

# The Power of Place-Based Legacies in Advancing Reengagement with Community

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## Abstract

The degree to which urban and metropolitan colleges and universities can have a positive impact on their respective communities is heavily influenced by the nature and extent of their connectedness to, and alignment with, civic need. Drawn from the experiences and outcomes of the College of Staten Island's Legacy Trilogy initiative, a comprehensive educational and community engagement campaign exploring and leveraging the college's Legacy of Institution, Legacy of Place, and Legacy of Mission, this article proposes that higher education institutions can increase connectedness and alignment with their surrounding metropolises by embracing their deep and intricate social and economic place-based histories. Engaging with legacy in this uniquely personal and purposeful way can not only give more meaningful shape and added dimension to institutional identity, it can also empower colleges and universities to become more impactful to the communities they serve.

**Keywords:** anchor institution, borough stewardship, institutional identity

## Introduction

A hallmark of highly impactful urban and metropolitan colleges and universities is that they are in strategic alignment with their communities. For these institutions, the foundations of their missions and identities reflect the deep, intricate social and economic histories and contexts of their respective, surrounding metropolises. Conversely, colleges and universities that consciously or unconsciously disassociate from their important place-based legacies can experience, through this disconnectedness, a diminished ability to advance mutually beneficial opportunities and engagements with their communities. Such was the case with the College of Staten Island, the only public institution of higher education on Staten Island, one of five boroughs of New York City.

In its present form, the college was formed in 1976. However, its institutional history runs much deeper, tracing its roots to the establishment and eventual merger of its two predecessor institutions, Staten Island Community College and Richmond College. In 1993, the College of Staten Island relocated from the northern part of the borough to a larger campus located mid-island. While the transition to a new campus represented a significant milestone for the college, the relocation also marked the beginning of a period in which the institution experienced a growing disconnect from the borough. As a consequence, the dynamic exchange of knowledge, skills, resources, and values between the college and Staten Island community, so vital to the advancement and growth of both, began to wane.

In 2012, the College of Staten Island made the critical decision to once again become part of, and not apart from, Staten Island by introducing an ambitious Legacy Trilogy initiative. Central to this initiative, which was presented in three separate but interconnected themes, was a comprehensive educational and community engagement campaign to foster greater understanding and discourse related to our significant, interwoven histories with the borough. More specifically, we sought to reengage with our Legacy of Institution, remembering our predecessor institutions Staten Island Community College and Richmond College and their historical ties to the North Shore section of Staten Island where they originated; Legacy of Place, acknowledging and valuing that our campus sits on the former site of the Willowbrook State School, widely regarded as the birthplace of the civil rights movement for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities; and Legacy of Mission, understanding and embracing our vital role as Staten Island's anchor institution.

The Legacy Trilogy was launched at our annual Convocation ceremony, the major event convening students, faculty, staff, and community members for the President's yearly State of the College address. Over a three-year period, each State of the College address was dedicated to a separate theme of the Trilogy. This seminal educational series stimulated college-wide dialogue about our connectedness to the borough. Of greater import, the reexamination of our narrative inspired meaningful and significant institutional change, fortifying the foundations of our mission and identity in the context of community engagement.

## Legacy of Institution, Returning to Community

Staten Island Community College was established in 1956 as the first public institution of higher education in the borough with an inaugural class of 112 students (The Staten Island Community College Records, 2018). It was an inspirational symbol of hope and opportunity for the people of Staten Island. As remarked by Staten Island Borough President Albert V. Maniscalco to the graduates at the first commencement of Staten Island Community College in 1958:

This is a historical day on Staten Island. You are the first graduating class of our Staten Island Community College. You are the product of long cherished dreams of the people of the borough for their own community college. We are proud of you, and to the people of Staten Island you are the first of their dreams come true. (Maniscalco, 1958, side 1, 38:40)

By the mid-1960s, enrollment at the community college had grown to over 2,000 full and part-time students (The Staten Island Community College Records, 2018). This was reflective of a national increase in the number of graduates from two-year colleges, which gave rise to consideration of a new concept in higher education, the upper-division college (Volpe, 2001). In 1965, Richmond College became the first urban upper-division college in the country, providing undergraduate programs for juniors and seniors and select graduate studies (The Staten Island Community College Records, 2018). Its auspicious beginning was short lived, though, as New York City would soon become embroiled in mounting fiscal crises culminating in 1975 with the city narrowly avoiding bankruptcy (The Staten Island Community College Records, 2018). Richmond College, funded exclusively through the city and facing imminent danger of closing, merged with Staten Island Community College, thus creating the College of Staten Island in 1976 (The Staten Island Community College Records, 2018). Both Staten Island Community College and Richmond College were originally located in the borough's North Shore community district, an area encompassing seven neighborhoods and home to the famous Staten Island Ferry, connecting Staten Island to lower Manhattan across New York Harbor.

