

Advancing Collective Impact through Place-Based Community Engagement

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Abstract

Higher education institutions and communities are becoming increasingly interdependent to protect and promote democracy and human rights. Centered on Paterson, N.J., a historic industrial city facing decades of socioeconomic decline, Montclair State University (hereafter referred to as Montclair) intends to leverage university resources and community partnerships to support the Paterson OSM community's well-being. This manuscript examines how Montclair utilizes a Place-Based Community Engagement (PBCE) framework and Theory of Change principles to translate theory into practice while aligning with the CUMU 2025 Conference theme, "The Power of Place." By co-creating solutions with local community partners, the university develops sustainable strategies for long-term community well-being and youth empowerment. The Paterson One Square Mile (OSM) initiative serves as a comprehensive place-based community engagement model that builds trust, strengthens community partnerships, and connects university resources and support systems to OSM residents. Addressing urban challenges at scale requires a renewed focus on measurable and consistent actions. To effectively address these challenges, institutions must employ place-based approaches. Understanding the significance of this approach, Montclair State University enhanced the impact of its interventions by integrating place-based principles into its community engagement strategies and restructuring its institutional infrastructure. Through these steps, the university intends to form a deeper connection to the local communities, transform both the campus culture and the local community, and improve opportunities for economic mobility. This led to the creation of the Paterson One Square Mile initiative, designed to bring the University's resources, faculty, and students together to support and advance the Paterson community. Additionally, with the generous support of the Geraldine R. Dodge

Foundation, the university advanced the initiative by establishing Eastside High School as a University-assisted community hub offering wraparound services, including academic support, health services, and counseling for students and families. This article applies the Place-Based Community Engagement (PBCE) framework through an examination of the Paterson One Square Mile (OSM) Early College Program, illustrating the framework's value in practice.

Keywords: place-based community engagement, higher education, local communities, community-university partnerships, collective impact, theory of change

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Introduction

This article discusses the implications of applying the theoretical framework of Place-Based Community Engagement in practice to advance Montclair's commitment to the city of Paterson, located in Northern New Jersey. This manuscript explores how Montclair State University applied the Place-Based Community Engagement (PBCE) framework and Theory of Change principles to move from theory to practice in building trust, co-creating community-centered solutions, and sustaining long-term partnerships.

The Place-Based Community Engagement (PBCE) strategy focuses on improving economic and social conditions through customized initiatives tailored to the unique needs and assets of the specific geographic area. To align university and community resources, Montclair is applying the Place-Based Community Engagement approach to support its transition from theory to practice and to help achieve shared goals. The article examines a community-building strategy grounded in a three-phase theoretical framework of Place-Based Community Engagement, Exploration, Development, and Sustaining (Yamamura and Koth 2018), and adapted by Montclair State University.

Aligned with the CUMU 2025 Conference theme, "The Power of Place," the Establishment of the Office of Community Engagement and Partnerships (OCEP) within the President's Office marked the university's first strategic step in applying the Place-Based Community Engagement framework. This office provides the institutional infrastructure needed to strengthen community connections, catalyze systems change, transform campus culture, and advance community wellbeing.

Montclair's 30 Years of Community Engagement History

Building on the Maryvale Model, first implemented during his tenure at Arizona State University's Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions, President Jonathan GS Koppell adapted and brought this vision to Montclair as a transformative approach to community engagement. Conceived as his "brainchild," the Paterson One Square Mile (OSM) initiative reflects a deliberate, place-based strategy designed to integrate university resources with community-led efforts to build dynamic, healthy, and resilient neighborhoods. Through this approach, Montclair State University shifted from fragmented, ad hoc engagement toward a coordinated model that mobilizes the University's academic, economic, and institutional strengths in partnership with the Paterson community.

However, Montclair State University is not new to community engagement work. Over the past 30 years, the university has been part of the national movement advancing the **Community Engagement approach** in higher education. From the early stages of this movement, Montclair

remained deeply involved in strengthening its institutional commitment to community partnerships and collaborative impact

Montclair State University's 30 Years of Community Engagement History	
Year	Milestone
1996	MSU was awarded a <i>Learn and Serve</i> grant, leading to the establishment of the Service-Learning and Faculty Fellows Programs.
2001	HUD awarded MSU a Community Outreach Partnership Center grant, which led to the creation of the Center for Community-Based Learning.
2006	The first of four <i>Bringing Theory to Practice (BT2P)</i> grants were awarded to MSU, including a Demonstration Grant in 2007. MSU also launched the Bonner Leader Program. The Center for Community-Based Learning was dissolved and reorganized into the Service-Learning and Community Engagement Program.
2010	Montclair awarded its first AmeriCorps Grant.
2014	Montclair was awarded a \$2.5 million five-year grant by the U.S. Department of Education to establish a University-Assisted Community School in partnership with Orange Public Schools.
2015	MSU received the Carnegie Foundation's Community Engagement Classification , and the Center for Community Engagement was formally established.
2021	Jonathan GS Koppell was appointed as the 9th President of MSU. In the same year, he inaugurated the Office for Community Engagement and Partnerships (OCEP). Montclair's longstanding commitment to community engagement laid the foundation for transforming campus culture and strengthening community connections.

FIGURE 1. Key milestones in Montclair State University's 30-year community engagement history.

The university has demonstrated a longstanding dedication to this work by deepening its investment in Place-Based Community Engagement, advancing collective impact strategies, and strengthening connections with local communities. It advances collective impact by fostering an unbounded institution that prioritizes place-based community engagement as part of its commitment to students and democracy. As Yamamua and Koth (2018) explains, there is no single model for PBCE efforts because each community faces unique challenges, and each university possesses distinct resources to help address those barriers. When these assets are connected through collaboration and shared knowledge, they can generate powerful solutions that respond to community needs across cultural, gender, and generational differences. Montclair integrated the Place-Based Community Engagement (PBCE) framework to cultivate community trust, co-create strategic solutions, and institutionalize sustainable outcomes.

