


# **An Analysis of Clark University Club Sport & Dance Teams' Relationship with the Worcester Community**

**Praxis Project Thesis: Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts — as part of the Community, Youth,  
and Education Studies Major at Clark University**

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Bridgette Reyes

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### **Abstract**

This study aimed to examine how Clark University club sports and dance teams engage with the Worcester community. I surveyed club sports and dance team members to assess their involvement with community programs and outreach efforts. I collected survey responses to analyze the extent of their engagement, as well as potential barriers that may be harming their involvement. My analysis reveals three important factors that need to be discussed when having conversations around community engagement: How people view community shapes how they engage, who initiates engagement, and the barriers in the way of engagement.

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## Introduction

Before solidifying this project, I hoped to create a basketball clinic where I would run a structured youth basketball clinic for the Worcester community. The goal of that project was to run activities to improve general basketball skills, along with teaching and talking about the basics of teamwork, collaboration, and productive communication, teammate-to-teammate, and teammate-to-coach. These activities would allow the participants to work together for a common goal of self-improvement and betterment of their basketball skills. Unfortunately, this did not work out, so I had to pivot to researching the relationship between the Worcester community and Clark's sports and dance teams. I learned about this relationship through an anonymous survey sent out to the Clark club sports and dance teams. Despite this project change, my values and ideas did not change. One of the reasons that my previous project proposal got denied was that the clinic did not exist, and they wanted me to do it in a pre-existing space. That aligns with my current research project, which aims to create spaces where this connection can happen in the future between Worcester communities and Clark sports and dance teams.

The problem centers around a disconnect or limited engagement between Clark University's club sport and dance teams, with the broad Worcester community. This may stem from missed opportunities for meaningful partnerships, a lack of understanding, or even an underutilization of sports as a community-building resource. While Clark promotes on-campus activities targeting community engagement, the challenge of enhancing this relationship with the local community is more present.

This is not just an issue seen at Clark University; it is a broad dynamic in many different universities and can be attributed to reasons such as institutional focus, non-matching ideals, or

even resource allocation. Universities have such a big impact on orchestrating community engagement that they can often prioritize internal programs and activities, sidelining local community involvement. Ideas not aligning also cause these said events not to occur. One example is that the community may perceive college students and organizations as not authentic or detached from the community. Additionally, community members may view university students as temporary residents with little to no stake in the area. Resource allocation is another area that blocks this connection. While Clark University's teams may have the skills, energy, and time, they need to align these resources with community priorities.

### **Vignette**

As a kid growing up in southern Maine, the opportunities to have a basketball camp run by a university were limited. Despite this, I was fortunate enough to participate in a one-week basketball camp hosted by Bowdoin College in their gymnasium. This happened in the summer when I was going into fifth grade, and I only knew two other kids at the camp. Although I knew some of the campers, I felt awkward not knowing any of the other 30-plus kids there, and the counselors. Almost all of the counselors were Bowdoin basketball players on the men's and women's teams, along with the men's team coach facilitating. Throughout this whole camp, the one thing that I still remember vividly was the effort that the Bowdoin players made to connect with us and make the campers feel safe and comfortable. This allowed me to be in a space where I could focus on improving my basketball skills while making new connections with other campers. Eventually, as the camp wrapped up, I was upset that I had to leave, which was not the reaction I thought I would have at the start of the program. There was one specific interaction that I had with a counselor that had a great impact on me. At this time, I was short for my age, and almost every other camper there was taller than me. I did not pay too much attention to it,

but I did notice it. Once the camp got going on the third day, I experienced some bullying from other campers because of my height, with some of them pushing me when I was guarding them on defense. After this, I was visibly frustrated. One of the counselors approached me and asked why I was upset. I told her that it was because I was shorter than everyone else, and I did not think I could guard any of the taller campers because of it. She told me that she was also one of the shortest players on her team, and she loved it. “When you’re short, they can’t see you coming,” is what she said to me. Additionally, she showed me how to play defense against people taller than me and how to be aggressive and have a strong base. Even though I know this may seem like basic advice, at the time, she understood that even with the insecurity I had with my height, there were still benefits. She made me feel more confident in myself, and ultimately, that should be the goal of a camp: making the campers feel more comfortable and confident in their abilities. Overall, the program was somewhat forgettable, but this moment with a college basketball player meant something to me. This is the kind of connection that should happen at a basketball camp.

This problem is significant to me because I have been a part of Clark Club Basketball for four years, with two years being the president of the club. I know the lack of impact that we as a club have on the Worcester community. Since this has been missing from our club, I wanted to see if it was similar to other club sports and dance teams here at Clark University. This is also important to me because of the community impact, my stake, and social growth. For the community impact, I recognize the potential for these teams to build bridges between the university and the Worcester community, while addressing local needs and fostering engagement. As someone who was involved in college sports camps in my childhood, I understand the impact that sports and dance can have on connecting communities. Furthermore, my personal stake in



this issue comes from being a member of Clark University; more specifically, as a member of the Clark University Club Basketball. As the president of the club, I not only feel the responsibility, but I also aim to create a broader impact, especially in a way that aligns with the community's needs. Lastly, this project is important to me because of the social growth that could come from it, including facilitating connections between sports, arts, and residents. This can additionally enhance mutual learning, break down pre-existing stereotypes, and build social connections. All of these align with my broader educational goals.

I started at Clark University in 2021, and I have had many different experiences since joining Club Basketball. Clark was relatively open to community members using facilities like the Kneller Gymnasium, the Dolan Athletic Center, and the Robert H. Goddard Library. As a first and second-year Club Basketball participant, we occasionally had Worcester residents play pickup basketball with us during our practices. It was a time that benefited both groups involved. For the Clark students, it was a chance to compete and create relationships with some Worcester residents, and for the Worcester residents, they were able to use Clark's facilities and have people to play basketball with. There were limited restrictions when those community members entered these spaces. That was until April of 2023, when Worcester residents were using the Kneller courts, and a fight broke out, resulting in an individual pulling out a knife and injuring two men. There were no Clark students involved in this altercation. Even though none of the individuals involved in this incident were those who would join our practices, they had their facilities taken away from them.

This resulted in Clark University adding more restrictions to the spaces that Worcester residents could use. For the Kneller, Clark students could no longer invite non-Clark students to our practices. Before this altercation, the workers at the front desk would let anyone in who was

there for our practices, but since then, you either have to swipe your One-Card or have the CORQ app. This has dramatically impacted the resources and facilities available for Worcester residents to utilize.

To help me make sense of my project, I explored the following research questions for understanding the relationship between the Clark club and dance teams with the Worcester community. My questions are

1. How actively do Clark University Club Sports & dance teams engage with the Worcester community through events, volunteering, or partnerships?
2. What could Clark club sports and dance teams do to better engage with the Worcester Community? What are the barriers limiting this connection?

I investigated these research questions by first sending out an anonymous survey that qualified participants would take. The purpose of the survey was to see what the Clark club members believed about their relationship or connection with the Worcester community.

### **Theoretical Framework**

To guide my praxis, I draw on two key theoretical frameworks: Community Engagement and barriers for connection. These frameworks act as both a lens, which illuminates the different dynamics of community-university partnerships, and a compass, which guides the action toward more inclusive and effective engagement.

### **Community Engagement**

Community Engagement in Higher Education emphasizes the importance of universities' active, authentic involvement in addressing issues through partnerships with local communities. This framework encourages a shift from traditional hierarchy or top-down approaches to a more collaborative, inclusive model. In the traditional top-down approach for community engagement,

the college can hold the majority of power, but when we shift to a more inclusive model, that centers the community with the university partners. Additionally, this challenges the idea of a savior complex from the university's side. In the savior complex, it is the need to “save” other people by fixing their problems for them. In some cases, someone with a savior complex often feels the need to go out of their way to help people, even when those people don’t need or want their help (Cleveland, 2024). For a solidified definition of community engagement, I draw upon the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, community engagement "describes collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (*Community*, 2025). This partnership between higher education and the local community can foster scholarship and research, and enhance the curriculum, which aims to prepare educated, engaged individuals. When this relationship occurs, it can help with critically thinking about society issues and contribute to the public good (*Community*, 2025).

As Jones & Lee highlight, there is a need for a more comprehensive approach to community engagement, one that includes attention to community voice, finance, and overall strategic planning. One of the benefits of this approach is it ensures that universities consider diverse perspectives and engage with community partners meaningfully, rather than in one-sided relationships. Community Engagement also provides a framework for praxis by guiding how universities can structure their engagement to be more reciprocal and community-centered.

### **Barriers to Connection**

As universities recognize their significant role in supporting local communities, they face several challenges in creating meaningful connections. When investigating this, I came across a

paper titled *The Close Connection Between Universities and Local Communities* published by Forward Pathway, that explores these barriers and suggests ways to overcome them.

This piece argues that while universities often state their commitment to community engagement, there are realistic obstacles to creating sustainable partnerships with the local community. One of the main issues discussed is the disconnect between local needs and university priorities, with colleges sometimes focusing more on performance than on addressing the needs of the local environment. Another key point mentioned is the lack of readiness within universities to engage effectively with community organizations, particularly when it comes to providing the resources necessary and support for long-term collaboration. Additionally, the privatization of space complicates efforts to promote community involvement.

In conclusion, the paper emphasizes the need for universities to shift towards more inclusive, locally-focused models of engagement that take into consideration the needs of the local community. It also suggests that universities should invest in long-term relationships with local communities, aligning their goals with the needs of the people they aim to help and serve. Overall, this article provides essential insights into the barriers that hinder community-university partnerships and offers practical recommendations for overcoming them.

In addition to this piece by Forward Pathway, I came across a journal titled *Academics Meets Action: Community Engagement Motivations, Benefits, and Constraints*, published by the Journal of Community Engagement and Higher Education from Northern Illinois University, that further explores barriers seen in community engagement on the university side. Furthermore, this piece is about the importance of civic engagement on a college campus and the factors that either block this engagement or improve it.

This journal offers examples of barriers limiting community engagement. A main topic that is discussed as a limitation is the rising cost of higher education, leading university students to get a paying job during the year, which then reduces the amount of time to participate in community engagement efforts. Along with this, they also argue that a prominent reason for the lack of participation from university students in community engagement is the negative stereotype around volunteering. That community engagement is not meant for younger people, and it does not make a genuine difference (Schattelman, 2014).

