Critical Connectors: Libraries Developing Community-Engaged Research Partnerships

ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

Academic libraries can serve as critical campus and community connectors, developing sustainable collaborative models and lasting partnerships by responding to community information needs with library and university resources. Librarians can help break down silos and address systemic injustice in local communities through innovative outreach, community engagement, and curricular integration of critical information literacy. In this case study, a Business & Entrepreneurship Librarian and an Assistant Professor of Business Communication will detail a class project they developed in partnership with a local entrepreneur to support the success of a local Black-owned business, help address the racial wealth gap, and provide a valuable, engaged learning experience for undergraduate students.

KEYWORDS

The year 2020 brought not only the global COVID-19 pandemic but a national reckoning with the centuries-long racism pandemic in the United States—a reckoning brought about by a pattern of deadly police violence against Black citizens made increasingly visible through social media. In response, a cascade of institutions making a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and anti-racism developed. In July 2020, four months after Breonna Taylor was murdered in her home by Louisville police, the University of Louisville President made a commitment to become "the premier anti-racist metropolitan research university in the country" (Kelso 2020). This was an invitation for university faculty to align their research and teaching with this anti-racist mission. The University of Louisville had made a prior commitment to being a community-engaged anchor institution, supporting economic development in the local community. The Business & Entrepreneurship Librarian at the University of Louisville sought to connect these anti-racist and anchor-institution missions through the work of the University Libraries.

Silos are known barriers to success throughout institutions, including libraries, universities, and entrepreneurial ecosystems. Silos lead to "long-standing environmental, structural, and cultural challenges" which are "inherent to higher education institutions" and impede organizational change (Lloyd 2016, 607). Bridging common interests, building sustainable collaborative models, and developing lasting partnerships remain a challenge. Kirwan et al. (2022) argue that silos can lead to inefficiencies and duplication of

effort in curriculum development and what is "desperately needed are efficient and effective approaches to developing interdisciplinary curricula" (375). To generate interdisciplinary collaboration, Lloyd (2016) advocates for "boundary-spanning personnel" who are "responsible for a range of cross-boundary relationships" and "possess knowledge and skill to understand the contextual information, conceptual frameworks, and language of both sides of the boundary" (610). Libraries exist as epicenters of information and connection in their communities and are uniquely situated at an interdisciplinary intersection of research and expertise. Academic librarians can serve as "boundary-spanning personnel," critical campus and community connectors, who develop opportunities for partnerships and collaboration based on common research interests and information needs.

Universities often serve as anchor institutions in their communities, supporting local wellbeing and economic development (Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities n.d.). However, too often silos are constructed that prohibit effective and meaningful collaboration between universities and their surrounding communities. Academic libraries can support higher education's anchor mission by responding to their local community's information needs with library and university resources. By doing so, libraries not only strengthen the relationship between universities and surrounding communities but also advance the mission of diversity, equity, and inclusion. These partnerships can provide more equitable access to information for communities that have been historically excluded and minoritized. Academic libraries can help invite community members who may not traditionally have access behind university paywalls to engage with and benefit from the research being done by university faculty and students. As the field of academic librarianship and conceptions of information literacy continue to evolve in response to increased awareness of social justice, so too should the role of academic librarians in supporting community-engaged research and scholarship through innovative outreach and engagement.

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In 2021, the Business & Entrepreneurship Librarian at the University of Louisville began an initiative to connect local Black entrepreneurs with library and university resources. Outreach was done across campus and the local community to determine how the University of Louisville can fulfill its anti-racist and anchor missions by addressing the racial wealth gap and supporting the success of local Black-owned businesses. Through presenting a case study of how this outreach led to a partnership between a librarian, professor, and local entrepreneur, this article illustrates how librarians can help break down silos and address systemic injustice in local communities through innovative outreach and curricular integration of critical information literacy. The Business & Entrepreneurship Librarian and an Assistant Professor of Business Communication will detail the class project they developed in partnership with a local business owner to provide undergraduate business communication students the opportunity to conduct research that would have a real-world impact, delivering final projects that addressed the business owner's self-defined business goals and research needs. This case study contributes an example of high-level outreach and engagement to the professional literature that other librarians can use to develop community-engaged research partnerships at their institutions.

