

Case Study Sketch: A PASAG for “Engaged Scholarship” at City College of New York

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The following is a case study of the Project for Activist Scholarship Against Gentrification (PASAG), with emphasis on its “engaged scholarship” component. Through thick description of my own participant observation and analysis of focus group discussions with students, I aim to highlight the programmatic features that potentially lead to the success of under-represented students, and to an understanding of PASAG’s theory of change.

I. The Students

The Project for Activist Scholarship Against Gentrification (PASAG) is a multi-year project combining community-based research and “engaged scholarship” courses in support of a citywide alliance of social justice and affordable housing organizations and academics committed to winning housing for all New Yorkers. This alliance, called the [New York City Community Land Initiative \(NYCCLI\)](#), is working to lay the groundwork for Community Land Trusts and other non-speculative housing models that promote “development without displacement” of housing and neighborhoods, for and with community members not served by the private market.

The students involved in PASAG are not part of a “program” as much as they are enrolled in courses that require and support student involvement in PASAG (and therefore NYCCLI) throughout the Spring 2015 semester. Two groups of undergraduate students are currently participating in PASAG through their coursework at City College of New York

(CCNY), a senior campus of the [City University of New York- CUNY](#) located in Upper Manhattan. They are from [Macaulay Honors College](#) and the [Colin Powell School for Civic and Global Leadership \(both of which are part of CCNY\)](#), and are fairly representative of CUNY's diverse undergraduate student body, close to half of which were born outside the United States and approximately 20 percent of which are the first in their families to attend college.¹ Less than half of CUNY students live on or near campus; most commute from other parts of the city, some from several hours away. The majority of CUNY students have full or part-time jobs, and many have families. Note: It is likely the case that the Honors students come from a somewhat more privileged background, and it is definitely true that the Honors College provides them with a more advantageous institutional environment, including free tuition and other resources (more on this later). In fact, when asked what success means for them, several Honors students cited “getting into Macaulay” as one of their most important achievements thus far.

The twenty-two Honors students are enrolled in a course called *Shaping the Future of NYC*, the last of four required interdisciplinary seminars for Honors Students. These Honors students are sophomores and juniors in their 20's with a wide range of academic pursuits, although more than half are majoring in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields. In terms of racial/ethnic composition, the class is roughly one-third white, and two-thirds Middle-Eastern or Asian/South East Asian descent; there is one Black and one Latino

¹ <http://www.cuny.edu/about/alumni-students-faculty.html>

student. The course is a seminar on policy, planning, and grassroots-organizing practices that shape NYC, a new area of study for most of the class, although students relate rather easily to our focus on housing, community development, and gentrification through their personal experiences.

The twenty-six students from the School for Civic and Global Leadership are enrolled in *Urban Politics*, an elective regularly offered for students in this school (developed and taught by Associate Professor of Political Science, John Krinsky). These students are from the Political Science and Black Studies Departments at CCNY, and this course fits more squarely within the students' interests and their other coursework than is the case for the Honors students. They range in age from 19 to 30, and are majority Black and Latino, with two Asian and two white students.

These two courses are part of PASAG's broader effort to facilitate the NYC Community Land Initiative (NYCCLI)'s research-related activities and to provide engaged scholarship opportunities for CCNY students. A third course, *Oral History: Documenting Anti-Gentrification in Harlem* (developed by Associate Professor of History, Adrienne Petty) will be offered in Fall 2015 as a "special topics" course cross-listed in the social sciences. Specifically, PASAG is working with CCNY students to: document the experiences of housing and neighborhood struggles and residents' connection to place in East Harlem; build an evidence base for NYCCLI and its first offshoot, the East Harlem-El Barrio Community Land Trust;

continually refresh and deepen NYCCLI members' understandings of our work and its contexts; and to identify shared goals and strategies among its constituents.