In conclusion, this journal emphasizes the importance of universities understanding the real constraints and motivations of students in terms of community engagement. By highlighting barriers such as time, financial restraints, and academic demands, the study shows that occasional service opportunities are effective in fostering engagement. Furthermore, it argues that universities should invest in long-term, meaningful relationships with local organizations and businesses that allow students to apply their unique skills while building community relations. Overall, this article offers valuable insights into what motivates students and what limits their engagement and provides recommendations for designing sustainable, reciprocal university-community partnerships (Schattelman, 2014).

### **How These Frameworks Guide Praxis**

By combining these theories, I approach community engagement with a focus on both the structural change and the social identities at play. Community Engagement encourages partnerships that are rooted in mutual respect and collaboration, ensuring that voices are heard and respected. Together, these frameworks guide us to take action that is respectful, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of both the community and the university.

## **Conceptual Framework**

When examining the salient concepts in my research, I draw upon three concepts that help me make sense of my project: engagement, reciprocity, and barriers.

### **Engagement**

Engagement refers to active participation and collaboration. I draw upon an article from the British Journal of Education, which states that effective engagement includes aligning the goals of the institutions with the community needs, fostering sustainable relationships, and creating values shared through collaborative initiatives (Saltmarsh et al., 2019).

This concept emphasizes creating meaningful, mutually beneficial relationships where both parties contribute and benefit. Engagement can take many forms, including community events such as field days, food festivals, or fun runs. Other examples of engagements are workshops, mentorship programs, or even joint initiatives addressing goals shared between parties.

Key engagement elements include actively participating in shared goals and mutual learning. For this project, active participation is moving beyond mild involvement to establish sustained connections with the community. For Clark University students involved with these sports and dance teams, active participation with the Worcester community is creating deep relationships that have value and mutually benefit both parties. Shared goals happen when aligning the interests of the university teams with the needs and aspirations of the Worcester residents. Mutual learning is recognizing the value of knowledge from another perspective; in this sense, it is understanding the knowledge from the community and integrating it into university-led initiatives to enhance cultural understanding.

Engagement helps build trust and foster a sense of shared identity between the university and the community. For my project, engagement could involve the teams organizing community sports clinics, dance performances, or even collaborative projects that serve local needs while showcasing their talents. While acknowledging university-led programs and events, it is just as important, if not more, to understand the agency of the community in organizing/choosing their events. Clark students can learn from the Worcester community, and that goes both ways.

### **Barriers**

Barriers are obstacles that hinder collaboration between Clark University sports and dance teams and the Worcester community. Identifying and addressing these barriers is crucial for creating successful, long-lasting partnerships. Common barriers with community engagement are a lack of funding, sustainability, resource constraints, and inconsistent communication between all parties (O'Meara & Jaeger, 2016).

For communication gaps, there can be a lack of awareness from the university about the community's needs or an unwillingness to engage. Additionally, in the realm of communication gaps, there can be misaligned expectations between Clark and local Worcester residents. Cultural differences are differing priorities, values, or even problems that both communities face. These differences between students and community members can lead to misunderstandings or reluctance to collaborate. One of the main occurrences of things holding community engagement back is a lack of resources. This can look like limited time for both university students and community members, a lack of funding, or organizational support for the teams to engage in community-backed initiatives. Lastly, there could be perception issues, the community may view students as temporary residents with little to no commitment to partnerships that last long-term.

On the other hand, students may perceive community engagement as non-essential compared to academic work.

For my project, understanding these barriers will be crucial to designing interventions that address them, such as communication strategies for creating co-developed initiatives with local stakeholders.

### **Reciprocity**

For my research, reciprocity is the principle of mutual benefit and respect for university-community engagement. To help understand reciprocity, I draw upon the notion that was discussed where true reciprocity challenges traditional power dynamics. This is done by valuing the knowledge and expertise of community members as equal to that of academic institutions (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002).

This definition states how important it is to challenge power dynamics when working with community members. Instead of the hierarchy, it should be a mutually beneficial partnership, where you value the expertise and knowledge of the community members. Reciprocity also emphasizes that both university and community bring valuable resources, knowledge, and perspectives to the partnership. Furthermore, it challenges the idea of a one-sided relationship where the community only gives, and the community only receives.

Key aspects of reciprocity include mutual benefit, co-creation, and respect for local knowledge. Mutual benefit looks like ensuring that community engagement efforts address both the needs of the university teams and the needs of Worcester residents. Co-creation involves community members in the planning, instead of planning events without taking into account their perspectives. Promoting co-creation in the planning and execution of the projects to ensure that they stay relevant and sustainable. Reciprocity, or lack thereof, starts with respecting local



knowledge and perspectives. Recognizing and valuing the expertise and lived experiences of community members.

For example, a reciprocal approach to community engagement could involve co-developing a youth sports program where the Clark sports teams provide mentorship while learning from the community about challenges and aspirations. For the dance teams, this could look like co-planning a performance where both university students and community members choreograph dances.

### **How They Work Together**

Together, these concepts create a framework for analyzing and improving university and community-based partnerships. Engagement initiates collaboration, barriers identify challenges to be addressed, and reciprocity ensures that efforts are balanced and beneficial for all parties involved.

### **Literature Review**

When examining other projects like mine, I drew on outside resources that focus on university-backed community engagement, and sports and dance teams' impact on the community. These resources around these topics helped me situate my project in similar programs to mine. It also helped me make sense of the gaps in my project.

During this process of finding articles, I struggled to locate articles that were similar to my project. Since my project is relatively niche, finding pieces relating to my study was difficult, but I took two different approaches. The first of which was logging into Google Scholar and typing out words or phrases that had a relation to my project. Phrases like “university-community engagement efforts and sports/dance importance in community engagement” as a baseline. This process was frustrating, seeing how I could not find many

pieces of literature that were similar to my study. Eventually, I was able to find a handful of valuable resources to help guide my project. Once I believed I could no longer find any additional resources, I reached out to the Clark librarians to schedule a meeting in hopes of finding more resources to use for my understanding. This process was extremely beneficial for me, as I was provided with the tools to locate more literature. If I were to begin this project again, I would have reached out to the Clark librarians earlier, as they are a great resource for finding educational readings, along with being tremendously kind.

### **Sports Role in Social Connection**

When examining the role of sports in promoting social connection, Michael A. Hemphill and Tom Martinek's piece, *Sport as a Tool for Social Inclusion: A Critical Analysis of Sports-Based Interventions for Disadvantaged Young People*, gives an in-depth view of the effectiveness of sports programs in addressing inequalities and fostering community engagement. Hemphill and Martinek argue that:

- a) The programs aim to develop leadership, communication, decision-making, and community awareness in youth and highlight the social skills obtained through these initiatives, along with personal growth
- b) An emphasis is placed on how universities collaborate with community organizations to address challenges and contribute unique resources, creating a mutually beneficial relationship.
- c) There is a clear focus on maintaining programs over time, with faculty and leaders aligning initiatives with the university's priorities to ensure lasting benefits for both the institution involved and the community (Hemphill & Martinek, 2017, p. 9).

Two main groups were running these programs for the disadvantaged youth, both of which were community partners. One of which was the Chucktown Squash Scholars, the other being the Project Effort Youth Leader Corps. These organizations relied on university support, non-profit organizations, and philanthropists to provide funding, space, transportation, and mentorship to the participants. As we can see from Hemphill and Martinek's analysis, while sports programs hold significant potential for addressing social inequalities, their success hinges on thoughtful implementation and integration with the wider community and policy initiatives.

As sports continue to play a significant role in communities, they offer more than pure entertainment. Sports are such an easy way to connect people and communities, along with helping encourage healthy environments and promote overall well-being. I came across a piece titled *Yielding Healthy Community with Sport?* (Warner et al., 2017), which explores how sports can enhance community health and unity.

This piece argues that sports have the potential to strengthen community ties by promoting health outcomes and fostering a sense of belonging. It discusses how participation in sports can increase a sense of community, which leads to improved health behaviors and reduced negative outcomes. The study found that the undergraduate students who are involved with sports, in particular club sports, reported higher levels of physical activity and better overall health compared to those not involved in said sports. Additionally, the paper highlights how crucial community-driven sports programs are to encourage inclusivity and support marginalized groups, making sports a tool for not only physical well-being but also social well-being.

In conclusion, the paper puts value on sports in building healthier, more connected communities. Moreover, it draws on solid data to show how sports participation can lead to

better health outcomes and stronger overall community engagement. This research provides a valuable understanding of how sports can be used to enhance both individual and collective health within communities.

### **Impact of Community Engagement**

The article *The Student-Athlete Volunteer Experience: An Investigation of a University Athletics–Community Sports Partnership* by Cailie S. McGuire, Jennifer T. Coletti, and Luc J. Martin explores how university athletics programs foster meaningful connections between student-athletes and their communities. The authors argue that student-athletes are motivated by a mix of intrinsic and extrinsic factors, such as pressure, the desire to give back to the community, the opportunity to build leadership, and to improve sport-specific skills for community members. Through their roles as role models for the community, they positively impact young athletes' psychosocial and athletic development. Furthermore, these programs benefit universities by enhancing their reputation as organizations that promote civic engagement and strengthen ties with the community. (McGuire, C., & Coletti, J., & Martin, L., 2023).

This study highlights the reciprocal benefits of volunteer programs, emphasizing that such initiatives not only improve the lives of the youth participants involved, but also influence personal growth and community awareness among these university clubs, varsity, and dance teams. Structured programs that align with the interests of both students and community members can create sustainable partnerships and lasting social impact.

### **Strengthening Collegiate Athletics with Community Partners**

This piece by Svensson, Huml, and Hancock (2014) examines the relationships between collegiate athletic departments and community service organizations in their article, *Exploring Intercollegiate Athletic Department–Community Partnerships Through the Lens of Community*

*Service Organizations.* This study investigates the challenges, motivations, and benefits of these partnerships. Finding that these Community Service Organizations (CSOs) engage with athletic departments to increase volunteer capacity, extend their mission through educational outreach, develop long-lasting relationships with these student-athletes, and receive donations. However, the research also highlights issues of poor communication and ambiguity in the expectations of both groups, which often hinder the sustainability of these partnerships.

The study emphasizes the importance of well-structured and properly managed collaborations between universities and their local communities. At the same time, student-athletes bring valuable skills such as discipline, leadership, and teamwork. This research suggests that clearer communication and shared objectives between athletic departments and CSOs are necessary for long-term success. By strengthening these partnerships, universities can enhance their civic engagement efforts while providing meaningful service opportunities for student-athletes (Svensson et al., 2014).

