JOURNEY MAP

> "We are bringing community members into spaces where they can have a voice and create opportunities for themselves and others. The three partners have built so many quality relationships that will serve as the social infrastructure for the community for years to come."

Stephen Jackson
Social Services Librarian,
Oak Park Public Library

Activating Community Opportunities

Triton College, Oak Park Public Library, & the Equity Team

Oak Park, IL

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The town of Oak Park, IL has long seen itself as a bastion of harmonious diversity and progressive values. However, awareness has been gradually brewing that, in reality, deep divides and inequities exist, especially along racial lines. One glaring indicator of this are the gaps in students' success by race.

In 2017, Triton College, Oak Park Public Library (OPPL), and the Equity Team of Oak Park (E-Team) saw how the common work of each organization could be aligned to achieve greater impact toward narrowing the outcome gaps in the city's schools linked to race and income. Together, they launched an after-school tutoring and mentoring program with funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and AmeriCorps.

In its first year, the project produced remarkable outcomes in student achievement. Equally important, they have also catalyzed significant action, contribution and engagement around equity and education in Oak Park and deepened their capacity in "leading by stepping back" to support community leadership--both crucial ingredients for the work to continue beyond the life of the grant. As Stephen Jackson of Oak Park Public Library reports, "We are bringing community members into spaces where they can have a voice and create opportunities for themselves and others. The three partners have built so many quality relationships that will serve as the social infrastructure for the community for years to come."

EARLY BEGINNINGS

The partnership between Triton College, the E-Team and Oak Park Public Library grew from a relationship between three staff members originally forged over a one-week 2013 conference at Harvard University on closing the educational achievement gap. Years later, the three began meeting to discuss how they might collaborate to address the gap in Oak Park.

Informed by the conference and the work each had done locally upon their return, the group formed a plan to close the loop by ensuring support for students between school, home, and the library. **The project would build on activities for teens already happening in other areas of the library while also offering one room where academics were the focus and tutors were available at all times to accommodate the students' varied schedules.**

Triton committed to attract 50 Triton students who would also be AmeriCorps volunteers and receive awarded stipends and tuition reimbursement. Oak Park Library would provide a large room to serve as the tutoring center four days a week. E-Team members would manage the tutoring center at the Oak Park Public Library, enroll families in a supportive network, and engage community members to partner in the work, drawing on its numerous relationships and connections throughout Oak Park with families, community organizations, PTOs and schools. The project was awarded IMLS and Americorps funding and launched in October of 2017.

PROJECT ACTIVITIES & IMPACT

Several challenges emerged during the first several months of the project. The team encountered difficulties attracting student tutor/mentors due to students' heavy workload and responsibilities--an obstacle they handled by expanding recruitment beyond to include community members from Oak Park, River Forest, Brookfield, and neighboring communities. Work was hindered by differences in emphasis among partners on how students should be supported, trust issues, and a lack of clear definition and agreement of protocol

Despite these challenges, the work in the tutoring center showed exciting results. **The grades of participating students began to increase. Also, to the team's surprise, students receiving tutored began to mentor students younger than them of their own initiative.** E-Team Director Frances Kraft reported seeing "great things happen where the kids are taking the lead in supporting each other." Staff saw a link between this spontaneous "stepping up" and their approach from the beginning to foster dialogue and relationship-building between students, tutors, parents and families as well. "Even though we've had that sense of urgency," Kraft reported, "we've had to allow for that time for the relationships to build and the stories to build."

From this space of storytelling, **new insights on the issue of outcome disparities also emerged which informed the partners' work. A common story began to appear in which high-performing students of color experienced disciplinary measures from a teacher.** After this, Kraft noted, the students would "kind of drop out as a student and feel like, 'Well, if that's who you see me as, that's how I'll be.'" The E-Team then took this to teachers in the form of small-group conversations with local teachers engaging them in discussions around how they might apply it to their practices.

Several months after the project's launch, the project team attended a workshop on Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) for IMLS grant recipients where they gained tools for identifying and mobilizing local strengths and creating space for community leadership. These tools included one-on-one Learning Conversations as well as Open Space Technology and World Cafe facilitation methods. The team also experienced shifts in their perception of the work of community engagement. **Kara Lester, Project Manager for the grant at Triton, recalls realizing: "We don't have to lead every single thing. We can create opportunities for community members who are already talented [to take the lead]."**

Following a visit in April 2018 from the ABCD consultant team, the project team adapted their approach yet again by expanding their lens to see all community members as assets and part of the work, rather than solely as potential tutors or mentors. Toward this end, they integrated practices into the various components of the project for discovering and supporting the contribution of community members' skills, assets and leadership.