Literature Review

Community-engaged scholarship refers to partnerships between universities and their local communities that "collaboratively develop and apply knowledge to address public issues" (Gordon da Cruz 2017, 363). Universities often aim to be anchor institutions in their local communities, supporting local wellbeing and economic development. There can be an inequitable dichotomy between universities and their local communities in which "the university is a center of employment, education, innovation, culture, and support" while "surrounding communities grapple with poverty, economic disinvestment, and wellness" (Mathuews and Harper 2019, 2). Community-engaged scholarship seeks to establish mutually beneficial partnerships to address these inequities. However, there are often challenges to these collaborations which generally take the form of "academic and administrative silos that inhibit collaboration and resource-sharing" (Mathuews and Harper 2019, 2). Academic librarians can help respond to these barriers and support the efforts of community-engaged scholarship. Academic libraries are uniquely situated at an interdisciplinary intersection, often serving local communities in addition to the entire university. With increasing emphasis on social justice, critical information literacy, and curricular integration, supporting community-engaged research and scholarship provides an actionable avenue for libraries to explore as the field of academic librarianship continues to evolve.

Community-engaged scholarship can encompass a variety of interrelated pedagogies and practices that fall under a broader umbrella of community engagement, including community-engaged teaching, community-based learning, service learning, experiential learning, engaged learning, and community-based research (University of Louisville 2011). Service learning and information literacy developed alongside each other in higher education, originating in the 1960s and 1970s and experiencing greater institutionalization between the 1980s and 2000s. Christopher Sweet chronicled this parallel development, advocating for more integration of the two approaches (Branch, Nutefall, Gruber 2020, 123). In 2003, John Riddle asked, "Where is the library in service learning?" and put forth models for engaged library instruction that introduced information literacy to service learning (Riddle 2003, 71). While Sweet and Riddle both offer an important analysis of the intersections of information literacy and service learning, their investigation lacks the integration of "social justice and critical pedagogy orientations" which became increasingly relevant to higher education, including both service learning and information literacy, throughout the 2000s (Branch, Nutefall, Gruber 2020, 124).

Higher education, including the fields of librarianship and community engagement, is evolving to incorporate critical frameworks that center social justice. Critical information literacy has become increasingly common in librarianship and Laura Saunders suggests the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy "offers an opportunity for librarians to approach teaching and learning from a social justice perspective" (Saunders 2017, 55). Gordon da Cruz (2017) proposes "critical community-engaged scholarship" as a guiding framework that centers racial and social justice in developing university-community partnerships (363). Librarians have an opportunity to become critical connectors, connecting critical information literacy with critical community-engaged scholarship to help students become engaged citizens and understand themselves as members of their local communities who can apply their education to issues facing their neighbors. This speaks to Paulo Freire's pedagogical ideas of developing "critical consciousness" in students, moving away from mere knowledge acquisition, and having students "identify and engage specific problems in their world" (Elmborg 2006, 193). Critical

information literacy advocates call for this kind of "critical and reflective pedagogy and praxis" that encourages students to "actively engage with information" and "see themselves as people with agency and the ability to affect their own conditions" (Saunders 2017, 63). In helping students navigate the relationship between their university education and the systemic injustices that have an impact on surrounding communities, it's imperative that librarians center race and social justice in information literacy instruction.

Winfield and Davis (2020) shed light on the lack of consideration for race in previous scholarship related to community engagement and anchor institutions, and emphasize the importance of acknowledging race, racism, and racial power dynamics in research on community engagement and anchor institutions (16). While library scholarship has explored race and racism in the profession itself, there is limited scholarship on how librarians utilize information literacy to respond to racial injustice in their local communities. This article seeks to respond to this gap in the literature by presenting a case study of developing a community-engaged research project in collaboration with a local Black business owner in order to provide more equitable access to library and university resources, promote Black entrepreneurship, and address the racial wealth gap. In 2016, the net worth of the median white family in the United States was $171,000, which is approximately ten times more than the net worth of the median Black family, which was $17,150 (McIntosh et al. 2020). Entrepreneurship is a key driver of building generational wealth, and "healthy Black-owned businesses could be a critical component for closing the United States' Black-white wealth gap" (Baboolall et al. 2020). A 2018 economic analysis of U.S. income published by the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis concluded that historical data reveals "no progress has been made in reducing income and wealth inequalities between black and white households over the past 70 years" (Mineo 2021). Librarians can utilize strategic outreach and critical information literacy to power critical community-engaged scholarship that seeks to address systemic inequities impacting local communities, like the racial wealth gap.