### **Inside-Out and Outside-In Models**

When examining community engagement models, I came across a chapter in Richard L. Hughes and Andrew G. Stricker's essay, *Outside-In and Inside-Out Approaches to Transformation*. This piece gives an in-depth review of how organizations can transform in both a structural sense but also a cultural reset. Their piece argues,

- a) One of the prominent challenges of implementing inside-out transformations is the leadership culture. There can be “unwritten rules,” or assumptions about the “way things are around here” within an organization. This can result in leadership staying stagnant, and therefore, that falls onto the workers of the organization (Hughes et al., 2009)

- b) “Outside-in efforts are changes in structure, systems, and processes that essentially involve conforming behavior to new external demands. Inside-out efforts, in contrast, involve changing values, assumptions, and beliefs about how best to achieve effective direction, alignment, and commitment throughout the organization (Hughes et al., 2009, p. 190).”

As we can see from Hughes and Stricker’s essay, there can be a resistance to accepting inside-out transformation within an organization, both from leadership and the workers. If individuals are so set in their ways, it creates an echo chamber where new ideas and actions are seen with as much passion and energy as recurring ones. Additionally, Hughes and Stricker also offer the perspective that “differences in goals and objectives significantly increase the complexity of collaborative efforts, and collaboration is simpler and easier when the parties can meet face-to-face (Hughes et al., 2009, p. 193).”

This shows the importance of organizations having clear and concise goals, especially when collaborating with other organizations. If the objectives do not align, the communication system can be damaged, and programs no longer benefit both parties involved. While the focus of this piece is on organizations within the United States military, arguments and discussions brought up throughout this are valuable in my understanding of inside-out and outside-in models and the organizational impact of these models.

### **Building Social Connection Through Dance**

When examining the role of dance in fostering social connection, Rebecca Pritchard, Natalie Darko, and Elizabeth Stevnson’s study *Enhancing Community Engagement, Public Involvement, and Social Capital Through Researchers’s Participation in Community Dance*

*Projects*, provides an in-depth exploration of how community-based dance initiatives and programs impact social inclusions and improve health equity.

These authors argue that dance-based community projects help build social capital by fostering both bonding within groups and bridging across different social backgrounds. Additionally, participation in dance programs contributes to an overall stronger mental well-being and empowerment, particularly when sessions are structured in a culturally relevant and inclusive manner. Lastly, while dance can be a valuable tool for community engagement, its effectiveness relies on broader institutional and policy support to ensure lasting sustainability and impact (Pritchard et al., 2024).

One thing that I found from this piece by Pritchard and her colleagues' analysis, while community dance initiatives hold significant potential for fostering social connection and improving public health outcomes, their success depends on thoughtful implementation, long-term institutional support, and cultural responsiveness.

The literature reveals that sports and dance can play a powerful role in building connections, promoting health, and strengthening university-community partnerships. The studies I reviewed highlighted the value of structured, inclusive, well-supported programs to build meaningful connections. Furthermore, there is a call for these collaborations between universities and local communities to explore partnerships with local businesses and organizations to aid the funding gap. Additionally, throughout these pieces, there is an emphasis on maintaining a clearer communication system between the parties is essential for a sustainable relationship. Even though the literature provided is helpful to my understanding of this complex project, some aspects need to be unpacked. One of those aspects is for the universities pushing

for more student volunteering. The significance of volunteering can be harmful and insinuates that the institution has something to offer that the community wants or needs. This has the potential to be damaging as it implies the need for a “savior” in this connection. The implication that there needs to be a savior in this relationship takes away the value and agency of the community. Once that agency is taken away from the community, it can damage the mutually beneficial partnership. However, there is a gap present in the literature, which is the specific relationship between university clubs and the surrounding community. In particular, there is no deep discussion about student-led ventures rather than university-led ventures. My project seeks to fill the gap by focusing on student-run, university-supported sport and dance clubs at Clark University engaging with the Worcester community, and the barriers they face in this attempt at connection. This niche perspective adds to existing research by seeing smaller-scale, less university-run efforts that still aim to make a meaningful impact.

### **Context**

The setting of this project is Clark University, located in Worcester, Massachusetts. Clark is a liberal arts university that has a diverse population. Clark has a strong commitment to community engagement, offering various programs that connect students with the surrounding Worcester area. Clark is taking space within the Main South neighborhood of Worcester, where the community has a majority of marginalized families, leading to a rich, diverse culture. This provides a unique lens to view the relationship between Clark’s sports and dance teams and the local community. Worcester is home to a variety of community organizations, events, and activities, and these serve as potential points of intersection for the university's extracurricular groups. Clark’s sports teams, both varsity and club, along with its dance team, play an important role within the university, but their involvement with the Worcester community is an area of



focus for this project. These teams engage in various outreach programs and collaborations that connect Clark to Worcester, fostering mutual partnerships that are reciprocal.

Furthermore, there are community engagement programs in place in Worcester between Clark University and surrounding schools. One of the most prominent examples of this connection is the University Park Partnership. Established in 1995, this partnership has now reached its thirtieth anniversary. In 1997, the University Park Campus School was founded to prepare every student for college. UPCS<sup>1</sup> is located 0.2 miles away from the Clark University campus in the Main South neighborhood. Additionally, this partnership offers benefits for both the Clark body and the students of UPCS. The University Park Partnership educational programs have included free classes for high school students at Clark that count as college credits, adult education, and a university program where students are provided free attendance at Clark University, worth around \$12 million in tuition to 101 students from Main South (PD&R, 2017). I have been fortunate enough to be in multiple classes at Clark with UPCS students, and I have appreciated their perspectives and ideas. This partnership extends past education, with Clark University stating that it focuses on four major areas of urban development: “housing and physical rehabilitation, education, economic development, and social and recreational activities for neighborhood residents (University Park, 2019).” There are more pre-existing partnerships between Clark University and Worcester, and this is just an example of one.

## **Participants**

Participants in this study were all Clark University students who were above the age of 18 and who were involved in sports and dance teams. The level of involvement with the Worcester community varies, with some participating in community service projects and local

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<sup>1</sup> UPCS refers to University Park Campus School

events. One example of this is the men's basketball team, which occasionally goes into schools to work with the students on general basketball skills. Furthermore, Worcester community members, such as local business owners, event organizers, and members of community groups, also collaborate with Clark's sports team. At the beginning of the 2024-2025 school year, the Clark University men's varsity basketball team spent its day practicing with the Special Olympics Massachusetts flag football team. During this event, the Clark players competed with the Special Olympics team to have a field day. Another example of a collaboration between a Clark sports team and the local Worcester community comes from Clark's softball team. In the fall of this school year, the team traveled to a local Worcester school to hold a skills clinic. This clinic was not strictly softball, but soccer, basketball, and more. The collaboration between Clark students and Worcester community members can help bridge the gap between the university and the city, which creates a dynamic partnership that benefits both sides. Through these interactions, the sports and dance teams at Clark University contribute to the cultural and social fabric of Worcester, while also gaining valuable experiences and exposure within the community.

### **Worcester & Main South**

When referring to Worcester, it is important to acknowledge the diversity, especially in the Main South neighborhood. In Main South, 43.9% of residents are of Hispanic or Latino heritage, 32.9% are white, 16.1% are Black, and 11.7% are Asian (Main South, 2023). When you compare this to the general Clark population in 2022, 47.3% of students are white, 7.75% Hispanic or Latino, 4.96% Asian, and 3.87% Black (Data USA, 2023). This shows a clear disparity in population, with Clark University being predominantly white, while the Main South neighborhood is predominantly Hispanic or Latino.

There are current opportunities for youth sports leagues within Worcester. An example of one is the Worcester Youth Soccer League, which is available for ages 4-18, either recreational or travel. The league is a volunteer-based program meant to promote sportsmanship and soccer skills in a fun and safe environment. Similar to a majority of leagues, there is a fee to register; the price depends on the age of your child, either \$110.00 or \$120.00. Despite this, there are scholarships available for families to fill out if the charge is unrealistic. There are other youth sports leagues available throughout Worcester, all of which share the goal of creating an environment where youth feel safe and have a chance to improve in their sport.

### **Insider vs. Outsider**

The idea of insider vs outsider and their role in the college community is essential for understanding their relationship in the city. For a more defined example of outsider vs insider, I draw upon a book chapter about religion and how insiders vs outsiders impact that community. Even though this chapter is referencing religion in terms of how insiders and outsiders impact the community, the definitions provided are valuable for this research. The author describes this view as a four-step process. An outsider is someone who is a complete observer in the space, whereas an insider is someone who is a complete participant. In between these roles are an observer as a participant, and a participant as an observer (Knott, 2009). For Clark University students, it is crucial to understand the role we take on.

As students at Clark, we are so immersed in the Main South neighborhood of Worcester, and we need to be aware of the role we are taking in that community. Many students, particularly those who live on campus and engage mostly in university-affiliated activities, often exist between the roles of “observer as participant” and “participant as observer.” They may attend local events or engage in the city, but their engagement can often be filtered through the

university. In this perspective, students can appear physically present in Worcester yet socially and culturally absent. Therefore, remaining outsiders in the broader community's everyday life. On the other hand, students who live off campus, work in the city, or form relationships outside the university may begin to shift from an outsider to the insider role by participating more fully in the life of the local community. An example of this could be a Clark student who is in the Master's of Teaching Program who teaches at a Worcester school. In this sense, would they be an insider to the community or still an outsider? This individual is still a Clark student, but they are also very immersed in everyday life in Worcester as a school teacher. Furthermore, would this individual be considered an "observer as participant," as a participant in the community, but from the perspective of an outsider? Recognizing these complex positions allows Clark students to better assess their impact and responsibilities as members of the Worcester community, whether temporary or long-term.

In this realm of insider vs outsider is the role of a guest. A guest in a community could be someone who is invited or uninvited. This involves entering a space with the understanding that one does not have ownership over any of the space. A guest should not be there to impose their values or goals, but to listen and participate in ways that are welcomed by the community. Embracing the role of a guest encourages more thoughtful reciprocal relationships where students do not simply serve or volunteer in the community, but actively learn from it. This mindset can shift engagement away from a one-sided effort and instead toward a deeper connection based on trust that respects the lived experiences of all Worcester residents.

### **Comparing Campus-Community Connections**

When comparing community engagement approaches at other Division III schools in Worcester, such as Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI), Worcester State, and Anna Maria

College, to Clark University, it becomes clear that each institution emphasizes student involvement. Although the visibility and accessibility vary. To understand this difference, I went to all these colleges' community engagement pages to see how they approach community engagement. Worcester State stands out with a formal recognition from the Carnegie Foundation for Community Engagement, signaling an institutionally supported approach to community partnerships and service learning. While Worcester State's club community-based initiatives are less documented or not accessible (*Community*, 2023).