The College of Staten Island eventually relocated its campus to mid-island in 1993, and soon thereafter, the college, on an institutional level, began to turn its attention inward, becoming increasingly campus-centric and less connected to its surrounding community. Within this context of growing disconnectedness, an institutional narrative evolved, framing our historical timeline as beginning in 1976, the year of the merger. Pursuant to this narrative, our predecessor institutions, Staten Island Community College and Richmond College, and their more than 30,000 alumni, began to slowly fade from our institutional memory, and with it, an appreciation of the indelible void left in the community when our predecessor institutions departed from the North Shore.

According to a recent study by Mehrotra, Kimiagar, Drobnjak, and Halktis (2018), today the North Shore is one of New York City's most populated community districts with approximately 174,000 residents. It is one of the few districts in which its racial and ethnic diversity, 36% white non-Hispanic, 21.3% Black non-Hispanic, 30.4% Latino, and 8.7% Asian, is representative of New York City as a whole (Mehrotra et al., 2018). Income disparity is prevalent in the North Shore as there are many residents falling on the higher end of the income continuum, while many

others live under very challenging economic conditions (Mehrotra et al., 2018). The study notes that the overall poverty rate, 21%, is slightly higher than the citywide rate, with one-third of North Shore children living in poor households, and the labor force participation rate among residents, 66%, being significantly lower than New York City overall. Of particular concern, North Shore youth “are more likely to be disconnected than youth citywide - meaning greater numbers are both out-of-school and out-of-work.” (Mehrotra et al., 2018, p. 6). One suggested reason for this is that:

young people on the North Shore are less likely to be enrolled in college compared to years past. The share of 18- to 24-year-olds with a high school diploma who are enrolled in college has decreased substantially; the share of students from North Shore high schools enrolling in post-secondary education has also declined. (Mehrotra et al., 2018, p. 6)

Our focus on Legacy of Institution firmly established Staten Island Community College and Richmond College as inseparable from our institutional history, a change in narrative that was eventually adopted by the university system at our behest. This provided us with a pivotal opportunity for self-examination of our engagement with, and service to, the North Shore community. Long the bane of Staten Islanders’ existence, public transportation has historically suffered from an extremely poor infrastructure as the only borough without rapid transit, underscored by the lack of a subway system (Kramer & Flanagan, 2012). Layered with other socio-economic impediments, there are tangible barriers for North Shore residents to attend the College of Staten Island at our mid-island campus. This serious introspection eventually led to a major institutional undertaking: the college’s return to the North Shore.

In fall 2017, we opened the new College of Staten Island St. George satellite facility, CSI St. George, located in the North Shore’s St. George neighborhood adjacent to where Staten Island Community College and Richmond College once stood. CSI St. George, the first satellite facility established by the college for matriculating students, is a newly constructed 16,000-square-foot space, with ten Smart Classrooms, a state-of-the-art computer lab, an open and expansive student lounge, and a dedicated on-site student services center. In just one year of operation, it has grown from an initial enrollment of 523 full and part-time students to 992 students in fall 2018, with more than half residing in the North Shore (M. D’Alessandro, personal communication, May, 19, 2019).

With increasing enrollments and the expansion of student and community programming, CSI St. George is steadily weaving the college back into the fabric of the North Shore. Arising from our Legacy of Institution, the College of Staten Island has now come full circle in its journey originating in 1956. Our return has enriched and strengthened our identity as a beacon of higher education opportunity and, as expressed by the Borough President 61 years ago, fulfilling our promise as “the product of long cherished dreams of the people” (Maniscalco, 1958, side 1, 38:40).

## Legacy of Place, Ascending from Tragedy

The second theme of our Trilogy, *Legacy of Place*, has a deep and uniquely special meaning as it relates to our mid-island campus. The College of Staten Island is situated on historical, if not hallowed, ground. Our idyllic, verdant, park-like campus belies its tragic past as the former home of the Willowbrook State School, which gained world-wide notoriety for its inhumane treatment of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

The story of Willowbrook began in 1938 with the first rumblings of the State of New York's intention to build an institution in the borough of Staten Island for people with developmental disabilities, which was part of a broader, long-standing institutionalization movement (Goode, Hill, Reiss, & Bronston, 2013). Willowbrook State School was eventually constructed on the land where the College of Staten Island now sits. However, its original intended use was briefly diverted to serve as the site of the Halloran General Hospital military facility during World War II (Goode et al., 2013). It was not until 1947 that the Willowbrook State School for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities opened with a small number of residents (Goode et al., 2013). From its very inception, the institution grew in population and in structure, but always under the conditions of overcrowding, understaffing, and underfunding by the state (National Council on Disability, n.d.). By 1962, the number of children and adult residents had climbed to 6,000, greatly exceeding its capacity of 4,000, with a staffing ratio reportedly to be one attendant for every 60 residents (Goode et al., 2013).