> "While library scholarship has explored race and racism in the profession itself, there is limited scholarship on how librarians utilize information literacy to respond to racial injustice in their local communities. This article seeks to respond to this gap in the literature by presenting a case study of developing a community-engaged research project in collaboration with a local Black business owner in order to provide more equitable access to library and university resources, promote Black entrepreneurship, and address the racial wealth gap."

Outreach and Relationship Building

To connect local Black-owned businesses with library and university resources, the Business & Entrepreneurship Librarian first had to do an environmental scan to understand who on campus may already be working with local Black-owned businesses and what university resources may be available to entrepreneurs in the community. The librarian initially spoke with the Community Engagement Librarian as well as representatives from the Family Business Center, Center for Entrepreneurship, Entrepreneurship Law Clinic, and Office of Community Engagement. The librarian did not discover any programs or initiatives specifically geared towards local Black-owned businesses in these conversations, but she did gain a better understanding of what resources, services, and expertise on campus could be made accessible to community entrepreneurs.

As a result of relationships formed during the campus environmental scan, the librarian was introduced to a local nonprofit working to support entrepreneurs. After an introductory conversation with the Director of Business Development at the local nonprofit, the librarian was invited to give a presentation on the library's resources at an organizational staff meeting. This presentation led to a collaboration with the organization's Director of Community Engagement and a University of Louisville student intern. Louisville has several Black-led marketplaces featuring Black-owned businesses. The librarian, community engagement director, and student intern visited two of these marketplaces to do outreach to local business owners. The librarian created flyers that she handed out at both marketplaces (figure 1). During this initial day of community outreach, the librarian spoke with over thirty local entrepreneurs.

Figure 1. The flyer used for initial outreach to local Black business owners

After doing outreach in the community, the librarian's next step was to hold research appointments with local entrepreneurs in the library. While the library is open to community members, they are only permitted to use library computers for up to one hour a day. Having to come to the library to access the databases was already a significant barrier; the one-hour limit exacerbated the inconvenience, making it unfeasible. The librarian worked with library administration to extend visiting scholar accounts to community entrepreneurs. This allows access to library computers for up to four hours a day. As entrepreneurs reached out to the librarian to schedule research appointments, the librarian would have visiting scholar accounts created for those individuals.

As the Director of Business Development at the local nonprofit met with local entrepreneurs about their business plans, she began to refer them to the librarian to do market research. While this was a productive partnership, the librarian had to maintain consistent service to the College of Business. In Feldmann's (2014) survey of academic business librarians partnering with local community organizations, time was repeatedly mentioned as a barrier in supporting local entrepreneurs because the librarians' "primary focus is to assist their institution's faculty, staff, and students" (118). As the Business & Entrepreneurship Librarian was meeting for research appointments with local entrepreneurs and business students, she observed a clear overlap. Rather than allowing time to be a barrier to supporting local entrepreneurs, the librarian saw this as an opportunity to connect the services she was offering to the university and the community. Students were primarily doing research for fictional businesses and hypothetical business scenarios. The local entrepreneurs struggled to find the time to consistently come to the library to do market research. This was an opportunity to serve as a critical connector, bridging critical information literacy and critical community-engaged

scholarship to develop partnerships for community-engaged research that would mutually benefit students and local entrepreneurs.

The librarian leveraged her existing relationships in the community and in the College of Business to pursue developing a community-engaged research project in which students partnered with a local business owner. The librarian pitched the idea to an entrepreneur she had met with in the library several times. The founder and CEO of Black Complex, a coworking and creative space for Black professionals, was eager to participate in a pilot project. The librarian then reached out to a faculty member who taught undergraduate Business Communication classes to see if the faculty member would be interested in collaborating on the project.