WPI takes more of a project-based approach to engagement, which is evident in programs like the Worcester Community Project Center, where students collaborate with local organizations in Worcester to address the needs and goals of the community. WPI club sports and dance teams play active roles in campus life through performances and games, which encourage student involvement within the institution. Despite this relationship that they are aiming to obtain within the university, there does not appear to be a connection to the greater Worcester area (*Worcester*, 2025). This does not mean that this type of engagement from clubs to the community does not exist; it is not featured on their community engagement page. Therefore, this could mean that this relationship might not be tracked or emphasized.

Anna Maria encourages community service through organizations like AMCARES, which supports student-led volunteerism and local outreach. Despite this, Anna Maria appears to host club activities such as a cheer team and promotes community involvement on a broad scale. There is little public information available detailing how their club sport and dance teams interact with the surrounding community in Worcester (*Activities*, 2025).

In summary, through all three of these colleges in Worcester, there seems to be a varied approach to how community engagement is implemented. This is especially clear with the club

sport and dance teams' relations to the Worcester community, as no defined area on these websites talks about how these clubs engage with the community. Furthermore, this leads me to assume that this is a gap in engagement in Worcester schools, and it is a field that could benefit both the community and the universities.

### **Methodology & Data Analysis**

The primary method for my data collection in this project involves the creation and development of a survey targeted toward Clark University club sports and dance teams. The survey aimed to gather insights into the relationship between these groups and the greater Worcester community. Additionally, it focused on themes of engagement, barriers, and reciprocity. The survey consisted of questions designed to explore the extent of involvement between these university groups and community groups and organizations, and what the perceived barriers are to fostering a deeper connection.

Participants qualified to take the survey are representatives from Clark University's dance groups and club sports, above the age of 18. The distribution of the survey was digitally sent out through email and social media platforms, which ensures accessibility and convenience for the college student respondents. Additionally, the survey link was sent out to members of the club's EBoard to send out to their club members. Furthermore, the survey follows guidelines from the college, with an attached informed consent form at the beginning of the survey, participation is voluntary, and all the participants are anonymous. Survey participants are informed about the purpose of the project and their right to withdraw at any time.

Survey Questions;

1. What is the name of your club/organization?

2. How many active members does your club have?
3. What is your club's primary focus or mission (e.g., sports, arts, advocacy)?
4. Are you involved in any other clubs on campus?
5. How long have you been a part of the club sport?
6. Is your club involved in any community (e.g., Worcester) outside of Clark?  
☐ Yes  
☐ No
7. If yes, what does that involvement look like? What specific community groups or organizations does your club partner with?
8. If no, would you be open to involving your club in the community outside of Clark?  
Why or Why not?
9. What ideas or suggestions do you have about engaging with the community outside of Clark?
10. How frequently does your club involve themselves in the Worcester community?  
☐ Weekly  
☐ Monthly  
☐ Once per semester  
☐ Rarely/Never
11. What additional support would help your club strengthen its relationship with the Worcester community?
12. Are there specific projects or ideas your club would like to implement in Worcester if resources were available?

The approach for data analysis includes quantitative analysis, qualitative analysis, and comparative analysis. For quantitative analysis, the closed-ended survey questions were analyzed using statistics to identify any patterns or trends in the data. Tools like Excel and Google Docs were used to process this data. Qualitative analysis, specifically thematic analysis, was used for open-ended survey responses. This involves coding responses to identify themes, such as

barriers, engagement, or reciprocal relationships. Thematic analysis provides stronger insights into the experiences of the participants than quantitative analysis. Lastly, comparative analysis where data was compared across different sub-groups of participants, such as club sports vs. dance teams. The aim is to explore themes that may align or disconnect with each other around community engagement practices and challenges that hinder this connection. This comparison may help reveal approaches or barriers to certain groups.

Throughout this process of thematic analysis, I switched the way I approached it. Initially, I wrote the codes or phrases I collected on paper, I did this because handwriting generally helps me with retaining the information. After I completed my first trial of coding on paper, I decided to input the codes into a code book I created on Microsoft Excel. When mapping out the code book, I did it question by question and color-coded each question (see Appendix B). All of these codes came from open-ended questions in the survey, which required participants to input their responses. In the A and C columns of the code book, the words attached are the codes I took from the survey responses. Furthermore, columns B and D show the frequency count for each code, or how many times each word was mentioned by the survey participants. As new responses came in from survey participants, I added them to the respective areas of the code book.

In the middle of the process, I decided to use a classroom in Jonas Clark with a chalkboard for the next step of my data analysis. Although I hadn't finished coding all the data at that point, I wanted to start identifying categories by grouping similar codes. I wrote all the codes I had so far on the chalkboard to view them from a new perspective and began organizing them based on common themes. Eventually, I identified six preliminary categories: *types of community, needs (Clark-side), types of engagement, club offerings, pronouns, and*



*neighborhood needs*. Each category contained at least seven codes. For example, under *needs (Clark-side)*, I grouped codes that reflected what Clark clubs required for effective community engagement, such as “money, advice, more funding from Clark, stronger social presence, connections, outside interest, commitment, access, and time.” Once I closed the survey and completed the full coding process, I was able to either refine these categories or add new ones as needed.

Before I sent my survey out, there were some anticipated challenges that I expected to face. A key challenge was ensuring a high response rate; to address this, outreach efforts emphasized the importance of the project and highlighted how survey participants' input could inform strategies and recommendations for strengthening these communities and the Clark team's partnerships. Another way I had to mitigate this risk was by sending out the survey to members of the club's EBoards in hopes of them sending it out to their team. Moreover, there was a potential challenge of representation. If I noticed that certain groups, such as dance teams, were underrepresented, it could have skewed the results. There could also be only a few teams filling out the data, which could make survey questions repetitive. To help aid this problem, I broadened the outreach and recruitment strategies to reach all groups. One final challenge for this research was a bias in the responses. I believe that participants may respond in ways they think are expected, rather than their authentic opinions. To help mitigate this, I attempted to assure anonymity and emphasize honest answers.

### **Positionality**

Social identity plays a significant role in society and how you are perceived. Your identity can provide you with a sense of belonging, whether with friends, community, class,

sexual orientation, or anything along those lines. Social identity can affect who you surround yourself with and who you choose to align with.

Throughout my life, I have been very fortunate and privileged to experience various forms of community engagement. Coming from Freeport, a small town in Southern Maine with a population of around 10,000, our community was strong and close. My main experience with engaging with the community was through sports, as I attended a lot of sports camps run by either the high school, middle school, or the general school system when I was younger. Growing up in a predominantly white town in Maine, I was surrounded by white peers and educators. My early experiences were built on privilege. Since my parents were divorced and both educators themselves, and had three kids, money was not a constant. Although my family was considered low-income, I rarely felt singled out because of it. This could have been for multiple reasons; the most likely was that I always presented myself as nice and friendly, and my classmates rarely picked on me. Another reason for me not feeling singled out is that I always felt people thought of me as the nice guy, and would not want to make fun of me. Looking back, I think I went along with that, and I made my identity as the “nice-guy” in avoidance of conflict. One moment when I did feel targeted was during a college tour with my friends. A majority of them were discussing that they would go wherever they wanted with no financial restraints. This was not the case, for me, I was going to go wherever gave me the best financial aid package. I realized my decision did not have to do with preference, but instead it was based on the financial aid offered. This moment highlights how economic differences shaped my experiences compared to those around me. As a kid, some sports were inaccessible to my family because of the expenses that came with the sport. An example of this was hockey, since the charges for this were considerable, compared to basketball and baseball. According to Playground Equipment, the three most expensive sports

for families are ice hockey, skiing/snowboarding, and field hockey. All of these sports cost at least \$2,000 on average per year for families to have their child participate in. Some of those charges involve registration, equipment, travel, lessons, and camps (Hart, 2024). These costs show the annual cost of each youth sport per year for one child, and if you account for youth playing multiple sports, the charges increase steadily. Growing up in a low-income family meant that there were sports that we could not afford to play. This is even more noticeable because my brother and I were always involved in athletics, so the charges were generally double.

Furthermore, this leads to a section of sports that can be inaccessible for families who can not afford to have their child/children play. Moreover, these expensive sports tend to have wealthier families involved, which further pushes the class divide. I understand the town I live in is vastly different from Worcester in many ways. One of the most noticeable differences between the two is the diversity, or lack thereof. Worcester is the second biggest city in New England, with a population of around 200,000. While I have struggled with income for most of my life, it has certainly been a different experience than some of the Worcester community. That being said, it is vital to take into account the intersection of race and class when considering my positionality as well. I have been fortunate enough to have the opportunity to compete in the sports I love. It started as a kid in Maine, and has blossomed to college, where I find myself the President of Clark Club Basketball. Since I have been at Clark, I have experienced various leaders of this team, and I have seen how the club has evolved over the past four years. Sports have played such an instrumental part in my life, and the relationships that I have created in these spaces last a lifetime. As an athlete, I have been a part of a copious number of teams, whether baseball, basketball, soccer, or any other sport I played. I have been able to understand sports as more than just competition. They have been a space of connection, belonging, accountability, and

inclusiveness. My identity as an athlete has been shaped by early access to my local sports programs, which were often run through our school system in my small town. This accessibility allowed me to grow in a system that was built for me, a white cisgendered man in a predominantly white community. I also recognize that sports often reflect broader systems of privilege, and my presence in athletic spaces is rarely questioned. While I have faced challenges related to class, such as affording registration, gear, or travel opportunities, I have still benefited from a culture in sports that centers people like me. At Clark, continuing as an athlete has exposed me to the ways that athletics can create community, but also how they can unintentionally exclude. An example of this is seen in Club Basketball. Everyone who participates in the club has to fill out a form for safety reasons, stating that if they get hurt, they can not take legal action against Clark. Occasionally, at club practices, we would have Clark students who just wanted to compete with us, and we had to tell them they could not unless they filled out this information. Recognizing this has pushed me to think critically about how I can use my role as an athlete not just to compete, but to advocate for more inclusive spaces.

As the president of the Clark Club Basketball team, I carry an added layer of responsibility in how I represent the club. This position places me at the intersection of leadership and organization. I have had to navigate an inconsistent practice schedule, budget restraints, and find a balance between the president of the club and just another participant. That power dynamic has been prevalent, particularly at the beginning of this school year, with the influx of first-year students joining our club. I could sense that some of the first years would not play as competitively against me compared to the other members of the club. That is not what I wanted as the president of the club; I wanted everyone to treat me the same as they were treating everyone else, but I also understood that as the president of the club, that is not something that I

should have, but rather something that I need to earn. Additionally, holding this role has made me more aware of the structural limitations that exist even within an institution and how they can prevent meaningful community engagement. The leadership role that I have been put in has made me reflect on whose voices are included in decision-making, and how power operates even in club sports. I have made a conscious effort to make sure all voices in the club are heard. I view my position not just as a logistical or organizational role, but as a space to create a more inclusive and safe space to compete.

