# SHIFTING THE PARADIGM: NEIGHBORLINESS AS A COMMUNITY-IDENTIFIED FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNITY-CAMPUS RELATIONSHIPS

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A Research Report by Carmine Perrotti
with the Neighborly Engagement Research Lab (NERLab)
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PROVIDENCE COLLEGE

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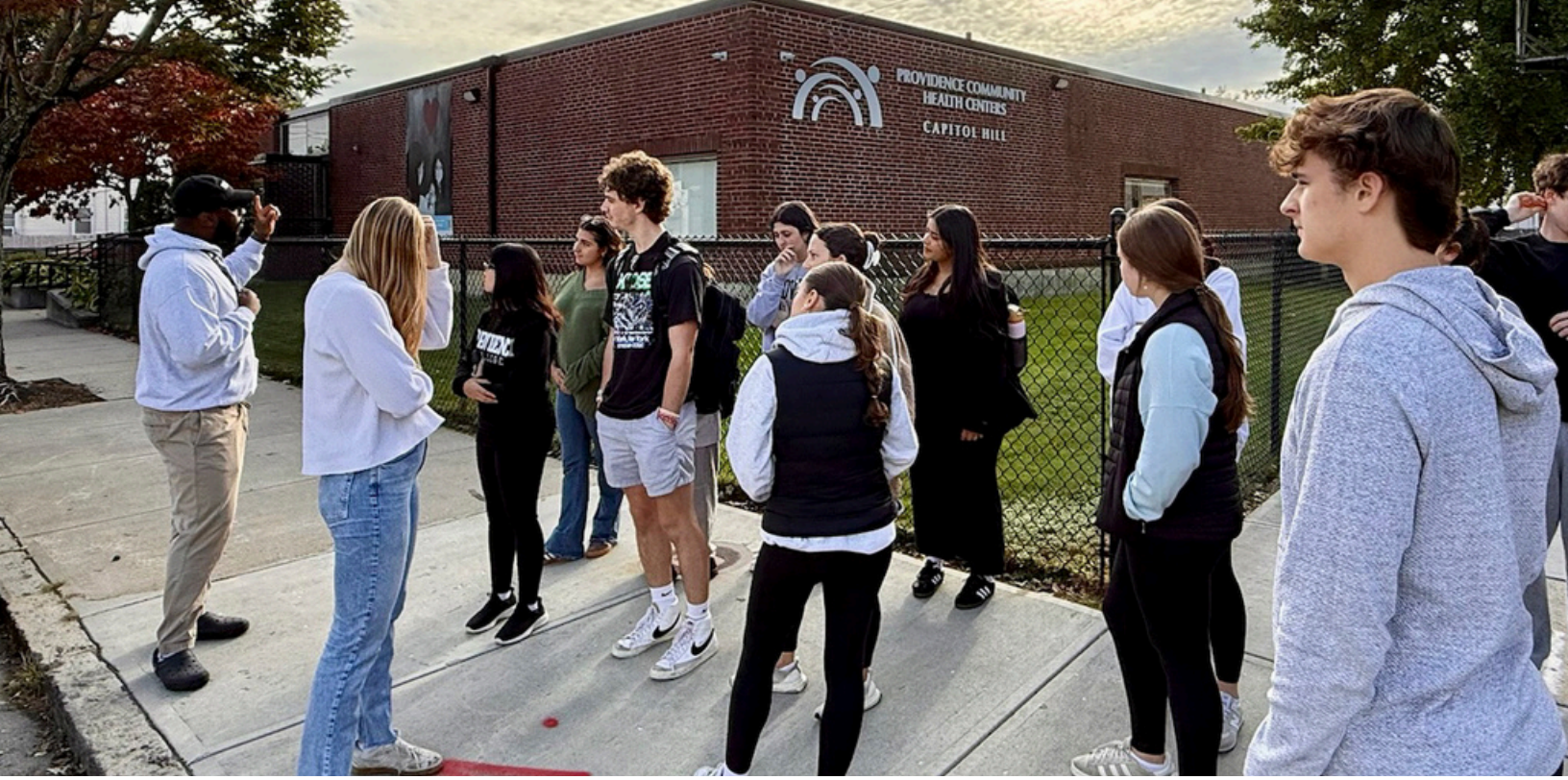


# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Research and writing are not isolated endeavors. Community-engaged scholarship relies on meaningful relationships with community partners and sustained engagement over time. Rather than reinforcing top-down research approaches that distance communities and position higher education stakeholders as the sole “experts,” this work centers lived experience, shared knowledge, and collective learning alongside communities. This research was made possible by the generous time, knowledge, and wisdom of the many community members who collaborated with the NERLab and contributed their perspectives to this study. Thank you.

We are also grateful to those who provided support that strengthened this work and report, including Will Toner and Kaleb Beavers from the Providence College (PC) Writing Center and Student Success Center, who reviewed an early version of the Principles for Neighborly Engagement presented here; Bridget Landry for her editorial support; and Megan Lessard from the PC Phillips Memorial Library for her contributions to the report’s visual design and layout.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY


The NERLab at Providence College is a community-engaged research collaborative grounded in the belief that colleges and universities should engage with the communities in which they are located as *good* neighbors. This report shares findings from the NERLab's first collaborative research study, which explored what it means for institutions of higher education to act as *good* neighbors from the perspectives of Providence residents.

A team of NERLab students and faculty conducted nearly two dozen in-depth interviews with residents, participated in more than 100 hours of community meetings and events, and worked collaboratively with community members to analyze and synthesize findings. This work was guided by the research question, *"What are neighborly principles and practices for higher education community engagement, as defined by residents themselves?"*.

Key findings highlight an important distinction between *being a neighbor* and *acting neighborly*—between geographic proximity and intentional presence and engagement. A set of Principles and Practices for Neighborly Engagement emerged from this distinction, offering a community-identified framework for fostering more equitable community-campus relationships and reimagining the role of higher education within neighborhood life.

The guiding principles include:

- Prioritizing Institutional Commitment and Strategic Community Engagement
- Establishing Shared Leadership and Collaborative Decision-Making
- Building Contextual Knowledge of People, History, and Place
- Leveraging Community and Campus Assets to Promote Access and Inclusion
- Reflecting On and Assessing the Impact of Community-Campus Relationships and Engagement

The practices complement and operationalize the principles, and are presented along a continuum that illustrates how engagement can deepen over time—from formal acknowledgment and institutional commitments, to communication, presence, and local investment, and ultimately toward shared governance and deeper collaboration.