Developing a Community-Engaged Student Research Project

Business Communication Course Objectives

The Business Communication program in the University of Louisville's College of Business was developed in 2016 through a five-competencies-based model: professionalism, clarity, conciseness, evidence-driven, and persuasion. Of the five competencies the course focuses on, evidence-driven is dedicated to the need for quality and relevant evidence to make persuasive claims. Not surprisingly, the faculty who teach this course have often partnered with academic librarians to facilitate conversation and research aids. However, over the years, the collaborative nature between librarians and faculty—with respect to the course content—tended to end there. It was not until the uprising of 2020 and the racial unrest in the city of Louisville that racism and the university's stance came into view. As such, projects that focused on diversity and inclusion became front and center, and the typical assignments of the Business Communication course came into question for how they were contributing to a more socially just world. Enter the partnership between the Business & Entrepreneurship Librarian and Assistant Professor of Business Communication.

A typical semester of Business Communication would have the student groups write a research report or white paper, and then they would present their findings in an oral presentation. While there had always been some working relationship between the librarian and Business Communication faculty, it was typically a one-class session, wherein the librarian detailed the research process and offered an opportunity for students to ask questions about databases. While there is certainly value in this, having the librarian play an integral role in the curriculum for this course was a novel idea and proved incredibly beneficial to the students' research skills. Additionally, while research topics tended to be community focused, the instructor had never worked with an active community issue. Instead, previous reports focused on open-data sources of community projects. The students had never had the opportunity to think critically about how a minority business might thrive, or fail, in their own city. This project became an important opportunity for students to develop these critical information literacy skills.

Developing Partnership with Black Complex

The first step in the formation of the community-engaged research project was for the librarian to put the professor and entrepreneur in conversation so they could better understand the entrepreneur's research needs and the course objectives. The three project partners met and started by sharing details of their background and experience. The entrepreneur and founder of Black Complex, Aaron Jordan, discussed the inspiration for his company. He described working in the music industry and spending time at Black-led clubs

and coworking spaces in New York and Atlanta. Jordan wanted to create a similar space in Louisville that was a "culmination of all those experiences" in other cities "coupled with Louisville's unique position of being a ground zero for social justice work and racial reckoning." The mission of Black Complex is to provide space and time for entrepreneurs, creatives, freelancers, and business travelers to build together and collaborate. Black Complex holds professional development training and curated events that are Black focused and Black centered. According to Jordan, "Louisville is a multicultural place, but we don't have multicultural spaces." While Black Complex is Black centered, the goal is to hold inclusive conversations that span across ages, genders, ethnicities, and other identities.

In their introductory meeting, the professor shared the objectives of the Business Communication course, explaining that it is primarily a business writing course with a research component. The librarian discussed the research she and the entrepreneur had been working on in the library, primarily market research and identifying potential members and funders for Black Complex. The librarian and professor asked the entrepreneur what he would want from a dedicated class of student researchers and writers if he had them. This led to a conversation about the entrepreneur's current business goals and research needs. The result of this conversation was a list of six projects, each of which required extensive research: a market research report, a funding plan, an on-boarding document for future employees, a membership plan for the business, a business structure plan, and a SWOT analysis. These projects were a mutually beneficial opportunity for Black Complex to gain evidence-driven insights usually held behind university paywalls, while having the students gain real-world experience in working with a local business owner.

Semester-Long Collaboration

The librarian and entrepreneur attended a class session early in the semester to introduce themselves and Black Complex, and to discuss the research projects. The librarian first discussed community-engaged research and the important opportunity students in the class had to conduct research with a real-world impact. The entrepreneur started with an ice breaker, asking students to write down their business-related goals, and encouraging them to think about how they can make those goals even bigger. The entrepreneur discussed his background and how Black Complex was established. The professor explained the different projects student groups would complete. While students had not yet been assigned specific projects, this was an opportunity for the students to ask questions about the business. Students asked who the entrepreneur's target market in Louisville would be, what kind of membership levels he was considering, what positions he was hoping to hire, and whether there were other coworking spaces that may be competitors. Based on the questions received, the entrepreneur sent portions of his business plan and other relevant documents to the librarian and professor, which students could use in their assignments.

The librarian created a custom research guide for students to use for this project, and the class came to the library for an instruction session. The librarian began with an exercise encouraging students to recognize their position as members of the local community, consider their privilege in accessing university resources and expertise, and contemplate how they may utilize their research and education to address local community issues they observe around them. After critically engaging and situating the students, the librarian led the students through the research guide, highlighting effective research strategies and resources to use to strengthen their reports. Each team project had a

dedicated page on the guide. The homepage of the guide included information about research that all teams would need to complete (figure 2). It was important that all the students do research about the coworking industry and Black entrepreneurship so that they could understand and communicate what coworking spaces are and why spaces like Black Complex need to exist. By integrating research about systemic injustice, including the racial wealth gap, this project supported university DEI and anti-racism efforts in addition to the university's anchor mission.