In 1965, United States Senator Robert F. Kennedy made an unannounced visit to the Willowbrook State School, thereafter summarily referring to it as a “snake pit” (Goode et al., 2013, pp. 90-91). In his testimony before a New York Joint Legislative Committee, Kennedy described what he had witnessed:

There are young children slipping into blankness and lifelong dependence. There are crippled children without medical supervision or rehabilitative therapy [...] There are children and young adults without education and training programs to prepare them for life in the community. And there are many - far too many - living in filth and dirt, their clothing in rags, in rooms less comfortable and cheerful than the cages in which we put animals in a zoo - without adequate supervision or a bit of affection - condemned to a life without hope ... There are no civil liberties for those put into the cells of Willowbrook . . . (Goode et al., 2013, p. 90)

The ensuing years brought more intense scrutiny to Willowbrook's deteriorating state. Jane Curtin, a reporter with a local newspaper, the *Staten Island Advance*, wrote a series of articles chronicling the inhumane conditions of the State School (Goode et al., 2013). Then, on January 6, 1972, Geraldo Rivera, at the time a young reporter for WABC-TV Eyewitness News, broke into the school grounds with a film crew capturing the shocking images of the mistreatment of residents, similarly witnessed by Senator Kennedy seven years earlier (Goode et al., 2013). That night, the exposé was broadcast on network television, and the local and national outcry that followed signaled Willowbrook's tipping point (Goode et al., 2013).

Within months of the broadcast, parents of residents filed a class action lawsuit alleging conditions at Willowbrook violated the residents' constitutional rights (National Council on Disability, n.d.). Following a period of protracted litigation, Governor Hugh Carey signed a landmark consent decree (National Council on Disability, n.d.). The Willowbrook Consent Decree, as it would be known, mandated major reforms including the transition of residents to community placements and opportunity for residents to lead productive, fulfilling lives (National Council on Disability, n.d.). In 1987, Willowbrook was finally declared officially closed, paving the way for the College of Staten Island to eventually relocate its campus to the grounds of the former State School in 1993.

Coinciding with the college's growing disconnect with its surrounding community after relocation, the college also started distancing itself from the perceived stigma and shame associated with the painful history of the Willowbrook State School. Individual faculty members admirably sought to preserve the memory of the State School through an annual Willowbrook Memorial Lecture Series, but this was done largely without institutional support. The college's disassociation with the former State School stood in stark contrast with the intentions of individuals, agencies, and organizations supporting and advocating for people with developmental disabilities in the community that the injustices of Willowbrook would never be forgotten. This dynamic mired our shared connection to the Willowbrook State School in anger and distrust.

Our engagement with Legacy of Place provided the College of Staten Island with the invaluable opportunity to embrace our place-based connection to the Willowbrook State School and to formally acknowledge the injustice perpetrated upon thousands of residents in its care. It also allowed us to talk about Willowbrook's lesser known, but equally significant, stories of triumph. The many courageous individuals and organizations whose activism led to the closure of the school are credited not only for leading the first civil rights movement for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, but also for effectively ending the practice of warehousing the most vulnerable in society. Remarkably, the national attention over Willowbrook led to the adoption of the first federal civil rights legislation protecting people with disabilities, which served as the building blocks leading to the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 (National Council on Disability, n.d.). Approaching Willowbrook from this more complete and rich historical perspective helped to finally move its story beyond tragedy.

Arising from our Legacy of Place, the college now actively and proudly supports and sponsors the annual Willowbrook Memorial Lecture Series. At our most recent Commencement, the college awarded Jane Curtin an honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters for her contributions in exposing the conditions at the State School. Geraldo Rivera, once considered a trespasser at Willowbrook, was welcomed back to speak at the college's departmental exercise for the first graduating class of our new Bachelor of Science in Social Work degree. Imbued by the sense of rebirth of place, he created the College of Staten Island Geraldo Rivera Fund for Social Work and Disability Studies, which provides support for public conferences, symposia, lectures, and publications that will inform the public, influence policy, and empower people with disabilities.