Together, these principles and practices offer adaptable, resident-grounded insights that support more responsive and reciprocal community-campus relationships. Rooted in the perspectives of Providence residents, the framework's value lies not only in identifying what neighborly engagement entails by defining the principles, but also in making those principles actionable. Rather than prescribing a single model to adopt, the framework can function as a reflection tool—an inventory institutions can use to assess their current practices, consider how neighbors experience engagement, and imagine more equitable ways of working together.

The Principles and Practices for Neighborly Engagement provide a practical, actionable foundation for colleges and universities seeking to engage with the neighborhoods that surround their campuses—*as* neighbors, *with* neighbors.

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# GUIDING DEFINITIONS

This section presents the NERLab's current understandings of the following terms and concepts that are commonly used in higher education. These definitions both guide and are shaped by our work, and we offer them as foundational context for this research report.

## Community Engagement

Community engagement can mean different things to different people. In higher education, it is often associated with service-oriented activities and student volunteerism. While service and volunteering are valuable, they represent only one form of engagement; community engagement can also be understood as a broader **approach that connects academic learning with work in and alongside communities**. Accordingly, it can include **the many ways students learn to participate in civic life and contribute to social change**, such as community organizing, activism and advocacy, community-engaged research, philanthropy, social innovation, among others (Crossland et al., 2025).

From a teaching and learning perspective, community engagement has the potential to deepen disciplinary knowledge, build civic skills, and prepare students for life and careers beyond college. It can also strengthen faculty scholarship and relationships between campuses and communities, including through financial partnerships and contributions to local and regional community development. Importantly, community engagement should always center community-identified priorities and contribute to community well-being.

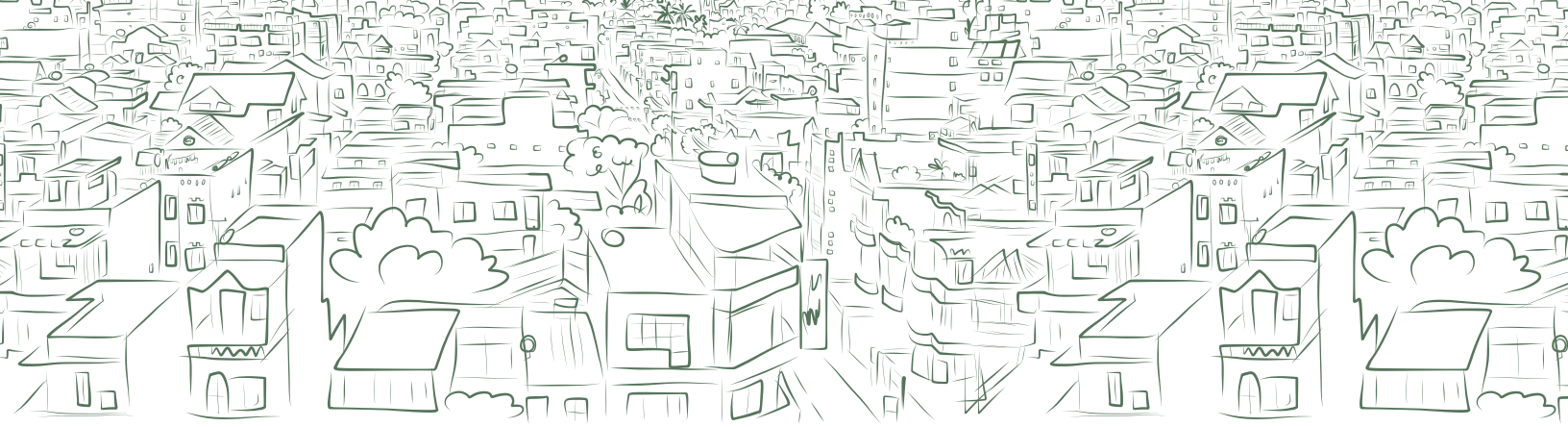
At its core, however, we understand community engagement as **a commitment to collective learning and reciprocity**. It is not defined by individual projects or programs, but by the relationships, trust, and shared knowledge that campuses and communities build together over time. In this sense, **community engagement is a knowledge-building endeavor** that brings academic and community-based knowledge into dialogue—drawing on the values, ethics, and practices of both—to collaboratively address priorities identified by communities themselves. Through this lens, community engagement requires genuine partnerships, values diverse ways of knowing, and seeks reciprocal benefit, including student learning, community development, faculty scholarship, and stronger, more accountable community-campus relationships.

## Community-Campus Relationships and Partnerships

Community-campus relationships and partnerships are central to community engagement. In fact, this work would not exist without community partners. For this reason, **we use the term "community-campus" deliberately to signal a community-centered orientation**, even as "campus-community" remains more common in higher education literature.

In practice, the term "partnership" is often used in the context of structured projects or programs through which campuses and communities work together. These partnerships are frequently associated with *place*s, such as community-based organizations, including nonprofits, K–12 schools, and government agencies with whom community-engaged courses and initiatives often collaborate. We are, however, primarily concerned about the **relationships—with the *people*—that make such partnerships possible**.

Consistent with our understanding of community engagement, community-campus relationships are **rooted in collective learning and community well-being**. They require the intentional, often slow and challenging work of building trust and connection between people and across places, between campus and community. These relationships center shared knowledge and action and foster trustworthiness through open communication, transparency, collaborative decision-making, and mutual respect, creating the conditions for meaningful and accountable partnerships to emerge (Center for Health Justice, n.d.). In this sense, **relationships are both a process and an outcome of community engagement.**



## Mutual Benefit and Reciprocity

Mutual benefit and reciprocity are often assumed to be inherent in higher education community engagement. In practice, however, both require intentional effort and are not guaranteed—especially given power differentials between campuses and communities and higher education's historic tendency to prioritize student learning and institutional goals within community engagement, often at the expense of community-defined impact.

**Mutual benefit signals that everyone involved—students, faculty, staff, and community members—contributes their capabilities and gains something of value from the work.** Reciprocity moves beyond notions of "giving and receiving" to emphasize working as true partners by sharing responsibility, leadership, decision-making, and expertise. Like our broader understanding of community engagement, **reciprocity includes a shared knowledge component, in which engagement priorities, processes, and outcomes are co-created**. We use both terms throughout this report because we believe each is essential to authentic community engagement.

These definitions are supported not only by existing literature (Dostilio et al., 2012; Janke, 2013; Saltmarsh et al., 2009), but also by what we heard from local residents interviewed as part of this research study. Community members expressed that those involved in community-engaged work should contribute and also receive something in return, and they emphasized the importance of having **"a seat at the table"** to help define both the work and its outcomes.