Black Complex: Home
This guide provides research support for BUS 301 students working on projects for Black Complex.

| Home | Business Structure | Fundraising | Hiring and Onboarding | Market Research | Membership | SWOT |

Black Complex

To learn more about Black Complex and its programs and events, visit: https://www.blackcomplexlouisville.com/.

Coworking Spaces

Coworking spaces are an emerging industry even more in demand due to the pandemic. Be sure to do some research about this industry as part of your project. Some of you will be doing a more in depth industry analysis, but you all want to be sure you can communicate what this industry is and how Black Complex fits into it.

Some keywords you may use to search:

coworking

coworking spaces

Black Entrepreneurship

Why do spaces like Black Complex need to exist? Be sure to do some research that addresses the why. You can find evidence that addresses systemic barriers to wealth, business success, and representation.

Some keywords you may use to search:

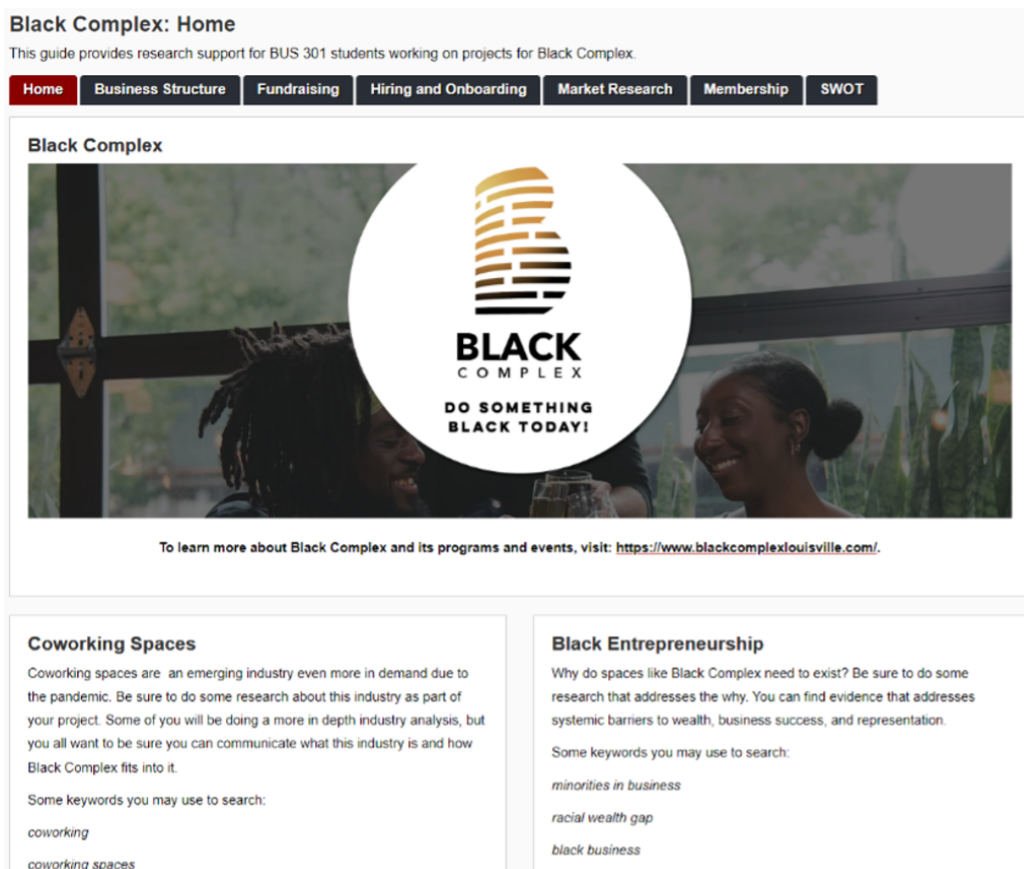minorities in business

racial wealth gap

black business

Figure 2: A screenshot of the Black Complex research guide homepage.