Triton shifted their tutor recruitment strategy to turn standard interviews into a learning conversation. Lester recalls, "when we put out a call and we'd hear back from people, **that was an approach I implemented rather than an interview: 'Tell me about your experience,' It was a conversation and truly wanting to get to know who they were; more us knowing if we can be a fit for you, [and] 'How can we truly be a fit for you?' Not, 'Can we fit you into our mold?'"**

In addition to their basic process of working with schools and organizations and efforts to recruit families, the E-Team added a larger Family Resource Network and questions to their intake interviews about families' assets and areas of expertise in addition to

their needs. Kraft recalls, **"This initiated a conversation with each family about how they have assets and expertise, even if they are looking to connect . . . around what they need."** Finally, Oak Park Library staff connected to the project, Stephen Jackson, began actively seeking and integrating the assets of the community, including families and youth.

These practices unleashed a wave of new energy, partners, contributors and resources as community members, students, and tutors began taking on more involved, leading roles in the work. They offered skills and ideas not considered in the original plan. Examples include:

- One tutor has taken the initiative as a "college coach" who holds space on a weekly basis just for students to discuss college and/or career choices.
- A program led by young people titled Leaders In Training (LIT), a group of teens who seek to create a Restorative space where the participants have a platform to speak their truths.
- A community member with a Ph.D. and

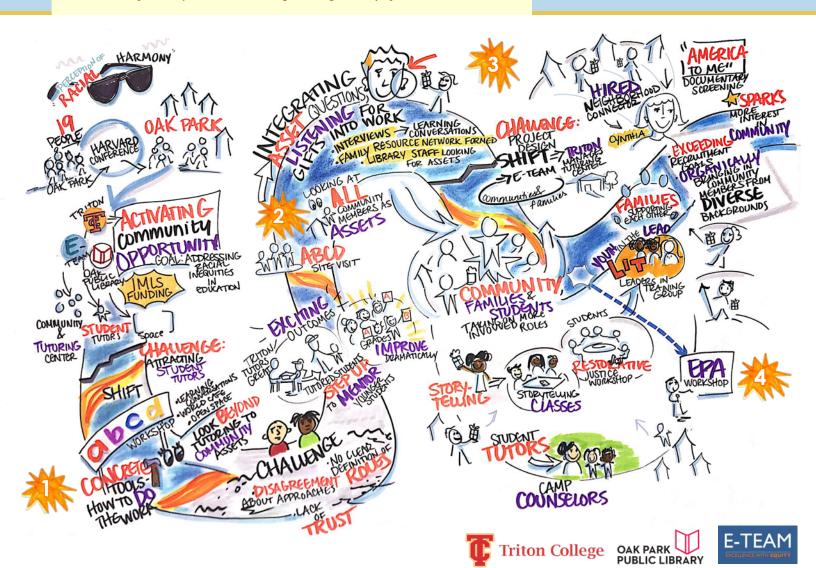# "Activating Community Opportunities"

JOURNEY MAP

Where in the journey has the team engaged with the community and/or taken action with/alongside the community?

How did their work, approaches, and relationships change?

How did their assumptions or perspectives of their communities shift based on what they learned from ABCD and through working on their projects?

1 At the ABCD workshop, the team gained practical tools and a broader perspective on engaging community beyond traditional interventions and strategies: "We don't have to lead every single thing. We can create opportunities for community members who are already talented" to take the lead."

Illustration by Brittany Curry

Triton College · OAK PARK PUBLIC LIBRARY · E-TEAM EXCELLENCE WITH EQUITY

2 After a visit from ABCD consultant, **the team begins looking at all community members as assets and part of the work.** They change volunteer interviews into learning conversations aimed at getting to know the individual, their assets and expertise, and they form a network to support exchange of support and assets between families.

3 Seeing the surging local response to the EPA workshop and "America to Me" documentary, the team **realizes the vast amount of local resources available to work on equity and include youth**–including community members, informal and formal groups and organizations.

4 The team now understands their work as leading by stepping back and catalyzing the work of others while creating change within systems. "Instead of looking at how to manage numerous things, I see it more as being just one member of a team that includes as many voices that haven't been heard previously." (Kraft)

food science background hosts a weekly STEM pop up table for middle and high school students at the Oak Park Public Library. As an African American woman, she serves as a powerful role model for young people of color and young women in particular that they too can pursue a career in the sciences, a field dominated by white males.

- A community member with talents in storytelling who has now led two storytelling classes for youth.
- Seven high school students who received tutoring of the program have taken on roles; three of whom were hired to lead activities for students in grades 2-8 over the summer in a separate program, four have volunteered to support younger students as they learned to write poetry, study Frank Lloyd Wright and architecture, play chess, dance, sing, code Sphero balls, and more.