While the Principles and Practices for Neighborly Engagement presented in this report emphasize both mutual benefit and reciprocity, we acknowledge that achieving reciprocal community-campus relationships is difficult in practice due to existing norms and power dynamics within higher education (LaDuke et al., 2025). As one Providence resident put it, **"both sides need to want it."** Another resident echoed this sentiment, emphasizing shared responsibility: **"There has to be a little give and take. Everybody got to give a little bit of themselves. Everybody has to have some skin in the game."**

# INTRODUCTION

Higher education has long claimed a civic mission, reflected today in the wide range of civic and community engagement initiatives on campuses across the U.S. and globally. Yet, colleges and universities have historically been perceived as "ivory towers" up on their hills, disconnected from the neighborhoods and communities around them (Baldwin, 2021)—a perception that has contributed to declining public trust in the sector (Fischer, 2023; see also New America, 2022). This decline has also been fueled by ongoing political attacks on higher education by the current presidential administration. At the same time, trust in other key institutions, including nonprofits and governments, is also declining (Edelman Trust Institute, 2025). In this context, community engagement, while not a standalone solution, offers one way to build more meaningful and trustworthy relationships (Fischer, 2023; White, 2021), especially when institutions see themselves and act as *good* neighbors (Guarasci, 2022; Mitchell, 2022; Perrotti, 2024).

> **"To be a neighbor is to co-exist. To be a good neighbor is to build community."**
>
> -Elmhurst resident

This report presents the NERLab's first collaborative research study to explore what it means for institutions of higher education to act as *good* neighbors. Grounded in local residents' lived experiences in the Providence College (PC) context, the study aimed to better understand how colleges and universities are perceived in neighborhood contexts and what more meaningful, trustworthy engagement can look like in practice.

This report shares findings from a collaborative study guided by the research question, *"What are neighborly principles and practices for higher education community engagement, as defined by residents themselves?"*. Brief contextual background, informed by academic literature and the perspectives of community members engaged throughout the research process, is provided, followed by an overview of the research methods. The report then presents a set of Principles and Practices for Neighborly Engagement. Together, these Principles and Practices offer a community-identified framework for strengthening more equitable community-campus relationships and reimagining the role of higher education within neighborhood life.

The broader value of this work is its emphasis on both *what* neighborly engagement can look like and *how* it can be practiced in concrete ways, as identified by residents. By naming levels of engagement, and the strategies and tools that support them, the framework moves beyond abstract commitments and offers more than a one-size-fits-all model from the PC context. Rather it can serve as a practical reflection and assessment tool—an inventory that institutions, in partnership with community members, can use to ask:

**How are we showing up as good neighbors today?**

**What more could be possible through deeper, more reciprocal engagement?**

**What might neighborly engagement look like within our specific institutional and community contexts?**

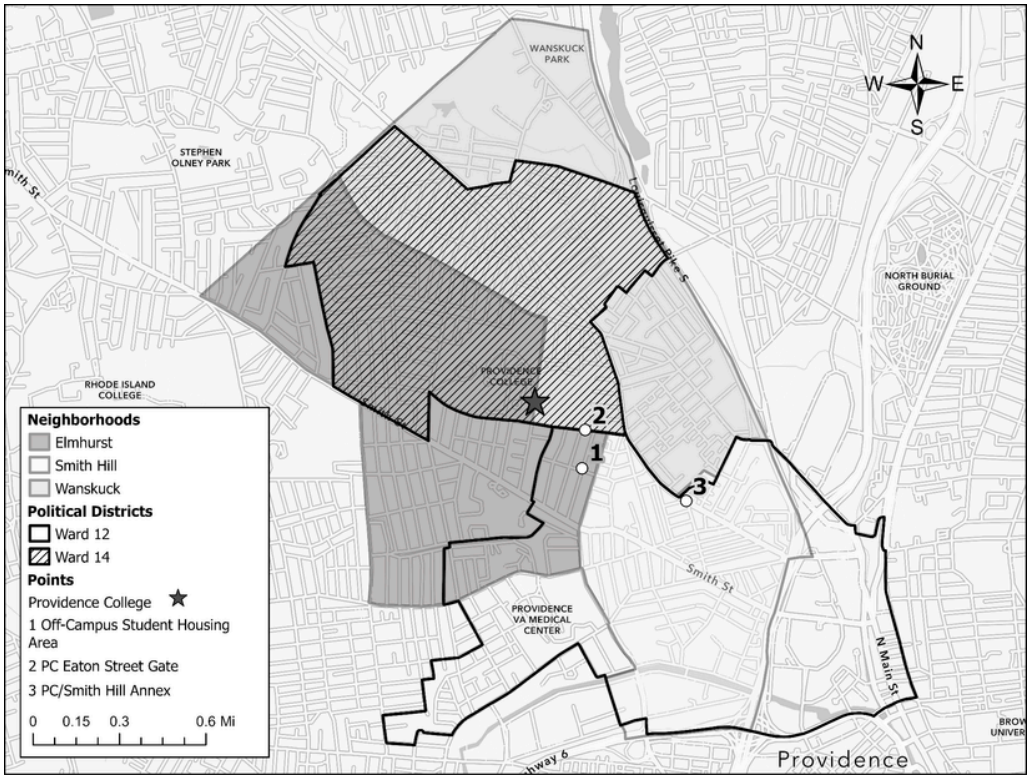
# ABOUT THE NERLAB AT PROVIDENCE COLLEGE

This research report was developed by the NERLab at PC. Founded and directed by Dr. Carmine Perrotti in 2023,

**the NERLab is a community-engaged research collaborative grounded in a simple but powerful idea: colleges and universities should engage with the neighborhoods and communities where they are located as good neighbors.**

Notably, the concept of "neighborly engagement" is central to PC's institutional mission and values. A small liberal arts, Catholic, and Dominican institution in Providence, Rhode Island, PC is guided by a mission of serving "God and neighbor." The College, a predominantly white institution, is situated within the diverse neighborhoods of Elmhurst, Smith Hill, and Wanskuck (see Figure 1).[1] These three neighborhoods reflect differences in racial diversity and economic resources: Elmhurst is majority white and higher income, and Smith Hill and Wanskuck are predominantly Hispanic and Black with lower median household incomes (City of Providence, 2020). While PC engages with all three neighborhoods through various initiatives, it has developed a more intentional and sustained partnership with Smith Hill, a relationship that dates back to 1992 (Smith Hill Community Development Corporation, 1992-2025; see also Morton & Bergabauer, 2015).

