

2017

## Detroit: A Classroom for Social Responsibility

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### Recommended Citation

Jacobsson, Alex and Perhamus, Lisa (2017) "Detroit: A Classroom for Social Responsibility," *Colleagues*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/colleagues/vol14/iss1/6>

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Photography by Alex Jacobsson

# Detroit: A Classroom for Social Responsibility

By Alex Jacobsson, GVSU Staff; and Lisa Perhamus, GVSU Faculty

When looking at education as a social framework, developing social responsibility is a key value. Education is entwined in communities and people. It is essential for education students to explore the diversity of neighborhoods and community connections to schools in order to become effective educators. Students in the College of Education at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) have this opportunity through a course offered in collaboration with GVSU's Brooks College of Interdisciplinary Studies. The city of Detroit is used as a field classroom where students explore the rich connections between people, community, and education.

This course, *Learning from Detroit: Education and Community Revitalization* is taught each fall semester by Dr. Lisa Perhamus.

Perhamus' course partners with the James and Grace Lee Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership (Boggs Center) to provide students with direct connections to



multiple communities in Detroit. The Boggs Center was founded in 1995 by friends of James and Grace Lee Boggs. The Boggs were grassroots social activists, theoreticians, and civil rights activists. Their work focused on the (r)evolution of humanity: how do we as humans work to understand and accept each other as human beings? Today, the Boggs Center

continues the couple's work by helping individuals "develop themselves into visionary leaders and critical thinkers who can devise proactive strategies for rebuilding and re-spiriting our cities and rural communities."

In addition to their classroom time at GVSU, students in Perhamus' class spend two 12-hour days in the city of Detroit. Students witness first-hand the neighborhood capacity-building challenges that Detroit faces and successful changes that Detroiters are making in their neighborhoods. Although Detroit often has a reputation as a place of blight and decay, there is transformational growth and renewal occurring throughout the city.

Photography courtesy of James and Grace Lee Boggs Center

Freedom Freedom Growers, one of more than 1,600 urban gardens in Detroit, is a good example of how Detroit residents are nourishing their own neighborhoods. Students in Perhamus' class spend time working in this garden and learning how Detroit's urban gardens



Photography by Lisa Perhamus

experience will become learning moments," she said. To quote Grace Lee Boggs, students in this class learn how Detroiters are putting "the 'neighbor' back in the 'hood'."

Perhamus currently serves as a James & Grace Lee Boggs

Fellow through the

provide people with food security and access to fresh, organically grown foods. Perhamus said her students discover, "Detroit is a place where many folks have not only stayed but are doing innovative, neighborhood-based work: lessons that leave long-lasting impressions upon GVSU students."

The course is unique in that many of the topics examined in the classroom are shaped directly through the experience and conversations that emerge from the time spent in Detroit. For example, students who examined a mural that addressed foreclosure were able to dialogue about how housing relates to and impacts education. "I can plan the curriculum all I want, but this is about people, places, and experiences," Perhamus said. The course remains flexible to allow those conversations to occur. "We never know what

Boggs Center. In this role, she works closely with the Boggs Center, participating in their public forums and serving the mission and vision of the Boggs Center by sharing Boggs's teachings with students, colleagues, educators, and community members. As a Boggs Fellow, Perhamus also works to connect many grassroots activists and visionary community leaders in the Detroit, Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo, and Chicago metropolitan areas. These collaborations connect many disciplinary and professional fields, such as education, social work, non-profit organizations, business, urban agriculture, art, philosophy, history, and indigenous knowledge. Together, these fields explore ways to enrich communities through an asset-based lens.

## Five steps to becoming more socially responsible

To mature in social responsibility, an individual must move beyond their old ideas and be open to transformational experiences. Authentic self-transformation can happen by communicating with people and discovering what it means to be humans in our world. This communication is really more about listening than talking: it is about hearing one another's life narratives and truly valuing another person's lived realities. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once stated, "you don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step." Some ideas for how you can engage in acts of social responsibility are:

**Identify your Passion:** What social issues are you passionate about, or what changes do you want to see in your communities?

**Gather Information:** Research topics and issues to discover multiple perspectives and understand the developments and concerns in your passion area.

**Join an Organization:** Connect with groups that can provide you with opportunities to serve and grow in the community.

**Listen:** Take time to listen to people and understand their perspective. Remember that silence is also a form of communication.

**Be Willing to be Uncomfortable:** Get out of your comfort zone. Challenge old ideas (even your own), listen to different perspectives, and be willing to share with others.

### Learn More

The James and Grace Lee Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership is online at [www.boggscenter.org](http://www.boggscenter.org)

EDF 325: *Learning from Detroit: Education and Community Revitalization* is offered to students each Fall semester: enrollment is available through Banner.