While the introductory and library sessions were planned by project partners at the beginning of the collaboration, the librarian and entrepreneur were invited to attend another class before the final presentations to answer students' additional questions that had arisen. Students were unclear on the scope of the projects, including how much information the entrepreneur needed and how he would use the final reports. The students also wanted proprietary information that the entrepreneur was unable to share. While this caused roadblocks in the research process, it was because of these roadblocks that the students and professor were forced to think critically and creatively about what other sources of data they could find and use.

Project Outcomes

For the faculty member, the community-engaged research deliverables were the perfect addition to the curriculum. The students were tapping into the five competencies of the course and expanding their research skills while gaining real-world experience. Additionally, these students were given a unique opportunity to do research for a business owner and gain insights into the

challenges and opportunities that minority business owners contend with. The fundraising team, for example, found several minority-focused loans and grants that the entrepreneur could apply for. However, in their research they also noted the extreme racial bias in bank lending, an eye-opening finding for the student team. The team working on the SWOT analysis also found many of the threats to minority-owned businesses such as racism and lack of start-up capital. Another team working on market research found data illustrating the racial wealth gap in the city of Louisville (figure 3). On a more positive note, the students were able to cite the opportunities available to a Black entrepreneur in a city that was going through a racial awakening. Despite the projects not being focused on social justice per se, the students' research led them down that path organically.
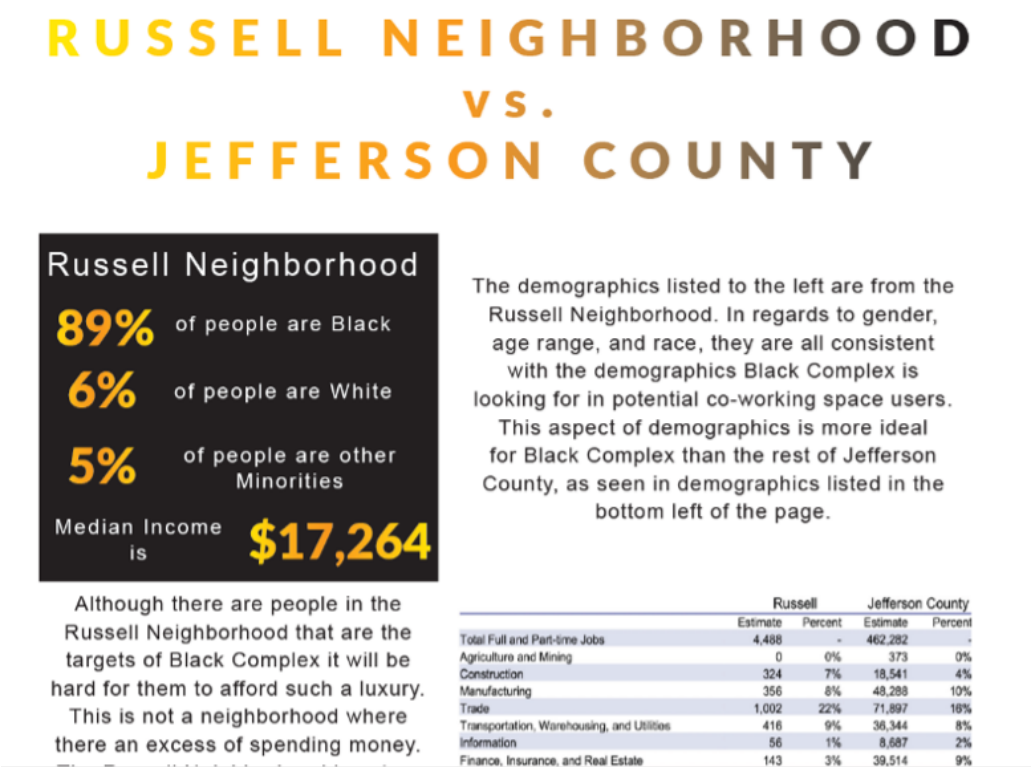

RUSSELL NEIGHBORHOOD VS. JEFFERSON COUNTY

Russell Neighborhood

89% of people are Black

6% of people are White

5% of people are other Minorities

Median Income is **$17,264**

The demographics listed to the left are from the Russell Neighborhood. In regards to gender, age range, and race, they are all consistent with the demographics Black Complex is looking for in potential co-working space users. This aspect of demographics is more ideal for Black Complex than the rest of Jefferson County, as seen in demographics listed in the bottom left of the page.