The Emergence of Montclair State University as a Place-Based Community Engagement Institution

As a public-serving institution, Montclair is dedicated to advancing the public good through the theory and practice of Place-Based Community Engagement (PBCE). It adopted the three phases

of PBCE to become a place where students, faculty, and community interact to achieve the following mutually beneficial goals:

- **Exploration:** Identify community needs, map assets, and build trust.
- **Development:** Co-create strategies, set shared goals, and establish collaboration structures.
- **Sustaining:** Institutionalize engagement, scale initiatives, and strengthen partnerships.

In the article “A Meditation on Why Place Matters for Higher Education” (2024), Pribbenow asserts that colleges are place-based communities because they are rooted in a particular place, community, or neighborhood, and share a similar set of values and practices. This is important because it defines the way an institution designs its work to support and serve communities. A community-centered approach is an integral part of Montclair's mission, with university leadership actively supporting this commitment as a public-serving institution. Thus, Montclair developed a new mission statement and commitments to show how it plans to fulfill its commitment in advancing place-based community engagement efforts.

The following statements illustrate the university's commitment to place-based community engagement:

- **Mission** - *Form partnerships to enhance prosperity, democracy, and well-being in the community we serve and in the commitments; and*
- **Commitment** - *Embrace local universal aspiration - We are a national university that is proud to be of and for New Jersey. We serve our state's dynamic, varied communities while also fulfilling our obligations to serve our country, our planet, and the enduring truths that bind humanity as one (“Mission Statement,” 2025).*

Montclair's practical application of the PBCE framework is reflected in its commitment to the City of Paterson, New Jersey. The city was founded in 1791 under the leadership of Alexander Hamilton, who recognized the strategic importance of the Great Falls of the Passaic River as the site of one of America's first planned industrial centers. Over time, Paterson's mills and factories played a pivotal role in the nation's early industrialization, earning the city the title “Birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution.”

By the 1880s, Paterson had become the nation's leading silk-producing city. Throughout the 19th century, the success of its mills attracted many experienced immigrant workers. Today, Paterson continues to be known for its influx of immigrants seeking better opportunities for their families. Paterson, New Jersey, once celebrated as the birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution, has a rich legacy shaped by early investments in industrial infrastructure and its unique access to natural resources. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Paterson served as a national center of innovation, producing technologies that profoundly influenced the trajectory of the United States, from the Colt revolver that transformed the American West to the engine that

powered Charles Lindbergh's Spirit of St. Louis, as well as foundational components of the modern submarine ("About Paterson").

However, in the 20th century, the manufacturing revolution began to decline with the abandonment of factories in the area by industries. This resulted in Paterson's current economic condition, with limited job opportunities for the residents and a high risk for crime ("Paterson History: The Rich History of the City of Paterson, NJ"). Today, Paterson faces significant socio-economic challenges. The city, located in Passaic County, now contains some of New Jersey's most under-resourced neighborhoods, particularly within the 4th and 5th Wards and parts of the 1st Ward, areas that comprise the Paterson One Square Mile (OSM) community. Home to approximately 35,000 residents, the OSM area experiences persistent inequities, including high school non-completion rates, limited post-secondary access, and a workforce in which 71% of adults lack employment training ("Community Data & Feedback Summary Report," 2024). In response to these disparities, Montclair State University, guided by its public-service mission and commitment to strengthening democracy, has adopted the Paterson One Square Mile initiative as a place-based, collective-impact strategy. Through this effort, the University mobilizes its academic, social, and institutional resources to support the revitalization of Paterson's most underserved communities and addresses the critical educational and economic needs of its residents ("Community Data & Feedback Summary Report," 2024).

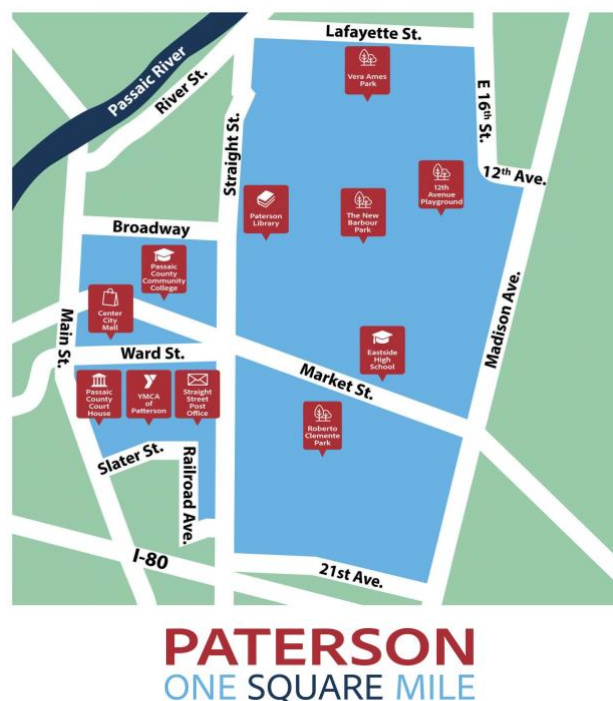


FIGURE 2. The map represents the geographic area primarily defined as the Paterson OSM by the 1st, 4th, and 5th wards of the City of Paterson.