Students in *Shaping the Future of NYC* are working in teams of seven or eight to investigate “The future of” community gardens, homelessness and the shelter industrial complex, and major private development projects – chosen by the instructor based on key issues NYCCLI is tackling. Each team has a “community contact,” a representative of a NYCCLI-member group that is organizing around the issue at hand. The teams are exploring and documenting how their focus issues have been shaped, and the limitations and potential of different “shaping strategies” that could effectively address the issues’ root causes. They have been asked to ground their investigations in the priorities of their community contact/NYCCLI member group, and to use their findings to contribute to both the ongoing organization of NYCCLI as an alliance and the larger conversations that surround urban development in East Harlem and NYC. To date, each team has conducted extensive historical analysis of its issue, and participant observation and interviews with its community contact and others directly affected by or organizing around the issue. The teams have also begun to use what they have learned to develop white papers with public policy recommendations that will be presented at a model City Council session at the end of the semester, and popular education materials that their community contacts can use to facilitate public dialogue and community organizing.

Students in *Urban Politics* are examining the politics of policymaking in New York City, through NYCCLI's efforts to launch a pilot Community Land Trust (CLT) in East Harlem that can serve as a first step in establishing a citywide network of grassroots CLTs. At this stage in the pilot project, NYCCLI is surveying residents in currently and formerly city-owned buildings in the neighborhood that are candidates for joining a CLT; and NYCCLI's Residents' Committee is working to educate and organize the community about impending threats and potential responses. Throughout the semester, *Urban Politics* students have gone door-to-door with NYCCLI members to document East Harlem residents' needs and concerns about their housing and neighborhood. This is providing NYCCLI with much needed manpower, and students with an experiential entry point into classroom discussions around the exercise and distribution and dynamics of political power. Students and NYCCLI members recently worked together to conduct initial analyses of the surveys, which they will use to research the various possibilities for linking needs and resources in our complex urban system. For their final projects, the students will work in groups to produce neighborhood profiles of NYCCLI target neighborhoods (those that are most threatened by gentrification or most involved in fighting against it) that NYCCLI can use to do workshops with groups organizing in those neighborhoods.

Professor Krinsky and I have scheduled three joint sessions over the course of the semester for our students to work together, share their projects with each other, and exchange feedback. In the first of these sessions, *Shaping the Future of NYC* students presented their draft

white papers; in the second session Professor Krinsky led both classes in a workshop on methods for needs-based, community-directed planning. In the final joint session, *Urban Politics* students presented their neighborhood profiles and housing recommendations. Both classes are meeting with their NYCCLI contacts regularly for input, and will make final presentations to NYCCLI at the end of the semester.

It is my epistemological position that learning and development around social and political issues is most successful when done through critical, collective inquiry with those most affected by the issue at hand. However, it is difficult to facilitate this within the institutional constraints and requirements of higher education, which is inherently exclusionary when it comes to those most affected by issues like homelessness, and inherently individualizing for the students and faculty that are included (more on this later). The idea behind PASAG is to help scaffold this type of work in a sustained way for the shared benefit of students, faculty, directly affected communities, and broader publics. Thus, my hope for the students in *Shaping the Future of NYC* is that they develop critical skills for investigating the historically uneven distribution of the power to "shape" New York City across the city's people, built environment and institutions; and that they gain both a global and intimate understanding of how they are personally and politically situated within these structures and processes. More concretely, I hope they learn to plan, develop and implement a collaborative, inquiry-based project; to craft white papers and policy testimony; and to work collaboratively with multiple media to create engaging

popular education materials. These skills will enhance the more general goal of enabling the students to engage in key contemporary debates about the future of the city, via in-class discussions, written work, and presentations to different audiences.