The team's stronger focus on enlisting community members' strengths also led to the onboarding of a community member named Cynthia Mars into the role of project coordinator. This aided significantly in bringing community members into expanded roles such as facilitators of enrichment programs at the Oak Park Public Library. Lester recalls:

When I was in my previous role [as Volunteer Coordinator], I saw a flyer around the library about a storytelling event that [Cynthia] was doing in the community with a PTO and another organization in the community. What drew me to it was the connection they were making to college and career readiness. I was thinking, "This is great, this is what we need," and for some reason I just kept it. And later, when the transition happened, I reached out to her [and] told her about opportunities with what we're doing for summer and asked her to share her story about the work she was doing with the parent group [and] in the community. . . The interview we had was just so organic. I looked at her and just thought, "She would be perfect for this role!" And I encouraged her to apply, [then] invited her to come to our Site Team meeting,

[and] the whole meeting ended up being about her because everyone was so interested in her background and what she was doing."

Cynthia quickly exceeded the recruitment goal of 10, bringing in at least 15 community members of diverse backgrounds. As a natural connector from the neighborhood, Cynthia's relationships, local knowledge, and existing passion for the issue itself proved invaluable.

As a resident of the community of Oak Park, that library is hers. That's her community. She had a personal interest in the project so she made sure to see it through. And she did a phenomenal job, getting out and attending events, meeting people, spreading the word. . . Since then, she's been able to recruit 40 volunteers who are all community members through the program, not because anybody is telling her, "This is what you need to do--this is your job," but totally on her initiative.

The E-Team's focus on surfacing and connecting existing assets among families has also led to powerful outcomes. Kraft reports:

As the families in our Family Resource Network get to know each other in small conversations, they share their stories of how to advocate or find resources for various issues. For one of our Community Circles, we asked a mom who had helped her son, who is on the spectrum, organize his backpack for middle school. She actually brought his backpack, which contained two drawstring bags and color-coded binders and folders, and walked other parents through the process. Other families then shared what had worked for their students. In another case, a family needed information on how best help their son apply to drama programs at several universities. The application is very different for the arts. The experienced parent met with the family and shared an electronic document he had created to organize the process and keep track of deadlines. Other parents have stepped up when a parent needed an advocate to accompany them to an IEP meeting at school.

Two additional local events contributed to building momentum around the issue of equity and educational outcomes. The first was a community workshop on equity and

educational outcomes, which the project team participated in planning together with the Environmental Protection Agency. The second was a series of local screenings in August of the documentary on educational disparities in Oak Park entitled "America to Me" further spurred interest, dialogue and action.

These two events heightened the team's awareness of the many individuals, groups and organizations committed to the issue, as well as the reality that no one group can solve the complex issue alone. Lester recalls, "Since the documentary I have come to learn that people have become more interested in acknowledging the harsh realities of their community but also looking for ways to do something about it." She adds, "**My most significant, 'aha' moment came when I realized how many resources exist in Oak Park.**" In reference to these and other events, Kraft notes, **"We have discovered that there are community members who are very vocal and attend every event that touches on equity. They are noted as leaders and are obviously assets and resources."**

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> Frances Kraft
> Director, E-Team

One challenge that has arisen from the partner organizations' greater knowledge of and connections with these many efforts and resources, is that of scheduling events amidst so much activity. Coordinating organizational resources can also be challenging due to territorialism and past harms, although events like "America to Me" screening appear to have helped with this dynamic.

The first year of the "Activating Community Opportunities" project has succeeded in both achieving its original goals and in catalyzing community resources toward addressing the complex issue of outcome gaps for students of color in Oak Park--despite the changes and challenges encountered along the way.

Achievements related to original project goals include:

- Increase attendance of students and families
- Increase non-cognitive and career skills
- Increase participation in SAT college entrance exam practice test
- Articulate an intended college pathway and available support networks
- Sign up and connect 200 families with a family mentor
- Improve the academic outcomes of the students with whom they work
- Increase the abilities of families to navigate the systems.

In addition to original project goals, **the project has successfully mobilized community members' assets, energy and leadership around equity and academic outcomes for youth, and built a rich web of connection and relationship in which these assets can flow naturally. Lester observes that they have achieved this "by identifying the gifts and talents that individuals hold and mobilizing those individuals to illuminate their gifts and talents."** Beyond engaging adults to organize for young people, Lester notes that **"we have catalyzed our community through inspiring young people to create for themselves."**

The team has witnessed greater overall activity and collaboration in the community.