Place-Based Community Engagement Framework in Action

The section below will discuss Montclair’s application of Place-Based Community Engagement in three phases: 1) Exploration, 2) Development, and 3) Sustaining.

Phase One: Exploration (2021-2024)

Guided by Yamamura and Koth’s “Three Phases of Place-Based Community Engagement” (2018), which begins with Exploration to identify community needs, map assets, and build trust, Montclair State University launched a foundational period of inquiry and strategic alignment in Paterson between 2021 and 2024. Similarly, as the success of a university could be evaluated by the well-being of its surrounding community, higher education institutions should consider developing mission-driven strategies that engage the community via the active participation of faculty, staff, and students. By recognizing the vital responsibility to collaborate *with* rather than just *for* communities, these institutions can maximize their impact and fully embrace their identities as anchor institutions (Clark, K.M., Martin, K.M., Nelson, A.K., Ullery, M., & Bester, V.S., 2024). Therefore, during the Exploration Phase, the University shifted from disconnected, one-off interventions to a coordinated, institutionally anchored approach that sought to bridge theory and practice through sustainable, equitable partnerships. This phase began in 2021 with the formal appointment of Jonathan GS Koppell as the 9th President of Montclair State University. In the same year, he inaugurated the Office for Community Engagement and Partnerships (OCEP).

Montclair’s longstanding commitment to community engagement laid the foundation for transforming campus culture and strengthening community connections. This evolution reflects a broader body of scholarship on Theory of Change (ToC), which is a strategic planning and evaluation tool that maps out how and why a specific initiative will achieve its long-term goals. It also underscores the importance of articulating the pathways of linking activities to long-term community outcomes. Studies indicate that the Theory of Change provides the conceptual scaffolding needed to guide complex community initiatives, helping organizations identify assumptions, map preconditions, and develop strategic connections (Anderson, 2005; Connell & Kubisch, 1998; Weiss, 1995). In community-engaged contexts, Theory of Change strengthens planning, implementation, and evaluation by aligning institutional resources with community-defined priorities. Models of multi-sector collaboration, including Collective Impact approaches, further reinforce ToC principles by emphasizing shared goals, cross-sector coordination, and mutually reinforcing activities as drivers of systemic change (Kania & Kramer, 2011; Cabaj & Weaver, 2016). As recent studies note, Theory of Change is especially critical in place-based university–community partnerships, where demonstrating coherence, equity, and accountability is essential for building trust and fostering sustained community transformation (Janzen, R., Ochocka, J., & Stobbe, A., 2019). Montclair’s early strategic decisions reflect this theoretical

grounding, marking a deliberate shift toward long-term, community-informed change-making in Paterson. Providing the strategic leadership necessary for systemic transformation, new presidential direction combined with donor support, most notably a \$1 million grant from the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation enabled Montclair to launch the Paterson One Square Mile (OSM) initiative and assume responsibility for its daily implementation. President Jonathan Koppell articulated a bold institutional vision in his inaugural address, describing a “public-serving university that expands opportunity, invents solutions, empowers problem-solvers, engages our communities, and reinvigorates our democracy.” To operationalize this vision, Montclair’s Office of Community Engagement and Partnerships (OCEP) served as the unit charged with mobilizing the University’s scholarly, economic, and institutional capacity in response to community-identified needs (“University Announces \$1 Million Grant to Develop Paterson One Square Mile Initiative,” 2023).

A central accomplishment of the Exploration phase was the transformation of Eastside High School into a University-assisted community hub offering comprehensive wraparound services, including academic interventions, mental health counseling, health care, free meals, adult English classes, and creative arts programming for teens. Funding also supported four Paterson-based nonprofits addressing homelessness, substance abuse, food insecurity, and youth arts engagement, illustrating Montclair’s commitment to community-led solutions. The establishment of the Paterson One Square Mile Advisory Committee further aligned University efforts with resident priorities, identifying housing as a focus alongside education, workforce development, health, and economic mobility. As Yamamura and Koth (2018) stated, the exploration phase is a critical time to engage key internal and external stakeholders to address issues that need action to move forward. Furthermore, as a result of community partners having a deep understanding of the needs within the populations they serve, higher education institutions need to prioritize listening to and learning from community, and co-creating solutions that would enable community leaders to validate outcomes ensuring the initiatives remain responsive to local community priorities (Brodie, B., Schwartzentruber, L., Teper, S., & Gray, B. (2024).

Aligned with this, the OSM advisory Committee became the platform to deliver the above goals by addressing key questions, clarifying the Place-Based Community Engagement vision, and getting feedback from the community to ensure alignment and mutual understanding and beneficial outcomes.

Moreover, this phase reflects Montclair’s commitment to laying “deep roots” in Paterson, a decades-long placement designed to uncover the ingredients of neighborhood transformation. As scholar-activist Jason Williams noted, Paterson’s urgent needs, spanning K–12 education, criminal legal system impacts, and substance use, require the kind of sustained investment historically denied to the city. Continuing this long-term commitment, the period concluded with a major cultural milestone: the opening of the Charles J. Muth Museum of Hinchliffe Stadium on

April 11, 2024. Made possible through a transformational \$5 million gift from Montclair alumnus and Paterson native Chuck Muth '77 and his wife, Laura, the museum honors the proud yet painful hard-fought history of Negro League baseball and Hinchliffe Stadium's role in Paterson's cultural life over the past eighty years. Its establishment further demonstrates Montclair's multidimensional investment in advancing community well-being through education, history, and place-based collaboration. The Hinchliffe Stadium played a pivotal role in shaping Paterson's cultural life over the past eighty years. The museum stands as both a site of remembrance and a symbol of Montclair's long-term, multidimensional commitment to community-centered revitalization ("Montclair State University Opens The Charles J. Muth," 2024).