Professor Krinsky works from a similar epistemological standpoint, and hopes the engaged scholarship component of *Urban Politics* will give students insight into urban policymaking from the ground up. Specifically, he hopes the students learn: interpersonal strategies to elicit reliable responses on surveys; how to evaluate the limits and strengths of community surveys in capturing politically relevant information, including an enhanced understanding of the principles of relevance for different analytic settings (i.e., political science, social activism); to connect community needs represented in survey data to policy history and to theories of policymaking; to identify governmental actors and institutions who have decision making power over community resources; to connect identified community needs with available resources; to analyze survey results qualitatively and quantitatively; and to produce a diverse set of presentation media for the dissemination of the political/social analysis they undertake with the community partner (NYCCLI). In sum, PASAG and these courses in particular were developed in the hopes that students will have the support they need to learn from and contribute meaningfully to a real life instance of community development and organizing around urgent social issues.

II. Institutional Supports and Issues

In the previous section I referred to the difficulty of facilitating engaged scholarship in the context of the exclusionary and individualizing dynamics of higher education institutions, but these points require elaboration. CCNY is part of New York City's massive public higher education system, and while it is more accessible and socially oriented than many private, elite universities, its public mission is increasingly constrained by significant funding cuts. CCNY students usually juggle their coursework with jobs and family responsibilities with limited outside or institutional support while working for a degree with less than abundant prestige. As one student put it, "Going to CCNY, you don't have a lot of recognition; when I hear about my friends going to Cornell, they have everything set for them, you know, so I feel a difference there."

For *Urban Politics* students, the institutional supports that are meant to support them within the university are a source of great frustration. Regarding financial aid, one student said that in order for it to go smoothly "you need to know someone in the system." Another shared that one of her biggest successes in college has been avoiding major problems with financial aid. Regarding guidance and mentorship, one student described having gone to the career center with the hopes of getting some advice because she "doesn't want to just settle," but said she "felt like no one was invested" and that it was "such a waste of time." She said that she knows it is up to her to find her way, but she works a full time job and could use some help. Institutional support is greater, on average, for those enrolled in *Shaping the Future of NYC*, as the Honors College

provides all its students with free tuition; an education fund (~\$7500) that the students can use for study abroad or to pursue some kind of internship or community project; a “Cultural Passport” that gets them into most museums for free; mentorship from Honors Advisors; an Instructional Teaching Fellow to assist with each of the four core seminars; and a laptop computer.

Still, the most commonly reported challenges that students are facing, even in the Honors College, are time- and stress- management, which appear connected to the strong sense of pressure and competition they report feeling. An Honors student, who is on a special fellowship from the School for Civic and Global Leadership, is struggling to decide whether to study abroad (for free) next semester because it is “time that doesn’t count” towards her degree. The same student talked about feeling overwhelmed by the number of internship and other kinds of opportunities brought to her attention by her advisor (approximately three per day); she said, “There are so many choices, it is hard to know what I want to do.” While students say they are overwhelmed by the sheer abundance of pressure and opportunities they are being offered, they are also well aware of how limited these opportunities actually are in the “real” world, in the context of today’s unequal and volatile economy. One of the students in *Shaping the Future of NYC* described feeling anxious just hearing about others doing well, because it means the “pool is dwindling.”

PASAG is part of a larger effort to bridge and enhance the institutional support available at CCNY for engaged scholarship in ways that make it meaningful and do-able for students who are perpetually overwhelmed, and that provide greater access to higher education for those who are excluded. The primary source of institutional support for PASAG is CCNY's relatively new Office of Engaged Scholarship, which is housed in the Colin Powell School for Civic and Global Leadership. Although Professor Krinsky and I were already working together to integrate our scholarship and activism with occasional support from the School for Civic and Global Leadership, our work has been bolstered by a three-year seed grant from the Office of Engaged Scholarship. This grant intended to support interdisciplinary collaborations of faculty and students from different departments at CCNY and "the community" through coursework and research that will have a "social impact." So far it has enabled us to broaden our collaboration to include the History Department at CCNY and the participation of Oral Historian, Adrienne Petty; and it has provided us with administrative and financial support in the strategic planning of this three-year, multi-phase project. Over the next three years it will provide professional development via grant and proposal writing courses, administrative assistance, and financial support for project materials, conference travel, and in the form of course releases for Professors Krinsky and Petty, and a stipend for me. As this is a seed grant, the administrative support will be focused on helping us to secure additional funding for the project, which we need in order to pay co-researchers from NYCCLI. In sum, the support we have received from the Office of

Engaged Scholarship has been significant to the development of PASAG as a focused and committed effort, but is not yet sufficient for it to fulfill its potential.

