the members of Group 1 do.

We did some further analyzing on safe strategies as we realized that some of these strategies come are typically connotated to a gender. For example, pepper spray is usually thought of as women carrying instead of men. What we found is that for the non-members of the Community Action Gateway program, gender did not have a significant impact on safety strategies. Where these members were born and raised was a greater factor. Students that come to Trinity from an urban environment are more comfortable with the city. For example, one student said born and raised in New York City said, “But I don’t feel unsafe. Mostly because you can’t come from New York and be afraid of people.” While a student raised in the suburbs said, “Hartford just gives me the creeps sometimes. Like I will be walking down a street downtown

and everything just looks dark and sad. I never see a lot of people out which is odd to me because it is a city.” Evidently, where students were raised played a larger factor in students comfort levels in Hartford.

Finally, we looked about the students responses to what they knew about Trinity’s connections to the city of Hartford. We found that Group 1 seemed to be more aware of programs and was able to give more specific examples of Trinity’s connections with the city of Hartford. These students talked about the Community Action Gateway Program, Trinity’s connection to HMTCA, the Trinfo café, and strongly emphasized how Trinity wishes to strengthen its connection with Hartford. Students in group one had positive feedback when asked about Trinity’s connection to Hartford. They were well aware of Trinity working on a second campus in downtown Hartford. Having a second campus in downtown Hartford would increase opportunities that students have to work with Hartford and connect with Trinity alumni. CACT applicants who were not accepted into the program were also pleased with Trinity working on a second campus. Group 2 had some variance in its responses to this question. There were students that talked about HMTCA, the downtown campus, and internship opportunities just like group one. However, there were some students that expressed skepticism and confusion in their responses.

### Major Findings

\_\_\_\_\_ While analyzing the transcripts from our interviews we were looking for any common trends and information that would help us understand how students in the Community Action Gateway differed from their views perceptions when compared to the students not in the

Community Action Gateway. What we found were four major themes that became present during our analysis. Our findings are summarized in the four points below:

- I. Gateway students were more likely to speak of Hartford in a positive way
- II. Students knowledge of Hartford came from testimonies from upperclassmen and rumors.
- III. Gateway students were more comfortable with being in the city
- IV. Gateway students were more aware of Trinity's initiatives in the city

### Discussion

We were pleased how our interviews were conducted. Students helped us gain a great amount of information and we enjoyed practicing our interviewing skills. There were only two pieces in our project that we wanted to change, and hope will change in the future.

The first factor we wish to change has to do with the response rate of group 3. As we previously stated in the paper we had to omit the group of highly rated applicants that did not apply to the Community Action Gateway Program. We hope in the future that the response rate from this group is increased so we are able to analyse not only their views and perceptions toward Hartford and Trinity. But we would also be able to compare all three groups together like we originally planned to.

The second factor that we wished to incorporate was a group four. When we first began this project we wanted to involve the Hartford community somehow. After we began our IRB form we quickly realized that incorporating the Hartford community would not only be difficult, but more importantly it would take a great amount of time. This was time we did not have in a single semester with a group of three students. In the future we hope that there will be a way to compare how residents in Hartford view the city of Hartford, other local residents, how they

view Trinity, and how their perceptions on the connection Trinity has with the local community. These results could also be compared to the findings from the other groups of Trinity students.

Overall we are satisfied with the methodology and results obtained as they compare to similar studies on service learning and community engagement. A model study evaluating the acclaimed SERVE Program at Ignatius University, New York, found that the initiative “increased students’ awareness of political and social issues; heightened their commitment to philanthropy; fostered their interest in pursuing socially responsible work; and strengthened their commitment to working for social change.” (Seider et al. 2010) Although our study was not designed to see the effects of the Gateway Program on students, it was interesting to see some cues that students in the Gateway program are more aware of the socio-economic and political issues in Hartford. Similarly, they demonstrated a want to help the community through volunteering their time. Our hope is that future studies of this Gateway Program go in par with this model study, and consequently, with our findings.

#### Racial Bias of Interview

\_\_\_\_\_ In our face-to-face interviews, we came to understand how interviewees responded differently to questions depending on the race of the interviewer. When John was interviewing an African student he was told that “So I don’t feel unsafe with the local residents, I feel more unsafe of the students on this campus. That’s what I mean, I don’t feel safe being around the pale boys on this campus.” On another account when Ardyn was conducting an interview she had a student state, “Especially everything in Kansas City is pretty much just a lot of white people, like us, who are pretty wealthy so it's different from here.” This shows how students felt more or less inclined to make certain statements based on our race. We do not believe that Lucy or John

would have caucasian students talking to them about how there are “white people like us” in certain areas. The same vice versa, it is hard for us to believe that African-American or African students would tell Ardyn that they are afraid of a “pale boys” at Trinity.

### Conclusion

The data we collected has taught us interesting information about how Trinity students coexist with the city of Hartford. In all of the interviews, Group 1 had the most positive feedback to give us about Trinity’s connection with Hartford. The Community Action Gateway has shown to give these students a better understanding of Hartford and its citizens. Students we interviewed from the CACT also are more aware of Trinity’s attempt to improve its connection with the City of Hartford. Group 1 students displayed a higher level of comfort than the students in Group 2. Since the students in group two were not learning the same information that Group 1 gained in the CACT, students in group two had developed more safety strategies than the students in group one. This is a theme that stuck out to our group during the analysis phase. Students used these strategies to protect themselves from the unknown. While history shows that Trinity has been progressively working on the relationship the school has with the local community through programs like the CLI, it seems as though a portion of students at Trinity are not aware of these opportunities.

Group 3 consisted of only two students. This has a substantial effect that negatively impacted the project and the understanding of qualified first year students that did not apply to the CACT. Currently the project is unable to make any comments on Group 3 that are can be strongly supported by collective data. If there were a larger sample of students from this group then essential data would be able to represent another portion of students at Trinity.

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