At Clark University, I have grown as a person in a way that I can feel proud of. My perspective has broadened significantly. The university and the Worcester community have exposed me to the idea of critical thinking and critical consciousness. These encourage me to reflect on my position in the world and community in ways I never did in high school. Courses like *Fundamentals of Youth Work*, *Youth Participatory Action*, and *Civics in Action* allowed me to hear diverse stories and lived experiences that differed from my own. Therefore, it gives me an understanding of how others experience the world differently from me. I have been fortunate enough to be in educational and non-educational spaces where there are dialogues about the importance of hearing different lived experiences. These conversations emphasize the importance of recognizing privilege and how society favors certain identities over others. I'll never understand what it is like to be discriminated against for my race, class, or gender identity. As an outsider to Worcester, it is my responsibility to learn from and actively listen to those who have different lived experiences from mine.

As I work on this project, I understand that my gender and whiteness may provide me with a platform or voice that others may not have. Additionally, I recognize that in academic conversations regarding community engagement, my voice is more likely to be heard due to

biases. Hearing and amplifying the voices of marginalized communities in Worcester is crucial for conversations around community engagement. My experience with financial insecurity has given me empathy towards others who may face similar or worse struggles to my own.

Furthermore, this perspective forces me to consider how economic barriers impact community engagement from all sides.

Ultimately, critical consciousness has been the most influential aspect of my identity. Clark has taught me to reflect deeply about structures in place meant to keep those in power, powerful, and those not in power, powerless. Along with how important it is to understand how privilege operates. All these experiences have affected me in a way that I can learn from. Since I graduated from high school, I have become a strong listener and observer. I believe this has allowed me to sit back and notice things that I would have previously missed. Reflecting on my own positionality and identity is vital when considering how I have engaged with my praxis project. My whiteness, gender, social class, Judaism, and critical consciousness all contribute to how I interact with the world, shaping what I see as important and how I show up.

## **Findings**

The data provided by the participants throughout this project was rich and full of varying viewpoints. It was clear that the relationship between the Clark University sports and dance clubs and the Worcester community is multifaceted, with various models of engagement. My approach to analyzing data led me to three main themes. In this section, I will review the themes that were reached once the data analysis was completed.

### **How People View Community Shapes How They Engage**

The first theme is “How participants view community shapes how they engage.” This theme was reached by combining categories that shared similarities, such as “types of engagement, neighborhood needs, and club offerings.”

In question six of the survey (see Appendix A), 43% of the participants who responded answered “No” to their clubs having any involvement with the Worcester community. Leaving 57% who selected “Yes”. This showed that a majority of the participants who filled out the survey did not believe their club had any involvement with Worcester. There were 40 responses to the survey, and only 23 of those participants answered this question. For the participants who selected “Yes,” they were then asked what that involvement looked like.

In these responses, I was able to understand what individuals viewed as engaging with the Worcester community. Multiple responses mentioned how their clubs engaged with the community by competing against other Worcester colleges in the area. Embedded in these responses were their individual beliefs about community engagement. However, this perspective contrasts with how I view community engagement, which emphasizes engaging directly with Worcester residents for Worcester residents, rather than with other Worcester schools.

The variation of responses points to a complex conversation about how community is defined. For some of the respondents, community engagement revolves around geographical components. As long as these events happen within Worcester and involve other local colleges, these interactions are valid and meaningful in creating a lasting connection with higher education in Worcester. In this view, connections to the community relate to proximity and shared experiences as universities within Worcester. On the other hand, my perspective of community engagement centers on the local Worcester residents. When working with Worcester residents directly, it extends past collaboration with the college environment. This approach suggests that a

deeper, more impactful connection comes from interacting with those who call Worcester their home.

Despite survey participants indicating their connection with other Worcester schools, some respondents mentioned their clubs' engagement with the greater Worcester community. This included multiple responses mentioning their connection to the Clark organization, Splash. In this collaboration with Splash, the participants mentioned how they do sports lessons with Worcester youth. Furthermore, this shows a different perspective of how individuals view community engagement. For the survey participants who selected "No" for question #6 (see Appendix A), there was a clear idea that this connection to the community was something that they wanted to achieve. Embedded in some responses, the community looked like "other Worcester schools, community outside of Clark, dance groups outside of Clark." There are three communities within these responses. Firstly, there is "other Worcester schools," which implies Worcester higher education universities; this is one perspective of how a community is defined. Secondly, there is "community outside of Clark," which encompasses a widespread community in Worcester. Lastly, "dance groups outside of Clark" is a specific grouping of the Worcester community. Each club has its perspective of the community, and that shapes how they engage with that community.

Understanding these differing perspectives is essential when assessing the impact that college clubs have on the broader Worcester community. If clubs limit their engagement in the community to other campuses, they may inadvertently reinforce the academic bubble in Worcester that excludes local residents. This can create a perception that college clubs prioritize university-university connections over genuine community integration. Furthermore, when clubs intentionally engage with Worcester residents, they have the opportunity to build relationships



between the university and the local population. This type of involvement can lead to shared resources, a stronger sense of community belonging, and mutual understanding between higher education and residents. Once there is recognition that the community can be viewed in multiple ways allows for a deeper conversation about how to foster meaningful relationships.

### **Who Initiates Engagement?**

One of the most prominent themes that emerged from the survey data analysis is the question of *Who Initiates Engagement*. This theme reflects the dynamics of outreach, resources, and communication between Clark University Clubs and the greater Worcester community. Additionally, this can be categorized into the models of inside-out and outside-in. Understanding these models can help understand the motivations and challenges that start community engagement efforts with the Clark club sports and dance teams.

This theme came from a result of combining categories that were created during my data analysis. A key element that helped shape this theme is the club offerings, and in particular, how the strengths of clubs lead to opportunities for collaboration with the Worcester community. This involves starting with the club's existing skills and resources to form partnerships based on community needs. Many survey participants highlighted that their club's expertise, whether that is athletics or dance, serves as a tool for outreach. For instance, varsity sports teams at Clark use their skill to run youth sports clinics. This is shown in many teams, women's soccer runs clinics at local schools for youth, sharing their expertise on soccer skills, teamwork, and collaboration. It is also important to acknowledge that some of these varsity sports teams go into the community to have these clinics, rather than hosting them at Clark University. This is a great example of the inside-out model of community engagement. In a study done about educational reform and

community engagement, in rural Alaska, Kushman & Barnhardt (2001), found that “[T]o be effective, reform processes that originate from outside the community need to start inside the community with the relationships that already exist and build outward. This inside-out approach can lead to sustained community engagement and ownership for the reform work.” (p. 18). Later on in the piece, they report that those who do not make connections with the established leaders in the communities do not see active community participation with the programs in place. Although this piece focuses on creating relationships in Alaska, the point I reached from it was the importance of going inside the community space to create lasting partnerships with the community.

### ***Inside-Out Model***

For question 12 of the anonymous survey (see Appendix A), participants indicated their suggestions for how they would want their club to engage with the community. Responses to this question included: “hosting clinics, free lessons, workshops, volunteering, open practices, pick up league, etc...” All of these codes fell under the category of types of engagement/club offerings that help build this theme. Conversely, others responded with, “connect with culture, supply drives, go into schools, and teach in the community.” All of these responses fit under the umbrella of club offerings. In this case, the university clubs would be the ones who initiate engagement with the community. When these survey respondents answered this question, I noticed that most of the responses had to do with holding these collaborative spaces throughout Clark’s campus.

In this inside-out model, engagement is initiated by Clark University clubs, extending their resources, skills, and programming to the greater Worcester community. This model

emphasizes outreach driven by the university, with clubs designing the events, performances, and volunteer efforts intended to involve the community. A handful of survey respondents indicated that their clubs already engage in this form of outreach through “work with other schools in Worcester to set up games, teaching programs, Splash<sup>2</sup>, and events outside of Clark.” The communities that are being mentioned in this question are varied. Whether that is other Worcester colleges in the area to set up games, or club-led Splash events for local Worcester students.

This model aligns with a concept of universities as “anchor institutions”, places that recognize their role in forming local communities and actively seek to contribute to them (Harris & Holley, 2016). This piece highlights that when universities take a leadership role in engagement, they can create programs that offer sustainable benefits to the community. At Clark, this might involve structured collaborations with Worcester residents, schools, youth organizations, or general community centers to provide training, mentorship, or skill training. However, a challenge with the inside-out model is the risk of university or club-driven initiatives failing to meet the actual community needs. An example of this risk would be if Club Basketball had an idea for a program and offered it to the Worcester community, but did not reach out to the community about what they wanted out of the program. This is an example of a potentially harmful aspect of the inside-out model of community engagement, by not understanding and hearing what the community wants and needs, you as a club are failing to meet this reciprocal partnership. When the university holds the power in this relationship, it is no longer a mutually beneficial partnership but rather a one-sided one. Additionally, a necessary aspect of beneficial

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<sup>2</sup> Splash is an student-volunteer run organization which offers classes taught by Clark University students to local students in grades 5-12. There is a belief that when offered a free class outside of the general K-12 curriculum, students will become more curious, motivated, and engaged learners.

engagement from the university side is listening skills (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). When you do not center the community partner in these engagement efforts, you are not using these listening skills that are so crucial in a sustainable partnership. Although it is a basic principle, it is occasionally forgotten in community engagement. An important step to transforming an organization with the inside-out model is first finding a clear and concise goal of how community engagement is present. Leadership and the culture of the club are essential in this process; values trickle down the hierarchy (Hughes et al., 2009). If the club EBoard leaders do not have a defined goal or objective for community engagement, other members may not be committed, and therefore, efforts to engage are limited.

Survey data indicates that a majority of the participants who filled out the survey felt that their club does not engage with the community. Specifically, 57% of the respondents believed that there was no connection between their club and the Worcester community. This could be due to a multitude of reasons, funding, resources, time constraints, and more. Successful community engagement initiatives require continual efforts to consult with community members before the creation of the programs. As mentioned earlier, there are logistical barriers that can hinder the overall effectiveness of inside-out engagement. Clubs that rely on students volunteering may struggle with consistency and frequent leadership changes, such as Eboard members switching every year. This can make it difficult to sustain community relations over multiple years.