## Figure 1: Providence College in Context: A Campus Among Neighborhoods




*Note. PC is situated at the intersection of several overlapping geographic and political boundaries. As shown in the map, the campus spans the Elmhurst and Wanskuck neighborhoods, with Smith Hill abutting its southeastern edge. Politically, PC lies primarily within Ward 14, while portions of its footprint extend into Ward 12 and sit just beyond Ward 5 (not shown). Together, these overlapping boundaries highlight the campus's location within the surrounding residential neighborhoods.*

1 Figure 1 was created with support from U-Spatial, Office of Research and Innovation at the University of Minnesota using the following sources: University of Rhode Island, Esri, Garmin, TomTom, SafeGraph, GeoTechnologies, Inc, METI/NASA, USGS, EPA, NPS, US Census Bureau, USDA, USFWS, Esri Community Maps Contributors.

The NERLab operates through PC's Department of Public and Community Service Studies, an academic division within the School of Arts and Sciences. PC credits itself as the first institution in the nation to offer a bachelor's degree in Public and Community Service Studies, and the NERLab emerged from this longstanding institutional commitment to and culture of community-engaged scholarship. Through this institutional context, the NERLab —a modest, community-centered effort at PC—seeks to support community-identified priorities, foster shared learning, and contribute to more equitable relationships between the College and the three neighborhoods it calls home.

The NERLab is structured around a collaborative research model that centers collective inquiry and shared learning. NERLab's Undergraduate Research Fellows participate in weekly team meetings and workshops focused on skill development, reflection, and collaborative problem-solving. Fellows receive training in community-engaged research methods, with emphasis on research ethics, responsibility, and accountability to community partners. Research is conducted through team-based inquiry, with Fellows working together on data collection, analysis, and dissemination through presentations, writing projects, and other forms of public scholarship.

Community accountability and co-creation are central to the NERLab's work. Research projects are developed in partnership with community members; Fellows regularly participate in local community meetings and events as a way to listen, build relationships, and remain accountable to neighborhood priorities. At the same time, the Lab prioritizes student growth and leadership: projects align with Fellows' academic and career interests, and students take on meaningful leadership roles that support both the research process and the collective functioning of the Lab. In this context,

**the NERLab is less about producing a specific product or programmatic outcome and more about the ongoing process of building neighborly relationships, both within the lab and in the broader community.**

The following section provides brief contextual background for this research study, drawing on relevant academic literature and the perspectives of community members engaged throughout the research process.

# BACKGROUND

This study builds on Dr. Carmine Perrotti's (2021; 2024) prior research on higher education's role, responsibilities, and potential as a neighbor to surrounding communities. In that earlier work, Smith Hill residents repeatedly identified power imbalances as shaping community-campus relationships. Across interviews, residents emphasized the need for institutions to recognize themselves as part of—and to act in authentic relationship with—the neighborhoods in which they are located and engage in community-based work.

A number of residents referenced a moment that resonated deeply with them: a statement made by the former PC President at the 2012 opening of the PC/Smith Hill Annex. (The Annex is a 1,000 square foot space that the College has rented at 231 Douglas Avenue for more than a decade to foster community-campus collaborations.) In his remarks at the Annex opening, President Shanley stated:

**"In addition to being in a city, we're in a neighborhood and this is our neighborhood. . . This is our local neighborhood and this place represents our anchoring in this neighborhood . . . and it's long term" (PC, 2012, 2:23).**

For many residents, this was the first time they had heard a College leader explicitly acknowledge the institution as part of the neighborhood. Their reflections on this moment—and their calls for institutions to live up to it—helped shape the foundation of NERLab and this study. Put simply, residents urged institutions to understand themselves as part of, rather than separate from, the neighborhoods in which they are located—to act as *good* neighbors.

## Why Campuses Should Care About Communities—and Vice Versa

While community engagement offers a pathway for building more meaningful and trustworthy relationships between institutions and communities (Fischer, 2023; White, 2021), higher education nevertheless has a reputation for not caring about local communities (White, 2012). This perspective surfaced during this study, including in personal correspondence with a campus administrator. Paraphrased here, the administrator questioned why local residents would be concerned with campus activities, suggesting that community attention to the institution distracts from challenges within their own neighborhoods. In response to such perspectives and the lack of public confidence in higher education, as discussed in the introduction of this report, scholars have responded with the following:

**College's fortunes can rise and fall with the health of the neighborhoods around them. High crime rates, run-down housing, and poor public schools can hamper institution's ability to recruit top-flight faculty members. Families, too, may be hesitant to send their children to study in a place where they don't feel safe. And as an enrollment cliff caused by declining birth rates looms, colleges need to do more to nurture and widen their pipelines of prospective students, including those next door. (Fischer, 2023, p. 5)**

In other words, a college's prosperity is tied to the social, cultural, and economic well-being of the place it is located (White, 2021), and recognizing this interdependent relationship between a college and its place is a critical strategic priority.

During interviews for this study, residents were explicitly asked to reflect on why campus activities matter to them. One Elmhurst resident commented on the abovementioned interdependent relationship between campus and community:

**Neighborhoods change. . . So it's worth PC's while. I mean, if you see the cement falling out of the foundation of a house—if you wanna preserve the house—you fill in the cement, or someday that foundation is gonna collapse. It's worth their while. If water is getting into your basement, are you gonna let it rot out everything, or are you going to fix the foundation and keep it sturdy?**

While residents frequently framed the College's investments in surrounding neighborhoods in terms of shared benefit, others extended that logic further, emphasizing a moral responsibility rooted in institutional mission and values. As a Catholic and Dominican college with a mission of serving "God and neighbor," one Smith Hill resident, in particular, stressed the moral responsibility PC has to its neighbors. Reflecting on how community engagement should align with institutional mission and values, the resident drew on Pope Leo XIV's (2025) apostolic letter, *Dilexi Te*, to emphasize that community engagement should be rooted in presence, humility, and shared responsibility for collective well-being—an ethic that aligns closely with what many residents described as being a *good* neighbor, as presented throughout this report.

