

## **Amherst Together**

A creativity hub and organizing infrastructure for collective impact

Amherst Together was launched as a vision of the Amherst Regional Public Schools Superintendent, Maria Geryk, to coordinate the community component of Dr. Ronald Ferguson's *The Movement: Excellence with Equity*; an innovative pathway for maximizing youth development and success. Ferguson emphasizes collective impact as the pathway toward this goal. Worldwide, communities are becoming more aware of the effectiveness of partnerships and embracing collective impact as a model for success.

Examples include:

- President Obama's White House Council for Community Solutions, created to encourage civic participation in innovative community solutions, focused on youth as the issue of critical national importance
- Funders such as Bloomberg Philanthropies emphasize collective impact over isolated impact, as their funding priorities
- In Franklin County, MA, Communities that Care Coalition is a collective impact initiative designed to reduce substance use. The coalition raised \$5 million for their collective impact initiative

Amherst Together was established just shy of eight months ago to focus on community, collaboration, equity and inclusion in Amherst. The initiative uses media, art and innovation design to promote youth development, community engagement, and social impact. Amherst Together offers an orienting and framing opportunity for encouraging interaction across social and economic lines, which holds the potential for a more positive and transformative approach to community. A healthier community promotes and produces much better outcomes for our students—the single, most important element for sustainability, and for our community at large. To understand and better the environments and conditions that matter to people; assure health and well-being for all; develop appropriate, actionable, and tangible strategies that result in new, innovative avenues for growth, that are grounded in organic, authentic and collaborative action, Amherst Together advocates for the active participation of all of its members, in order to accelerate change.

This pursuit is developed in three phases, a three-year strategic plan for developing collective impact in Amherst.

### **Phase One and Two**

Phase one and part of phase two activities aim to build interpersonal relationships, social cohesiveness and awareness of and participation in the ongoing community building process.

As a **creativity hub**, the goals of Amherst Together are to:

- Provide greater opportunities for people to connect and interact
- Act as an operational tool to drive action
- Encourage input, collaboration and open communication among people and various organizations
- Focus on opportunity mapping and capacity building
- Access the climate and needs of the community

Activities to achieve these goals in the 2014-2015 year include:

- Partnering with the UMass department of Landscape Architect and Regional Planning (LARP) professor Flavia Montenegro-Menezes, The UMass-Engaged graduate studies team and Independent Research Analyst Jen Stromsten, Amherst Together began conducting a public participation survey in order to collect perception data that measures values and quality of life of the residents of Amherst and its surrounding region. We are nearing our goal of 380-400 participants, with approximately 75 needed to reach that goal, which we anticipate will occur by early-April.
- An online interactive community map asking community members to respond to “what I like in Amherst”, “what I’d like to see in Amherst”, and an opportunity to leave general comments. The map was developed for Amherst Together by Elias Sprietzer of the UMass-Engaged graduate studies team.
- Eyes Are The Window: A Digital Poetry Exhibition, sponsored by Amherst Together and the Amherst Public Art Commission is now open for poem submissions. The poems will rotate throughout the year and will be displayed at the Boltwood Parking Garage. Poets of all ages are welcome to participate. Submissions will be accepted March 23-April 30. This year’s theme is identity. Poets are asked to answer the question, “When I look into your eyes, what will I see?”
- On Friday, April 10 and Saturday, April 11, 2015, the Amherst College 2015 Innovative Education Summit presents keynote speaker Harvard Innovation Lab’s Tony Wagner. Amherst Together will co-sponsor a workshop introducing the concepts and practices underlying design thinking; a process of learning about and responding to human needs, alongside Megan Lyster of the Center for Community Engagement, followed by a Q&A with professor Wagner.
- A film screening of Schooling The World followed by a community discussion, potentially with a visit from the film director, Carol Black. Schooling The World examines the hidden assumption of cultural superiority behind education aid projects; looks at the failure of institutional education to deliver on its promise of a way out of poverty; questions our very definitions of wealth, poverty, knowledge and ignorance; and uncovers the role of schools in the destruction of traditional sustainable agricultural and ecological knowledge...calling for a “deeper dialogue” between cultures, suggesting that we have at least as much to learn as we have to teach, and

that these ancient sustainable societies may harbor knowledge which is vital for our own survival in the coming millenia. This will be a partnership with Amherst College and Jones Library