### ***Outside-In Model***

In contrast, the outside-in model is driven by the community identifying their own needs and reaching out for collaboration. Under this model, Worcester residents or schools take the initiative to engage with the university, requesting participation in local events or programs that

exist, such as the Worcester Youth Soccer League, for mentorship, expertise, or asking for specific types of support. Throughout this survey, responses indicate that this model is less common than the inside-out approach to community engagement, as many of the Clark clubs focus on their own goals. However, when these community groups do reach out, it often leads to more impactful collaborations, seeing how their goals and needs are at the forefront of the conversation. For example, a local organization might approach a Clark University sports team to help run a youth clinic. This can be seen from Clark varsity sports outreach with Worcester schools to help out with clinics for the youth. One of the major advantages of the outside-in model is that it tends to align more authentically with community interests. When Worcester residents and groups seek out Clark University clubs for engagement, it suggests that they see value in having university students collaborate with local youth. However, barriers to this model exist as well. Many local community groups may not be aware of the potential of Clark clubs interested in collaboration, which limits their ability to initiate this engagement. There are ways to help this potential problem, including having Clark clubs create flyers stating their interest in collaborating with the local community. Once the creation of the flyers is complete, the clubs either send them to Worcester elementary and secondary schools or go in person and talk about the opportunities that they are offering. Another potential way to mitigate this lack of awareness is by maintaining an online presence. When clubs have the chance to collaborate with the Worcester community, using social media to promote the event can help raise awareness. Platforms like Facebook can help raise this awareness if maintained consistently (Bayne & Cianfrone, 2013). While this study is outdated in the realm of social media, it still shows the importance of maintaining a consistent social media presence. Additionally, there may be university structures in place that make it difficult for external groups to find an easy way to

request a collaborative space. Without an accessible way to connect with student-run clubs at Clark, the outside-in model may continue to be underutilized.

The survey data indicates that while most engagement efforts at Clark follow this model of inside-out, some clubs are in spaces where they experience collaboration from the outside. There is a way to help mitigate this imbalance, where university-led initiatives receive input from the community, and community-driven programs receive strong support from Clark, which could enhance the effectiveness and expansion of the engagement efforts. For Clark clubs, dual engagement could involve the creation of an additional Eboard member, such as a Community Liaison, or feedback surveys for the community members involved, or direct partnerships with community organizations to help facilitate deeper connections. Overall, creating space for ongoing dialogue between university students and Worcester residents can lead to more meaningful, lasting collaborations.

The distinction between inside-out and outside-in models of engagement highlights key considerations for Clark clubs as some seek to strengthen or create connections with the Worcester community. Those clubs that follow an inside-out approach should be mindful of ensuring their goals align with the actual community interests and needs. Otherwise, expanding opportunities for community-led collaboration could help increase meaningful participation from Worcester residents. In terms of who does the initiation of engagement in this project, the consensus seen from the survey is that participants believed that they or their clubs are the ones who initiate engagement. The survey data emphasizes the complexity of engagement between Clark clubs and the Worcester community. By critically examining who initiates engagement, Clark University clubs can work toward building a more inclusive and mutually beneficial

relationship with the local Worcester community. Additionally, when examining who initiates this engagement, leveraging club strengths for collaboration is prevalent.

### **Barriers In The Way of Engagement**

Engagement between college organizations and the surrounding Worcester community is essential for maintaining mutual growth and support. At Clark University, club sports and dance teams have the potential to bridge this gap and serve as key agents in community involvement. However, various barriers hinder deeper interaction between these clubs and the community. These barriers can be classified into two major categories, Clark-based barriers and community-based barriers. The former refers to obstacles within the university itself, such as resource allocation, financial constraints, and limited time. While the latter refers to external factors like outreach, or lack thereof, along with structural challenges within Worcester. Examining these barriers through the lens of engagement highlights the complex ways in which institutions and communities create a sustainable relationship.

One of the primary hurdles that I found in the survey responses was financial limitation. Funding for sport and dance clubs is already stretched thin, with much of the budget allocated toward essential expenses such as equipment, travel, referee reimbursement, and league/event planning. For example, as president of the Club Basketball team, we were given around \$4,000 for the school year of 2024-2025. Firstly, we had to pay our annual fee of \$960 towards the league that we are in for the school year. Every time we play at home, we play two games, and have two referees for each game. Those referees charge \$90 per game, so that adds up to \$360 for every home game. In each season, we have around four or five home games, so that equates to around \$1,620. Once you add those charges together, the remaining total is \$1420. Every away

game that we play, we reimburse the drivers for gas, which is expensive. At the end of the season, we likely end up with around \$600 to spend, typically, that goes toward team gear for everyone. This is just one of the ways a club spends its funding. In the recent 2025-2026 funding allocation, Club Basketball applied for \$4,800 and got approved for less than half of that amount. This will lead to the future of Club Basketball having to limit the amount of games played, and therefore, money allocation will go down tremendously. As a result, there may be little left to support outreach efforts or community engagement initiatives. In question 11 of the anonymous survey (see Appendix A), respondents indicated multiple times that money was in the way of strengthening the relationship with the Worcester community. Furthermore, this was in the form of ways that Clark could support the clubs. There were additional codes that I took out from the survey of ways that Clark could support the clubs, including “Clark to community communication, posting the practice schedules, and a stronger social presence.” This shows that there are ways that participants think Clark could help them bridge the gap in connection with the community. For dance teams, securing rehearsal space and transportation to off-campus events can be a financial burden. Without dedicated financial support for community outreach, organizing programs, and combined initiatives with local Worcester residents becomes difficult.

To help mitigate this financial barrier to engagement, there are methods of collaboration with existing Clark University that can aid this problem. One way to bridge this gap is by connecting with the Office of Community Engagement and Volunteering, which can provide funding and support for community-based programming. For example, if Club Basketball had an idea of a way to engage with the Worcester community but lacked the necessary funds to support this, they could reach out to the Office of Community Engagement and Volunteering for help with funding, outreach, and organization. Another way to bridge this gap is by partnering with



local businesses or community centers to aid this financial barrier to connection. If a club has a plan it hopes to implement, but is lacking the necessary funding for the implementation, these partnered local businesses can act as a sponsor and help provide funds to get the program started. In addition to the financial aid that this partnership may provide, there is also the opportunity for more outreach. If the community business partners with a Clark club, they can promote that relationship in their space and therefore increase accessibility to areas outside of pre-existing Clark University spaces. One last method that clubs may be able to breach the financial barrier that is so common is by collaborating on joint outreach events, combining their resources to increase impact while reducing the overall cost of the event. These approaches offer ways to make community engagement more financially sustainable for Clark University club sports and dance teams.

Along with financial barriers in the way, there is also a resource allocation problem. Even beyond monetary constraints, the allocation of university resources plays a crucial role in limiting engagement. Constant scheduling conflicts for athletic spaces or performance spaces, along with competition with other campus clubs for funding, both contribute to difficulties in organizing community-oriented events. Additionally, the broader administration may not always align with the goals of clubs in community engagement, leaving student-led efforts without the support of the university. In this same realm of thinking, survey respondents indicated that communication on all fronts should be improved to help with this engagement. One participant mentioned in question 11 of the survey, “If another club that has already engaged with the community gave us some advice on how to do it.” This shows that this club member wished for previous methods of well-done engagement with the community. Others indicated that more communication from Clark to the community would be mutually beneficial. In the case of the

ultimate frisbee club, they practice at a partnered program with Clark, and when they leave the field, they have to lock the gates. When doing so, Worcester residents have to leave, and this lack of communication between Clark and the partnered organization of Worcester goes unseen.

There is also a concern noted from a participant in question 8 (see Appendix A) where the participant stated that the reason that connection to the community may be difficult is because the club has a hard time getting members together already. This is a very realistic concern when it comes to a barrier for clubs to engage with the community. If members of a club are not invested in their club, how can they expect to be active and passionate about community involvement?

While Clark University values community engagement within Worcester, as seen by varsity sports engaging with the community, and programs where Clark students teach in Worcester public schools for the Master of Teaching program. Despite this, there are still pockets of Clark that offer valuable insights and information. Academic service-learning programs and these varsity teams usually take precedence, and Clark often focuses on research-based initiatives to engage with the community. Without explicit encouragement and structured support from the university, the team may struggle to integrate community outreach into their already busy programming.

One of the major barriers to engagement on the community side is the challenge of effective outreach. Worcester residents may be unaware of the opportunities to engage with Clark University's club sports and dance teams. Similarly, student organizations may lack the channels or expertise to establish meaningful connections with local schools, youth groups, organizations, and community centers. Furthermore, differences in types of communication, such as the reliance on social media versus the more traditional networks of communication, can create a disconnect

between these Worcester residents and the Clark clubs. Without strong outreach methods, efforts may struggle to gain traction even if they are well-intentioned. Additionally, there are also socioeconomic disparities presented between the university population and the Main South neighborhood of Worcester, which can impact the engagement. The median household income in Worcester Main South is \$26,736 compared to the city average of \$45,869 (Main, 2024). Compared to the average Clark University student household income in 2017 of \$114,600 (Buchanan & Aisch, 2017). Although family income does not always align with the individual who attends the university, it is important to understand this large disparity. Moreover, there may be perceptions of exclusivity or the lack of relatability, which may deter community members from feeling comfortable participating in Clark-led activities. Local organizations may have their priorities addressing more urgent social or economic issues, making sports and dance engagement a lower priority. Establishing long-term partnerships requires strong relationship-building along with consistency. That can be challenging given the changes to the leadership within each club each year.

Addressing these barriers requires a varied approach that involves both university-led initiatives, student-driven efforts, and the co-creation of programs. Clark could provide more structured funding and resources for community outreach efforts within sport and dance organizations. Offering institutional support could help facilitate sustainable involvement. For stronger outreach strategies, student organizations could collaborate with the Worcester school systems to establish clear communication channels. Additionally, utilizing flyers, in-person engagement, and local networks can help with visibility. Engagement should focus on sustainable, steady partnerships. Establishing networks where club leaders and Worcester residents can communicate about mentorship programs, annual events, recurring workshops, and

other forms of engagement, varied by the club or the community. By addressing these barriers, Clark University's club sports and dance teams can strengthen their role as active participants in the Main South neighborhood of Worcester. As a Clark student in Worcester, you are most likely an outsider to the Main South neighborhood, and it is crucial to listen and hear the local community. While challenges remain, a strategic and collaborative approach can lead to more meaningful and lasting engagement.

