

## **Serving a “City Invincible” With Access and Engagement**

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**E**ngraved on the south side of City Hall in Camden, New Jersey, not too far from the Rutgers University–Camden campus, are the words of the poet Walt Whitman: “In a dream I saw a city invincible,” from his poem “I Dream’d in a Dream.” On the front of the building, there is etched a passage from Proverbs 29:18: “Where there is no vision the people will perish.” The city of Camden has faced considerable challenges over the past several decades, struggling to recapture the economic vitality that it was known for during the boom of the industrial revolution, when RCA/Victor, the Campbell Soup Company, and the New York Ship Building Company brought tens of thousands of jobs into the city.

Founded in the 1920s, during the period of economic boom in Camden, Rutgers University–Camden began as the South Jersey Law School and the College of South Jersey. In 1950, the two schools became the Camden campus when they merged with Rutgers, the state university of New Jersey. During the subsequent years, Rutgers’s relationship with its host city could be characterized as “cordial,” but the university focused inward. Construction during the 1960s and 1970s resulted in facilities that faced into the liberal center of campus, delivering the perception of a university turning its back on what was becoming by then a struggling community.

The long-term effects of deindustrialization and social and racial inequity became more visible in the city during the time when Rutgers–Camden was building out the campus. Today, they continue to challenge Camden, where African Americans make up 48% and Hispanics 47% of the city’s population, and the unemployment rate is 12%, more than double the national average. Only 37% of Camden residents over age 25 have graduated from high school and among those high school graduates, less than 10% have earned either a 2-year or 4-year college degree (*U.S. Census Bureau, 2015*). Furthermore, more than one third of Camden residents—40%—currently live below poverty levels, and 54% of children under age 18 are living below poverty (*U.S. Census Bureau, 2015*). These numbers are even more staggering when considering that 44% of

Camden's population (77,344 people) is under age 24 (*U.S. Census Bureau, 2015*).

However, this "city invincible" is in the midst of resurgence. Economic development initiatives are bringing into the city corporations such as Subaru, the Philadelphia 76ers, Lockheed Martin, and Holtec, along with technology and manufacturing companies that will bring new jobs and strengthen the economic foundation of Camden. Public safety has been greatly enhanced, the city's community policing efforts catching the attention of President Barack Obama, who visited Camden in 2015.

However, the key to truly transforming the city lies in transforming the educational landscape for Camden's youth. High quality K-12 education and access to higher education are imperative for moving Camden youth out of generational poverty, and the city struggles to make significant gains in these areas. As we started to think more deeply as an institution about how to engage the city in meaningful ways, it became clear we needed to make educating Camden's K-12 youth and supporting their transition to and through higher education a key part of our mission as a university.

## **Camden K-12 Background**

More than 15,000 Camden youth attend K-12 schools in the city and over the years, Camden's public schools have faced significant challenges in raising the level of achievement of their students. In 2014, for example, 23 of the 26 schools in the district had the lowest schoolwide proficiency rates in New Jersey, with three of the public schools designated as the absolute lowest performing schools in the state. In the 2012–2013 school year, only 21% of K-8 students in the district reached proficiency in language arts literacy, and only 31% attained proficiency in math. High school students did not fare much better, with only 41% reaching proficiency in language arts literacy and 18% in math.[Citation – Camden City Schools Superintendent Presentation, Wednesday, January 8, 2014]]

Graduation rates have increased over the past 2 years: 62% of Camden high school students graduated in 2014, up from 56% in 2013 and 41% in 2012. Nonetheless, a significant gap remains between Camden public school students and their peers in schools across New Jersey in relation to college and career readiness. During the 2013–2014 school year, only 32% of seniors in Camden's two traditional comprehensive high schools, Woodrow Wilson High School and Camden High School, took the SAT. In school districts with comparable demographics, 72% of students took the exam.

Among the students from the two schools who took the SAT, none met the College Board SAT benchmark score of 1550, and three were considered college-ready (*Camden City School District, 2014*).

Despite these sobering statistics, students in the public schools are eager to learn, and their parents have high expectations of them. Students and their families have long sought rigorous and engaging educational experiences, both during and outside the school day, that will increase academic achievement and provide a pathway to higher education. Over the past 2 years, a newly appointed state superintendent of the public schools has begun to respond to and address the needs and desires of students and families by reducing the administrative bureaucracy that prevented parents from advocating for their children; increasing professional development, training, and mentoring of school leaders and teachers; and partnering with nonprofit charter school operators to convert several schools to charter–public hybrid “renaissance” schools. Students and families have said that they have seen some progress in the schools, though huge challenges still remain—especially for those students who wish to transition to higher education upon graduation.

### **Barriers to College Access**

These are matters of particular concern to me, as the chancellor of Rutgers in Camden, but I also know that thousands of low-income students face barriers to college access every year in our neighboring Philadelphia and across the nation. According to a recent White House report (*Executive Office of the President, 2014*), research shows that the level of a student’s academic achievement by eighth grade has a greater impact on college and career readiness than high school achievement. However, low-income students are less likely to take a core curriculum and less likely to meet readiness benchmarks on college entrance exams than their peers from higher income families.