"There is a greater sense of collective action in our community than there was when we began the work on this grant," says Kraft. "Numerous groups now work together and the school districts are discussing equity more than ever. There seems to be a dedicated effort by the schools and various groups to persist and continue the dialogue and work until movement occurs."

As the project moves into their second year, the team's goals are to continue meeting project goals and to put into place what is needed to ensure that the work continues beyond grant funding:

- Develop additional metrics to measure the individual growth and success of their students and families.
- Increase the access our students have to academic support.
- Sustain the engagement of volunteers from community and Triton to engage with youth as not only tutors but also to advance other initiatives
- Sustain increased student and family attendance at Oak Park Public Library, improvement in non-cognitive skills, and student participation in college readiness activities
- Increase students' sense of belonging.
- Strengthen relationships between teachers, students, and families, and increase the network our families have with each other.

Kraft also points out the importance of continuing to strengthen relationships between families and schools to both partner and push for systemic change.

IMPACT ON PROJECT TEAM & ORGANIZATIONS

The teams and individuals working most closely on the project have all learned a great deal through this process—about their community, the work of community engagement, and the issue of academic racial inequities they have been working to address.

The team notes an increased awareness that **no one institution or group alone can close the opportunity gap and prepare students for college and/or the workforce.** Lester has realized that "**this work cannot happen overnight. However, what we can do is listen to understand from the community what is the change they would look like to see take place, and support them in allowing that to happen.**" Kraft adds, "We are trying to change something that has existed for generations and serves many people well, but doesn't work for all students. **By approaching the systems as partners who can supplement existing work, we are more likely to be invited in by teachers or counselors, for example.**"

The team has changed their approach to engaging and catalyzing community. Jackson notes a realization that **"I could only do so much programming and would be better served as a connector and informing the staff at Oak Park Public Library about how they could play a part in the project."**

Lester notes, "My thinking has changed because, as with any task placed before me, I view it as being a problem--therefore I must solve it. However, after this project, . . . **I have learned to be ok with stepping back, listening more, recognizing the gifts and talents of individuals, and creating intentional opportunities for those gifts and talents to flourish."**

Kraft observes, **"I think of the work we are doing as much more of catalyzing the work of others while creating change within systems. Instead of looking at how to manage numerous things, I see it more as being just one member of a team that includes as many voices that haven't been heard previously."**

This work often calls upon practitioners to develop new skills or call upon old ones which are not always utilized in their other roles or projects. In particular, Lester notes, "I found myself practicing patience, empathy, and listening skills more. These skills came from my educational experiences but also personal experiences where I was not valued, [and] from having phenomenal mentors

who modeled these skills." Kraft found herself strengthening "the ability to form deep relationships one-on-one and in groups; the patience to allow the work to unfold and go through many steps before it takes hold; and the ability to listen and let many people lead." Additionally, she observes, E-Team members' backgrounds as mothers, teachers, and active community members have been invaluable. "We have taught in the schools, served on the school board, and led PTOs. Each of us has lived in the area for at least 20 years. Our knowledge of the community, relationships with community members and school officials, and understanding of policy has helped tremendously."

LEARNINGS FOR THE FIELD

For this grantee team, this project's success and impact confirms that libraries have a unique and powerful role to play in catalyzing communities to help solve complex problems like racial disparities and the academic opportunity gap.

"Libraries are uniquely positioned to partner with and support community," notes Lester, "because they are viewed as being a safe space where all individuals regardless of background can come." Kraft adds that, beyond its contribution of tutoring space, "our library actively reaches out to our school districts and numerous community organizations and invites them to partner. One of the greatest resources to our community is the library staff [who] are already providing so many valuable services and connections throughout the community and . . . have been invaluable in making the work of this grant possible. They work to stay true to their vision to empower all voices in the community."

What is the team's advice to others embarking on a journey to catalyze community?

"The greatest advice is simple: communication is key."
(Stephen Jackson)

"Igniting community transformation is hard work and does not simply happen. It takes time to establish and maintain meaningful connections. Authenticity supports community transformation."
(Kara Lester)

"Catalyzing a community is in many ways the opposite of how many people are used to working. In an institution, the goal is to sell a product, make a profit [or] preserve a system and way of doing things. In many ways, it is about power and control. . . The constant effort is to release control and empower others, . . . not working to claim credit or gain recognition. . . It is an ongoing process of transformation that must happen internally (within each of us) as well as externally."
(Frances Kraft)

TO LEARN MORE:

Triton College   https://www.triton.edu
Oak Park Public Library https://oppl.org
The E-Team   https://www.e-teamoakpark.com

IMLS Community Catalyst Initiative
www.imls.gov/issues/national-initiatives/community-catalyst-initiative