- On Wednesday, April 15, 2015, One Drop of Love, a multimedia one-woman show written and performed by Fanshen Cox DiGiovanni, incorporates film, photographs, and animation, and takes us on a journey from the 1700s to the present spanning locations throughout the world as 16 characters facilitate a reconciliation between a daughter and her father. One Drop of Love provides an interactive opportunity for audiences 13+ to engage with explorations of identity, it's meaning and relevance in modern day society. 7 pm at Amherst Regional Middle School auditorium
- On Saturday, May 9, 2015, at 11am, a screening and discussion of the short film, Aspirations. Seven adults share their deepest aspirations with seven youth who, in turn, interpret and paint the adults faces with their interpretation. This event provides an opportunity for adults and children to share perspectives that may significantly impact how we all think about our future and the kinds of people we'd like to be. Co-sponsored by Jones Library.
- On-going, on-camera conversations with a wide variety of community voices, available for public viewing on the Amherst Together YouTube page.

### **Phase Two and Three**

As an **organizing infrastructure for collective impact**, the goals for Amherst Together are to:

- Identify gaps between community needs and perception, and the system of practices, goals and policies that regulate it.
- Evaluate and determine where current programs work or fall short
- Utilize innovation design thinking as a human-centered approach for integrating the needs of people and resources, through community experimentation, ideation, prototyping, creative problem-solving and capacity building
- Advance social literacy and build consensus through shared language and understanding of issues
- Cultivate cross-sector groups to build collective impact partnerships.
- Secure back-bone capacity to sustain and measure collective impact vision, mission and goals.

### **Activities to achieve these goals in FY2016 include:**

- Attendance at the Ready By 21 National Meeting, New Orleans, LA, from March 31 – April 2. The conference brings together up to 400 national, state and local leaders committed to improving partnerships, policies and practices for children and youth. 11 representatives from town, school, higher education, non-profit, and community will be attending from Amherst.

- On Thursday, May 28, a public participation community presentation and discussion at Jones Library. Amherst Together, UMass Department of Landscape Architect and Regional Planning (LARP) and UMass-Engaged will present a summary analysis on the public participation survey and focus group data, followed by refreshments and discussion. The evening opens with a short film mini-doc about the UMass-Engaged student experiences working on the project.
- The making of an Amherst Together film, beginning in early May. A film about a community conceiving a film—involving the community in the creative process. The film will document community members discussing what groups, topics, issues in the community ought to be represented in the film. This will be its own film, independent from the narrative film that gets made, capturing the challenging and interesting collaborative effort and process of whittling down the film’s narrative that will be documented and shared with the larger community. The film aims to be an educational wake-up call to inspire collective impact. Working with Amherst College alumni and filmmaker, Jose Rodriguez, recent winner of the Five College Student Film and Video Festival award.
- Working with Amherst College PVCS students, CCE’s Megan Lyster, and Andrew Stachiw of TESA on innovation design activities beginning in early June, utilizing data from the public participation survey to drive direction.
- A host of films and panel discussions and activities for advancing social literacy, beginning in the Fall of 2015.
- Preparation and planning for the 2016 Vision Summit

**Verbal Overview of program so far and how it is positively impacting the community**

Since its inception, Amherst Together has received encouraging support and endorsement from an ever widening range of community members. Our civic, education, business and government leaders are realizing that the advantages of this proposed collaboration effort include the growth of community based relationships, decreased conflict, increased funding opportunities, and achievable goals that will improve the quality of life for all. Community input continues to serve as the genesis for Amherst Together goals and planning strategies. Formal and informal meetings and conversations across town with students, business and community leaders, parents, educators, law-enforcement agencies, seniors, veterans, elected officials, employers and employees continue to guide the plan's creation. The ultimate success of the initiative will be measured by the continuous participation of and reporting back by community members and organizations with the results of these measurable goals.

The Amherst Together website receives approximately 1000 views per month with a total of 4,260 views since its launching in late November 2014. 58% of those are direct hits, 25 percent referred from Google search, 7% from the town website, 3% from Masslive and 3% from Amherst Bulletin.