### **Action**

After analyzing the themes that connected to my research questions about the engagement between Clark University's club sport and dance teams and the Worcester community, I will propose actionable solutions. These ideas aim to promote sustainable and consistent involvement that is mutually beneficial for both parties involved.

One of the primary obstacles is the lack of a designated role within sports and dance teams to facilitate this communication and outreach. To address this, each club's executive board (Eboard) should include a Community Liaison position. Currently, each club is required to have four positions: president, vice president, treasurer, and secretary. All clubs, whether sports-centered or dance-related, could benefit from the appointment of a Community Liaison. Within the role of the community liaison, they would be responsible for outreach, coordination, documentation, and advocacy. It offers a role within the club that offers support and the organization of actual opportunities for positive engagement in the Worcester community, that complement the skill set, availability, and values of the club. The Community Liaison would be responsible for establishing and maintaining relationships with Worcester-based community organizations, schools, and recreational programs. Additionally, they would be the go-to person for any community partnerships. Aside from relationship building, the liaison would organize at

least one outreach event per semester, such as a workshop, clinic, performance, or volunteering, while collaborating with the community partner. They would oversee the planning and communication for these events, working with other club leaders and community partners. Furthermore, the role also includes maintaining open channels of communication within the club about potential opportunities and ensuring the events, conversations, and meetings are properly documented for future reflection. Every semester, the liaison would submit a summary of the activities the clubs engage in with the community. In this summary, it could also include ongoing barriers they saw to access, such as funding, logistical issues, or scheduling complications. Ultimately, this position empowers the clubs to be active in the local community and enhance their members' experience. I understand that this may be a difficult task for one person to take on, but with the help of fellow Eboard members and general Clark club leaders, it can be beneficial. Having a dedicated liaison within each organization would create a consistent and structured approach to community engagement rather than relying on one-time efforts. The number of active members of each club will determine the number of community liaisons per club. For every 25 club members, there will be one appointed community liaison for that club. If a club has 54 active members, then the club will appoint two community liaisons. This is due to the workload that the community liaison would take on; the more club members, the more complex it becomes. Due to the complexity of the role, this could be a paid position. Each club could use a small portion of the funds from its budget to compensate the community liaison. Although this is not always an option at Clark, due to existing budget cuts. With this in mind, clubs could receive sponsorships from local businesses or funding from the Office of Community Engagement and Volunteering.

Another strategy that was brought up in the anonymous survey was the idea of a coalition of sports clubs and dance teams at Clark University. This coalition would serve as a forum where representatives from different teams come together to discuss ongoing or upcoming opportunities to collaborate with the community. In addition, this coalition would share best practices and challenges related to engaging with the Worcester community; these should be challenges from both sides, and lastly, brainstorm and implement joint events that encourage interaction between Clark clubs and residents. This initiative would create a support network for clubs looking to enhance their outreach efforts while also ensuring that engagement is approached collectively rather than in isolated instances. A coalition would also allow for more significant events to be planned collaboratively, increasing the impact and visibility of the effort. To help increase the visibility of these efforts, there could be space for varsity teams who already have a method of community engagement to connect with this coalition to try and serve as many community members as possible. This coalition of clubs would be required to meet once every month. Every club a part of this coalition needs to have at least one EBoard member present at the meeting. The hope for this coalition is to have the club community liaison attend these meetings, but student schedules are inconsistent, so one member of every club's EBoard would be required to be at the meetings. Each meeting would be one hour, where the students involved would either record or take notes about the dialogue discussed throughout.

Additionally, there is also the opportunity for the creation of a centralized repository website where clubs and teams can document their current community engagement efforts. This would serve as an ever-evolving archive that showcases what each club is already doing with the Worcester community. In addition to this, it would also have the opportunity to identify the local organizations they collaborate with, and outline the type of support that they offer. On this

website, the clubs could describe the activities they participate in, such as volunteering, fundraising, mentorship, etc. In addition to this website being for clubs, it would also be beneficial for the varsity sports teams to use. If the clubs can see the connections that the varsity teams make, it may be more inspiring for clubs to pursue more community engagement. The goal of this repository should be to increase visibility around student-led outreach efforts. By centering this information, the site can help clubs learn from one another while inspiring those clubs who are not yet involved. Additionally, it would provide an easy point of access for Clark University clubs and community members who are interested in partnering with Clark students. Furthermore, this website addresses one of the barriers identified in this project, limited communication and accessibility for both Clark and the Worcester community. Over time, the repository could grow into a valuable resource for tracking involvement, consistency, support, and strengthening Clark University's commitment to community engagement.

Lastly, I believe that there could be a tangible event that could strengthen the relationship between the Clark club sports and the Worcester community, such as a field day. This would happen at least once per semester, when it would be open for Worcester residents, particularly youth. Involved in this field day, there are a lot of moving parts, whether it is a multiple club field day or a singular club, that could also be discussed with community members in the club coalition. The field day could include aspects that club leaders want to integrate, such as soccer skills, or ultimate frisbee scrimmages, but also areas where the Worcester participants want to be included. Throughout this day, local youth can try different sports, engage with Clark athletes, and learn about various physical activities. Providing an opportunity for these sports clubs to showcase their expertise while promoting physical and mental wellness and fun for residents. Although I believe there could be a way to integrate dance clubs into this field day, it may be

more beneficial for those dance teams to have their own day where they host workshops and dance lessons. For the clubs that do participate in these events, it is unrealistic to have every member of the club there, but as long as they have a chunk of members, that would still be extremely beneficial. In both of these scenarios, it is vital to have these events occur every year. Consistency and sustainability is one of the hardest aspects of community engagement. This event would not only increase Clark's visibility within the community but also demonstrate an ongoing commitment to engagement beyond the occasional volunteer efforts.

For this schedule, the field day schedule will be based on three Clark sports clubs participating in this event. The field day will run for approximately three hours and will be designed for two distinct age groups: children ages 5 to 9 and children ages 10 to 14. Where this event will be held is a big topic. Is it held in a neutral site, such as the Boys & Girls of Worcester, or at Clark University's campus at the Dolan Athletic Center? The event will be structured around rotating activity stations, allowing participants to experience multiple sports. There will also be a 20-minute meal break halfway through, and the day will end with a fun collaborative activity for all ages.

The number of youth participants will be determined by the number of club members who attend this field day. If this event has three club sports, the hope would be for around five to ten members of the clubs to participate. When combining these club members' participation, you would have around fifteen to thirty counselors to help coordinate, organize, and lead the activities. The number of club members allows for more youth participants to be involved. Each age range could have around thirty youth sign up to not overwhelm the club members involved. For this schedule, I will include three club sports to help participate in this field day, as an example, soccer, frisbee, and basketball.



The day will begin with a 10-minute welcome/stretching period that includes an icebreaker game to help participants and club members warm up and feel comfortable. From there, the kids will rotate through three sets of activities, each lasting about 25 minutes. These stations will run in parallel for each group, meaning both age groups will be doing activities at the same time, in separate areas. For the younger group, the stations will include working on general skills, fun games relating to the sport, and a last chunk of time dedicated to what the youth participants want to do with that sport. At the same time, for the older group, the activities will be more dynamic and competitive, while still keeping it fun and engaging. This could include working on specific drills, games, or competitions. An area that will be required for these club sports to implement is the importance of teamwork and inclusivity. Those are two areas of athletics that can be overlooked.

After the stations are completed, there will be a 20-minute meal break where the participants can rest and eat together. Food will be provided by the coalition of clubs that helped set this event up. If funding is an issue with this, these clubs can work with the Office of Community Engagement and Volunteering for funding opportunities. The field day will conclude with a 30-minute all-ages collaborative event such as a big kickball game or a teambuilding activity. In this final activity, it will encourage the older kids to lead and support the younger ones, emphasizing the importance of teamwork and inclusivity. This wraps up the day on a high-energy, community-centered activity.

One of the benefits of this field day is that it allows for both the clubs and the youth to focus on their strengths and improve areas that might be less developed. For the clubs, the members structure how their station will run, and the youth get to pick an activity to do within that station toward the end of the time. At the end of the field day, the club members will fill out

a sheet about how the stations went, what worked well, what needed to be improved upon, and how the experience was for them. This will be uploaded by the community liaison to the repository website so that the memory of it will be present. Additionally, the clubs involved will ask the youth participants to fill out a very brief questionnaire about how the experience was for them, and if they want to see anything differently if they were to do this event again.

## **Conclusion**

### **Summary**

The beginning of my project was formed after multiple other ideas. In the first semester of this three-semester capstone, I was planning on taking over a project from the cohort above me. This came from a place of self-doubt. I did not think I could create a project from scratch, so I went with the safe choice. Early in the second semester of this capstone, I decided to switch my project to what I was passionate about. This looked like me hosting four basketball clinics for Worcester youth in the Kneller Gymnasium. Eventually, once I submitted the IRB and got feedback, I was told that I could not continue with this project because I was creating this clinic instead of joining an established one. Near the middle of the second semester of this capstone, my professor suggested the idea of analyzing the relationship between Clark University club sports and dance teams. This intrigued me since I was the president of the Club Basketball team, and I understood our lack of connection with the Worcester community. Through the formation of the project, I investigated two research questions;

1. How actively do Clark University Club Sports & dance teams engage with the Worcester community through events, volunteering, or partnerships?
2. What could Clark club sports and dance teams do to better engage with the Worcester Community? What are the barriers limiting this connection?

In terms of the first question, I concluded that a majority of club sports and dance teams did not have a solid connection to the greater Worcester community. Although some participants indicated that their club did collaborate with other Worcester colleges for games, scrimmages, and events. This is an example of higher ed colleges connecting, but not to the local Worcester community. Additionally, I found that every participant who filled out the survey indicated that they did want to form a connection with the community if they did not already have one.

Transitioning to the second question, I concluded that there were a multitude of ways in which these clubs would like to engage with the Worcester community. Furthermore, barriers were limiting this connection, such as money, resources, outreach, etc. Survey participants also gave a wide range of suggestions that could help bridge this gap in connection. This suggests that there is a need for community outreach, but there are barriers in the way that hinder this relationship.

### **Theoretical Implications**

A theoretical implication that arose from this thesis is how more structured communication methods would help this connection. Building on this idea, one of the main barriers expressed by survey participants was communication from Clark to Worcester residents. Within that model, there was also a concern about communication between clubs. This paper explores the importance of communication in building long-term relationships between Clark clubs and the community.