Although there are people in the Russell Neighborhood that are the targets of Black Complex it will be hard for them to afford such a luxury. This is not a neighborhood where there an excess of spending money.

	Russell		Jefferson County	
	Estimate	Percent	Estimate	Percent
Total Full and Part-time Jobs	4,488	-	462,282	-
Agriculture and Mining	0	0%	373	0%
Construction	324	7%	18,541	4%
Manufacturing	356	8%	48,288	10%
Trade	1,002	22%	71,897	16%
Transportation, Warehousing, and Utilities	416	9%	36,344	8%
Information	56	1%	8,687	2%
Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate	143	3%	39,514	9%

Figure 3: A screenshot from a student team's market research project report.

The students' research culminated in written and oral reports wherein they had the opportunity to present to the entrepreneur in a professional manner utilizing all the competencies they had gained in the course. The professor traditionally graded on a set of rubrics designed to measure the competencies. Initially, the professor was worried that the rubrics would not fit with the final projects, but she was pleased to see that despite the different approach to the course, the competencies and learning objectives were still measurable. Additionally, the competency of persuasion, which is one of the most difficult for students to grasp, was the strongest learning objective met.

The written reports were presented as business plans to the entrepreneur, printed and bound, to be used as official documents for his stakeholders. Moreover, the student groups gave final presentations to the entrepreneur as well as the CEO of the local nonprofit who had initially referred him to work with the librarian. The student presentations were treated as business pitches, offering the entrepreneur concrete ideas based on the needs that had

been determined. The entrepreneur asked pointed questions to the students, asking them to offer rationale for their ideas if they were not clear. Additionally, the faculty member invited a professor in the marketing department to give more formal feedback to the students. The presentations were saved in a Dropbox folder so that the entrepreneur could have access to them to present to stakeholders and the larger community. This rich learning experience would not have been possible had the class not taken on this real-world community-engaged research project.

Impact

A key aspect of community-engaged research is that the projects must be mutually beneficial to the university and community partners involved. Opportunities for community-engaged research should enhance student success and learning outcomes while having a positive, long-term impact on the community. In evaluating the success of the Black Complex Business Communication project, it is important to consider the impact the project had on both the entrepreneur and on the students. The broader theoretical impact for the College of Business will also be considered.

The entrepreneur participating in the project knew it was a pilot project for the librarian and professor. While the entrepreneur was interested in the research the students would uncover, this collaboration was also an opportunity to gain an affiliation with the university and student perspectives on his business concept. The entrepreneur said he was impressed with the research and quality of the student projects. He said he could tell the students put in significant time and effort. He even carries the student research projects in his briefcase and says he references them often. The entrepreneur wants his company to be inclusive of university students and said that the student perspectives gave him additional insight.

The hardest part of the collaboration for the entrepreneur was not having more time for interaction with the students. The entrepreneur hoped for active and engaged sessions with the students with lots of time for brainstorming and sharing ideas. Because the meetings were held during class sessions, there was limited opportunity for sustained and active engagement with students. The entrepreneur did welcome students to volunteer and apply for internships with Black Complex. At least one student from the class worked as a volunteer for Black Complex's annual Juneteenth Festival the summer after the project concluded. The entrepreneur was happy to provide value to the students by giving them the opportunity to work with a local business owner and to do research that would have real-world impact on scaling a business.

To gain the students' perspective on whether the project was a success, the students were asked to write a professional email to their professor reflecting on the projects they completed. The response was overwhelmingly positive. Several students noted that this was one of the best projects they had completed in their time at the university. One student went so far as saying that they had learned more about entrepreneurship from this class than from any other. Several other students discussed how valuable working on a real-world project was, and how the stakes being that much higher pushed them to do their best. Of course, there was some criticism. Several of the students were frustrated that they were not given explicit directions of what to do, which caused confusion for them. However, just as many who said this caused problems admitted that this is probably what happens in business, and the lack of clarity was a valuable learning opportunity. All in all, the project was a success from the students' perspective.

Another unforeseen result of this project was the relationship formed between the professor and the librarian. Universities tend to be siloed. Even though faculty need librarians to aid in their research, faculty can at times act as lone wolves, reinforcing these silos. This newly formed relationship opened the door for the professor and the librarian to connect in new ways, to hold each other accountable, and to lean on each other when issues arose. Going forward, these colleagues have opened a door to more proactive collaboration between the College of Business and the University Libraries.