Galvanized by this momentum, the college has broken ground on a momentous project, a commemorative museum trail called the Willowbrook Mile. This major endeavor will incorporate multiple outdoor exhibit stations, each providing information about the Willowbrook State School, placed at various locations of historical importance across campus. Notably, and indicative of a growing community trust, the Willowbrook Mile is a result of a collaboration between the College of Staten Island and several organizations serving the disabilities community including the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Council, the largest coalition of agencies, parents, advocates, and professionals offering information, referrals, and assistance for those with developmental disabilities.

For the College of Staten Island, the transformative impact of Legacy of Place arose from a uniquely painful and conflicting time in our history. The acknowledgment and valuing of the important social lessons originating from our place have helped to facilitate a restorative healing of our community. Concomitantly, Legacy of Place has uplifted the college by giving meaningful shape and a profound, added dimension to our institutional identity.

### Legacy of Mission, the Borough's Anchor Mission

Emanating from our vital presence as the only public institution of higher education in the borough, the foundational purpose of the College of Staten Island is to provide our students with higher education access and equal opportunity as a vehicle for intellectual growth and upward social mobility. The community-inspired themes and efficacious outcomes of Legacy of Institution and Legacy of Place illuminated that our foundational purpose can be viewed as part of an overarching mission, serving as a responsible steward of the borough. Legacy of Mission, the third and final theme of our Trilogy, elucidated the college's crucial role as Staten Island's anchor institution.

To engender a better understanding of our anchor role, Legacy of Mission presented a view of the college through the lens, not of its presence within the community, but of its potential absence. What would happen, we asked, if the College of Staten Island were to suddenly cease to exist: the disappearance of 2,800 jobs as Staten Island's second largest employer, the loss of goods and services contracts as well as the purchasing power of our students and employees, all of which support local businesses, the deficit of trained and skilled students to meet workforce needs, the dissolution of the intellectual capital needed to advance community-based research and scholarship, the vanishing of a major cultural and intellectual center, and a diminution of local volunteerism, service, and civic engagement by students, faculty, and staff. This perspective provided enlightenment concerning the college's great obligations and responsibilities to the borough attendant with its anchor status.

In 2017, the College of Staten Island finalized its new Strategic Plan, "Opportunity to Ascend," to guide the college's vision and growth over the next five years. Sprung from our Legacy of Mission, for the first time in our history, a major strategic priority was created to advance the college as an anchor institution. That strategic priority, Borough Stewardship, derived from the landmark publication, *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place*, from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (2002), provides in pertinent part:

The College of Staten Island is fully committed to advancing its role as a ‘Steward of Place’ through direct, two-way interaction with the Staten Island community through the development, exchange, and application of knowledge, information, and expertise for mutual benefit ...

To help effectuate the ambitious goals of Borough Stewardship, the college created an entirely new unit, the Division of Economic Development, Continuing Studies, and Government Relations. The division brought together new and existing offices and departments that are directly and organically aligned with anchor work. Designed to be predominantly community-facing, the division has become the college’s principal liaison to the borough to facilitate organic collaborations and integrations.

Most recently, the College of Staten Island was selected among thirty-one colleges and universities across the United States as an inaugural member of the Higher Education Anchor Mission Initiative. This is a joint initiative of the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities and The Democracy Collaborative, a national research institute developing strategies for a more democratic economy. This national collaboration is “designed to develop and share new strategies for deploying higher education’s intellectual and place-based resources to enhance the economic and social well-being of the communities they serve,” and will provide a comprehensive framework for assessing the impact of our work (Democracy Collaborative, 2018).

Legacy of Mission sparked an epiphany concerning our role as an anchor institution, and the process of self-realization moved the college to fully embrace its identity as borough steward. This inspired fundamental institutional change reflecting our newfound commitment to community engagement that is both substantive and enduring. The extraordinary outcomes from our Legacy of Institution and Legacy of Place, as well as the subsequent outgrowth of our many other place-based initiatives, exemplify the singular significance of the anchor mission.

## **Conclusion**

Urban and metropolitan colleges and universities are facing exceptional challenges in turbulent times. Among them, decreased public funding, declining enrollments, and heightened concerns over the cost of education spurred on by the student debt crisis are fueling debate concerning the value of higher education. Therefore, it is critical for higher education institutions to meet the challenge of relevancy by demonstrating greater value propositions with the communities in which they reside through more purposeful and meaningful connections aligned with civic need. As evinced by the College of Staten Island’s Legacy Trilogy initiative, place-based legacies provide fertile ground for institutions to reengage with their surrounding metropolises for mutual advantage. By leveraging shared social and economic histories, even those with painful or difficult origins similar to our Willowbrook legacy, colleges and universities can fortify their respective missions and identities to become even more impactful to the communities they serve. This is the power of legacy.



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