On a more practical level, other community members interviewed shared that what happens on campus—ranging from planning and development to event parking and off-campus student housing—affects them directly. Another Elmhurst resident said that they care because, **"...things spill out in the neighborhood."** Because of that, another Smith Hill resident exclaimed,

**"It affects me. . . I care because it falls into my neighborhood."**

It is noteworthy to mention that while this research is focused on the role of institutions acting more neighborly from the perspectives of local residents, one Elmhurst resident stressed that, **"it's not 'us' versus 'them.'"** Reflecting on community-campus relationships, the same resident reflected:

**There's just nuance all the time. It ebbs, and it flows. Sometimes it goes awesome. Sometimes it's really shitty. . . [It's] a beautiful work in progress. One of the things that I think is extremely important for the College to understand is that the goal is to never make them the bad guy. It's just to make them a better neighbor.**

Several residents reiterated this sense of reciprocity in community-campus relationships by emphasizing that **"everyone has a role to play."** One Smith Hill resident noted, **"It's not just [the College's] fault because they sit up on the hill. We sit in the valley and we never interact. You gotta meet halfway."** Another Smith Hill resident echoed that

**campuses and communities "have to keep coming back to the table. Keep listening. Keep trying. Keep adjusting. Because the needs change, the people change, and if we want to be good neighbors, we have to change too."**

This background and these resident reflections set the foundation for the collaborative research approach outlined in the next section.

# METHODS

This study aimed to better understand the role of institutions in acting more neighborly from the perspectives of local residents and was guided by the research question:

## "What are neighborly principles and practices for higher education community engagement, as defined by residents themselves?"

Together, the NERLab team of students and faculty conducted nearly **two dozen in-depth interviews** with residents in Elmhurst, Smith Hill, and Wanskuck—along with numerous informal conversations—driven by the impetus to explore PC's role as a neighbor in its communities (Seidman, 2019). The team also participated in **more than 100 hours of community meetings and events**—taking notes (when appropriate)—to listen and learn how residents talked about PC and their expectations of the institution in the broader context of neighborhood and community life (Green, 2014). Meetings regularly attended included: the Smith Hill Partners' Initiative; Ward 5, Ward 12, and Ward 14 Community Meetings; and Ward 14 Student Housing Task Force meetings. Interviews were transcribed and meeting notes were typed.

The NERLab team then analyzed all data for recurring patterns and established themes (Seidman, 2019), guided by questions such as:

- How do residents describe what it means to be a "good neighbor" in their community?
- How do residents experience PC's presence in their neighborhood?
- How do residents understand PC's role and responsibilities, including its current contributions and challenges?
- What possibilities do residents identify for future engagement and relationship building?
- What might being a "good neighbor" look like in practice for higher education community engagement, as described by residents?

Community members also played an active role in the collaborative research process. Key community partners assisted with interview recruitment and remained engaged throughout the iterative stages of data collection and analysis. As key themes and findings emerged, they were shared through campus and community meetings and events, and written drafts were disseminated for feedback. Community members were invited to reflect on the findings, ask questions, and share additional insights, all of which strengthened and informed the collaborative analysis. This work was guided by the NERLab's commitment to ethical, community-engaged scholarship, with an emphasis on building trust, protecting confidentiality, respecting and compensating participants for their time and knowledge, and remaining accountable to community members throughout the research process.

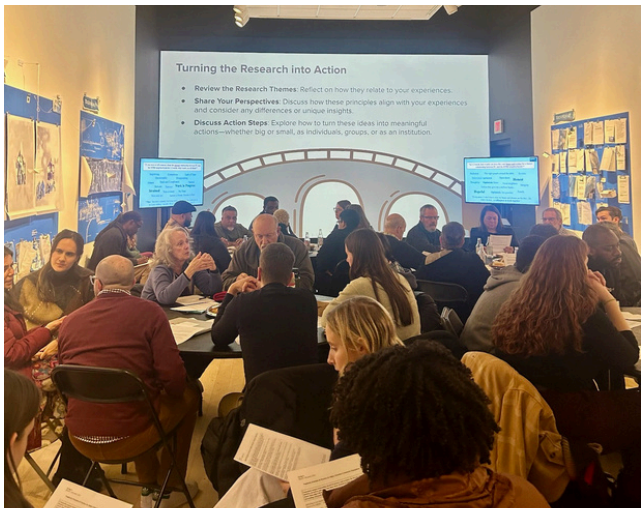
From this work, the NERLab developed a set of Principles and Practices for Neighborly Engagement, offering a community-identified framework for fostering more equitable community-campus relationships and reimagining the role of higher education within neighborhood life. These principles and practices were synthesized directly from the data generated by the interviews and sustained engagement between the NERLab and local community members throughout the research process. Together, they offer insight grounded in residents' lived experiences that can be adapted across diverse institutional and community contexts to support more responsive and reciprocal community-campus relationships and engagement.

## Considering "the Community"

For some, especially those in the field of higher education civic and community engagement, the findings presented in this report might resemble U.S. anchor and place-based engagement models (see Garton, 2021; Yamamura & Koth, 2018). However, NERLab's work is significant because it directly engages residents in the research process. Despite community engagement not being possible without "the community," research has often overlooked local residents and have relied instead on nonprofits as a proxy for community. While higher education community engagement most frequently partners with nonprofits and other community-based organizations, nonprofits alone do not necessarily represent "the community" (Perrotti, 2024). NERLab's intention is not to bypass nonprofits, as they play an important role in higher education community engagement and community building (Morton & Bergabauer, 2015). Rather, as one Smith Hill resident interviewed for this study put it, higher education's community-engaged work must consider the multiple **"layers"** of communities, including residents who are often most impacted—in both positive and negative ways—by campus decisions, day-to-day activities, and community engagement efforts.

The following presents the findings—Principles and Practices for Neighborly Engagement—as defined by residents themselves.






# DEFINING WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A GOOD NEIGHBOR IN HIGHER EDUCATION: COMMUNITY-IDENTIFIED PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES

**"The first thing I did when I read your [research information sheet] was I looked up 'neighbor,' and then I looked up 'neighborly,' and they are two different things. . . Well, a neighbor, let's see—Jordan, Israel, Syria, Gaza—they're all neighbors, but are they neighborly?"**

-Smith Hill resident

**"Neighbor but not neighborly. There's a difference. . . There's a difference between co-existing in the same geographical place but being neighborly is different. It's a relationship."**

-Smith Hill resident

We were particularly struck by the reflections, as articulated in the above resident quotes, for their clarity in distilling **a central theme that emerged from our research: the important distinction between being a "neighbor" and acting "neighborly"—between mere geographic proximity and intentional presence and engagement.**