For those low-income students who do graduate high school, many are much less likely to enroll in college. Access to college advising and mentorship is important for all students as they prepare for college, yet students from low-income families and disadvantaged backgrounds have few mentors to turn to, and school guidance counselors are often too overwhelmed to provide students the additional necessary guidance and support to navigate the college application process. In 2012, only 52% of children from low-income families enrolled in college immediately after gradu-

ating from high school, compared to 82% of graduating students from families in the top fifth of income distribution (*Executive Office of the President, 2014*).

Once in college, these students continue to face challenges. Many students enter college underprepared and at 4-year institutions, low-income students have the greatest remediation needs. They also are less likely to attend colleges and universities that give them the best chances for success, believing that the cost of attendance is out of reach at such small liberal arts colleges and highly selective universities, mainly because they are often not fully aware of their options (*Executive Office of the President, 2014*). Even when low-income students gain access to college, they are less likely to complete college than higher-income students. These challenges highlight the need for interventions at earlier ages to better prepare low-income students for college. Unfortunately, these students often are enrolled in poorer districts where those interventions are not occurring.

### **The Impact of Higher Education**

We know that earning a college degree leads to greater lifetime earnings, as well as lower levels of unemployment and poverty. Data confirm that far more people from high-income families (half) earn a bachelor's degree by age 25 than do those from low-income families (1 in 10; *Executive Office of the President, 2014*). According to a recent study by Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce, of the 2.9 million "good jobs" created from 2010 to 2014, defined as those with median annual earnings of \$42,700, fully 2.8 million (97%) have gone to workers with at least a bachelor's degree (*Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2015; Stilwell, 2015*). Furthermore, according to a previous Georgetown study (*Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011*) on the long-term value of a college degree, people who hold bachelor's degrees earn about \$2.27 million over their lifetime, more than counterparts with some college (\$1.55 million) or a high school diploma (\$1.3 million).

Many universities ascribe their community-based commitments to their roles as anchor institutions. According to the Anchor Institutions Task Force (AITF), an anchor institution must imbue its mission with social purpose, emphasizing such core values as "democracy, equity, social and racial justice, place and community," in order for that institution to "become a change agent and engine of socioeconomic development" (*Taylor & Luter, 2013, p. 7*).

Late in the 1990s, Rutgers University–Camden made a strategic decision to embrace the guiding principles set forth by the AITF. The university began to transform its culture to become *of* the community in addition to being *in* the community. Community engagement emerged as a pedagogical opportunity for faculty and students alike, albeit in an ad hoc manner. In 2009, Rutgers–Camden formalized its commitment to civically-engaged learning with the creation of an Office of Civic Engagement and the appointment of an executive-level leadership position with campuswide responsibility for developing civically engaged learning courses and programs.

As an anchor institution, we are committed to the city not just because we are a “fixed asset,” but because our larger purpose is to “play a vital role in the building of a better, more democratic and just society” (*Taylor & Luter, 2013, p. 1*). Through our civic engagement initiatives, we ask ourselves as an institution how to leverage the resources of the university to address complex societal problems that exist in the city of Camden, especially those affecting youth and education.

Through partnerships with faculty, deans, and administrators, Rutgers University–Camden has built a solid foundation of courses that incorporate some element of community engagement. These courses, many of them undergraduate, reflect our longstanding commitment to experiential learning by providing our students with rich learning experiences, and faculty with innovative opportunities to advance their research projects and teaching skills. The programs cut across every academic unit at Rutgers University–Camden, from the humanities and arts to law, business, and nursing.

## **K-12 Education Outreach at Rutgers University–Camden**

In tandem with the growth of civic engagement in its academic mission, Rutgers University–Camden has identified core areas of emphasis that place students, faculty, staff, and alumni into partnerships with the community focused on Camden youth and their education. By engaging the critical resources of the university to create academically enriching and rigorous programming for students in grades K-12, Rutgers University–Camden is focused on achieving better outcomes for youth and families in the city of Camden and creating pathways for youth to access higher education. Each initiative builds and expands on another, connecting

Camden youth to Rutgers programs from elementary to high school and supporting them while they attend Rutgers or other institutions of higher education to college completion.

Rutgers–Camden has made a signature commitment to supporting all K-12 institutions in the city of Camden through a variety of civic engagement efforts, described below.

**Rutgers North Camden Schools Partnership.** This collaboration between Rutgers–Camden, the Camden City Public Schools, Mastery Charter Schools, and the Camden Community Charter School serves more than 300 students in grades K-8 and their families through a university-assisted community schools approach. It seeks to increase student achievement by providing an integrated system of partnerships that promote academic success, support positive social and emotional development, and engage families and community members in an effort to strengthen the North Camden neighborhood.