While the University of Louisville's College of Business does partner with local businesses for different class projects, there has not been a focused effort on connecting with local minority-owned businesses. In their article "How Business Schools Can Help Corporate America Fight Racism," Bruce et al. (2020) assert that "the racial gap in academia reflects and feeds the inclusivity gap in corporate America." In order to address this inclusivity gap in corporate America, Bruce et al. emphasize the importance of addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion in the business school curriculum. They argue that DEI should not be treated as "a separate, elective class" but rather "woven into all business classes, as one would with ethics and innovation" (Bruce et al. 2020). The importance of incorporating "a level of Black-related content that is commensurate with the buying power of Black people in the market" is paramount because "non-Black students who don't learn about or understand the important role that Black talent plays in organizations [. . .] while in school, may go on to exclude Black stakeholders in their organizations where they hold future jobs. Meanwhile, Black students who do not see themselves reflected in their programs, receive a tacit, yet powerful, message about their value and potential as leaders" (Bruce et al. 2020). Partnering with local Black business owners for student research projects is an effective way that business professors can weave DEI content into their courses and highlight Black talent to the benefit of all students.

Conclusion

The collaboration on this community-engaged student research project introduced a new approach librarians can take to support curricular integration of critical information literacy through proactive outreach and engagement. While librarians certainly provide custom research guides and research assistance for class projects, taking a proactive curricular integration role, specifically with regards to community engagement, is not as common. O'Kelly (2017) points out that "library instructional involvement in the curriculum often comes from the side, through invitation by faculty or librarian persistence" and discusses the challenges libraries face "in designing programs that support the curriculum even if the library itself does not offer credit-bearing courses" (227). As academic librarians continue to explore their role in supporting community engagement, the model presented in this case study provides an opportunity to utilize library resources and expertise to bridge the research and information needs of students on campus and members of local communities. This provides a new avenue to explore for critical information literacy, one in which the library moves away from "a passive information bank where students and faculty make deposits and withdrawals" to "a place where students actively engage existing knowledge and shape it to their own current and future uses" (Elmborg 2006, 193). In grounding their information literacy instruction in instances of systemic injustice in their local communities, librarians can support student learning that "becomes the essentially humanistic process of engaging and solving significant problems in the world" and "information can then be redefined as the raw material students use to solve these problems and to create

their own understanding and identities, rather than as something 'out there' to be accessed efficiently" (Elmborg 2006, 198).

This case study illustrates one step academic librarians can take to serve as critical connectors, developing partnerships for community-engaged research across campus and the community and connecting critical information literacy with critical community-engaged scholarship. The librarian author is currently conducting a grant-funded, qualitative research study to develop a framework and best practices that librarians, educators, and community partners can use to develop community-engaged student research projects that are inclusive of faculty, student, and community voices.

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Appendix 1: Anti-DEI Legislation Statement

This case study discusses outreach and programming that occurred in 2021–2022. In January 2024, the Kentucky legislature launched an attack on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts in higher education through the introduction of Senate Bill 6. The bill seeks to defund DEI offices, staff, and scholarships at public colleges and universities and prohibit the spending of any resources on DEI initiatives as DEI promotes "discriminatory concepts" (Kentucky General Assembly). The Kentucky House of Representatives passed an amended version of the bill in March 2024 that defines "discriminatory concepts" as "presenting as truth, rather than as a subject for inquiry, that an existing structure, system, or relation of power, privilege, or subordination persists on the basis of oppression, colonialism, socioeconomic status, religion, race, sex, color, or national origin" (24 RS SB 6 / HCS 1). The following case study is based on factual data that demonstrates the realities of the nation's racial wealth gap and the unequal distribution of business ownership across racial lines. The initiatives outlined in this case study, aimed at addressing systemic injustices, are in jeopardy of being labeled as "discriminatory" and consequently dismantled due to the prevailing biases and willful ignorance within the state legislature. Anti-DEI legislation seeks to prohibit educators from fulfilling their responsibility to educate by legally prohibiting the presentation of factual information and data as irrefutable truths. This demonstrates even more the need for critical information literacy and critical community connectors as anti-DEI legislation has been introduced in over half of the nation, and at the federal level, since 2023 (The Chronicle of Higher Education).