Phase Two: Development (2023-2025)

The Development Phase focused on co-creating strategies and establishing the shared goals and collaboration structures necessary to translate Montclair State University's Theory of Change into coordinated community-grounded action. This phase corresponds directly with Phase Two of the Place-Based Community Engagement (PBCE) Framework, in which universities and community partners jointly design solutions, align resources, and build organizational structures required to advance new initiatives (Yamamura & Koth, 2018). However, it is important to highlight that there are no perfect place-based community engagement efforts unique to a specific situation faced by the higher education institutions and community partners; every situation and collaboration needs to be focused on building relationships with a wide range of stakeholders from residents, local organizations, government agencies, school districts and healthcare providers in a hyper-local geographic area (Barringer, Grabsch, Kalkidan, Anderson and Hinduja, 2025). The literature of PBCE continues to illustrate the importance of addressing the challenges through a community-focused approach and leveraging higher education institutional resources to foster co-creation of tailored solutions that address local community needs. Furthermore, higher education is in a unique position as a central stakeholder focusing on using its capacity as an anchor institution to elevate and drive positive social change (Jondy, J., & ZumBrunnen, M., 2025).

Montclair operationalized this phase by aligning the University's academic, economic, and institutional assets with the priorities identified by Paterson High School leaders, adult education partners, workforce agencies, and community-based organizations. This reciprocal alignment bridged theory and practice, ensuring that strategies were designed *with* the community rather than *for* the community, an essential PBCE principle.

The Theory of Change literature reinforces the importance of such structured alignment during program development. Researchers suggest that a well-articulated Theory of Change offers the conceptual infrastructure needed to guide complex, multi-stakeholder initiatives, clarifying the

causal pathways linking interventions to anticipated outcomes (Weiss, 1995; Connell & Kubisch, 1998; Anderson, 2005). More recent work demonstrates that the Theory of Change strengthens planning and evaluation within participatory and community-engaged settings by making assumptions explicit and ensuring that planned activities, supports, and resources systematically advance a shared vision of change. For example, the current digital age allows limitless exchange of ideas (Davidson, 2009; Kendall et al., 2012). The literature on multi-sector community change, including Collective Impact models, reflects similar principles, emphasizing that coordinated action, shared measurement, and mutually reinforcing roles are prerequisites for long-term community-level outcomes (Cabaj & Weaver, 2016). These insights informed Montclair's approach during the Development Phase, shaping the design of advising systems, tutoring models, curricular support, and partner engagement structures to ensure fidelity to the underlying causal logic.

Applying this integrated PBCE-Theory of Change lens, Montclair and Paterson partners worked collaboratively to identify the intermediate outcomes necessary for student and community success, articulate measurable goals, and assign mutually reinforcing roles across institutions. Furthermore, existing research indicates that offering students robust academic support, mentorship, and culturally enriching experiences encourages them to emerge as future educational leaders. Inspired to "pay it forward," become guides for their peers. Additionally, supporting families as they navigate the educational system is also essential, as parental understanding of these processes is a critical factor in ensuring students receive a quality education and achieve academic success. (Salina, J., Cardenas-Vazquez, S., De Alva, S., Salinas, E., Salinas, G., & Santana, V. (2025).

For Early College, this co-creation process led to a unified strategy for aligning course selection, intrusive advising, tutoring deployment, bilingual communication, and family engagement, structures shown in the literature to increase academic persistence and postsecondary momentum (Adelman, 2006; Bailey et al., 2015; Karp, 2016). For Adult ESL learners, collaborative design emphasized contextualized instruction, workforce navigation, digital literacy, and community-connected support, consistent with community-engaged adult education research. These structures strengthened continuity across service providers and ensured that programming reflected both community expertise and evidence-based practice.

The synergy between the PBCE framework and the Theory of Change was especially critical in the Development Phase. While the Theory of Change articulated *why* specific interventions would contribute to long-term educational and economic mobility outcomes, PBCE structured *how* cross-sector partners would align their responsibilities, design strategies, and coordinate resources to achieve those outcomes. Together, these frameworks ensured that Montclair's emerging initiatives were not isolated or reactive but thoughtfully constructed components of a broader ecosystem of place-based collaboration.

Notable activities and partnerships in the Development Phase include focus on gathering voices, strategic planning and priorities development, public launches and continued community engagement, expand programming, collaboration and pathways at Eastside High School through College and Career Readiness Infused Programming, Food Technician Career Pathway Training, Summer Bridge and Career Exploration, Hispanic Serving College Institute, Rapid Response and Community Need Mobilization.

Community Engagement and Collective Impact: The Gathering Voice Campaign

During Phase Two, the One Square Mile (OSM) initiative advanced from exploration to implementation through a comprehensive community engagement strategy rooted in collective impact principles. Central to this effort was the “Gathering Voices” Community Feedback Campaign, conducted in partnership with Transform Consulting Group (TCG), a highly accomplished external consulting agency with deep expertise in community engagement, collective impact, and strategic planning.

Through this large-scale engagement effort, OSM and TCG gathered input from more than 300 community members, representing residents, service providers, educators, and local leaders. Engagement activities included two large-scale community events and ten focused listening sessions, providing opportunities for residents to share their lived experiences and articulate the challenges and opportunities present in Paterson’s neighborhoods.