Another implication that arose from this research is that the idea of who initiates engagement is important. The findings suggest that in most cases, the Clark clubs are initiating any potential collaboration. This can be for multiple reasons, including that Clark clubs have an area of expertise and are willing to connect with the community, along with community members

potentially not having a way to easily approach Clark about this kind of connection. This paper suggests a way for these Clark clubs to collaborate with the Worcester community. In conclusion, this paper can help as a guide to an awareness for Clark clubs about this connection, and potential ways to implement the connection with Worcester residents.

### **Implications for practice**

If I could do this project again, I would make changes to aspects. There are several factors that I was not able to consider when creating this project, mainly due to time constraints. The first factor is the most glaring miss for me, how I was not able to reach out to Worcester schools to see if this was something the residents would be interested in. If I were to do this project over again, I would have reached out to multiple schools to see if their student body would be interested in this. Additionally, in that same realm, I would hope to understand their needs and goals for a relationship like this one. Ideally, this would have been the first step in this process. If this did occur, I would have two different perspectives, one from Clark club members and the other from actual Worcester residents. By doing this, it would take away from the Clark-centered aspect of this project.

As mentioned earlier, time constraints played a significant role in this regret. Between designing and reorganizing the survey, considering its repetitiveness, and ensuring the questions related to my research questions, I found myself chasing perfection. This is something that I struggled with, trying to make everything perfect before the action is put in place, and therefore, not giving myself enough time to evolve with the project. Additionally, family issues arose during this semester that cut off the amount of time that I could put toward this project.

Another aspect I wish had been different in this project is my ability to continue this project beyond its current timeline. The issue of engagement barriers between Clark University

clubs and the Worcester community is ongoing, and while this project may have provided valuable insights, it only reaches the surface. A long-term commitment to understanding and addressing these barriers could lead to more meaningful and sustained partnerships between Clark and the broader Worcester community.

When I think about whether or not this project will continue at Clark once this portion is complete, I unfortunately do not believe it will continue. Without a structure to carry it forward, I find it unlikely that future CYES students will pick up where I left off. However, despite this, I am hopeful that I can continue to work on similar projects in the coming years. Since I will not be going for my Master's at Clark University, I hope to work in a school system to help bridge the gap between schools and the community. The themes that I explored in this research are critical in many different contexts. Whether at Clark or elsewhere, I want to carry forward the lessons learned from this experience and apply them to future projects where I aim to make a meaningful impact.

Even though I am uncertain about whether or not this project will live on, I wanted to describe what the next steps would have been if I could continue. One of the most prominent decisions I would make is to reach out to the Worcester community to see if they even want this collaboration, and what that would look like for them. This would look like me developing a survey similar to the one I created for club sports and dance teams, but it would be tailored to the Worcester community. This survey would hope to reach a broad audience in Worcester, so I would send it to multiple schools and local organizations such as the Worcester YMCA and the Boys & Girls Club of Worcester. Another step that I would love to include in this next process is interviewing members of the Worcester community, along with Clark University club advisors and members. The goal of this would be to gain deeper insight into their experiences and

perceived barriers to community engagement, specifically with Clark University. These steps will help me identify recurring themes, strengthen the authenticity of the project, and ensure a more comprehensive understanding of the current relationship between Clark and the Worcester community.

### **Closing**

Although this project did not live up to my initial expectations, I believe the topics brought up were valuable. The survey process and research revealed key insights into the barriers that Clark club sports and dance teams face when engaging with the Worcester community. While challenges such as time constraints and response rate limited the project's extent, the data collected provided a foundation for understanding the obstacles in the way that hinder community engagement. When reflecting on who this project impacted, I hit a crossroads. I believe that the impact did not reach what I had initially envisioned. The intended impact of this project was to affect Clark University club sports and dance teams, along with the greater Worcester community. Despite this intention, I did not reach that realm of impact. Throughout this project, I have dealt with a lot of complex steps, like my project changing twice in the first two semesters, IRB rejection for my project idea, and more. Even with all of this, I learned a lot about myself in this process. I have never done a project of this magnitude before, and I had doubts about whether I could accomplish it, but I have felt a sense of pride over the progress and evolution that I have made during this entire Praxis sequence.

Community Engagement at Clark University can be a difficult thing to accomplish with ease. I have experienced this firsthand. My initial idea for this praxis project was to create a free basketball program for Worcester youth held at the Kneller courts at Clark. Once I mapped out how the clinic was going to run, I reached out about reserving a one-hour time slot on Saturdays

for a month starting in late October 2024. Since I was attempting to hold this program from late October to late November, it was a busy time in the Kneller Gymnasium with women's volleyball, men's and women's basketball starting up, club sports, and other charity events happening in this space. With that in mind, I tried to find a time in the schedule where this program could run effectively with no interruptions. My intended age group for this project was kids ages 9-13. After a handful of emails back and forth, I realized that there was no time available to hold this clinic. On top of that, there was a requirement to have the participants fill out a minor's on-campus consent form on top of my consent form that was required to do research in this space. Ultimately, I knew that I would not be able to achieve any of this if I did not have permission from the Institutional Review Board at Clark. Furthermore, I sent out my IRB submission. Nearly a month later, I heard back from them, saying that my project was not approved. The main reason for the denial from the IRB was that I could not create a new clinic, but instead, they wanted me to go into a pre-existing program and do research on that. At the time I got this information back, I only had five and a half months left of this praxis sequence, and I had to decide on my next steps. Eventually, to my disdain, I had to pivot and choose a different project, which ended up being this one. Within this process, I have seen and experienced the barriers that are at Clark when it comes to establishing community engagement. Access to facilities is one noticeable barrier that I experienced throughout the trial of my initial project. As the Kneller became less likely as a space to hold this clinic, I switched my location to Crystal Park in Worcester. Due to the uncertainty of the weather, this space was no longer viable. Another barrier to engagement that I saw with this project is communication. This is no one's particular fault, it is more of a structural problem. During this process, I had to make several different email threads with multiple people just to attempt to reserve time in the gym space. In

many ways, the failure of the basketball clinic became part of the research itself. It highlighted just how difficult it can be to move from good intentions to real-world outcomes. The transition that I went through from planning a program to studying the structure of community engagement at Clark reflects the complex nature of community engagement at Clark.

Throughout this project, I began to acknowledge the complexity of the town/gown relationship between Clark University and the surrounding Main South community of Worcester. While many Clark club members express a strong interest in community engagement, the intent does not always lead to meaningful or sustainable relationships. I noticed structural barriers like a lack of time, funding, getting enough members to participate, or even a knowledge of how to begin outreach efforts in a student-led endeavor. Additionally, I learned that not all community engagement efforts are truly reciprocal; they can benefit one direction, often that is toward the university side of the relationship. This then follows under the traditional power dynamic of a university having the power and creating a system or program where the community partner is not centered in this engagement. Therefore, it is crucial in town/gown relationships to center the community partners' needs and goals for the partnership while also focusing on the strengths of the Clark club. I also noticed the unique potential of sport and dance clubs as a powerful bridge between Clark University's campus and the community. With the right support, mindset, and proper training, these groups could play a vital role in fostering mutually beneficial relationships.

Another thing that I realized during this project is how one-sided my understanding of the town/gown relationship still is. Most of what I learned came from the Clark side, from students and club members trying to engage with the community. But I did not get to hear directly from Worcester or Main South residents about what they would want in this connection, if anything. This was in part due to time constraints, lack of access, and a misunderstanding of how to



approach this outreach. Because of this, I was not able to understand what the community wanted, or if they even wanted engagement from Clark. This made me think more critically about whose voices are included in these conversations of community engagement in the town/gown relationship.

Throughout this process, I gained a deeper understanding of how to be more adaptable, adjusting my expectations, revising my survey questions, and being open to new findings. This paper can serve as a resource for those interested in fostering stronger relationships between clubs and the broader community. It highlights factors to consider when implementing initiatives regarding engagement, as well as areas to be improved upon on the Clark side. Overall, while I am appreciative of what this project has accomplished, I recognize the missed opportunities throughout. If given another chance, I would have prioritized community outreach earlier in the process and explored ways to ensure the project's longevity beyond my involvement. Despite these challenges, this experience has created a passion in me for exploring what engagement looks like for university and community partnerships, and I look forward to pursuing similar work in the future.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### Anonymous Survey Questions:

1. What is the name of your club/organization?
2. How many active members does your club have?
3. What is your club's primary focus or mission (e.g., sports, arts, advocacy)?
4. Are you involved in any other clubs on campus?
5. How long have you been a part of the club sport?
6. Is your club involved in any community (e.g., Worcester) outside of Clark?  
☐ Yes  
☐ No
7. If yes, what does that involvement look like? What specific community groups or organizations does your club partner with?
8. If no, would you be open to involving your club in the community outside of Clark? Why or Why not?
9. What ideas or suggestions do you have about engaging with the community outside of Clark?
10. How frequently does your club involve themselves in the Worcester community?  
☐ Weekly  
☐ Monthly  
☐ Once per semester  
☐ Rarely/Never
11. What additional support would help your club strengthen its relationship with the Worcester community?
12. Are there specific projects or ideas your club would like to implement in Worcester if resources were available?

## Appendix B.

Code Book:

	A	B	C	D
1	Sports	IIII IIII	possibly	II
2	Basketball	II	hard	
3	Physical activity	IIII	members together	
4	Practice		engaging with	
5	Play		involved	
6	Expressing ourselves		exist outside Clark	
7	Building community		If they wanted to	
8	Friendship		difficult	
9	golf		could be	
10	other club		wanted	
11	frisbee	III	haven't been able	
12	fun	II	host workshops	
13	better		free lessons	
14	display		wouldn't mind	
15	organized		important	
16	teamwork		increase access	
17	dance/arts	IIII	great opportunity	
18	community		boys and girls club	
19	play frisbee		pick up frisbee	III
20	splash	II	outside of Clark	
21	other		surrounding area	
22	teach		other schools	
23	youth		volunteer	II
24	once a semester		host clinics	
25	don't all participate		splash	
26	opt out		share the field	
27	community work		locals	
28	national leagues		lock them out	
29	Worcester area		reaching out	
30	WPI	II	events	
31	Holy Cross		collaborate	
32	outside Clark		they need	
33	money	III	interest in	
34	engaged		tailor our engagement	
35	community		teaching	
36	advice		performing	
37	businesses		workshops	II
38	included		learn	
39	stronger social presence	II	not sure	
40	communication	III	clinics	IIII
41	coalition		connect with culture	II
42	connection		teach Latin people	
43	other clubs		supply drives	
44	branch out		Worcester youth	
45	outside interest	II	pick up league	
46			lessons	
47			free dance lessons	
48			resources available	