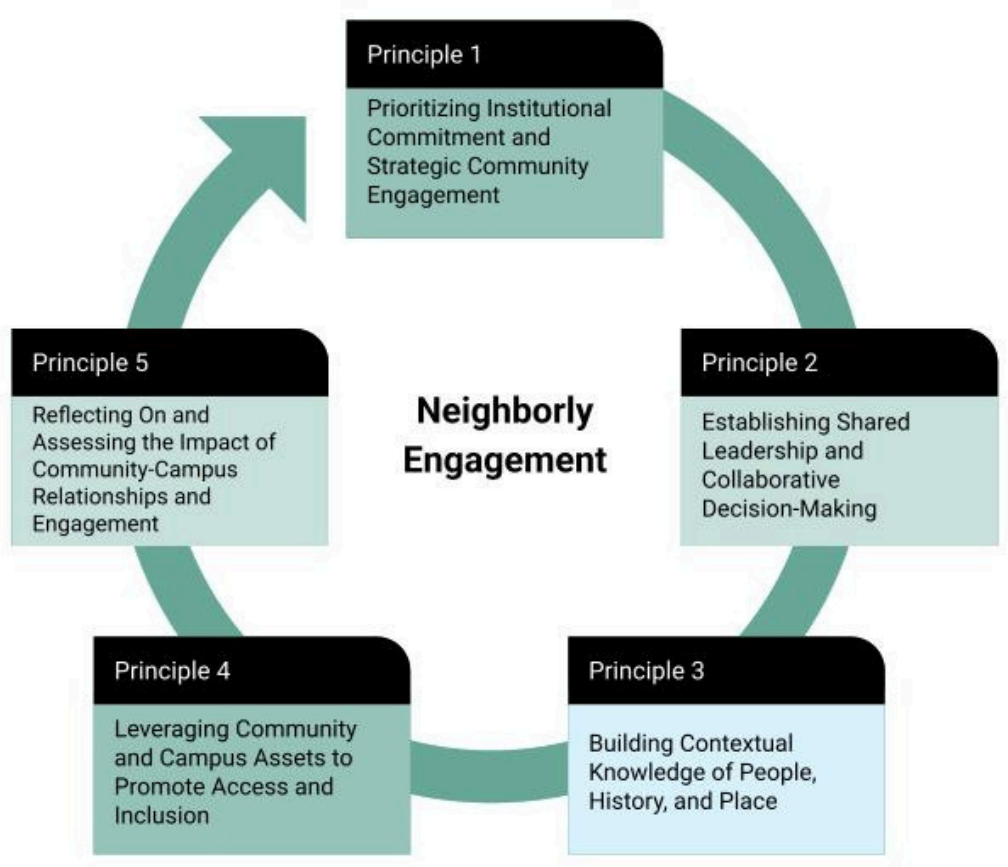
Higher education institutions are not separate from the neighborhoods and communities where they are located. Rather, they are members of shared places, histories, and futures. Acting as *good* neighbors—or acting *neighborly*—requires moving beyond geographic proximity and transactional service, charity, or helping commitments (being *a* neighbor) toward a more proactive presence, authentic engagement, and mutually beneficial, reciprocal relationships (being a *good* neighbor and acting *neighborly*).

This work demands dismantling the artificial boundaries that higher education institutions have historically erected between campus and community, while also acknowledging and working through the inevitable tensions that arise in these relationships (Campus Compact, 2025). Doing so requires a commitment to mutual respect grounded in listening, dialogue, and shared accountability—practices that help cultivate trustworthiness and deepen relational responsibility over time (Center for Health Justice, n.d.). Through this ongoing process of acting in *neighborly* ways, *neighborliness* emerges as a guiding orientation, one that positions higher education as a more integrated, engaged, and socially responsible public good.

## Principles for Neighborly Engagement

The following Principles for Neighborly Engagement offer a framework for cultivating neighborliness across community-campus relationships within higher education community engagement, as defined by local residents (Figure 2). While the principles reflect a developmental arc—from establishing shared commitments and supportive structures, to deepening place-based understanding, mobilizing campus and community assets, and engaging in ongoing learning—they are not intended to be linear or prescriptive. Rather, they are offered as **a flexible set of principles that institutions and community partners can adapt and implement based on their shared goals, contexts, and stages of engagement.**

## Figure 2: Principles for Neighborly Engagement




## Principle 1: Prioritizing Institutional Commitment and Strategic Community Engagement

This first principle establishes the foundational institutional commitments necessary for fostering neighborly engagement.

- Acknowledges that campus decisions shape the quality of life of neighboring communities—intentionally or unintentionally, and in both positive and negative ways—and develops a responsive engagement strategy aligned with the institution's mission, values, and strategic plan.
- Invests in a shared, campus-wide understanding and commitment to community engagement, beginning with visible leadership from the Chancellor, President, Provost, and other key institutional decision-makers.
- Establishes and implements a coordinated, campus-wide strategy for community engagement that has clear buy-in across often siloed campus units and is developed in partnership with community members.
- Recognizes and elevates community engagement as a strategic priority across multiple areas of institutional work, including community relations, student learning, faculty research and scholarship, and local community and economic development.
- Builds and sustains internal infrastructure for coordination, communication, and shared feedback loops across campus units, minimizing duplication of efforts and ensuring that community-engaged policies and practices remain aligned with community-identified priorities.
- Commits to adaptability by acknowledging that community priorities evolve; creates flexible processes that allow the institution to respond to changing needs without waiting for lengthy strategic planning cycles.
- Strives for mutual benefit by directly addressing institutional power dynamics and investing in the conditions necessary for reciprocity, recognizing that reciprocal relationships are not automatic but require intentional and continuous effort.

## Principle 2: Establishing Shared Leadership and Collaborative Decision-Making

Building on the commitments established in Principle 1, Principle 2 focuses on the importance of shared leadership and collaborative decision-making between campus and community.

- Prioritizes both "top-down" and "bottom-up" leadership from campus and community partners, building clear structures that support direct, transparent, and consistent communication across groups.
- Acknowledges that leadership decisions and community engagement efforts can create both intended benefits and unintended harm, and therefore centers inclusive, participatory decision-making that elevates the voices of those most affected. This process is supported by continuous communication and shared learning with community members.
- Recognizes that campuses and communities often have both shared and distinct goals; ensures that collaborations are not extractive but instead honor each partner's contributions and build capacity in ways that community members identify as valuable.
- Commits to a sustained, proactive campus presence in the community beyond moments of convenience and crisis. Emphasizes the responsibility of campus leaders across all levels of the institution to "show up" and be present, at least periodically, to build trust and humanize the institution and its leadership.
- Recognizes that community-campus relationships are dynamic and complex, that intentions and impact do not always align, and that power imbalances can inhibit meaningful engagement. Commits to sustained presence and accountability by working through tensions, addressing potential harm, learning from mistakes and failure, and ending specific initiatives when needed—without severing relationships—to maintain trust and respect.
- Ensures engagement does not fall into the sole hands of individually engaged students, faculty, staff, or formal community leaders, but is instead embedded within the culture, fabric, and operations of the institution.