TCG synthesized the qualitative feedback with publicly available data to produce the Community Data & Feedback Summary Report, which served as the foundation for the Advisory Committee’s decision-making process. The report illuminated a range of interconnected needs facing Paterson families and ultimately guided the Advisory Committee in identifying housing as the primary focus area for the first action phase of OSM. To ensure that findings were accessible and widely disseminated, Montclair State University and TCG developed a public-facing infographic, conducted two webinars, and leveraged social media outreach to share key insights and promote community awareness (“Community Data & Feedback Summary Report,” 2024).

Strategic Planning and Development of Housing Priorities

With housing established as the initiative’s central priority, Montclair and TCG conducted extensive research to ground the strategy in local assets and evidence-based practices. This included development of an asset map of organizations providing housing-related services in Paterson, review of best-practice models from comparable communities, and analysis of policy opportunities and systemic barriers (“Paterson One Square Mile”).

The findings were compiled into a comprehensive Housing Research Report, which informed a strategic planning session in May. During this convening, the Paterson OSM Advisory Committee collaboratively developed strategies around five core housing aims that now anchor the OSM Housing Plan:

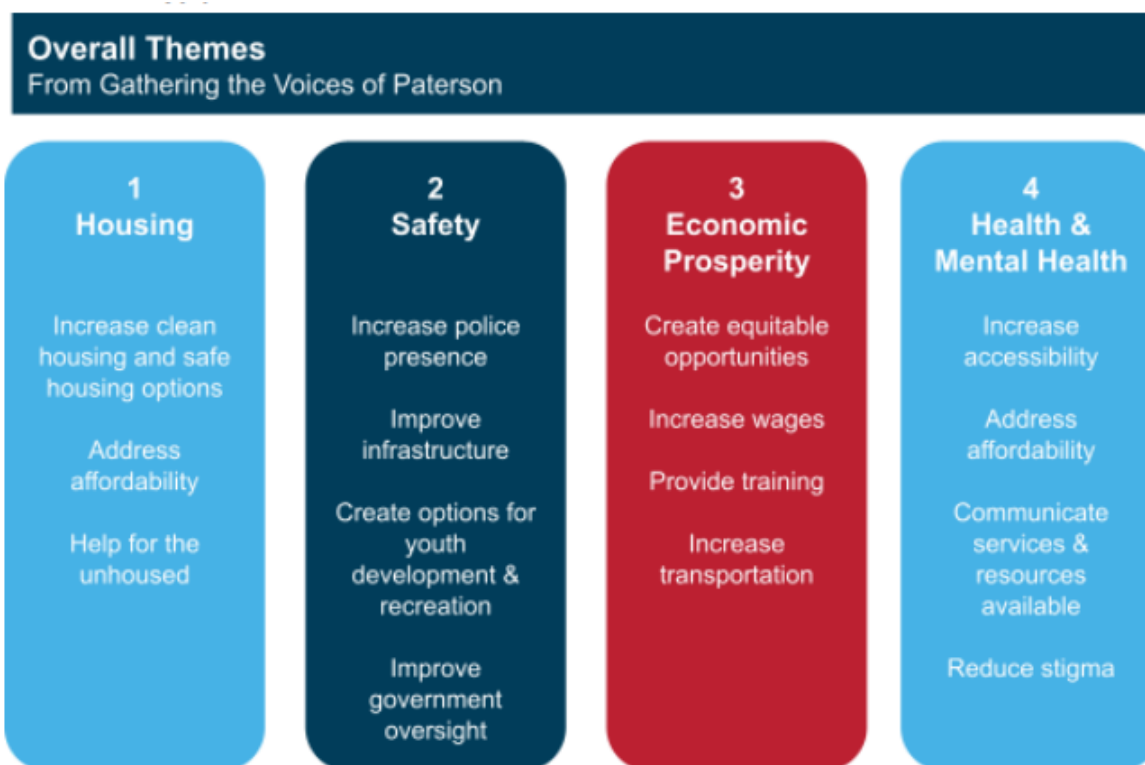


FIGURE 3. Four “overall themes” from the “gathering the voices of Paterson” initiative.

To deepen and validate the emerging strategies, Montclair hosted two additional Gathering Voices housing-focused events in June 2024, drawing over 200 community attendees. The feedback collected during these sessions refined and prioritized the draft strategies. TCG incorporated this input into the initiative’s first comprehensive housing strategic action plan, *Housing in Paterson One Square Mile: A Foundation for the Future*.

Complementing the strategic plan, Montclair and TCG launched a public housing dashboard, now available on the Paterson OSM website. The dashboard provides ongoing access to key housing indicators, ensuring transparency and supporting data-driven accountability.

Public Launch and Continued Community Engagement

On November 21, 2024, Montclair and TCG formally unveiled the housing strategic plan and dashboard during a public launch event attended by community members, partners, and stakeholders. To encourage further involvement, TCG created an engagement one-pager with a

QR code that links residents to an interactive form where they can learn more and participate in future activities (“Paterson One Square Mile”).

Expand Programming, Partnerships, and Pipelines at Eastside High School as a University-Assisted Full-Service Community School

Through the Eastside Full-Service Community School model, OSM supported 15 programs serving 2,229 students and families from 2023–2024. These programs addressed academic enrichment, college readiness, social-emotional learning, and workforce development.

Methodology and Practice: Implementing Place-Based Community Engagement through the One Square Mile Early College Program

This article utilized the Place-Based Community Engagement (PBCE) framework and Theory of Change principles to guide the development of the Paterson One Square Mile (OSM) initiative and the university-assisted Full Service Community School partnership with Eastside High School. Through the PBCE model, Montclair State University sought to deepen relationships with local communities, transform both campus culture and community outcomes, and improve opportunities for educational attainment and economic mobility, aligning with the CUMU 2025 Conference theme, “The Power of Place.”

