

Introductory Essay: *eJournal of Public Affairs*, Volume 10, Issue 2

Greg Burris

United Way of the Ozarks (Springfield, Missouri)

Author Note

Correspondence concerning this essay should be addressed to Greg Burris, President and CEO, United Way of the Ozarks, 320 N. Jefferson Avenue, Springfield, MO 65806. Email:

gburris@uwozarks.org

Introductory Essay: *eJournal of Public Affairs*, Volume 10, Issue 2

This special issue of the *eJournal of Public Affairs* demonstrates why we should care about “community ownership,” or an internalized feeling of responsibility for the success of one’s community and those living in it. Community “owners” accept responsibility for learning about and improving their community. They talk and listen differently about their community, they see problems, and they want to be part of the solution. Community ownership works to prompt an entire community—not just nonprofit agents—to engage with common purpose.

Communities that build this sense of responsibility within their citizenry will more successfully address social challenges—which cannot be accomplished by simply issuing a memo. (I know because I tried that.) Communities also cannot expect nonprofit actors to solve local problems on their own; complex issues can only be addressed by deploying talented, creative citizens who understand those issues and who want to be part of the solution. As Rev. Mark Struckhoff once said, “Ignoring these problems in our community is like saying, ‘There’s a hole in *your* end of the boat.’” We all determine whether the boat sinks or stays afloat.

However, most citizens do not know where to start or which direction to face before they take the first step. I believe there are two essential components for building community ownership: (a) informing/educating the citizenry about their community’s issues and challenges, and (b) providing access to civic engagement opportunities. As readers engage with the ideas and research in this special issue of the *eJournal*, I encourage them to consider the following questions:

- Is some degree of community ownership necessary to trigger involvement in civic engagement opportunities? Does one need to care before one acts?

- Are people who feel greater ownership of their community more likely to get involved in their community's civic volunteer opportunities (e.g., strategic planning process)? Does getting involved in civic volunteer opportunities trigger greater community ownership within the participants? Can both be true?
- Does one's higher level of empathy trigger greater ownership and thus increase their likelihood of civic engagement?
- Does age matter when building community ownership? Can community ownership be enhanced in youth, high school and college students, adults, and older adults? Is it more effective when multiple generations are involved together?
- Do we have a moral obligation to help the most vulnerable among us? Can it be true that volunteers benefit more than the organizations for which they volunteer?

Amy Blansit's article, "Income Predicts Federal Poverty Guideline, but Food Security Is the Mediator," reports on a study of Reaching Independence through Support and Education (based in a Springfield, Missouri, neighborhood) which revealed significant improvements in participants' self-sufficiency as a result of program participation, along with other benefits.

Highlighting another programmatic success, Bradley Fisher and Gloria Galanes's research note, "Give 5 Gives Back: Assessment of a New Civic Matchmaking Program for Older Adults," describes a Springfield initiative designed to teach older adults—mostly retired or retiring baby boomers—about social challenges within their community by introducing them to hundreds of volunteer opportunities focusing on these social issues. Give 5 graduates have indicated consistently that the program increased their "sense of responsibility to help improve the community."

Keeping with a Springfield focus, Christina Ryder provides insight into community-based participatory research (CBPR), through which a university works with community stakeholders to conduct research and develop strategies for addressing problems specific to the area. Ryder describes a project involving Missouri State University's Department of Sociology and Anthropology, which gathered data on residents' perceptions of poverty in their midst. She also provides a list of best practices for universities pursuing core elements of their mission through CBPR.

Similarly, in "The Importance of Missouri State University to Springfield," Clif Smart, president of Missouri State, argues that a university with a statewide mission in public affairs should naturally involve itself in building community ownership.

Phyllis Segal's essay, "Intergenerational National Service By, With, and For All Ages," covers significant territory regarding intergenerational activities and policies. She offers specific recommendations for expanding intentional intergenerational service as a pathway toward increasing community ownership.

Brian Fogle's review of *Unbound: How Inequity Constricts Our Economy and What We Can Do About It*, by Heather Boushey, provides a perspective on inequity that is both timely and necessary. The ideas expressed by Boushey, who now serves on President Biden's Council of Economic Advisers, add considerable value to the issues that Fogle explores.

Tyrone Bledsoe, Sr.'s essay, "We Invest in What We Care About," describes the Student African American Brotherhood (also known as Brother-to-Brother), a program working to instill community ownership in young men of color as they progress through high school and college.

In "For the Love of Cities—2020 and Beyond," Peter Kageyama simultaneously departs from and reinforces his generally positive outlook on cities and the emotional connections people

can have within their communities, and takes a sobering look back at the challenges of the previous year. Cora Scott's article, "Coming Together While Standing Apart: Encouraging Community Ownership During the Isolating Days of the Pandemic," outlines how one city responded to COVID-19. Scott describes a variety of civic engagement and communication initiatives launched at a time when civic engagement was never more difficult. In "Engaging the Community in Strategic Visioning," Mike Mowrey shows how community strategic planning can increase civic engagement and build community ownership. And Hrishue Mahalaha's "Time to Throw Away the Old Economic Development Playbook" provides specific guidance to communities interested in looking differently at economic development strategies, namely in a manner that increases community ownership.

Finally, Amy Neugebauer's article, "Children Are Undiscovered Community Assets," explores one strategy for building community ownership in children. The Kids for Kids Fund is an innovative program that helps children learn about challenges in their community in order to work toward investing in one of them.

I hope the contributions to this special issue will encourage readers to tilt their head and look at their own communities a bit differently—to not stay in their lane. What could be accomplished by a variety of citizens who have raised their hands and said, "This is my community, and I want to help make it better"? The difference between citizens saying "This is *a* community" and "This is *my* community" is enormous—and suggests that at the local level, committed citizens who say the latter can do almost anything. I also hope readers will see this issue as a springboard from which to further consider the role that building community ownership can have in all of our communities. I remain convinced this is a strategy that

successful communities will use (or continue to use) to make progress on a variety of critical community challenges.