III. Connecting with Community

The concept and practice of “community” is endlessly complex in the context of engaged scholarship at CCNY. There are various sites of community at play, all of which are as precarious and contested as they are strengthening and unifying. In the world of engaged scholarship, “community” typically refers to a group of people outside the university, or “on the ground,” with which faculty and students collaborate; these groups are often identified by their shared geography, and often proximity to the university, or by a single issue or cause. In the case of PASAG and the engaged scholarship courses, there is not s a community as much as there is a loose political alliance (NYCCLI) of community organizations, resident groups, artists, and academics from across the city, trying to coordinate their varied agendas and ways of working around a common set of ambitious goals. For those involved in NYCCLI, organizing as an alliance is seen as critical if there is to be a broad and powerful impact, but it presents significant challenges for community building among its diverse and geographically dispersed participants. To make things more complicated, students from CCNY live, work, and go to school all across the city, and are themselves situated within a wide range of communities. Because CCNY is a commuter campus, it is not a ready source of community for many of its students. As one student said, “You have to work to have a social life.” For other students, it

takes work to maintain their relationships with their families, because they have so little time. This is especially true for the *Urban Politics* students, for most of whom family is top priority. Thus, connecting students and faculty simultaneously with their campus and with “community contacts” from NYCCLI, and supporting them to engage in a sustained and meaningful way, is difficult to say the least.

IV. The History/Evolution of the Program

PASAG has emerged from and attempted to navigate the institutional, practical, and political challenges described above by concentrating resources and efforts in a strategic way on a single project/partner (NYCCLI) with which we are already closely involved. Professor Krinsky and I have been working with, indeed within, NYCCLI for several years; we have developed an infrastructure of solidarity, trust, and collaboration with its other core members; we have put in considerable time as “boots on the ground,” and have laid the groundwork for us to contribute as activist-scholars/facilitators of activist scholarship. In turn, our on the ground experience with “shaping the future of NYC” and “urban politics” has enriched our capacity to teach these subjects. The Director of the Office of Engaged Scholarship and our primary contact there, Genea Stewart, has also played a critical role in PASAG’s development. She is leading the effort to transform CCNY’s various “service-learning” and “civic engagement” initiatives into a more critical, coordinated, sustained, and effective program. For example, Stewart recently worked with us to develop an ethically robust Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)

that will be used to ensure mutual accountability between the School for Civic and Global Leadership and the PASAG team, modeled in part on the MOU that we developed for use between NYCCLI and outside collaborators. Taken together, this experience and the institutional support from the Office of Engaged Scholarship has shaped the theory and practice of PASAG's engaged scholarship courses, in ways that we hope will be mutually beneficial for our students and NYCCLI.

V. Student Reflections

To gain deeper insight into the students' perspectives on success and struggle in college, and on their experience with engaged scholarship, I asked a group of seven from each class to draw a "relief map" of their college experience, using different colors to distinguish between highs, lows, and their paths. Their responses suggest a complex landscape of personal/political struggle and development in and beyond their attempts to succeed in college. For most of the Honors students, success is marked by milestones related to their place in society, like making social and professional connections, securing internships, getting into graduate school, and finding careers in their field. They also place significant emphasis on more personal forms of growth and transformation, like self-discovery, and the development of greater cultural and ethical awareness, expressed as "being a good person," and "becoming more accepting and understanding." For the Urban Politics students, success is overwhelmingly about doing right by their families by finishing college, following in the footsteps of older siblings or setting a good