The implementation process followed the three PBCE phases: Exploration, Development, and Sustaining. During the Exploration Phase, university representatives engaged school administrators, teachers and families to identify students' needs and establish trust. Planning meetings included school leadership, school counselors, teachers, Full Service Community School staff, university faculty, and community partners. Recruitment into the planning process occurred through existing relationships between the Paterson Public Schools and university faculty and staff.

The Development Phase focused on co-creating strategies and establishing shared goals among the university, school district, and families. A primary objective was to increase educational access and college readiness for underrepresented urban youth in Paterson. Supported by the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation and Full Service Community Schools federal grant funding, the One Square Mile Early College Program launched in Fall 2024 with 18 students. By Fall 2025, enrollment increased to 25 students as part of a collaborative intervention designed to strengthen the transition from high school to college. Planning and implementation involved extensive coordination among university departments, including Montclair’s Early College Programs staff, University Community Action Nexus, the College of Communication and Media, Bloomfield College, faculty members, tutors, and Full Service Community School staff, all of whom

emphasized student-centered Theory of Change and Place-Based Community Engagement approaches.

Relationship-building served as the foundation of implementation. University staff participated in after-school programs, classroom visits, parent workshops, and community events to establish visibility and trust with students and families. Meetings with principals, counselors, and teachers helped develop recruitment strategies and communication plans that were culturally responsive and accessible to families. Information sessions were offered in both English and Spanish to ensure equitable participation. Recruitment followed a best-practices model using GPA benchmarks, teacher recommendations, and individualized outreach to students and parents.

The logistics of implementation reflected a coordinated, student-centered approach. Students received support with registration, onboarding, NetID setup, two-factor authentication, tutoring, mentoring, and academic advising. Courses were intentionally selected to provide transferable college credits and foundational academic skills. The program offered Argumentative & Analytic Writing (WRT 105) through Bloomfield College and Interpersonal Communication (CMST 146) through Montclair State University. Faculty integrated experiential learning opportunities, campus tours, and professional development workshops focused on communication, time management, and college readiness. Tutoring was provided both virtually and in person to accommodate student schedules and learning needs.

The Sustaining Phase focused on institutionalizing these partnerships through the university-assisted Full Service Community School model. The initiative emphasized long-term collaboration rather than episodic intervention by embedding university resources, faculty expertise, and student engagement into community-based educational strategies. Through service-learning projects, internships, and community-based research, the university leveraged its role as an anchor institution to create mutually beneficial relationships that support both community advancement and student experiential learning.

Results

Evaluation data demonstrated significant success. All 43 students who participated in the inaugural Fall 2024 and Fall 2025 cohorts completed their college-credit courses, earning between three and seven college credits, with all students receiving passing grades of A. Student surveys indicated 100% satisfaction with the program, highlighting strong faculty support, increased confidence, and improved time-management skills. Faculty and staff reported growth in students' communication abilities and academic preparedness, while tutors identified personalized mentoring and one-on-one support as critical components of student success. Lessons learned included the importance of earlier technology distribution, clearer

communication regarding support roles, and continued alignment between faculty and tutoring staff.

The One Square Mile Early College Program demonstrates how place-based community engagement can function as an impactful intervention by building trust, aligning institutional resources with community priorities, and co-creating sustainable educational pathways for historically underrepresented students. The detailed planning, relationship-building strategies, and logistical coordination described in this initiative provide a replicable model for higher education institutions seeking to advance collective impact through university resources and community partnerships, including collaborations with local school districts.

Paterson One Square Mile Rapid Response and Community Need Mobilization

A critical component of the Development Phase is the capacity to respond quickly and effectively to emergent community needs, reinforcing both trust and accountability within the One Square Mile initiative. Grounded in the principles of Place-Based Community Engagement (PBCE), Montclair State University operationalized a rapid-response model that aligns university and community resources to address urgent local priorities while maintaining long-term strategic goals (Yamamura & Koth, 2018). This approach reflects a Theory of Change, an informed understanding that timely interventions, when connected to systemic supports and collaborative structures, can generate measurable impact across multiple dimensions of community well-being.

In 2024, the Paterson One Square Mile Rapid Response Community ReGrant Program exemplified this model in action. The program provided agile, targeted funding to community-based organizations serving Paterson's 1st, 4th, and 5th Wards, supporting projects that addressed immediate needs in housing, education, health, and social services. Four organizations received grants totaling \$159,597, enabling them to scale evidence-based interventions and expand outreach. Recipients included:

- **Chosen Generation Community Corporation – Tier 1 Recovery**, addressing overdose prevention and substance use disorder treatment through culturally responsive programming.
- **Inner City Ensemble**, providing arts-based engagement, dual-language programming, and mentorship for local youth.
- **New Destiny Family Success Centers, Inc.**, is implementing family-centered enrichment and attendance interventions to combat chronic absenteeism.
- **Wafa House, Inc.**, offers culturally sensitive domestic-violence services and capacity-building support for survivors.

These grants were complemented by community events such as the 4th Ward CPTED Committee Block Party and the “Say That Be About That Back-to-School” Event, which

mobilized residents, fostered neighborhood cohesion, and strengthened connections between students, families, and service providers. Additionally, the Paterson Alliance Apprenticeship Program offered high school students hands-on professional experience within nonprofit and community initiatives, reinforcing civic engagement and workforce-readiness competencies.

From a Theory of Change perspective, this rapid-response framework illustrates the causal pathway between immediate resource deployment and longer-term community outcomes: addressing urgent needs enhances trust, engagement, and participation, which in turn amplifies the effectiveness of broader strategic interventions such as Early College, Adult ESL, and career-readiness programs. By integrating rapid-response mechanisms with ongoing assessment and feedback loops, Montclair ensures that emergent challenges, such as food insecurity, substance abuse crises, or access barriers, are addressed promptly while maintaining alignment with the initiative's overarching goal of sustainable community transformation.