**Ignite.** Launched in 2012 and supported by funding from the New Jersey Department of Education, Ignite is a STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) program aimed at “sparking discovery” through experiential and inquiry-based instruction. Camden students in fourth through eighth grade receive daily academic enrichment through health and wellness activities, express themselves creatively through visual and performing arts programming, and begin to focus on their futures with early college awareness workshops offered by the Hill Family Center for College Access in their school sites across the neighborhood. During the summer, Ignite students come to campus, where they spend their days working closely with Rutgers–Camden faculty, staff, and students and experiencing life on a college campus. The intention underpinning all of the efforts of Ignite and the Rutgers North Camden Schools Partnership is for these Camden youth to envision themselves as future college students and to begin creating their own path to higher education. For Rutgers–Camden, this civic engagement initiative is the beginning of building the pipeline to college.

In addition to our elementary and middle school initiatives, Rutgers–Camden has developed more intentional educational pathway opportunities to increase the number of underrepresented students in and around the city who apply to, enroll in, and complete postsecondary education, including Rutgers Future Scholars and The Hill Family Center for College Access.

**Rutgers Future Scholars.** Each year, this program introduces 50 first-generation, low-income, academically promising rising eighth graders from the Camden City schools to the promise and opportunities of a college education. Beginning in the summer preceding their eighth-grade year, Scholars become part of a unique precollege experience of year-round university academic programming and enrichment events, support, and mentoring that continues through high school and college. For Scholars who complete the precollege part of the program with an academic record suitable for admission to Rutgers University, Rutgers provides 4 years of tuition-free college education. Currently there are 250 Scholars in eighth to 12th grade in Camden and 68 Scholar alumni in college, with an additional 22 Scholar-alums to be added for the 2015–2016 school year.

**The Hill Family Center for College Access.** The Center was created in 2011 by the generous donations of two brothers, Dr. Washington Hill and Dr. George Hill, both former Camden residents and graduates of Rutgers–Camden. The Hill Center seeks to help underrepresented, economically-disadvantaged youth in and around the city make the transition to higher education. The Center provides workshops in high schools and on campus for students in Grades 11 and 12. Trained Rutgers students assist students and their families in understanding higher education options, exploring career and academic interests, and securing financial aid through scholarships and FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) completion. The Hill Center also offers workshops to students in Grades 6 to 10 to build early college awareness and provides on-campus tours at Rutgers–Camden to expose students to college life. Since opening in 2011, the Hill Center has provided assistance to over 1,800 students in and around the city of Camden.

Over the past year, there have been significant changes to the K-12 landscape in Camden. Charter and renaissance schools have been expanding in order to provide additional educational options for families. In traditional public schools, the focus has been on increasing the capacity of school leaders and the rigor of the curriculum so that more students are college- and career-ready upon graduation. Furthermore, in 2015, the Obama Administration designated Camden a Promise Zone. Under the Promise Zone initiative, the federal government partners with local leaders in high-poverty communities “to increase economic activity, improve educational opportunities, leverage private investment, reduce violent crime, enhance public health and address other priorities identi-

fied by the community” (*United States Department of Agriculture, 2015, para. 1*).

To further those efforts, representatives from Rutgers University–Camden were among hundreds of higher education leaders who participated in the White House College Opportunity Day of Action in December 2014 in Washington, D.C. During the summit, Rutgers–Camden promised to continue its commitment to promote completion, create K-16 partnerships to advance college readiness, invest in the First Lady’s Reach Higher initiative, and increase the number of college graduates in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

According to Rutgers University–Camden enrollment records, since 2008, 1,044 Camden high school students applied to Rutgers University–Camden, with 404 being admitted (38%). Of the 404 admitted students, 196 came to Rutgers–Camden. Within that same timeframe, 513 students from Camden attending other colleges applied to Rutgers–Camden to transfer, and 248 were admitted (48%). Out of that group, 162 students transferred to Rutgers–Camden.

The collective results of these initiatives, including early indicators of student academic growth evidenced in programs like Ignite and the number of Camden students who have successfully transitioned into college, give us hope that civic engagement efforts like these can create a pathway out of poverty and educational inequity and a more positive outcome for Camden youth. Although the core of this work is focused on strengthening the educational experiences of youth in the city and providing them access to opportunities that we hope one day will allow them to realize their own dreams, these initiatives have done more than that. These K-12 initiatives have not only allowed us to mobilize the vast resources of the university in service to the students and families of Camden, but also helped advance Rutgers’s teaching, research, and service mission and the civic development of its undergraduate and graduate students through their deep engagement with this work.

Civic engagement activities are the result of mutually articulated interests and seek mutually beneficial outcomes. Rutgers–Camden’s K-12 efforts are not simply spaces for our faculty and students to serve and develop civic-mindedness, but act as efforts to collaboratively address critical problems in the community. It is through partnerships and collaborations that we are seeking to live out the public service mission of higher education. If access to higher education is key to lifting individuals and families out

of poverty, our efforts need to help students understand not only how to get to college but how to create pathways for themselves and their families to access high quality education and enrichment opportunities.

We must not leave transforming the K-12 educational system only to those in the system; it is our responsibility as an anchor institution to use our intellectual and financial resources and human capital to address the challenges that confront the city and its students.

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