example for their younger ones, and making sure they can provide for their parents or a family of their own some day. For both groups, these “highs” are illustrated as interconnected mountain peaks and plateaus, webs and chains of activity and affect. Some obstacles to these achievements are presented as institutional, as with “not enough time,” and “too much work/pressure,” while others are expressed as personal problems and feelings, as with laziness, uncertainty, identity, forgetfulness, wasting time, and irritability. These worries are represented as surrounding pressure, in direct conflict, or in productive tension with the students’ goals and achievements. Students depict a number of navigation strategies including time-management, prioritizing, staying organized, and maintaining a positive outlook. The Urban Politics students talked more about working to develop networking and leadership skills, and by learning how to ask for help, which is not surprising given that the Honors students are plugged immediately into various networks, assumed to be leaders (that will shape the future of NYC, for example), and provided with plenty of institutional help. What comes through from both groups is that for the most part the students seem to recognize that their landscape is structural and political in nature, but to see their paths as individual and struggles internal. As an Urban Politics student stated, “it’s all about *putting yourself* in the right position” (my emphasis).

The engaged scholarship aspect of both classes required the students to spend a good deal of time outside of class in parts of the city where they do not live, work, or go to school, on topics not of their own choosing; and to work in groups, for a group grade, all of which provoked

considerable anxiety when first announced. Given all this, the students' views on the engaged scholarship aspect of class is especially interesting. An Honors Student described the experience as "mind-opening" and as helping them to become more culturally and politically aware. In the words of a student majoring in Economics and Math, "Classes like this are really important, especially for STEM majors where social issues are not pushed... it opens you up to thinking differently. I'm hoping to work with EDC [Economic Development Corporation, a quasi-public agency that is known for exacerbating gentrification] this summer. This is helping me to prepare, to have a different perspective- now I see why gentrification is such an issue." Comments like these connect to those many students made about goals of "making more meaningful connections, both personally and work-wise." A student majoring in Architecture, which is considered one of the most demanding programs at CCNY, spoke of not having time to watch television or read the newspaper; she said that without structured opportunities for community engagement, it is "easy to be in a bubble." Another Architecture major described the experience as bringing her "down to earth," and helping to her prioritize what is most important. These observations suggest that despite the additional demands that "community engagement" entails, in terms of time spent out of class and out of their comfort zones, the experience might in fact help to ground the students, and to recalibrate their expectations of themselves and others in a composing, focusing kind of way. An art student with an outside job who struggles with fatigue-related irritability, said she has become more understanding and sympathetic with people;

for instance when she sees homeless people on the train she thinks, “They probably have a job, and if they don’t, it’s probably because they don’t have an address.”

For the Urban Politics students, the engaged scholarship aspect of class was discussed more in terms of learning by being in, rather than reading about, the real world. They talked a lot about the amount of required reading, that feels tedious and irrelevant, and that may or may not even be discussed in class. One student said he had switched majors (out of political science) because the reading in past semesters was too much. About the community engagement part of this course, he said, “the whole point of going to college is to expand and learn and face to face is different. It’s not textbook, it keeps you interested.” He went on to say, “When you see a guy like that, [Professor] Krinsky, with all those degrees- he don’t have to do that, but when he puts us on these missions you see a whole different aspect/vision of yourself. So he helps people that’s far from where he’s at. I might ask him why he does it.” (According to Professor Krinsky this student approached him later that day with questions about how he got into this kind of work and why he goes to so much extra trouble when he could just teach from a textbook. Krinsky reportedly told him that he wasn’t sure exactly, just that he had learned and lived this way for as long as he could remember.) Many of the Urban Politics students spoke about a different kind of learning- one said that engagement made the issues more personal, because “you may not be living it, but you can feel the urgency and agency.” Thus for both sets of students there is some

evidence of emotional, intellectual, and ethical growth that is not necessarily captured by a focus on “success,” but is no less important to cultivating engaged citizenship.