- Values community members as both knowledge holders and knowledge producers, prioritizing their sustained representation and unique expertise in the ongoing leadership, design, and direction of community engagement strategies and initiatives.

## Principle 3: Building Contextual Knowledge of People, History, and Place

This principle strengthens the framework by grounding engagement in the historical, cultural, and place-based contexts that shape community-campus relationships.

- Recognizes that both community and campus histories and contexts shape effective engagement, including individual and institutional positionality as well as systemic barriers and biases. Acknowledges that while many institutional actors may be transient or not originally from the community, longstanding community members hold essential knowledge, wisdom, and cultural capital that must be respected and intentionally uplifted to build trust and foster neighborly relationships.
- Listens to, learns from, and engages with the multiple "layers" of the community—not only formal community leaders and established organizations, but also local residents—to avoid treating communities as monolithic or defined solely by nonprofit partners.
- Incorporates an understanding of place into engagement strategies and practices,[2] integrating diverse ways of knowing and including forms of community cultural wealth that extend beyond traditional academic values.[3] This includes educating students to act as both institutional representatives and *good* neighbors.
- Maintains continuity by committing to ongoing recognition of community and campus contexts, adapting to shifts in local priorities, and ensuring sustained, accountable collaboration and engagement over time.

## Principle 4: Leveraging Community and Campus Assets to Promote Access and Inclusion

After establishing a shared understanding of context, this principle turns toward mobilizing the assets of both campus and community.

- Supports existing community strengths, skills, and resources (assets) as foundations for community building and public problem solving, rather than framing communities in terms of deficits, needs, or problems.[4]
- Recognizes that campuses also have assets to leverage—not only intellectual, but also physical (e.g., campus spaces and services) and financial assets—and promotes transparency about when and how these assets can be accessed and shared with community members.
- Acknowledges that meaningful relationships and engagement occur both on and off campus by intentionally creating regular "back and forth" opportunities that welcome community members into campus spaces—and vice versa; values both organized engagement and everyday neighborly interactions grounded in a consistent campus presence in the neighborhood.
- Prioritizes local youth by fostering early exposure, a sense of belonging, and clear educational pathways that position colleges as accessible and welcoming.
- Reduces institutional barriers to community access by ensuring that requirements, such as liability waivers, insurance, and other administrative processes, are community-centric, transparent, and accessible to diverse participants.

2 Bachin, R. F., & Howard, A. L. (Eds.). (2023). *Engaging place, engaging practices: Urban history and campus-community partnerships.* Temple University Press.
3 Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 8*(1), 69-91. https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006
4 Kretzman, J. P., & McKnight, J. L. (1993). *Building communities from the inside out: A path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets*. ACTA Publications.; Russell, C., & McKnight, J. (2022). *The connected community: Discovering the health, wealth, and power of neighborhoods*. Berrett-Koehler.

## Principle 5: Reflecting On and Assessing the Impact of Community-Campus Relationships and Engagement

Finally, this principle emphasizes learning, accountability, and continuous improvement as essential practices of neighborly engagement.

- Recognizes the importance of assessing student learning alongside the strength and quality of community-campus relationships and the broader impacts of engagement efforts.
- Acknowledges that community engagement does not inherently produce positive outcomes and may result in both benefit and harm. Involves community members, especially those most affected by institutional decisions and engagement initiatives, in meaningful aspects of the assessment process, including design, implementation, interpretation, and/or dissemination of results, while embedding an ongoing reflection practice.
- Adopts assessment approaches that move beyond "one-size-fits-all" models and spreadsheet metrics, such as "service hours to dollars," by prioritizing relationships, meaningful conversations, and storytelling as effective tools for understanding community experience, impact, and reflection.
- Demonstrates a commitment to ongoing, consistent conversations with community members and builds the capacity to learn from mistakes and failure by pivoting and adapting engagement efforts to better align with community-identified priorities and lessons learned.
- Understands learning and impact as part of a larger ecosystem of partnerships across campus units, local institutions, and communities, and shares data and learning (with consent) with relevant stakeholders to support more coordinated and collaborative engagement.

Taken together, these principles are a synthesized reflection of how community members described neighborly engagement. Close attention was also paid to the specific actions that community members identified as being neighborly in practice; these practices are shared in the next section.

## Practices for Neighborly Engagement

The following continuum of practices for neighborly engagement (Figure 3) was mapped in collaboration with community members. This continuum illustrates how practices evolve—from formal acknowledgment and institutional commitments, to communication, presence, and local investments, and ultimately toward shared governance and deeper collaborations.

The use of a continuum is intentional. These practices, like the principles, reflect a developmental progression in which relationships deepen over time in quality, shared commitment, mutual benefit, and reciprocity. Rather than prescribing discrete categories, the continuum signals movement—from being a neighbor toward becoming a *good* neighbor and *acting* neighborly—while also recognizing that practices do not necessarily unfold in fixed or linear stages. This framing **allows institutions and communities to identify, adapt, and implement practices responsive to their shared goals, contexts, and stages of engagement.**

