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Bridging the town-gown gap

Posted in [CULTURE](#) by [Joel Gillespie](#) on Thursday, November 4, 2010 at 9:00 am

In an ethnically diverse community such as ours, academic researchers often undertake projects which are relevant to the broader community, and which have the potential to alienate existing community groups with a similar focus. With that in mind, several units of the University of Illinois recently initiated a collaboration called [eBlack Champaign-Urbana](#). The stated goals of eBlackCU are as follows



Low on Pho?



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Same Sex Sunday podcast is up!

Posted by Tracy Nectoux to the entry 'The Rainbow Connection: November 9–15 on 11/14/10.'

1. Centralize information on local African-American history and culture and create new knowledge through this centralization;
2. Involve past and present community residents in the production of knowledge by soliciting their contributions, both in the form of personal memories and in the form of digitized personal archives;
3. Create a community of scholars, activists and citizens interested in learning more about various aspects of local African-American history and culture; and
4. Develop the best-practices to scale this project up to the state-level in the implementation of eBlackIllinois: A Comprehensive Database on the Black Experience in Illinois.

To those ends, this Friday and Saturday, [eBlack Champaign-Urbana](#) will be hosting a [Campus-Community Symposium](#) centered around “the past, present, and future of campus-community engagement and research.” The two-day event will be taking place in two locations: Friday, on the U of I campus at the Graduate School of Library and Information Sciences, 501 E. Daniel in Champaign; and Saturday, at the Douglas Annex, at 804 N. 5th St. in Champaign. [You can download a pdf of the full festival schedule here.](#)

eBlackCU Program Director Noah Lenstra was kind enough to answer a few of my questions through the miracle of email.

Smile Politely: The town-vs.-gown issue is present in a lot of college towns. What do you think is unique about Champaign-Urbana’s particular situation? How have you structured eBlackCU (and this symposium) to make allowances for those differences?

Noah Lenstra: Much more could be done comparatively in terms of town-gown issues in medium sized cities. The only comparable project I know of is one done by Ball State University called “The Other Side of Middletown” where students collaboratively put together a history of African-American history in Muncie, Indiana. Now, Muncie is much more industrial than Champaign, but it has been studied EXTENSIVELY—but this project was unique in terms of giving agency to community members.

What makes Champaign-Urbana unique, perhaps, is the enormous influence of the University—we have tried to structure this into the eBlackCU project by focusing a lot of our digitization efforts on the dissertations and theses written about issues facing local African-Americans, a HUGE amount of literature, but one which has never really been grappled with. We hope those who come after us will be able to use this digital corpus to really say something more concrete about campus-community relations beyond the platitudes and generalities often offered as explanations. I think agency is often very tricky. We have to



Sorry 'bout that. Fixed now.

Posted by Joel Gillespie to the entry 'Crank it up on Sunday on 11/13/10.



I think I've sussed the eating obsession. I'm in the middle of *Bad Samaritans - The Myth of Free Trade and the Secret History of Capitalism* by Ha-Joon Chang. We learn that Koreans of Omma's generation had no food. Her parents' generation didn't even have empty...

Posted by Rob McColley to the entry

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acknowledge that as researchers our responsibility is research—in other words producing some sort of intellectual product that has value beyond the individual case.

Furthermore there is a need to report back to community members on the results of research and service projects, something that rarely happens—but is more necessary than ever in times of budget contraction. Acknowledging these differences we have also structured the campus-community symposium to really be two separate events. Friday is focused primarily on campus-community engagement and the need get more community voice into these engagements AND the need to have more concrete reporting back to the community on the results on service and research so that people (both on and off campus) can really see what is going on.

Smile Politely: The “Community Engagement @ Illinois” book (a 200+ page tome which will be distributed to attendees of the symposium) sounds like quite an undertaking. Can you tell a little bit about the process of putting together a project like that?

Noah Lenstra: Certainly. We started by targeting particular individuals/projects we know and then snowballed out as we heard of more projects. We ended up gathering documentation on over 40 recent (last one to two years) projects, both research and service, having local African-Americans as a primary or secondary audience or subject. We initially circulated our call for papers in March and between then and October 1 it involved a lot of hounding individuals to get paper out of them. There were a few projects that just didn't have anything to report—or at least didn't share it—but we hope through this book to flip the script on the old “publish or perish” dictum. We would rather say “publish and prosper.” In other words, let's embrace what makes the university so important and really take our jobs seriously.

Smile Politely: What community organizations will be involved in this symposium who haven't been connected with eBlackCU previously?

Noah Lenstra: A lot! Many of the roundtable participants on Saturday have not been in close contact with us up to this point—we worked through the UC2B anchor social institutions, word-of-mouth and our own digital database to find and invite contacts to the symposium. We were especially lucky to receive the eager participation of Women of Prestige, a local African-American professional women's group that gravitated to us and offered to help volunteer for both mornings of the symposium. I think there is a lot of energy, around UC2B, around the elections, which hopefully will catalyze people around the possibilities of technology in their day-to-day lives.

Smile Politely: How is the location for each day of the symposium significant? Do you expect most people will attend both days, or either the on-campus or Douglass Center events?

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Awesome write up. This was probably the most enjoyable Illinois BB game I've seen since the 2004-5 year. There were sustained moments where Illinois look like a genuine top 10 or even 5 ranked team. Granted SIU was playing its first game with apparently a lot of...