This model also exemplifies PBCE's principle of mutually reinforcing activities: rapid-response projects are designed not as isolated efforts, but as components of a cohesive ecosystem of interventions, informed by community input, coordinated across sectors, and connected to systemic outcomes. By combining agile action with long-term strategic alignment, Montclair and its partners maximize both immediate and enduring impact, demonstrating how universities can act as responsive, accountable, and equity-focused anchors within their communities.

By grounding the Development Phase in shared goals, co-created strategies, and durable collaboration structures, Montclair State University and its Paterson partners established the foundation necessary for coordinated implementation and long-term community impact. This integrated approach strengthened the initiative's capacity to influence both individual learner trajectories and broader systems of educational opportunity within the city.

Expanding Educational Services

- Faculty and staff expertise deepened engagement through teaching, learning, and research opportunities within the One Square Mile.
- Early College and Career Readiness programs, along with Adult ESL training, are designed to empower residents to pursue personal and professional growth, reinforcing the university's dual role as both educator and collaborator.
- Co-create programs, develop shared goals, and establish a collaboration structure. Since its inception, Paterson OSM has launched and supported several impactful programs/projects and has served a total of **843 community members**.

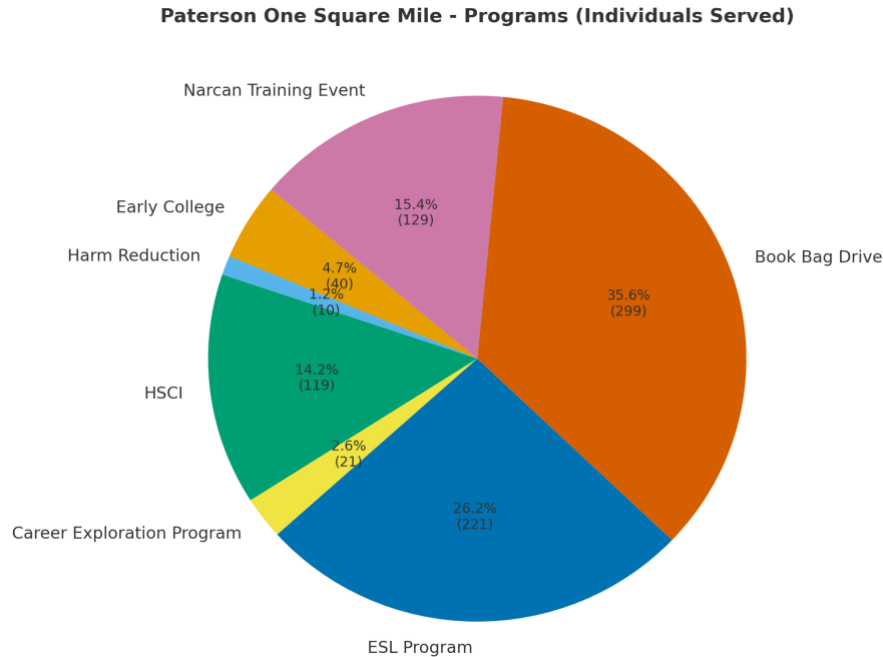


FIGURE 4. The chart explains the total number of individuals served in the Paterson One Square Mile programs.

Paterson One Square Mile: TOTAL IMPACT 843	
Programs/Projects	Number of People Served
Early College	40 community members
Harm Reduction	10 community members
Hispanic Student College Institute & Summer Bridge Career Exploration Workshop	120 community members
Career Exploration Program	22 community members
Adult ESL Program	221 community members
Book Bag Drive	300 community members
Narcan Training Event	130 community members

FIGURE 5. Total number of community members served.

Paterson One Square Mile: Summary of Community Impact

Across its place-based initiatives, the Paterson One Square Mile project served **843 community members**, demonstrating broad engagement in education, health, and community support programs. Educational pathways reached diverse age groups, including over **40 Early College participants**, **120 youth engaged through the Hispanic Student College Institute and Summer Bridge Career Exploration Workshop**, and **22 individuals participating in career exploration programming**. Adult learners benefited substantially, with **221 residents enrolled in the Adult ESL Program**, reflecting strong community demand for language-access initiatives.

Community-centered support further extended the project's reach. Health and safety efforts included **10 participants in harm-reduction activities** and **130 attendees receiving Narcan training**, contributing to local capacity for overdose prevention. In addition, the **Book Bag Drive distributed resources to 300 community members**, helping meet essential needs.

Collectively, these outcomes illustrate the comprehensive, multi-sector impact of the initiative and highlight the value of place-based, collaborative approaches to community engagement.

Additionally, Carolyn McCombs, Executive Director of New Destiny Family Center, reported that the Regranting funding enabled the organization to serve 734 middle school students through its After-School Attendance Improvement Program during the 2024-2025 academic year. Participation increased steadily across marking periods, with 113 students attending the first, 124 the second, 185 the third, and 213 the fourth. Students who participated in the after-school activities reported feeling more motivated to attend school as a result of their involvement in the program.

Phase Three: Sustaining (2025-2028+)

The Sustaining Phase represents the institutionalization of Montclair State University's Place-Based Community Engagement, in which community engagement becomes embedded in the university's structures, policies, and long-term strategic direction. In alignment with the PBCE framework, this phase emphasizes building durable systems that ensure continuity, scale, and deepened collaboration, advancing sustainable, equitable partnerships that center community priorities and support collective well-being (Yamamura & Koth, 2018). Consistent with the Theory of Change literature, sustainability emerges not from maintaining a fixed set of programs but from constructing the conditions, relationships, and learning environments that allow community-driven change to evolve and endure over time (Anderson, 2005; Funnell & Rogers, 2011; Kubisch, Auspos, Brown, Buck, & Dewar, 2010).