## Figure 3: A Continuum of Engagement Practices: From Being a Neighbor to Acting Neighborly

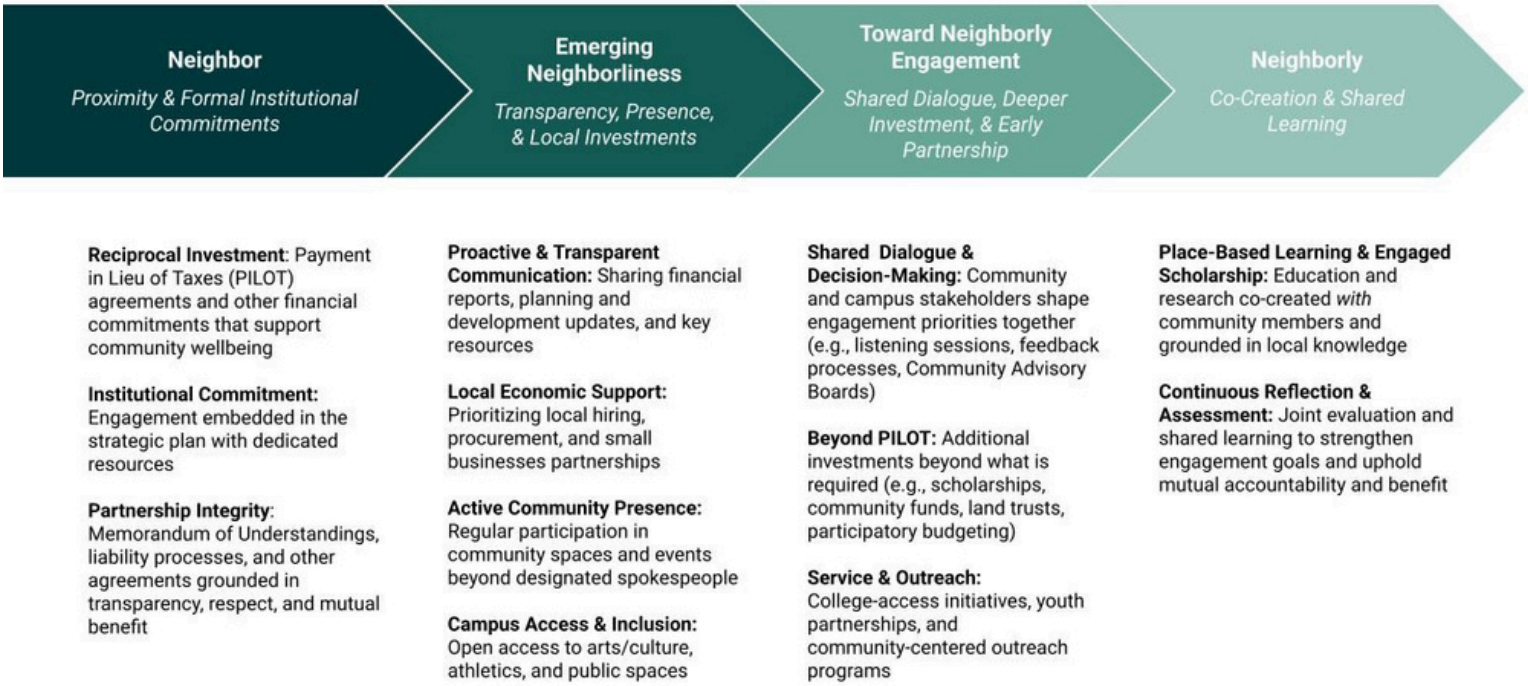
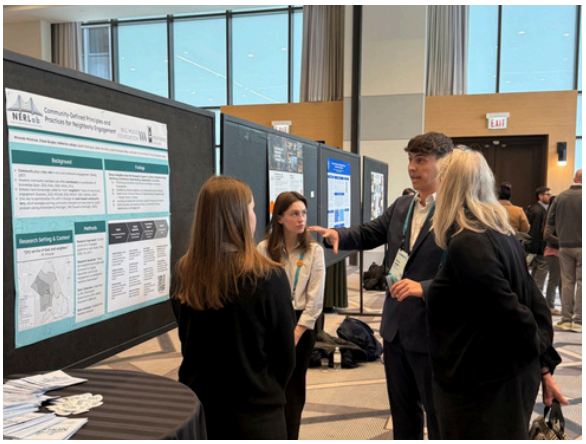



Figure 3 was developed through dialogue with residents, and reflects how community members in **our** local context described and experienced neighborly engagement; it is not intended to be interpreted as exhaustive or static. Rather, it offers a conceptual sketch of what neighborly engagement *can* look like in practice, while acknowledging that practices will vary across institution types, geographic locations, and the distinct histories and conditions that shape community-campus relationships. **This continuum is designed to be adaptive and generative—to serve as a starting point for conversations in other institutional and community contexts, where practices may be defined, enacted, and reflected in different ways.**

As one Elmhurst resident reflected, **"I'm sure there are other institutions in the world that have figured some things out, and we can take bits and pieces from each other, and try to come to some conclusion."**



# SIGNIFICANCE

Despite being a "single case" rooted in Providence, we believe the Principles and Practices for Neighborly Engagement offered above are relevant and adaptable across various institutional and community contexts (Yin, 2017). The work of building neighborly engagement is much less about a final product or programmatic outcome; instead, it is an ongoing, relational process, much like the NERLab itself. As one Smith Hill resident explained, **"It's the steps that you take to have a relationship."** The same resident continued:

> **You can't just come into my community, come to the library [for community service or a community meeting] and say, "We're your neighbors." It doesn't work that way. . . A good neighbor is someone you have somewhat of a relationship with. You start out small. She came to my house. I went to her house. We had meals. We chatted. We bitched and moaned and talked. And then it grew.**
>
> -Smith Hill resident

Without investing in such relationships, another Smith Hill resident, reflecting on institutional power dynamics, said, **"One bad situation can mess it up for the next five years."** Thus, as an Elmhurst resident shared earlier, it is worth investing in the **"foundation"** of community-campus relationships. As a third Smith Hill resident noted, building that foundation does not require liking one another so much as respecting one another and the community, and being willing to work together toward a shared goal.

Together with community members' reflections presented throughout this report, we believe the Principles and Practices for Neighborly Engagement provide a strong and actionable framework for colleges and universities to start the work of engaging with the neighborhoods and communities that surround their campuses.

# FUTURE RESEARCH

While the research presented in this report centers residents' perspectives on strengthening institutional commitment to acting in neighborly ways, residents also emphasized that students are neighbors, too. Throughout the interviews, community members expressed interest in better understanding how students experience the local neighborhoods in our context and how they perceive both their own and the College's relationship with and responsibility to these communities, given that students live in the area for most of the year. In response, the NERLab is developing a follow-up research study with an aim of better understanding student perceptions of the surrounding neighborhoods, anticipated to launch in Fall 2026. Future findings from this research, together with the insights shared in this report, will support the continued development of strengthening community-campus relationships toward neighborliness.

# CONCLUSION

Framing institutions as neighbors is subversive in its simplicity, yet it fundamentally challenges the aims, structures, and power dynamics that have long shaped campus-community relationships. Partnering *as* and *with* neighbors will require campuses to be creative and collaborative, adaptable and flexible—to show up not only *in*, but *with* and *alongside* community members to build capacity and to leverage institutional resources where community members say they are most needed. And while the Principles and Practices for Neighborly Engagement presented in this report serve as a foundation, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to neighborliness or to working with communities; neighborly engagement will necessarily take different forms across diverse institutional and community contexts. Engaging in and sustaining these conversations within your own local context is therefore imperative.

While the NERLab represents a modest effort within both our institution and the broader field of higher education community engagement, we remain committed to challenging these dynamics and advocating for equitable, sustained collaborations between our campus and the local community—even in small, everyday ways. As we enter the next phase of this work, the NERLab will continue to advance collaborative research that centers community expertise, strengthens sustainable relationships, and equips campus stakeholders with the perspectives and tools needed to engage thoughtfully and responsibly with the communities they are part of—*as* neighbors, *with* neighbors.

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