By SFJon to the entry 'Little Egypt suffers Illini tremblor on 11/15/10.



boo hoo, the athletic department needs money, and I don't care. I can respect that.

By Tracy Nectoux to the entry 'REO Speedwagon to play REO Speedwagon tribute

Noah Lenstra: As I said in answer to your first question, we take very seriously BOTH campus and community. Some community-engaged university people go way out of their way to leave the University behind. We don't—and we think it critical if we really want to move forward to fight to bring more people onto the University of Illinois campus. So we have our free shuttle going to-and-from GSLIS on Friday from Salem Baptist Church—where Pastor Shelby has allowed us to use his parking lot. And we have our Difference Makers Award Ceremony Friday at 1 p.m. in which we will honor about 100 Difference Makers in the lives of local african-americans with a commemorative booklet and certificate (along with a copy of our book “Community Engagement @ Illinois.” So I anticipate a good turn-out Friday, as well as Saturday. In many ways the focus of the two days is different. Friday we are oriented around “Community Engagement @ Illinois”; Saturday we are oriented around a Manifesto that has appeared in our newsletters.

We want to bring together people from different agencies in town—including Smile Politely!—to talk about how they use technology and to get people thinking about the opportunities, limits and needs regarding technology and the future of community institutions. So the Douglass Annex was a natural choice for our Saturday day of the symposium—a more intimate, familiar space conducive to conversation and networking around the ongoing struggles and successes of integrating technology into the day-to-day lives of our local populace, especially African-Americans and low-income populations in Champaign-Urbana. We currently have about 200 people registered for at least a portion of the two-day symposium—I am sure only a small number of those 200 will be there from 9-5 both days, but overall I anticipate very good turn-out despite a number of other events this Saturday.

Lenstra added,

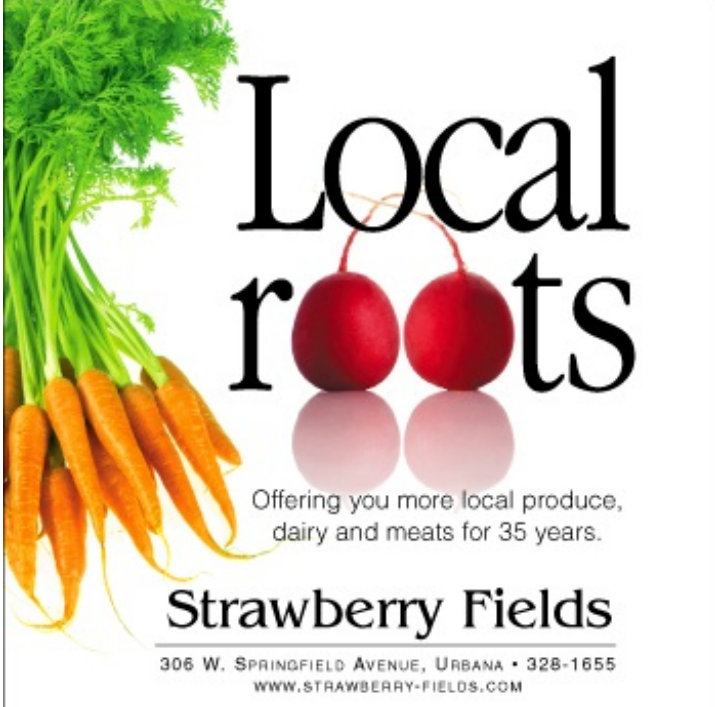
- 1) *We are recording audio and video from both days and will make accessible online following symposium.*
- 2) *UC2B has declared the symposium an official UC2B meeting - and will be participating largely to listen and to find ways that they can connect to the energy and excitement that already exists around technology in social service agencies, churches, schools, community groups, media outlets, and cultural heritage institutions.*

Smile Politely will be participating in a roundtable on “Community Groups, Media, Memory and Digital Technology” from 2:45 to 4 p.m. on Saturday at the Douglass Annex, 804 N. 5th

on 11/15/10.

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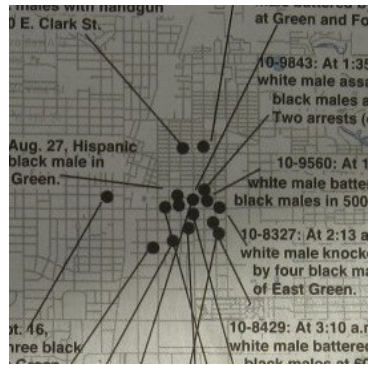
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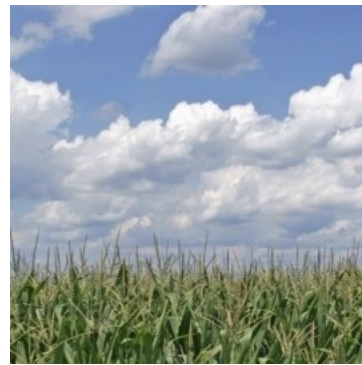
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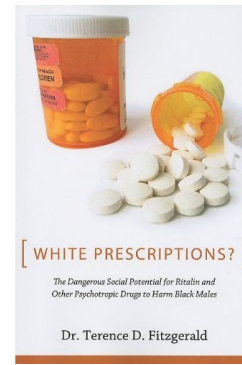
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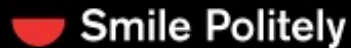


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Bob Dylan said Champaign, Illinois — Twice



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