Meanwhile, the “community contacts” from NYCCLI appear to be learning and expanding from PASAG as well, at least in terms of the potential they see in collaborating with students. One of the homeless organizers told me recently that this has been his best experience working with students (a group in *Shaping the Future of NYC* is working with the homeless organization on its “Homes Not Shelters” campaign). He said students are often sent to his organization to “learn and be helpful,” but are so unfamiliar with the issue and political context, and so limited in terms of time, that finding an appropriate role for them results in more work for the organizers, and no one seems to benefit. This suggests that the readings and class discussions, which have important historical content and critical methods of inquiry and analysis, have helped prepare the students. Similarly, the housing and community development organizer who has incorporated Professor Krinsky’s class into the East Harlem Household Survey project says the students have provided critical support for that effort, which was previously waning. In both cases, then, it seems we have succeeded in developing assignments through which students and their community contacts can learn and benefit, without overtaxing their limited resources. Taken together, these reflections indicate the potential for engaged scholarship, when carefully crafted and facilitated, to cultivate solidarity among directly affected communities and “outsiders” who want to help, not to mention strength in numbers.

VI. Program Sustainability

PASAG has been sustained by official support and funding from the Office of Engaged Scholarship, which is expected to continue for at least two more years. This funding will hopefully serve as seed money for other grants, for which we are in the process of applying. PASAG has also benefited from NYCCLI's organizational infrastructure, which entails rigorous strategic planning and governance processes. Thus, the engaged scholarship activities described here are also part of NYCCLI's work plan. This provides a structure for mutual commitment and cooperation, and thus, hopefully, sustainability. On the other hand, there is a general, persistent imbalance between the politically ambitious goals of NYCCLI and PASAG, and the amount of committed financial and organizational support, both from NYCCLI member groups and from CCNY, all of which are situated in a neoliberal context. Funding cuts frequently occur and always loom for NYCCLI and CCNY, as do changes in official support, due to political shifts or crises. Also, working in partnership with NYCCLI poses potential threats that stem from the precariousness of grassroots, alliance-based organizing, which is inherently unpredictable and politically volatile, and maintains a necessary distance from the bureaucratic demands of university programming. Finally, while the PASAG/NYCCLI work plan is fairly robust in terms of integrating the needs, resources, and capacities of those involved, and scaffolding opportunities for a wide range of participation, it does not provide students much opportunity to pursue their individual interests.

VII. The Edges of the Project

Given how limited the student involvement in PASAG has been thus far, I am struck by how deeply they have engaged. Their coursework and personal accounts of the experience are more critical and reflective than I would have expected or even hoped for at this stage. For students who are pressured, as they are, to make everything that they do “count” in the hyper-individualized race to elusive internships and careers, they are remarkable in embracing community and public praxis not presented as part of their paths to “success.” A young white man, who entered my class with little apparent interest in the topic, was most enthusiastic about sharing what he called, a “whole new outlook on things he didn’t see or view as that important.” He says he has become a “preacher” of these things to his friends and family, trying to “casually spread the awareness.” He reported sharing a webpage link from the homeless organization’s website with his parents, to show them some statistics that he found startling, and says that his father immediately made a donation to the organization. If students are responding this positively to a relatively new and limited engagement with engaged scholarship, it is exciting to think of what PASAG can do as we develop and integrate future courses and opportunities for students. It is our hope to deepen and make more concrete this kind of pedagogy in a range of CCNY courses; and to build an infrastructure for engaged, activist scholarship across the School for Civic and Global Leadership and CCNY. This project will also lay the foundation for more regular urban research methods courses at CCNY. A year-end internal assessment of the courses

will also give us the opportunity to gauge how different models of engaged scholarship courses can be taught. Finally, the results of PASAG will also be used to inform the goals and strategies of the community-building and organizing efforts of NYCCLI.