The Public Innovation Hub: Embedding Capability-Building as Core Infrastructure

At the heart of the Sustaining Phase is the Public Innovation Hub, which functions as the connective tissue between the University and the Paterson community. The Hub coordinates faculty expertise, student capacity, and university resources to address community-identified needs and generate meaningful, measurable impact within Paterson's One Square Mile and beyond. Its design reflects a shift from program delivery to capability-building, ensuring that residents, community organizations, and university partners strengthen their skills while collaborating on real-world projects.

Through "learning-by-doing," the Innovation Hub embeds methods from systems thinking and improvement science into everyday practice, introducing structured tools for diagnosing complex problems, testing changes, using data for decision-making, and refining strategies based on evidence. This integration of technical assistance and capacity development aligns with PBCE principles by bridging theory and practice and fostering reciprocal learning that strengthens both university and community partners. In this way, the Hub simultaneously advances tangible, community-led projects and expands the long-term capacity of Paterson stakeholders to drive systemic change.

The Paterson Anchor Collaborative: Aligning Institutional Power for Equity and Mobility

The Paterson Anchor Collaborative represents a second pillar of sustained, systemic impact. Designed to close the racial wealth and opportunity gap, the Collaborative brings together local anchor institutions, including Montclair State University, health systems, nonprofits, and municipal partners, to align strategies for hiring, procurement, workforce development, and policy to support community-defined goals. This structure reflects an evidence-based approach in the Theory of Change literature, in which aligned institutional investments serve as levers to improve economic mobility, health outcomes, safety, and housing stability within historically marginalized communities (Connell & Kubisch, 1998; Kubisch, Auspos, Brown, Buck, & Dewar, 2010).

By embedding accountability mechanisms and long-term commitments within participating institutions, the Anchor Collaborative ensures that community priorities, not institutional convenience, drive strategy. Residents' voices and aspirations remain central to One Square Mile in Action, and the Collaborative reinforces shared ownership of outcomes across sectors. Together, the *Innovation Hub and Anchor Collaborative* create a sustainability infrastructure in which capability-building, institutional alignment, and shared accountability continually reinforce one another.

Building a Model for Adaptation and Scale

Beyond Paterson, the Sustaining Phase positions Montclair's place-based work as an adaptable model for other communities in New Jersey and beyond. Rather than replicating a fixed blueprint, Montclair aims to disseminate principles, tools, and methods, including community-engaged research practices, systems thinking approaches, and PBCE-aligned structures, that can be tailored to varying local contexts. This emphasis on adaptation reflects the broader field's recognition that sustainable community change must be flexible, iterative, and grounded in local knowledge (Rogers, 2008; Vogel, 2012).

Dodge Foundation Support: Strengthening the Systemic Architecture for Change

Support from the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation enables the integration of three systemic levers, the Innovation Hub, the Anchor Collaborative, and One Square Mile in Action, into a cohesive architecture for community transformation. Rather than funding isolated projects, this investment strengthens a long-term, community-driven change model that connects strategy, capacity-building, and institutional action. This architecture not only positions Paterson for sustained advancement but also contributes to the broader field of place-based, systemic change by demonstrating how universities can act as durable, equity-focused anchor partners.

Discussion and Conclusion

Across its three phases, Exploration, Development, and Sustaining, the Montclair State University One Square Mile initiative demonstrates how higher education institutions can enact a long-term, equity-focused model of community engagement that is both systematic and transformative. Guided by the Place-Based Community Engagement (PBCE) framework, the University intentionally anchors its work within Paterson's neighborhoods, aligning institutional resources with community-identified priorities and fostering sustainable, reciprocal partnerships that advance shared goals and collective well-being (Yamamura & Koth, 2018). At each stage, PBCE provides the structural orientation that ensures engagement is not peripheral or episodic, but rooted in place, relationships, and co-created strategies.

The integration of Theory of Change strengthens this approach by offering a clear, evidence-informed pathway from activities to outcomes, serving as a blueprint for planning, implementation, and evaluation (Anderson, 2005; Funnell & Rogers, 2011). Rather than relying on reactive or disconnected interventions, Montclair's work in Paterson is shaped by a deliberate understanding of how systemic change occurs over time, beginning with trust-building and asset mapping, advancing through collaborative strategy development, and culminating in institutionalized structures designed to sustain impact. This intentional sequencing ensures that

each action is purposefully aligned with long-term goals, measurable outcomes, and the evolving aspirations of Paterson residents.

Ultimately, Montclair's place-based commitment demonstrates that meaningful community impact emerges not from isolated projects, short-term pilots, or externally imposed solutions, but from carefully planned, co-created, and continuously evaluated initiatives that honor community expertise and mobilize university strengths. By institutionalizing engagement, strengthening collaborative networks, and aligning resources with resident-driven priorities, this work advances a model of mutual benefit, enhancing educational opportunities, economic mobility, health, safety, and community well-being while providing rich learning, research, and civic engagement opportunities for students and faculty.

This evolving partnership between Montclair State University and the City of Paterson offers a replicable yet adaptable model for universities seeking to engage deeply and responsibly with their surrounding communities. It embodies an approach to place-based transformation that is not only aspirational but actionable, one that demonstrates how universities can be enduring partners in advancing justice, equity, and systemic change.

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